Title: Nell, of Shorne Mills; or, One Heart's Burden

Author: Charles Garvice

Release date: October 11, 2007 [eBook #22961]
Most recently updated: April 17, 2019

Language: English

E-text prepared by Roger Frank, Brownfox,
and the Project Gutenberg Online Distributed Proofreading Team
(http://www.pgdp.net)

[Pg 1]

NELL, OF SHORNE MILLS

Or, One Heart's Burden

By CHARLES GARVICE

Author of

"Better Than Life," "A Life's Mistake," "Once in a Life," "'Twas Love's Fault," etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY

PUBLISHERS :: :: :: NEW YORK
1898

[Pg 5]

NELL, OF SHORNE MILLS

CHAPTER I.

"Dick, how many are twenty-seven and eight?"

The girl looked up, with narrow eyes and puckered brow, from the butcher's book, which she was laboriously "checking," at the boy who leaned back on the window seat picking out a tune on a banjo.

"Thirty-nine," he replied lazily but promptly, without ceasing to peck, peck at the strings.

She nodded her thanks, and traveled slowly up the column, counting with the end of her pencil and jotting down the result with a perplexed face.

They were brother and sister, Nell and Dick Lorton, and they made an extremely pretty picture in the sunny room. The boy was fair with the fairness of the pure Saxon; the girl was dark—dark hair with the sheen of silk in it, dark, straight brows that looked all the darker for the clear gray of the eyes which shone like stars beneath them. But the eyes were almost violet at this moment with the intensity of her mental effort, and presently, as she raised them, they flashed with a mixture of irritation and sweet indignation.

"Dick, if you don't put that banjo down I'll come over and make you. It's bad enough at most times; but the 'Old Folks at Home' on one string, while I'm trying to check this wretched book, is intolerable, and not to be endured. Put it down, Dick, or I'll come over and smash both of you!"

He struck a chord, an exasperating chord, and then resumed the more exasperating peck, peck.

"'Twas ever thus," he said, addressing the ceiling with sad reproach. "Women are born ungrateful, and continue so. Here am I, wasting this delightful afternoon in attempting to soothe a sister's savage breast by sweet strains of heavenly music, and she——"

With a laugh, she sprang from her seat and went for him. There was a short and fierce struggle, during which the banjo was whirled hither and thither; then he got her down on the floor, sat upon her, and deliberately resumed pecking out the "Old Folks at Home."

"Let me get up, Dick! Let me get up this instant!" she cried indignantly and breathlessly. "The man's waiting for the book. Dick, do you hear? I'll pinch you—I'll crumple your collar! I'll burn that beast of a banjo directly you've gone out. Dick, I'm sure you're hurting me seriously. Di-ck! I've got a pain! Oh, you wait until you've gone out! I'll light the fire with that thing! Get up!" [Pg 6]

Without a change of countenance, as if he were deaf to her entreaties and threats, he tuned up the banjo, and played a breakdown.

"Comfortable, Nell? That's right. Always strive for contentment, whatever your lot may be. At present your lot is to provide me with a nice, springy seat, and it will so continue to be until you promise—on your honor, mind—that you will not lay a destructive hand on this sweetest of instruments."

"Oh, let me get up, Dick!"

"Until I receive that promise, and an abject apology, it is a case of *j'y suis, j'y reste*, my child," he responded blandly.

She panted and struggled for a moment or two, then she gasped:

"I—I promise!"

"On your word of honor?"

"Yes, yes! Dick, you are breaking my ribs or something."

"Corset, perhaps," he suggested. "And the apology? A verbal one will suffice on this occasion, accompanied by the sum of one shilling for the purchase of cigarettes."

"I shan't! You never said a word about a shilling!"

"I did not—I hadn't time; but I shall now have time to make it two."

The door opened, and a servant with a moon-shaped face and prominent eyes looked in. She did not seem at all surprised at the state of affairs—did not even smile.

"The butcher's man says shall he wait any longer, miss?"

"Yes, tell him to wait, Molly," said the boy. "Miss Nell is tired, and is lying down for a little while; resting, you know."

"I—I promise! I apologize! You—you shall have the shilling!" gasped the girl, half angrily, half haughtily.

He rose in a leisurely fashion, got back to his window seat, and held out his long, shapely hand.

She shook herself, put up one hand to her hair, and took a shilling from her pocket with the other.

"Tiresome boy!" she exclaimed. "If I live to be a hundred, I shall never know why boys were invented."

"There are lots of other things, simpler things, that you will never know, though you live to be a Methuselah, my dear Nell," he said; "one of them being that twenty-seven and eight do not make thirty-nine."

"Thirty-nine? Why, of course not; thirty-five!" she retorted. "That's where I was wrong. Dick, you are a beast. There's the book, Molly, and there's the money——Oh, give me back that shilling, Dick; I want it! I've only just got enough. Give it me back at once; you shall have it again, I swear —I mean, I promise." [Pg 7]

"Simple child!" he murmured sweetly. "So young, so simple! She really thinks I shall give it to her! Such innocence is indeed touching! Excuse these tears. It will soon pass!"

He mopped his eyes with his handkerchief, as if overcome by emotion, and the exasperated Nell looked at him as if she meant another fight; but she resisted the temptation, and, with a shrug of her shoulders, pushed the book and money toward the patient and unmoved Molly.

"There you are, Molly, all but the shilling. Tell him to add that to the next account."

"Yes, miss. And the missis' chocklut; it's just the time?"

Nell glanced at the clock.

"So it is! There'll be a row. It's all your fault, Dick. Why don't you go for a sail, or shrimping, or something? A boy's always a nuisance in the house. I'll come at once, Molly. There!" she exclaimed, as a woman's thin voice was heard calling in a languid and injured tone:

"Molly!"

"'Twas the voice of the sluggard——'" Dick began to quote; but Nell, with a hissed "Hush! she'll hear you!" ran out, struggling with her laughter. Five minutes later, she went up the stairs with a salver on which were a dainty chocolate service and a plate of thin bread and butter, and entering the best bedroom of the cottage, carried the salver to a faded-looking woman who, in a short dressing jacket of dingy pink, sat up in the bed.

She was Mrs. Lorton, the stepmother of the boy and girl. She had been pretty once, and had not forgotten the fact—it is on the cards that she thought herself pretty still, though the weak face was thin and hollow, the once bright eyes dim and querulous, the lips drawn into a dissatisfied curve.

"Here is your chocolate, mamma," said the girl. She hated the word "mamma"; but from the first moment of her introduction to Mrs. Lorton, she had declined to call her by the sacred name of "mother." "I'm afraid I'm late."

"It is ten minutes past the time," said Mrs. Lorton; "but I do not complain. I never complain, Eleanor. A Wolfer should at least know how to suffer in silence. I hope it is hot—really hot; yesterday it was cold—quite cold, and it caused me that acute indigestion which, I trust, Eleanor, it will never be your lot to experience."

"I'm sorry, mamma; but yesterday morning you were asleep when I brought it in, and I did not like to wake you." [Pg 8]

"Not asleep, Eleanor," said Mrs. Lorton, with an air of long-suffering patience—"no, alas! not asleep. My eyes were closed, I have no doubt; but I was merely thinking. I heard you come in—— Surely that is not all the cream! I have few fancies, Heaven knows; but I have always been accustomed to half cream and half chocolate, and an invalid suffers acutely from these deprivations, slight and trifling though they may appear to one in your robust, I had almost said savage state of health."

"Isn't there as much as usual? I will go and see if there is some more," said the girl, deftly arranging the tray. "See, it is quite hot this morning."

"But it will be cold before you return, doubtless," sighed Mrs. Lorton, with saintly resignation. "And, Eleanor, may I venture to ask you not to renew the terrible noise with which you have been filling the house for the last half hour. You know how I dislike crushing the exuberance of your animal spirits; but such a perfectly barbaric noise tortures my poor overstrained nerves."

"Yes, mamma. We'll—I'll be quiet."

"Thank you. It is a great deal to ask. I am aware that you think me exacting. This butter is anything but fresh."

"It was made this morning."

"Please, oh, please do not contradict me, Eleanor! If there is one characteristic more plainly developed in me than another it is my unerring taste. This butter is not fresh. But do not mind. I am not complaining. Do not think that. I merely passed the remark. And if you are really going to get me my usual quantity of cream, will you do so now? Cold chocolate two mornings in succession would try my digestion sadly."

The girl left the room quickly, and as she passed the dining-room door she looked in to say hurriedly:

"Dry up, Dick. Mamma's been complaining of the noise."

"'Eleanor, I never complain,'" he murmured; but he put down the banjo, rose and stretched himself, and left the room, pretending to slip as he passed Nell in the passage, and flattening her against the wall.

She gave him a noiseless push and went for the remainder of the cream.

Mrs. Lorton received it with a sigh and a patient "I thank you, Eleanor;" and while she sipped the chocolate, and snipped at the bread and butter—she ate the latter as if it were a peculiarly

distasteful medicine in the solid—the girl tidied the room. It was the only really well-furnished room in the cottage; Nell's little chamber in the roof was as plain as Marguerite's in "Faust," and Dick's was Spartan in its Character; but a Wolfer—Mrs. Lorton was a distant, a very distant [Pg 9] connection by a remote marriage of the noble family of that name—cannot live without a certain amount of luxury, and, as there was not enough to go round, Mrs. Lorton got it all. So, though Nell's little bed was devoid of curtains, her furniture of the "six-guinea suite" type and her carpet a square of Kidderminster, her stepmother's bed was amply draped, possessed its silk eider-down and lace-edged pillows; there was an Axminster on the floor, an elaborate dressing table furnished with a toilet set, and—the fashionable lady's indispensable—a cheval glass.

"I think I will get up in half an hour, if you will be good enough to send Molly up to me," said Mrs. Lorton, sinking onto her pillow as if exhausted by her struggle with the chocolate.

"Yes, mamma," assented the girl. "What will you have for lunch?"

"Lunch!" sighed Mrs. Lorton, with an assumption of weary indifference. "It is really of no consequence, Eleanor. I eat so little, especially in the middle of the day. Perhaps if you could get me a sweetbread I might manage a few morsels. But do not trouble. You know how much I dislike causing trouble. A sweetbread nicely browned—on a small, a very small piece of toast; quite dry, please, Eleanor."

"Yes, mamma, I know," said Eleanor; but she looked out of the window rather doubtfully. Sweetbreads were not easily obtained at the only butcher's shop in the village; and, when they were, they were dear; but she had just paid the long-running bill, and——

"I'll go up to Smart's and see about it," she said. "Is there anything you want in the village, mamma?"

Mrs. Lorton sighed again; she rarely spoke without a sigh.

"If you really want the walk and are going, Eleanor, you might ask Mrs. Porter if she has got that toilet vinegar for me. She promised to get it down from London quite a week ago. It is really too ridiculous! But what can one expect in this hole, and living among a set of barbarians? I know that I shall never grow accustomed to this life of savagery; my memory of the past is too acute, alas! But I must stifle it; I must remember that the great trial of my life has been sent for my good, and I will never complain. Not one word of discontent shall ever pass my lips. My dear Eleanor, you surely are not going to be so mad as to open that window! And my neuralgia only just quiet!"

"I beg your pardon, mamma. The room seemed so hot, and I forgot. I've closed it again; see! Let me draw the eider-down up; that's it. I won't forget the toilet vinegar."

"I thank you, Eleanor; and you might get this week's *Fashion Gazette*. It is the only paper I care for; but it is not unnatural that I should like to see it occasionally. One may be cut off from all [Pg 10] one's friends and relations, may be completely out of the world of rank and refinement, but one likes now and then to read of the class to which one belongs, but from which one is, alas! forever separated."

"I'll get the *Fashion Gazette* if Mrs. Porter has it, mamma. I won't be long, and Molly will hear you if you want her before the time."

Mrs. Lorton sighed deeply in acknowledgment, and Nell left the room.

She had been bright and girlish enough while romping with her brother, but the scene with her stepmother had left its impression on her face; the dark-gray eyes were rather sad and weary; there was a slight droop at the corners of the sweetly curved lips; but the change lent an indescribable charm to the girlish face. Looking at it, as it was then, no man but would have longed to draw the slim, graceful figure toward him, to close the wistful eyes with a kiss, to caress the soft hair with a comforting hand. There was a subtle fascination in the very droop of the lips which would have haunted an artist or a poet, and driven the ordinary man wild with love.

Mrs. Lorton had called Shorne Mills a "hole," but as a matter of fact, the village stood almost upon the brow of the hill down which ran the very steep road to the tiny harbor and fishing place which nestled under the red Devon cliffs; and barbaric as the place might be, it was beautiful beyond words. No spot in this loveliest of all counties was more lovely; and as yet it was, so to speak, undiscovered. With the exception of the vicarage there was no other house, worthy the name, in the coombe; all the rest were fishermen's cots. The nearest inn and shops were on the fringe of the moor behind and beyond the Lorton's cottage; the nearest house of any consequence was that of the local squire, three miles away. The market town of Shallop was eight miles distant, and the only public communication with it was the carrier's cart, which went to and fro twice weekly. In short, Shorne Mills was out of the world, and will remain so until the Railway Fiend flaps his coal-black wings over it and drops, with red-hot feet, upon it to sear its beauty and destroy its solitude. It had got its name from a flour and timber mill which had once flourished halfway down the coombe or valley; but the wheels were now silent, the mills were falling to pieces, and the silver stream served no more prosaic purpose than supplying the fishing folk with crystal water which was pure as the stars it reflected. This stream, as it ran beside the road or meandered through the sloping meadows, made soft music, day and night, all through the summer, but swelled itself into a torrent in the winter, and roared as it swept over the smooth [Pg 11]

bowlders to its bridegroom, the sea; sometimes it was the only sound in the valley, save always the murmur of the ocean, and the shrill weird cry of the curlew as it flew from the sea marge to the wooded heights above.

Nell loved the place with a great and exceeding love, with all the love of a girl to whom beauty is a continual feast. She knew every inch of it; for she had lived in the cottage on the hill since she was a child of seven, and she was now nearly twenty-one. She knew every soul in the fishing village, and, indeed, for miles around, and not seldom she was spoken of as "Miss Nell, of Shorne Mills;" and the simple folk were as proud of the title as was Nell herself. They were both fond and proud of her. In any cottage and at any time her presence was a welcome one, and every woman and child, when in trouble, flew to her for help and comfort even before they climbed to the vicarage—that refuge of the poor and sorrowing in all country places.

As she swung to the little gate behind her this morning, she paused and looked round at the familiar scene; and its beauty, its grandeur, and its solitude struck her strangely, as if she were looking at it for the first time.

"One could be so happy if mamma—and if Dick could find something to do!" she thought; and at the thought her eyes grew sadder and the sweet lips drooped still more at the corner; but as she went up the hill, the fine rare air, the brilliant sunshine acted like an anodyne, and the eyes grew brighter, the lips relaxed, so that Smart's—the butcher's—face broadened into a smile of sympathy as he touched his forehead with a huge and greasy finger.

"Sweetbreads! No, no, miss; I've promised the cook up at the Hall——There, bless your heart, Miss Nell, don't 'ee look so disappointed. I'll send 'em—yes, in half an hour at most. Dang me if it was the top brick off the chimney I reckon you'd get 'ee, for there ain't no refusin' 'ee anything!"

Nell thanked him with a smile and a grateful beam from her gray eyes, and then, still lighter-hearted, went on to Mrs. Porter's. By great good luck not only had the toilet vinegar arrived from London, but a copy of the *Fashion Gazette*; and with these in her hand Nell went homeward. But at the bend of the road near the cottage she paused. Mrs. Lorton would not want the vinegar or the paper for another hour. Would there be time to run down to the jetty and look at the sea? She slipped the paper and the bottle in the hedge, and went lightly down the road. It was so steep that strangers went cautiously and leaned on their sticks, but Nell nearly ran and seemed [Pg 12] scarcely to touch the ground; for she had toddled down that road as a child, and knew every stone in it; knew where to leave it for the narrow little path which provided a short cut, and where to turn aside for the marvelous view of the tiny harbor that looked like a child's toy on the edge of the opal sea.

Women and children came out of the cottages as she went swiftly past, and she exchanged greetings with them; but she was in too great a hurry to stop, and one child followed after her with bitter complaint.

She stood for a moment or two talking to some of the men mending their nets on the jetty, called down to Dick, who was lying—he was always reclining on something—basking in the stern of his anchored boat; then she went, more slowly, up the hill again.

As she neared the cottage, a sound rose from the house and mingled with the music of the stream. It was the yelp of staghounds. She stopped and listened, and wondered whether the stag would run down the hill, as it sometimes did; then she went on. Presently she heard another sound—the tap, tap of a horse's hoofs. Her quick ear distinguished it as different from the slow pacing of the horses which drew the village carts, and she looked up the road curiously. It was not the doctor's horse; she knew the stamp, stamp of his old gray cob. This was a lighter, more nervous tread.

Within twenty paces of the cottage she saw the horse and horseman. The former was a beautiful creature, almost thoroughbred, as she knew; for every woman in the district was a horsewoman by instinct and association. The latter was a gentleman in a well-made riding suit of cords. He was riding slowly, his whip striking against his leg absently, his head bent.

That he was not one of the local gentry Nell saw at the first glance. In that first glance also she noted a certain indescribable grace, an air of elegance, which, as a rule, was certainly lacking in the local gentry. She could not see his face, but there was something strange, distinguished in his attitude and the way he carried himself; and, almost unconsciously, her pace slackened.

Strangers in Shorne Mills were rare. Nell, being a woman, was curious. As she slowly reached the gate, the man came almost alongside. And at that moment a rabbit scuttled across the road, right under the horse's nose. With the nervousness of the thoroughbred, it shied. The man had it in hand in an instant, and touched it with his left spur to keep it away from the girl. The horse sprang sideways, set its near foot on a stone, and fell, and the next instant the man was lying at Nell's feet. [Pg 13]

CHAPTER II.

For a moment Nell was too startled to do anything but cry out; then, as the man did not move, she knelt beside him, and still calling for Molly, almost unconsciously raised his head. He had

fallen on his side, but had turned over in the instant before losing consciousness; and as Nell lifted his head she felt something wet trickle over her hand, and knew that it was blood.

She was very much frightened—with the exception of Dick's boyish falls and cuts, it was the first accident at which she had "assisted"—and she had never longed for any one as she longed for Molly. But neither Molly nor any one else came, and Nell, in a helpless, dazed kind of fashion, wiped the blood from the wound.

Then suddenly she thought of water, and setting his head down as gently as she could, she ran to the stream, saturated her handkerchief, and, returning, took his head on her lap again, and bathed his forehead.

While she was doing this she recovered her presence of mind sufficiently to look at him with something like the desire to know what he was like; and, with all a woman's quickness of perception, saw that he was extremely good-looking; that he was rather dark than fair; that though he was young—twenty-nine, thirty, flashed through her mind—the hair on his temples was faintly flecked with gray.

But something more than the masculine beauty of the face struck her, struck her vaguely, and that was the air of distinction which she had noticed in his bearing as he came down the road, and an expression of weariness in the faint lines about the mouth and eyes.

She was aware, without knowing why, that he was extremely well dressed; she saw that the ungloved hand was long and thin—the hand of a well-bred man—and that everything about him indicated wealth and the gentleman.

All these observations required but a second or two—a man would only have got at them after an hour—and, almost before they were made, he opened his eyes with the usual dazed and puzzled expression which an individual wears when he has been knocked out of time and is coming back to consciousness.

As his eyes opened, Nell noticed that they were dark—darker than they should have been to match his hair—and that they were anything but commonplace ones. He looked up at her for an instant or two, then muttered something under his breath—Nell was almost certain that he swore [Pg 14] —and aloud, in the toneless voice of the newly conscious, said:

"I came off, didn't I?"

"Yes," said Nell.

She neither blushed nor looked shy. Indeed, she was too frightened, too absorbed by her desire for his recovery to remember herself, or the fact that this strange man's head was lying on her knee.

"I must have been unconscious," he said, almost to himself. "Yes, I've struck my head."

Then he got to his feet and stood looking at her; and his face was, if anything, whiter than it had been.

"I'm very sorry. Permit me to apologize, for I must have frightened you awfully. And"—he looked at her dress, upon which was a large wet patch where his head had rested—"and I've spoiled your dress. In short, I've made a miserable nuisance of myself."

Nell passed his apology by.

"Are you hurt?" she asked anxiously.

"No; I think not," he replied. "I can't think how I managed to come off; I don't usually make such an ass of myself."

He went for his hat, but as he stooped to pick it up he staggered, and Nell ran to him and caught his arm.

"You are hurt!" she said. "I—I was afraid so!"

"I'm giddy, that's all, I think," he said; but his lips closed tightly after his speech, and they twitched at the corners. "I expect my horse is more damaged than I am," he added, and he walked, very slowly, to where the animal stood looking from side to side with a startled air.

"Yes; knees cut. Poor old chap! It was my fault—my fau——"

He stopped, and put his hand to his head as if he were confused.

Nell went and stood close by him, with a vague kind of idea that he was going to fall and that she might help him, support him.

"You are in pain?" she asked, her brow wrinkled with her anxiety, her eyes darkened with her womanly sympathy and pity.

"Yes," he admitted frankly. "I've knocked my head, and"—he touched his arm—"and, yes, I'm afraid I've broken my arm."

"Oh!"—cried Nell, startled and aghast—"oh! you must come into the house at once—at once."

He glanced at the cottage.

"Your house?" [Pg 15]

"Yes," said Nell. "Oh, come, please. You may faint again——"

"Oh, no, I shan't."

"But you may—you may! Take my arm; lean on me——"

He took her arm, but did not lean on her, and he smiled down at her.

"I don't look it, but I weigh nearly twelve stone, and I should bear you down," he said.

"I'm stronger than I look," said Nell. "Please come!"

"I'll put the bridle over the gate first," he said.

"No, no; I will do it. Lean against the gate while I go."

He rested one hand on the gate. She got the horse—he came as quietly as his master had done—and hitched the bridle on the post; then she drew the man's arm within hers, and led him into the house and into the drawing-room.

"Sit down," she said; "lean back. I won't be a moment. Oh, where is Molly? But perhaps I'd better not leave you."

"I'm all right. I assure you that I've no intention of fainting again," he said; and there was something like a touch of irritation in his tone.

Nell rang the bell and stood looking down at him anxiously. There was not a sign of self-consciousness or embarrassment in her face or manner. She was still thinking only of him.

"I'm ashamed of myself for giving you so much trouble," he said.

"It is no trouble. Why should you be ashamed? Oh, Molly! don't cry out or scream—it is all right! Be quiet now, Molly! This gentleman has been thrown from his horse, and——Oh, bring me some brandy; and, Molly, don't tell—don't frighten mamma."

Molly, with her mouth still wide open, ran out of the room, and Nell's eyes returned to the man.

He sat gazing at the carpet for a while, his brow knit with a frown, as if he found the whole affair a hideous bore, his injured arm across his knee. There was no deprecating smile of the nervous man; he made no more apologies, and it seemed to Nell that he had quite forgotten her, and was only desirous of getting rid of her and the situation generally. But he looked up as Molly came fluttering in with the brandy; and as he took the glass from Nell's hand—for the first time it shook a little—he said:

"Thanks—thanks very much. I'm all right now, and I'll hasten to take myself off."

He rose as he spoke, then his hand went out to the sofa as if in search of support, and with an articulate though audible "Damn!" he sank down again.

"I'm afraid I'll have to wait for a few minutes," he said, in a tone of annoyance. "I can't think [Pg 16] what's the matter with me, but I feel as giddy and stupid as an owl. I'll be all right presently. Is the inn near here?"

"No," said Nell; "the inn is a long way from here; too far——"

He did not let her finish, but rather impatiently cut in with:

"Oh, but there must be some place where I can go——"

"You must not think of moving yet," she said. "I don't know much—I have not seen many accidents—but I am sure that you have hurt yourself; and you say that you have broken your arm?"

"I'm afraid so, confound it! I beg your pardon. I'll get to the inn—I have not broken my leg, and can walk well enough—and see a doctor."

Mrs. Lorton's step was heard in the passage, and the voice of that lady was heard before she appeared in the doorway, demanding, in an injured tone:

"Eleanor, what does this mean? Why do you want brandy, and at this time of the day? Are you ill? I have always told you that some day you would suffer from this continual rushing about——"

Then she stopped and stared at the two, and her hand went up to her hair with the gesture of the weakly vain woman.

"Who is it, Nell? What does it mean?" she demanded.

The man rose and bowed, and his appearance, his self-possession and well-bred bow impressed Mrs. Lorton at once.

"I beg your pardon," she said, in her sweetest and most ingratiating manner, with a suggestion of the simper which used to be fashionable when she was a girl. "There has been an accident, I see.

Are you very much hurt? Eleanor, pray do not stand like a thing of stock or stone; pray, do not be so useless and incapable."

Nell blushed and looked round helplessly.

"Please sit down," went on Mrs. Lorton. "Eleanor, let me beg of you to collect your senses. Get that cushion—sit down. Let me place this at your back. Do you feel faint? My smelling salts, Eleanor!"

The man's lips tightened, and the frown darkened the whole of his face. Nell knew that he was swearing under his breath and wishing Mrs. Lorton and herself at the bottom of the sea.

"No, no!" he said, evidently struggling with his irritation and his impatience of the whole scene. "I'm not at all faint. I've fallen from my horse, and I think I've smashed my arm, that's all." [Pg 17]

"All!" echoed Mrs. Lorton, in accents of profound sympathy and anxiety. "Oh, dear, dear! Nell, we must send for the doctor. Will you not put your feet up on the sofa? It is such a relief to lie at full length."

He rose with a look of determination in his dark eyes.

"Thank you very much, madame, but I cannot consent to give you any further trouble. I am quite capable of walking to anywhere, and I will——" He broke off with an exclamation and sank down again. "I must be worse than I thought," he said suddenly, "and I must ask you to put up with me for a little while—half an hour."

Mrs Lorton crossed the room with the air of an empress, or a St. Teresa on the verge of a great mission, and rang the bell.

"I cannot permit you to leave this house until you have recovered—quite recovered," she said, in a stately fashion. "Molly, get the spare room ready for this gentleman. Eleanor, you might assist, I think! I will see that the sheets are properly aired—nothing is more important in such a case—and we will send for the doctor while you are retiring."

Molly plunged out, followed by Nell, and Mrs. Lorton seated herself opposite the injured man, and, folding her hands, gazed at him as if she were solely accountable for his welfare.

"I'm very much obliged to you, madame," he said, at last, and by no means amiably. "May I ask to whom I am indebted for so much—kindness?"

"My name is Lorton," said the dear lady, as if she had picked him up and brought him in and given him brandy; "but I am a Wolfer."

He looked at her as if he thought she were mad, and Mrs. Lorton hastened to explain.

"I am a near relative of Lord Wolfer."

"Oh, yes, yes; I beg your pardon," he said, with a touch of relief. "I didn't understand for a moment."

"Perhaps you know Lord Wolfer?" she asked sweetly.

He shook his head.

"I've heard of him."

"Of course," she assented blandly. "He is sufficiently well known, not to say famous. And your name—if I may ask?"

He frowned, and was silent for an instant.

"Vernon," he said reluctantly, "Drake Vernon."

"Indeed! The name seems familiar to me. Of the Northumberland Vernons, I suppose?"

"No," he replied, rather shortly.

"No? There are some Vernons in Warwickshire, I remember," she suggested.

He shook his head. [Pg 18]

"I'm not connected with any of the Vernons," he said with a grim courtesy.

Mrs. Lorton looked rather disappointed, but only for a moment; for, foolish as she was, she knew a gentleman when she saw one, and this Mr. Vernon, though not one of the Vernons, was evidently a gentleman and a man of position. She smiled at him graciously.

"Sometimes one scarcely knows with whom one is connected," she said. "If you will excuse me, I will go and see if your room is prepared. We have only one servant—now," she sighed plaintively, "and my daughter is young and thoughtless."

"She is not the latter, at any rate," he said, but coldly enough. "Your daughter displayed extraordinary presence of mind——"

"My stepdaughter, I ought to explain," broke in Mrs. Lorton, who could not endure the praise of any other than herself. "My late husband—I am a widow, Mr. Vernon—left me his two children as

a trust, a sacred trust, which I hope I have discharged to the best of my ability. I will rejoin you presently."

He rose and bowed, and then leaned back and closed his eyes, and swore gently but thoroughly.

Mrs. Lorton returned in a few minutes with Molly.

"If you will come now? We have sent for the doctor."

"Thank you, thank you!" he said, and he went upstairs with them; but he would not permit them to assist him to take off his coat, and sat on the edge of the bed waiting with a kind of impatient patience for the doctor.

By sheer good luck it was just about the time old Doctor Spence made his daily appearance in Shorne Mills, and Nell, running up to the crossway, caught him as he was ambling along on his old gray cob.

"Eh? what is it, my dear? That monkey of a brother got into mischief again?" he said, laying his hand on her shoulder. "What? Stranger? Broke his arm? Come, come; you're frightened and upset. No need, no need! What's a broken arm! If it had been his neck, now!"

"I'm not frightened, and I'm not upset!" said Nell indignantly, but with a smile. "I'm out of breath with running."

"And out of color, too, Nell. No need to run back, my dear. I'll hurry up and see what's wrong."

He spoke to the cob, who understood every word and touch of his master, and jolted down the steep road, and Nell followed slowly. She was rather pale, as he had noticed, but she was not frightened. In all her uneventful life nothing so exciting, so disturbing had happened as this [Pg 19] accident. It was difficult to realize it, to realize that a great strong man had been cast helpless at her feet, that she had had his head on her lap; she looked down at the patch on her dress and shuddered. Was she glad or sorry that she had chanced to be near when he fell? As she asked herself the question her conscience smote her. What a question to arise in her mind! Of course she should be glad, very glad, to have been able to help him. Then the man's face rose before her, and appealed to her by its whiteness, by the weary, wistful lines about the lips and eyes.

"I wonder who he is?" she asked herself, conscious that she had never seen any one like him, that he was in some way different to any one of the men she had hitherto met.

As she walked slowly, thoughtfully down the road, a strange feeling came upon her; it was as if she had touched, if only with the finger tips, the fringe of the great unknown world.

The doctor, breaking away from the lengthy recountal of Mrs. Lorton, went upstairs to the spare room, where still sat Mr. Drake Vernon on the edge of the bed, very white, but very self-contained.

"How do you do, doctor?" he said quietly. "I've come a cropper and knocked my head and broken some of my bones. If you'll be so good——"

"Take off your coat. My good sir, why didn't you let them help you to undress?" broke in the old man, with the curtness of the country doctor, who, as a rule, is no respecter of persons.

"I've given these good people trouble enough already," was the reply. "Thanks; no, you don't hurt me—not more than can be helped. And I'm not going to faint. Thanks, thanks."

He got undressed and into bed, and the doctor "went over" him. As he got to the injured arm, Mr. Vernon drew his signet ring from his finger and slipped it in his pocket.

"Rather nasty knock on the head; broken arm—compound fracture, unfortunately."

"Oh! just patch me up so that I can get away at once, will you?"

The old man shook his head.

"Sorry, Mr. Vernon; but that is rather too large an order. Frankly, you have knocked yourself about rather more seriously than you think. The head——And you are not a particularly 'good patient,' I'm afraid. Been living rather—rapidly, eh?"

Vernon nodded.

"I've been living all the time," was the grim assent. [Pg 20]

"I thought so. And you pay the usual penalty. Nature is inexorable, and never lets a man off with the option of a fine. If one of my fishermen had injured himself as you have done, I could let him do what he pleased; but you will have to remain here, in this room—or, at any rate, in this house—for some little time."

"Impossible!" said Vernon. "I am a stranger to these people. I can't trespass on their good nature; I've been nuisance enough already——"

"Oh, nonsense," retorted the doctor calmly. "We are not savages in these parts. They'd enjoy nursing and taking care of you. The good lady of the house is just dying for some little excitement like this. It's a quiet place; you couldn't be in a better; and whether you could or couldn't doesn't matter, for you've got to stay here for the present, unless you want brain fever and the principal

part in a funeral."

Drake Vernon set his lips tight, then shrugged his shoulders, and in silence watched the doctor's preparations for setting the arm.

It is a painful operation, but during its accomplishment the patient gave no sign, either facial or vocal, of the agony endured. The doctor softly patted the splintered arm and looked at him keenly.

"Been in the service, Mr. Vernon?" he said.

Vernon glanced at him sharply.

"How did you know that?" he demanded reluctantly.

"By the way you held your arm," replied the doctor. "Was in the service myself, when a young army doctor. Oh, don't be afraid; I am not going to ask questions; and—and, like my tribe, I am as discreet as an owl. Now, I'll just give you a sleeping draft, and will look in in the evening, to see if it has taken effect; and to-morrow, if you haven't brain fever, you will be on the road to recovery. I'm candid, because I want you to understand that if you worry yourself——"

"Make the draft a strong one; I'm accustomed to narcotics," interrupted Vernon quietly.

"Opium, or chloral, or what?"

"Chloral," was the reply.

"Right. Comfortable?"

"Oh, yes. Wait a moment. I was hunting with the Devon and Somerset to-day. I know scarcely any one—not one of the people, I may say; but—well, I don't want a fuss. Perhaps you won't mind keeping my accident, and my presence here to yourself?"

"Certainly," said the doctor. "There is no friend—relative—you would like sent for?" [Pg 21]

"Good Lord, no!" responded Mr. Vernon. "I shall have to get away in a day or two."

"Will you?" grunted the old doctor to himself, as he went down the stairs.

The day passed slowly. The little house was filled with an air of suppressed excitement, which was kept going by Mrs. Lorton, who, whenever Nell or Molly moved, appeared from unexpected places, attired in a tea gown, and hissed a rebuking and warning "Hush!" which penetrated to the remotest corner of the house, and would certainly have disturbed the patient but for the double dose of sulphonal which the doctor; had administered.

About the time she expected Dick to return, Nell went down the road to meet him, fearing that he might enter singing or whistling; and when she saw him lounging up the hill, with a string of fish in his hand, she ran to him, and, catching his arm, began to tell her story in a whisper, as if the injured Mr. Vernon were within hearing.

Dick stared, and emitted a low whistle.

"'Pon my word, you've been a-going of it, Nell! Sounds like a play: 'The Mysterious Stranger and the Village Maiden.' Scene one. Enter the stranger: 'My horse is weary; no human habitation nigh. Where to find a resting place for my tired steed and my aching head! Ah! what is this? A simple child of Nature. I will seek direction at her hands.' Horse takes fright; mysterious stranger is thrown. Maiden falls on her knees: 'Ah, Heaven! 'tis he! 'tis he!'"

Nell laughed, but her face crimsoned.

"Dick, don't be an idiot, if you can help it. I know it is difficult——"

"Spare your blushes, my child," he retorted blandly. "The Mysterious S. will turn out to be a commercial traveler with a wife and seven children. But, Nell, what does mamma say?"

"She likes it," said Nell, with a smile. "She is happier and more interested than I have ever seen her."

Dick struck an attitude and his forehead.

"Can it be—oh, can it be that the romance will end another way? Are we going to lose our dear mamma? Grateful stranger—love at first sight——"

"Dick, you are the worst kind of imbecile! He is years younger than mamma—young enough to be her son. Now, Dick, dry up, and don't make a noise. He is really ill. I know it by the way the old doctor smiles. He always smiles and grins when the case is serious. You'll be quiet, Dick, dear?"

"This tender solicitude for the sufferer touches me deeply," he whimpered, mopping his eyes. "Oh, yes, I'll be quiet, Nell. Much as I love excitement, I'm not anxious for a funeral, and a [Pg 22] bereaved and heartbroken sister. Shall I take my boots off before entering the abode of sickness, or shall I walk in on my head?"

The day passed. Dick, driven almost mad by the enforced quietude, and the incessant "Hushes!" of Mrs. Lorton, betook himself to his tool shed to mend his fishing rod—and cut his fingers—and then to bed. Molly went to the sick room in the capacity of nurse, and Mrs. Lorton, after desiring

everybody that she should be called if "a change took place," retired to the rest earned by pleasurable excitement; and Nell stole past the spare-room door to her nest under the roof.

As she undressed slowly, she paused now and again to listen. All was quiet; the injured man was still sleeping. She went to the open window and looked out seaward. Something was stirring within her, something that was like the faint motion of the air before a storm. Is it possible that we have some premonition of the first change in our lives; the change which is to alter the course of every feeling, every action? She knew too little of life or the world to ask herself the question; but she was conscious of a sensation of unrest, of disquietude. She could not free herself from the haunting presence of the handsome face, of the dark and weary, wistful eyes. The few sentences he had spoken kept repeating themselves in her ear, striking on her brain with soft persistence. The very name filled her thoughts. "Drake Vernon, Drake Vernon!"

At last, with an impatient movement, with a blush of shame for the way in which her mind was dwelling on him, she left the window and fell on her knees at the narrow bed to say her prayers.

But his personality intruded even on her devotions, and, half unconsciously, she added to her simple formula a supplication for his recovery.

Then she got into bed and fell asleep. But in a very little while she started awake, seeing the horse shy and fall, feeling the man's head upon her lap. She sat up and listened. His room was beneath hers—the cottage was built in the usual thin and unsubstantial fashion—and every sound from the room below rose to hers. She heard him moan; once, twice; then his voice, thick and husky, called for water.

She listened. The faint cry rose again and again. She could not endure it, and she got out of bed, put on her dressing gown, and slipped down the stairs. She could hear the voice more plainly now, and the cry was still, "Water! water!"

She opened the door, and, pausing a moment, her face crimson, stole toward the bed. Molly was [Pg 23] in her chair, with her head lolling over the back, as if it were a guillotine, her huge mouth wide open, fast asleep.

Nell stood and looked down at the unconscious man. The dark-brown hair was tangled, the white face drawn with pain, the lips dry with fever, one hand, clenched, opening and shutting spasmodically, on the counterpane.

That divine pity which only a woman can feel filled and overran her heart. She poured some water into a glass and set it to his lips. He could not drink lying down, and, with difficulty, she raised his head on her bosom. He drank long and greedily; then, as she slowly—dare one write "reluctantly"?—lowered his head to the pillow, he muttered:

"Thanks, thanks, Luce! That was good!"

CHAPTER III.

"Luce!"

It was a strange name—the name of a woman, of course. Nell wondered whether it was his sister—or sweetheart? Perhaps it was his wife?

She waited for some minutes; then she woke Molly, and returned to her own room.

Drake Vernon was unconscious for some days, and Nell often stole in and stood beside the bed; sometimes she changed the ice bandages, or gave him something to drink. He wandered and talked a great deal, but it was incoherent talk, in which the names of the persons he whispered or shouted were indistinguishable. On the fourth day he recovered consciousness, but was terribly weak, and the doctor would not permit Mrs. Lorton to enter the room.

He put his objection very cleverly.

"I have to think of you, my dear madame," he said. "I don't want two patients on my hands in the same house. Talk him back into delirium!" he added to himself.

All these days Mrs. Lorton continued to "hush," Nell went about with a grave air of suspense, and Dick—it is not given to this historian to describe the state of mind into which incessant repression drove that youth.

On the sixth day, bored to death, and somewhat curious, he strolled into the sick room. Drake Vernon, propped up by pillows, was partaking of beef tea with every sign of distaste.

"How are you getting on, sir?" asked Dick.

The sick man looked at the boy, and nodded with a faint smile. [Pg 24]

"I'm better, thanks; nearly well, I devoutly trust."

"That's all right," commented Dick cheerfully. "Thought I'd just look in. Shan't upset you, or disturb you, shall I, sir?"

"Not in the very least," was the reply. "I'm very glad to see you. Won't you sit down? Not there, but some place where I can see you."

Dick sat on the end of the bed and leaned against the rail, with his hands in his pockets.

"I ought to introduce myself, I suppose. I'm what is called in the novels 'the son of the house'; I'm Nell's brother, you know."

Mr. Vernon nodded.

"So I see, by the likeness."

"Rather rough on Nell, that, isn't it? I'll tell her," said Dick, with a spark of mischief in his eye. "Why, she's as black as a coal, and I'm fair."

"You are alike, all the same," said the invalid, rather indifferently.

"My name is Dick—Dick, as a rule; Richard, when my stepmother is more than usually riled with me."

"Permit me to call you by the shorter name," said Mr. Vernon. "I'm afraid I've been a terrible nuisance, and must continue to be for some days. The doctor tells me that I can't venture to move yet."

"That's all right," responded Dick cheerfully. "We shall be glad to see you about again, of course; but don't worry yourself on our account, sir. To tell you the truth, we rather enjoy—that is, some of us"—he corrected—"having 'an accident case' in the house. Mamma, for instance, hasn't been so happy for a long while."

"Mrs. Lorton must be extremely good-natured and charitable," commented Mr. Vernon.

Dick looked rather doubtful.

"Er—ye-s. You see, it's a little change and excitement, and we don't get much of that commodity in Shorne Mills. So we're rather grateful to you than otherwise for pitching yourself at our front gate. If you could have managed to break both arms and a leg, I verily believe that mamma would have wept tears of joy."

"I'm afraid I can't say I'm sorry I did not gratify her to that extent," said Mr. Vernon, with a grim smile; but it was a smile, and his dark eyes were scanning the boy's handsome face with something approaching interest. "Mrs. Lorton is your stepmother? Did I hear her say so, or did I dream it?"

"It's no dream; it's real enough," said Dick, with intense gravity. "My father"—he seated himself more comfortably—"was Lorton & Lorton, the Patent Coffee Roaster, you know—perhaps you've heard of it?" [Pg 25]

Mr. Vernon shook his head.

"Ah, well! a great many other people must have done so; for the roaster made a pile of money, and my father was a rich man. Molly, you can take that beef tea downstairs and give it to Snaps. He won't eat it, because he's a most intelligent dog. Thought I'd get her out of the room, sir. Molly's a good girl, but she's got ears and a tongue."

"So have I," said Drake Vernon, with a faint smile.

"Oh, I don't mind you. It's only right that you should know something about the people in whose house you are staying."

Drake Vernon frowned slightly, for there was the other side of the medal: surely, it was only right that the people in whose house he was staying should know something about himself.

"Father made a lot of money over a roaster; then my mother died. I was quite a kid when it happened; but Nell just remembers her. Then father married again; and, being rich, I suppose, wanted a fashionable wife. So he married mamma. I dare say that she's told you she's a Wolfer?"

Mr. Vernon nodded.

"There's not much in it," said Dick, with charming candor. "We've never set eyes on any of her swell connections, and I don't think she's ever heard from them since the smash."

"What smash?" asked Mr. Vernon, with only faint interest.

"Didn't I tell you? Left the part of *Hamlet* out of the play! Why, father added a patent coffeepot to the roaster, and lost all his money—or nearly all. Then he died. And we came here, and——There you are, sir; that's the story; and the moral is, 'Let well alone'; or 'Be content with your roaster, and touch not the pot.' Sounds like the title of a teetotal tract, doesn't it?"

"And you are at school, I suppose? No, you are too old for that."

"Thanks. I was trying not to feel offended," said Dick. "Nothing hurts a boy of my age like telling him he isn't a man. No; I've left school, and I'm supposed to be educated; but it's the thinnest kind of supposition. I don't fancy they teach you much at most schools. They didn't teach me anything at mine except cricket and football."

"Oxford, Cambridge?" suggested the invalid, leaning on his elbow, and looking at the boy absently.

"Wouldn't run to it," said Dick. "Mamma said I must begin the world—sounds as if it were a loaf of bread or an orange. I should have 'begun it' long ago if it were. The difficulty seems to be [Pg 26] where to begin. I'm supposed to have a taste for engineering—once made a steam engine out of an empty meat tin. It didn't work very well, and it blew up and burst the kitchen window; but that's a detail. So I'm waiting, like Mr. Micawber, for 'something to turn up' in the engineering line. I take in the engineering paper, and answer all the advertisements; but nothing comes of it. Quite comfortable? Shall I shake up the pillow, sir? I know how to do it, for I've seen Nell do 'em for mamma."

"No; thanks, very much. I'm quite comfortable. If you really are desirous of taking any trouble, you might get me a sheet of note paper and an envelope."

"To say nothing of a pen, some ink, and blotting paper," said Dick, rising leisurely.

He brought them and set them on the bed, and Mr. Drake Vernon wrote a letter.

"I'm sending for some clothes," he explained. "May I trouble you to post it? Any time will do."

"Post doesn't go out till five," said Dick. "And we've only one post in and out a day. This is the last place Providence thought of, and I don't think it would have mattered much if it had been forgotten altogether."

"It's pretty enough, too, what I saw of it," said Mr. Vernon.

"Oh, it's pretty enough," assented Dick casually; "but it's precious dull."

"What do you find to do?" asked the sick man, with an attempt at interest.

"Oh, I ride—when I can borrow a horse—and boat and fish—and fish and boat."

At that moment a girl's voice, singing in a soft and subdued tone, rose from below the window.

Mr. Drake Vernon listened for a moment or two, then he asked:

"Who is that?"

"That's Nell, caterwauling."

"Your sister has a good voice," remarked Mr. Vernon.

"Oh, yes; Nell sings very well," assented Dick, with a brother's indifferent patronage.

"And what does your sister find to do?" asked Mr. Vernon.

"Oh, she does ditto to me," said Dick. "Fish, boat—boat, fish; but since you've been here, of course——"

He stopped awkwardly.

"Yes, I understand. I must have been a terrible bore to you—to you all," said Mr. Drake Vernon, gravely and regretfully. "I'm very sorry."

"No man can say more; and there's no need for you to say as much, sir," remarked Dick [Pg 27] philosophically. "As I said, you have been a boon and a blessing to the women—and I don't mind, now you're getting better and can stand a little noise."

Mr. Vernon smiled.

"My dear fellow, you can make all the row you like," he said earnestly. "I'm very much obliged to you for looking in—come in when you care to."

"Thanks," said Dick. "Oh! about the horse. I've had him turned out. I don't think he's hurt much; only the hair cut; and he'll be all right again presently."

"I'm glad to hear it. I needn't say that directly he's well enough, you can——Will you give me that letter again?" he broke off, as if something had occurred to him.

Dick complied, and Drake Vernon opened it, added a line or two, and placed it in a fresh envelope.

"There was a message I had to give you, but I've forgotten it," said Dick, as he took the letter again. "Oh, ah, yes! It was from my sister. She asked me to ask you if you'd care to have some books. She didn't quite know whether you ought to read yet?"

"I should. Please thank your sister," said Vernon.

"Anything you fancy? Don't suppose you'll find Nell's books very lively. She's rather strong on poetry and the 'Heir of Redclyffe' kind of literature. I'll bring you some of my own with them. Mamma, being a Wolfer, goes in for the *Fashion Gazette* and the *Court Circular*, which won't be much in your line, I expect."

"Not in the least," Mr. Vernon admitted.

"So long, then, till I come back. Sure there's nothing else I can do for you, sir?"

He went downstairs—availing himself of the invalid's permission to make a noise by whistling "Tommy Atkins"—and Nell looked in at the French window, as he swept a row of books from the shelf of the sideboard.

"Dick, what an awful noise!" she said reproachfully, and in the subdued voice which had become natural with all of them.

"Shut up, Nell; the 'silent period' has now passed. The interesting invalid has lifted the ban, which was crushing one of us, at least. He thanks you for your offer of literature, and he has recovered sufficiently to write a note."

As he spoke he chucked the letter on the table, and Nell took it up and absently read the address.

"Mr. Sparling, 101 St. James' Place," she read aloud.

"Rather a swell address, isn't it?" he asked. "Interesting invalid looks rather a swell himself, too. I did him an injustice; there's nothing of the commercial traveler about him, thank goodness! And [Pg 28] he's decidedly good-looking, too. But isn't he white and shaky! I wonder who and what he is? Now I come to think of it, he was about as communicative as an oyster, and left me to do all the palaver. You'll be glad to hear that he admired your voice, and that he inquired how you passed your time; also, that he was shocked when I told him that you whiled the dragging hours away by dancing the cancan, and playing pitch and toss with a devoted brother."

Nell laughed, and blushed faintly.

"What books are you taking, Dick? Let me see."

"No, you don't! I know the kind of thing you'd send—'The Lessons of Sickness; or, Blessings in Disguise,' and the 'Pilgrim's Progress.'"

"Don't be an ass, Dick!"

"I'm taking some of my own. Nell, you can post this letter. Yes, I'll—I'll trust you with it. You'll be a good girl, and not open it, or drop it on the way," he adjured her, as he climbed upstairs with the books.

"Here you are, sir. Hope you'll like the selection; there's any amount of poetry and goody-goody of Nell's; but I fancy you'll catch onto some of mine. Try 'Hawkshead, the Sioux Chief,' to begin with. It's a stunner, especially if you skip all the descriptions of scenery. As if anybody wanted scenery in a story!"

"Thanks," said Mr. Vernon gravely. "I've no doubt I shall enjoy it." But he took up one of Nell's books and absently looked at her name written on the flyleaf—"Eleanor Lorton." The first name struck him as stiff and ill-suited to the slim and graceful girl whose face he only dimly remembered; "Nell" was better.

CHAPTER IV.

He took up one of the books and read a page or two; but the simple story could not hold him, and he dropped the volume, and, leaning his head on his sound arm, stared listlessly at the old-fashioned wall paper. But he did not see the pattern; the panorama of his own life's story was passing before him, and it was not at all a pleasing panorama. A life of pleasure, of absolute uselessness, of unthinking selfishness. What a dreary pilgrimage it seemed to him, as he lay in the little bedroom, with the scent of Nell's flowers floating up to him from the garden beneath, with the sound of the sea, flinging itself against the cliffs, burring like a giant bumble bee in his [Pg 29] ears. If any one had asked him whether his life had been worth living, he would have answered with a decided negative; and yet he was young, the gods had been exceeding good to him in many ways, almost every way, and there was no great sorrow to cast its shadow over him.

"Pity I didn't break my neck," he muttered. "No one would have cared—unless it were Luce, and perhaps even she, now——"

He broke off the reverie with a short laugh that was more bitter than a sigh, and turned his face to the wall.

Doctor Spence, when he paid his visit later in the day, found him thus, and eyed him curiously.

"Arm's getting on all right, Mr. Vernon," he said; "but the rest of you isn't improving. I think you'd better get up to-morrow and go downstairs. I'd keep you here, of course; but lying in bed isn't a bracing operation, especially when you think; and you think, don't you?"

"When I can't help it," replied Vernon, rather grimly. "I'm glad you have given me permission to get up; though I dare say I should have got up without it."

"I dare say," commented the old doctor. "Always have your own way, as a rule, don't you?"

"Always," assented the patient listlessly.

"Ye-s; it's a bad thing for most men; a very bad thing for you, I should say. By the way, if you should go downstairs, you must keep quiet——"

"Good heavens, you don't suppose I intend to dance or sing!" broke in Vernon, with a smile, of irritation.

"No; I mean that you must sit still and avoid any exertion. You'll find that you are not capable of much in the way of dancing or singing," he added, with a short laugh. "Try and amuse yourself, and don't—worry."

"Thanks," said Mr. Vernon.

Then, after a pause, he added:

"I must seem an ill-conditioned beast, I'm afraid, doctor; but the fact is—well, I have been worried lately, and this ridiculous accident hasn't tended to soothe me."

The doctor nodded.

"Life's too short for worry," he said, with the wisdom of age.

"No, you're right; nothing matters!" assented Mr. Vernon. "Well, I'm glad I can get up to-morrow. I'll clear out of here as soon as possible."

"I shouldn't hurry," remarked Doctor Spence. "They're glad enough to have you."

Vernon nodded impatiently. [Pg 30]

"So they say—the boy's been in here this morning—but that's nonsense, of course."

On his way down the steep village street the doctor met Nell coming up, with her quick, bright step, and he stopped the gray cob to speak to her.

"Well, Miss Nell," he said, with a smile twinkling in his keen eyes as they scanned the beautiful face with the dark tendrils of hair blown across her brow, beneath her old sailor hat, the clear gray eyes shining like crystal, the red lips parted slightly with the climb. "Just left your interesting patient. He'll come down to-morrow. Don't let him fag himself; and, see here, Nell, try and amuse him."

The gray eyes opened still wider, then grew thoughtful and doubtful, and the doctor laughed.

"Rather difficult, eh?" he said, reading her thoughts. "Well, I should say it was somewhat of a large order. But you can play draughts or cat's-cradle with him, or read, or play the piano. That's the kind of thing he wants. There's something on his mind, and that's worse than having a splint on his arm, believe me, Nell."

Nell nodded.

"I thought—that is, I fancied—he looked as if he were in trouble," she said musingly. "Poor man!"

"Oh, I don't know that he wants your pity," remarked the doctor dryly. "As a rule, when a man's got something on his mind, he has put it there himself."

"That does not make it any the better to have," said Nell absently.

"True, Queen Solomon!" he returned banteringly. "There's not much on your mind, I should imagine?"

Nell laughed, and her frank eyes laughed, too, as she met the quizzical, admiring gaze of the sharp old eyes.

"What should there be, Doctor Spence?" she responded.

"What, indeed?" he said. "May it be many a day before the black ox treads on your foot, my dear!"

With a nod, he sent the cob on again, and Nell continued her climb.

Something on his mind! She wondered what it was. Had some one he cared for died? But if that were so, he would be in mourning. Perhaps he had lost his money, as her father had done? Well, anyway, she was sorry for him.

It need scarcely be said that Mrs. Lorton did not permit the interesting stranger to move from bed to sitting room without a fuss. The most elaborate preparations were made by Molly, under her mistress' supervision. The sofa was wheeled to the window, a blanket was warmed and placed over the sofa, so that the patient might be infolded in it; a glass of brandy and water was placed on a small table, in case he should feel faint, and a couple of huge walking sticks were ready for the support of the patient—as if he had broken his leg as well as his arm. [Pg 31]

"No, remember, please, Eleanor, that there must be no noise; absolute quiet, Doctor Spence insisted on. He was most emphatic about the 'absolute.' Pull down that blind, Molly; nothing is so trying to an invalid as a glare of sunlight—and close the window first. There must be no draft, for a chill in such a case as this might prove fatal. Fatal! I wonder whether it would be better to light a fire?"

"It is very hot, mamma," ventured Nell, who had viewed the closing of the window with dismay.

"It may seem hot to you, who are in robust, not to say vulgar, health; but to one in Mr. Vernon's condition——"

At this moment he was heard coming down the stairs. He walked firmly though slowly, and it was evident to Nell that he was trying to look as little like an invalid as possible. He had dressed himself with the assistance of Dick, who walked behind with a pillow—which he made as if to throw at Nell, who passed quickly through the hall as they descended—and, though he looked pale and wan, Mr. Drake Vernon held himself erect, like a soldier, and began to make light of his accident, and succeeded in concealing any sign of the irritation which he felt when Mrs. Lorton fluttered forward with the two sticks and the blanket.

"Thank you—thank you very much; but I don't need them. Put it on? No, I think I'd better not. I'm quite warm." He looked round the carefully closed room—Dick's complaining "phew!" was almost audible behind him. "No, I won't have any brandy, thanks."

"Are you sure, quite sure, you do not feel faint? I know what it is to rise from a sick bed for the first time, Mr. Vernon, and I can enter into your feelings perfectly."

"Not at all—not at all; I mean that I'm not at all faint," he said hastily; "and I'm quite strong, quite."

"Let me see you comfortably rangé," said Mrs. Lorton, who was persuaded that she had hit upon a French word for "arranged." "Then I will get you some beef tea. I have made it with my own hands."

"It's to be hoped not!" said Dick devoutly, as she fluttered out. "Molly's beef tea is bad enough; but mamma's——What shall I do with the pillow?"

"Well, you might swallow it, my dear boy," said Mr. Vernon, with a short laugh. "Anything but put it under me. Good heavens! Any one would think I was dying of consumption! But it is really very kind."

"All right; I'll take it upstairs again," said Dick cheerfully. But he met Nell in the passage. There was the sound of a thud, a clear, low voice expostulating, and a girl's footstep on the stairs, as [Pg 32] Nell, smoothing her hair, carried up the pillow.

When she came down Mrs. Lorton met her.

"Get some salt, Eleanor, and take it in to Mr. Vernon. And please say, if he should ask for me, that I'm making him some calf's-foot jelly."

Nell took in the salt. Mr. Vernon rose from the sofa on which he had seated himself, and bowed with a half-impatient, half-regretful air.

"I'm too ashamed for words," he said. "Why did you trouble? The beef tea is all right."

"It's no trouble," said Nell. "Are you comfortable?"

"Quite—quite," he replied; but for the life of him he could not help glancing at the window.

Nell suppressed a smile.

"Isn't it rather hot?" she said.

"Now you mention it, I—I think it is, rather," he assented. "I'll open the window."

"No, no," said Nell. "I'll do it; you'll hurt your arm."

She opened the window.

"If—if there was a chair," he said hesitatingly. "I'm not used to a sofa—and—I'm afraid you'll think me very ungrateful! Let me get the chair. Thanks, thanks!" as she swiftly pulled the sofa out of the way and put an easy-chair in its place.

"You see, it will be a change to sit up," he said apologetically.

Nell nodded. She quite understood his dislike of the part of interesting invalid.

"And there's really nothing the matter with me, don't you know," he said earnestly; "nothing but this arm, which doesn't exactly lame me. Won't you sit down?"

Nell hesitated a moment, then took a chair at the other side of the window.

"You've a splendid view here," he remarked, staring steadily out of the window, for he felt rather than saw that the girl was a little shy—not shy, but, rather, that she scarcely knew what to say.

"Oh, yes," she assented, in a voice in which there was certainly no shyness. "There is a good view from all the windows; we are so high. Won't you have your beef tea?"

"Certainly. I'd forgotten it. Don't get up. I'll——"

But Nell had got up before he could rise. As she brought the tray to him he glanced up at her. He had been staring at the bedroom wall paper for some days, and perhaps the contrast offered by Nell's fresh, young loveliness made it seem all the fresher and more striking. There was something in the curve of the lips, in the expression of the gray eyes, a "sweet sadness," as the [Pg 33]

poet puts it, which impressed him.

"It's very good to be down again," he said. She had not gone back to her chair, but leaned in the angle of the bay window, and looked down at the village below. "I seem to have been in bed for ages."

She nodded.

"I know. I remember feeling like that when I got up after the measles, years ago."

"Not many years ago," he suggested, with a faint smile.

"It seems a long time ago to me," said Nell. "I remember that for weeks and months after I got well I hated the sight and smell of beef tea and arrowroot. And Doctor Spence—your doctor, you know—gave me a glass of ale one day, and stood over me while I drank it. He can be very firm when he likes, not to say obstinate."

Mr. Vernon listened to the musical voice, and looked at the slim, girlish figure and spirituelle face absently; and when there fell a silence he showed no disposition to break it. It was difficult to find anything to talk about with so young and inexperienced a girl, and it was almost with an air of relief that he turned as Mrs. Lorton entered.

"And how do you feel now?" she asked, with bated breath. "Weak and faint, I'm afraid. I know how exhausting one feels the first time of getting down. Eleanor, I do hope you have not been tiring Mr. Vernon by talking too much."

Mr. Vernon struggled with a frown.

"Miss Lorton has scarcely said two words," he said. "I assure you, my dear madame, that there is absolutely nothing the matter with me, and that—that I could stand a steam phonograph."

"I am so glad!" simpered Mrs. Lorton. "I have brought this week's *Society News*. I thought it might amuse you if I read some of the paragraphs—Eleanor, I think you might read them. Don't you think indolence is one of the greatest sins of the day, Mr. Vernon?" she broke off to inquire.

Vernon smiled grimly, and glanced at Nell, who colored under the amused expression in his eyes.

"I dare say it is," he said. "Speaking for myself, I can honestly say that I never do anything unless I am compelled."

Nell laughed, her short, soft laugh; but Mrs. Lorton was not at all discomfited.

"That is all very well for a man, though I am sure you do yourself an injustice, Mr. Vernon; but for a young girl! I think you will find something interesting on the third page, under the heading of 'Doings of the Elite,' Eleanor." [Pg 34]

Nell took the paper—the journal she especially detested, and Dick never failed to mock at—and glanced at Mr. Vernon; but he looked straight before him, down at the jetty below; and, not shyly, but, with a kind of resignation, she began:

"'Lord and Lady Bullnoze have gone on a visit to the Countess of Crowntires. Her ladyship is staying at the family seat, Cromerspokes, which is famous for its old oak and stained glass. It is not generally known that Lady Crowntires inherited this princely estate from her aunt, the Duchess of Bogshire.'"

"A most beautiful place," commented Mrs. Lorton. "I've seen a photograph of it—a private photograph."

Nell looked appealingly and despairingly at Mr. Vernon, but his face was perfectly impassive; and, smothering a sigh, she went on:

"'Lord Pygskin will hunt the Clodford hounds next season. His lordship has been staying at Blenheim for some weeks, recovering from an attack of the gout. It is said that his engagement with the charming and popular Miss Bung has been broken off.'"

"Dear me! How sad!" murmured Mrs. Lorton. "I am always so sorry to hear of these broken engagements of the aristocracy. Miss Bung—I think it said last week—is the daughter of the great brewer. Poor girl! it will be a blow for her!"

Not a smile crossed the impassive face; Nell thought that perhaps he was not listening, but she went on mechanically:

"'The marriage of the Earl of Angleford has caused quite a flutter of excitement among the elite. His lordship, as our readers are aware, is somewhat advanced in years, and had always been regarded as a confirmed bachelor——'"

At this point Nell became aware that the dark eyes had turned from the window to her face, and she paused and looked up. There was a faint dash of color on Mr. Vernon's cheeks, and a tightening of the lips. It seemed to Nell, judging by his expression, that he had suddenly become impatient of the twaddle, and she instantly dropped the paper on her lap. But Mrs. Lorton was enjoying herself too much to permit of such an interruption.

"Why do you stop, Eleanor?" she inquired. "It is most interesting. Pray, go on."

Nell again glanced at Mr. Vernon, but his gaze had returned to the window, and he shrugged his shoulders slightly, as if he were indifferent, as if he could bear it.

----"'A confirmed bachelor,'" resumed Nell, "'and his sudden and unexpected marriage must have been a surprise, and a very unpleasant surprise to his family; especially to his nephew, Lord Selbie, who is the heir presumptive to the title and estates. We say "presumptive," because in the event of the earl being blessed with a son and heir of his own, Lord Selbie will, of course, not inherit the title or the vast lands and moneys of the powerful and ancient family.'" [Pg 35]

"How disappointed he must be!" said Mrs. Lorton, sympathetically. "Really, such a marriage should not be permitted. What do you think, Mr. Vernon?"

Mr. Vernon started slightly, and looked at the weak and foolish face as if he scarcely saw it.

"Why not!" he said, rather curtly. "It's a free country, and a man may marry whom he pleases."

"Yes, certainly; that is, an ordinary man—one of the middle class; but not, certainly not, a nobleman of Lord Angleford's rank and position. How old did it say he is, Eleanor?"

"It doesn't say, mamma," replied Nell.

"Ah, well, I know he is quite old; for I remember reading a paragraph about him a few weeks ago. They were describing the ancestral home of the Anglefords—Anglemere, it is called; one of the historic houses, like Blenheim and Chatsworth, you know. And this poor Lord Selbie, the nephew, will lose the title and everything. Dear me! how interesting! Is there anything more about him?'

"Oh, yes; a great deal more," said Nell despairfully.

"Then pray continue—that is, if Mr. Vernon is not tired; though, speaking from experience, there is nothing so soothing as being read to."

Mr. Vernon did not look as if he found the impertinent paragraphs in the *Society News* particularly soothing, but he said:

"I'm not at all tired. It's very interesting, as you say. Please go on, Miss Lorton."

Nell looked at him doubtfully, for there was a kind of sarcasm in his voice. But she took up the parable.

"'Lord Selbie is, in consequence of this marriage of his uncle, the object of profound and general sympathy; for, as the readers must be aware, he is a persona grata in society——' What is a persona grata?" Nell broke off to inquire.

"Lord knows!" replied Mr. Vernon grimly. "I don't suppose the bounder who wrote these things does."

Mrs. Lorton simpered.

"It's Italian, and it means that he is very popular, a general favorite."

"Then why don't they say so?" asked Nell, in a patiently disgusted fashion. "'Is a persona grata in society. He is strikingly handsome——'" [Pg 36]

Mr. Vernon's lips curved with something between a grin and a sneer.

—"'And of the most charming manners.'"

"Who writes this kind of rot?" he muttered.

"'Since his first appearance in the circles of the London elite, Lord Selbie has been the cynosure of all eyes. To quote Hamlet again, he may truthfully be described as the "glass of fashion and the mould of form." His lordship is also a good all-round sportsman. He spent two or three years traveling in the Rockies and in Africa, and his exploits with the big game in both countries are well known. Like most young men of his class, Lord Selbie was rather wild at Oxford, and displayed a certain amount of diablerie in London during his quite early manhood. He is a splendid whip, and his four-in-hand was eclipsed by none other in the club. Lord Selbie is also an admirable horseman, and has won several cups in regimental races.'

"That is the end of that paragraph," said Nell, stifling a yawn, and glancing longingly through the window at the sea dancing in the sunlight. "Do you want any more?"

"Is there any?" asked Mr. Vernon grimly. "If so, we'd better have it, perhaps."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Lorton. "If there is anything I dislike more than another, it is incomplete information. Go on Eleanor."

Nell sighed and took up the precious paper again.

"'As is well known'—they always say that, because it flatters the readers, I suppose," she went on parenthetically—"'Lord Selbie is a "Lord" in consequence of his father, Mr. Herbert Selbie, the famous diplomatist, having been created a viscount; but, though he bears this title, we fancy Lord Selbie cannot be well off. The kind of life he has led since his advent in society must have strained his resources to the utmost, and we should not be far wrong if we described him as a poor man. This marriage of his uncle, the Earl of Angleford, must, therefore, be a serious blow to

him, and may cause his complete retirement from the circles of *ton* in which he has shone so brilliantly. Lord Selbie, as we stated last week, is engaged to the daughter of Lord Turfleigh.'"

Nell dropped the paper and struggled with a portentous yawn.

"Thank you very much, Miss Lorton," said Mr. Vernon politely, with a half smile on his impassive face. "It is, as Mrs. Lorton says, very interesting."

Nell stared at him; then, seeing the irony in his eyes and on his lips, smiled. [Pg 37]

"I thought for the moment that you meant it," she said quietly.

Mrs. Lorton heard, and sniffed at her.

"My dear Eleanor, what do you mean?" she inquired stiffly. "Of course, Mr. Vernon is interested. Why should he say so if he were not? I'm afraid, Eleanor, that you are of opinion that nothing but fiction has any claim on our attention, and that anything real and true is of no account. I may be old-fashioned and singular, but I find that these small details of the lives of our aristocracy are full of interest, not to say edifying. What do you think, Mr. Vernon?"

He had been gazing absently out of the window, but he pulled himself together, and came up to the scratch with a jerk.

"Certainly, certainly," he said.

Mrs. Lorton smiled triumphantly.

"You see, Eleanor, Mr. Vernon quite agrees with me. I must go and see if Molly has put the jelly in the window to cool. Meanwhile, Mr. Vernon may like you to continue reading to him."

Mr. Vernon rose to open the door for her—Nell noticed the act of courtesy—then sank down again.

"You don't want any more?" she said, looking at the paper on her knee.

"No, thanks," he said.

She tossed it onto a chair at the other end of the room.

"It is the most awful nonsense," she said, with a girlish frankness. "Why did you tell mamma that it was interesting?"

He met the direct gaze of the clear gray eyes, and smiled.

"Well—as it happened—it was," he said.

The clear gray eyes opened wider.

"What! All this gossip about the Earl of Angleford, and his nephew, Lord Selbie?"

He looked down, then raised his eyes, narrowed into slits, and fixed them above her head.

"I fancy it's true—in the main," he said, half apologetically.

"Well, and if it is," she retorted impatiently, "of what interest can it be to us? We don't know the Earl of Angleford, and don't care a button that he is married, and that his nephew is—what do you say?—disinherited."

"N-o," he admitted.

"Very well, then," she said triumphantly. "It is like reading the doings of people living in the moon."

"The moon is a long ways off," he ventured.

"Not farther from us than the world in which these earls and lords have their being," she retorted. "It all seems so—so impertinent to me, when I am reading it. Of what interest can the [Pg 38] lives of these people be to us, to me, Nell Lorton? I never heard of Lord Angleford, and Lord—what is it?—Lord Selbie, before; did you?"

He glanced at her, then looked fixedly through the window.

"I've heard of them—yes," he said reluctantly.

"Ah, well, you are better informed than I am," said Nell, laughing softly. "There's Dick; he's calling me. Do you mind being left? He will make an awful row if I don't go out."

"Certainly not. Go by all means!" he said. "And thank you for—all the trouble you have taken."

Nell nodded and hurried out, and Mr. Vernon leaned back and bit at his mustache thoughtfully, not to say irritably.

"I feel like a bounder," he muttered. "Why the blazes didn't I give my right name? I wonder what they'd say—how that girl would look—if I told them that I was the Lord Selbie this rag was cackling about? Shall I tell them? No. It would be awkward now. I shall be gone in a day or two, and they needn't know."

CHAPTER V.

The following morning, the carrier's cart stopped at the cottage, and Dick, having helped the carrier to bring in a big portmanteau, burst into the sitting room with:

"Your togs have arrived, Mr. Vernon; and the carrier says that there are a couple of horses at the station. They're directed 'Drake Vernon, Esquire,' so they must be for you!"

Vernon nodded.

"That's all right," he said. "They were doing nothing in—where they were, and I thought I'd have them sent down here. I suppose I must get some one to exercise them?"

Dick's eyes sparkled and his mouth stretched in an expressive grin.

"Not much difficulty about that," he said. "For instance, I don't mind obliging you—as a favor."

Mr. Vernon smiled.

"I thought perhaps you might be so good," he said; and he added casually: "Anybody here who could be trusted to bring them from the station?"

"I know a most trustworthy person; his name is Richard Lorton, and he will go for 'em in a brace of jiffs," said Dick.

Mr. Vernon flicked a five-pound note across the table.

"There may be some carriage. By the way, one of them is a lady's nag, and I fancy they may have sent a sidesaddle." [Pg 39]

Dick nodded and repeated the grin.

"I can get them put up at Sandy's," he said. "Sandy used to keep some stables going for post horses before the coach ran to Hartland, you know. I've got your horse there. Oh, they'll be all right. You trust to me."

"I do," said Mr. Vernon. "One moment," as Dick was rushing out to put on his well-worn riding suit. "I don't think I'd say anything about—the sidesaddle to Miss Lorton—yet."

Once again Dick nodded—a nod so full of comprehension as to be almost supernal.

Mr. Vernon went upstairs, and, with Molly's assistance, unpacked the huge portmanteau, and, when she had got out of the room, examined the contents. Strangely enough, the linen was all new and unmarked. Only on the silver fittings of the dressing case were a monogram—in which the initial "S" was decipherable—and a coronet.

"Sparling's an idiot!" Vernon muttered. "Why didn't he buy a new case? I shall have to keep this locked."

When he came down again, having changed into a blue serge suit, Nell was in the drawing-room, arranging some flowers, and she looked up with a smile of recognition at his altered appearance.

"Your box has arrived, I see," she said, with the frankness of—well, Shorne Mills. "You must be glad. And where has Dick dashed off to? He nearly knocked me down in his hurry."

"To Shallop," he said. "I had a couple of horses sent down."

"But you couldn't ride, with your arm in a sling; and you've a horse here already."

"Don't suppose it's fit to ride yet," he said, "and I'm not going to carry a sling forever. Besides, they were eating their heads off—where they were."

He said nothing about the sidesaddle.

"I see. Well, I'm sorry Dick's gone this morning, for I wanted him to come out in the boat. It's a good day for mackerel." She looked wistfully at the sea shining below them. "Of course I could go by myself, but I promised Mr. Gadsby that I wouldn't."

"Who's Mr. Gadsby?"

"The vicar. I got caught in a squall off the Head one day, and—I really wasn't in the least danger—but they were all waiting for me at the jetty, and they made a fuss—and so I had to promise that I wouldn't go out alone. And old Brownie's out with his nets—he goes with me sometimes. It's a nuisance." [Pg 40]

He stood by the window silently for a moment, then he glanced at her wistful face, and said:

"I should be a poor substitute, in my present condition, for old Brownie, or old anybody else; but if you'll allow me to go with you, I shall be very grateful. I can manage the tiller, at any rate."

Nell's face lit up; she wanted to go very badly; it was a "real" mackerel day, and, like the days of other fishing, not to be missed.

"Will you? That's awfully kind of you! Not that I want any help; it isn't that, for I can manage the *Annie Laurie* in half a gale; but there's a feeling that, because I'm only a girl, I'm not to be trusted alone."

"I quite understand," he said. "I'll promise not to interfere, if you'll let me come."

"And it may do you good—it's sure to!" she said eagerly. "There's the loveliest of breezes—you must have some wind for mackerel—and——Can you go at once?"

"This very minute. I'm all ready," he said.

"All right," she exclaimed, just as Dick might have done. "I'll be ready before you can say Jack Robinson!"

She ran out of the room and was down again in a very few minutes. Vernon glanced at her as they left the cottage and descended the steep road. She had put on a short skirt of rough serge, with a jersey, which accentuated every flowing line of her girlish, graceful figure, and the dark hair rippled under a red tam-o'-shanter. He was familiar enough with the yachting costumes of fashion, but he thought that he had never seen anything so workmanlike and becoming as this get-up which Nell had donned so quickly and carelessly. As they walked down the steps which led to the jetty, Nell exchanging greetings at every step, an old fisherman, crippled with rheumatism, limped beside them, and helped to bring the boat to the jetty steps.

Nell eyed the *Annie Laurie* lovingly, but said apologetically:

"She's a very good boat. Old, of course. She is a herring boat, and though she isn't fascinatingly beautiful, she can sail. Dick—helped by Brownie—decked her over, and Dick picked up a new set of sails last year from a man who was selling off his gear. Have you put in the bait and the lines, Willy?"

"Aye, aye, Miss Nell; I'm thinkin' you'll be gettin' some mackerel if the wind holds. Let me help 'ee wi' the sail."

"No, no," said Nell, "I can manage. Oh, please don't you trouble!" she added to Vernon. "If you'll give me the sheet—that's the rope by your hand."

Vernon nodded, and suppressed a smile. [Pg 41]

"She'll go a bit tauter still, I think," he said, as Nell hoisted the mainsail.

She looked at him.

"You understand?" she said, with a little surprise.

Vernon thought of his crack yacht, but answered casually:

"I've done some yachting—yes."

"Yachting!" said Nell. "This isn't yachting. You must feel a kind of contempt for our poor old tub."

"Not at all; she's a good boat, I can see," he said.

Nell took up the oars, but she had to pull only a few strokes, for the wind soon filled the sail, and the *Annie Laurie*, as if piqued by the things that had been said of her, sprang forward before the wind.

Nell shipped the oars, looked up at the sail, and glanced at Vernon, who had taken his seat in the stern, and got hold of the tiller with an accustomed air.

"Make for the Head," she said. "I'll get the lines ready."

There was silence for a minute or two while she baited the lines and paid them out, and Vernon watched her with a kind of absent-minded interest.

She was quite intent on her work, and he felt that, so far as she was concerned, he might have been old Brownie, or the rheumatic Willy, or her brother Dick; and something in her girlish indifference to his presence and personality impressed him; for Drake, Viscount Selbie, was not accustomed to be passed over as a nonentity by the women in whose company he chanced to be.

"That ought to fetch them," she said, eying the baited line with an air of satisfaction. "You might keep her to the wind a little more, Mr. Vernon; she can carry all we've got, and more."

"Aye, aye!" he responded, in sailor fashion. "You only did her bare justice, Miss Lorton," he added. "She's a good boat."

Nell looked round at him with a gratified smile.

"She's a dear old thing, really," she said; "and she behaves like an angel in a gale. Many's the time Dick and I have sailed her when half the other boats were afraid to leave the harbor."

"Wasn't that rather dangerous, a tempting of Providence?" he said, rather gravely, at the thought of the peril incurred by these two thoughtless children—for what else were they?

"Oh, I don't know," she replied carelessly. "We know every inch of the coast and every current, and if it should ever come on too stiff, we should make for the open. It would have to be a bad sea

to sink the *Annie Laurie*; and if we came to grief——Well, we can die but once, you know; and, after all, there are meaner ways of slipping off the mortal coil than doing it in a hurricane off Windy Head. There's the first fish! If Brownie were here, we should 'wet it'; but I haven't any whisky to offer you." [Pg 42]

Her low but clear laugh rang musical over the billowing water, and she nodded at her companion as if he were one of the fishing men or Dick.

Vernon leaned back and gazed in turn at the sea and the sky and the slim, girlish form and beautiful face, and half unconsciously his mind concentrated itself upon her.

She was not the first young girl he had known, but she was quite unlike any young girl he had hitherto met. He could recall none so free and frank and utterly unselfconscious.

Most young girls with whom he had become acquainted had bored him by their insipidity or disgusted him by their precocity; but from this one there emanated a kind of charm which rested while it attracted him. It was pleasant to lean back and look at and listen to her; to watch the soft tendrils of dark hair stirred by the wind, to see the frank smile light up the gray eyes and curve the sweet red lips; to listen to the musical voice, the low brief laugh, which was so distinct from the ordinary girl's giggle or forced and affected gayety.

The fish were biting, and soon a pile of silver lay wet and glittering in the bottom of the boat.

"Haven't you got enough?" asked Vernon, with your sportsman's dislike of "pot hunting."

"For ourselves? Oh, yes; but some of the old people of the Mills like mackerel," replied Nell, "and they'll be waiting on the jetty for the *Annie Laurie's* return. Are you getting tired?" she asked, for the first time directing her attention to him. "I quite forgot you were an invalid."

"Go on forgetting it, please," he said. "In fact, the invalid business is played out. I'm far too hungry to keep up the character."

She laughed.

"So am I."

She raised herself on her elbow and looked toward the shore.

"If you'll take her to that cove just opposite us, we'll have some lunch. You can eat fish, I hope? It was awfully stupid of me not to remember——"

"I can eat anything," he said quickly. "I was just going to propose that we should cast lots, in cannibalistic fashion, to decide who should lunch on the other."

She laughed, and pulled in her line.

"That's a beauty for the last. Do you know how to cook mackerel?" [Pg 43]

"No; but I can learn."

"Very well, then; you'll find a spirit lamp and stove in that locker under the tiller. Yes, that's it. And there ought to be some bread and butter, and some coffee. Milk, as we don't carry a cow, we shall have to do without. We shall be in smooth water presently, and then we can lunch."

He sailed the boat into a sheltered cove, and, rather awkwardly, with his one hand, extracted the cooking utensils from the locker. Nell lowered the sail, dropped the anchor, and came aft.

"I'm afraid I shall have to cook," she said. "Dick generally does it, but you've only one hand. There's one fish;" as she cut it open skillfully. "How many can you eat?"

"Two—three dozen," he said gravely.

She laughed, and placed three of the silver mackerel in the frying pan.

"Now don't, please, don't say that you haven't a match!" she said, half aghast with dread.

He took his silver match box from his pocket, and was on the point of handing it to her. Then he remembered the coronet engraved on it, and holding it against his side, managed to strike a light and ignite the spirit.

"Of course, you have to pretend that you don't mind the smell of cooking fish; but it really isn't so bad when one is hungry," she said, as the pan began to hiss and the fish to brown.

"There's salt and pepper somewhere," she remarked. "You put them on while the fish is cooking; it is half the battle, as Dick says. They're in the back of the locker, I think. If you'll move just a little——"

He screwed himself into as small a compass as possible, and she dived into the locker and got out a couple of tin boxes.

"And here's the bread—rather stale, I'm afraid—and some biscuits. The coffee's in that tin, and the water in this jar. Do you know how to make coffee?"

"Rather!" he said, with mock indignation. "I've made coffee under various circumstances and in various climes; in the galley of a Porto Rico coaster; in an American ravine, waiting for the game;

on a Highland moor, when the stags had got scent and the last chance of sport in the day was gone like a beautiful dream; in an artist's attic in Florence, where the tobacco smoke was too thick to cut with anything less than a hatchet; and after a skirmish with the dervishes, when a cup of coffee seemed almost as precious as the life one had just managed to save by the skin of one's teeth; but I never made it under more pleasant circumstances than these."

He looked up and round him as he spoke, with a brighter expression on his face than she had as yet seen, and Nell regarded him with a sudden interest. [Pg 44]

"How much you have traveled!" she said—"that mackerel wants turning; raise the pan so that the butter can run under the fish; that's it—and how much you must have seen! Italy, Egypt, Porto Rico—where is that? Oh, I remember! How delightful to have seen so much! You must be a very fortunate individual!"

She leaned her chin in her brown, shapely hands, and looked at him curiously, and with a frank envy in her gray eyes.

His face clouded for a moment.

"Count no man fortunate until he is dead!" he said, adapting the aphorism. "Believe me that I'd change places with you at this moment, and throw in all my experiences."

She laughed incredulously.

"With me? Oh, you can't mean it. It is very flattering, of course; but it's absurd. Why"—she paused and sighed—"I've never been anywhere, or seen anything. I've never been to London even, since I was quite a little girl, and——Change places with me!" She laughed again, just a little sadly. "Yes, it does sound absurd. For one thing, you wouldn't like to be poor; and we are poor, you know."

"Poor and content is rich enough," he remarked sententiously. Then he laughed. "I'm as good as a copy book with moral headings this morning."

Nell smiled.

"I think that is nonsense, like most copy-book headings. And yet——Yes, I should be content enough if it were not for Dick. After all, one can be happy though one is poor, especially if one lives in a beautiful place like Shorne Mills, and has a boat to sail in the summer, and books in the winter, and knows all the people round, and——"

"And happens to be young and full of the joy of life," he said, with a smile. "And it's only on your mind!"

She nodded gravely.

"Yes, of course I know that it's not right that he should be hanging about the Mills, doing nothing, and wasting his time. I'm always worrying about Dick's future. It's a sin that he should be wasted, for Dick is clever. You may not think so——"

"Oh, yes, I do," he said thoughtfully. "But I wouldn't worry. Something may turn up——"

She laughed.

"That is what he is always saying; but he says it rather bitterly sometimes, and——But I ought not to worry you, at any rate. Those fish are just done."

"Then my life is just saved," he responded solemnly.

"There are two plates; you hold them on the top of the stove to warm—that's it! And now you fill the kettle—oh! I see you've thought of that. It will boil while we eat the fish." [Pg 45]

She helped him to some, and they ate in silence for some minutes. Only they who have eaten mackerel within a few minutes of their being caught, and eaten them while reclining in a boat, with a blue sky overhead and a sapphire sea all around, can know how good mackerel can taste. To Vernon, who possessed the appetite of the convalescent, the meal was an Olympian feast.

"No more?" he said, as Nell declined. "Pray don't say so, or I shall, from sheer decency, have to refuse also; and I could eat another half, and will do so if you will take the other. You wouldn't be so heartless as to deprive me of a second serve, surely!"

Nell laughed and held out her plate.

"I consent because I do not think the recently starving should eat too much at first. Didn't you say that you had been in Egypt fighting? You are in the army, then?"

He nodded casually, and she looked at him thoughtfully.

"Then we ought not to call you 'Mr.,'" she said. "What are you—a colonel?"

He laughed shortly as he picked the fish from the bones.

"Good heavens! do I look so old? No, not colonel. I'm a captain. But I'm not in the army now. I left it—worse luck!"

"Why did you leave it?" she asked.

He looked a little bored—not so much bored, perhaps, as reluctant.

"Oh, for a variety of reasons; the most important being the fact that a relative of mine wished me to do so."

His face clouded for a moment or two; then he said, with the air of one dismissing an unpleasant topic:

"This water's boiling like mad. Now is my time to prove my assertion that I am capable of making coffee. I want two jugs, or this jug and the tin will do. The coffee? Thanks. I'm afraid I'll have to get you to hold the tin. This is the native method: You make it in the tin—so; then, after a moment or two, you pour the liquid—not the coffee grounds—into the jug, then back, and then back again, and lo! you have café à la Français, or Cairo, or Clapham fashion."

"It's very good," she admitted, when it had cooled sufficiently for her to taste it. "And that is how you made it on the battlefield?"

"Scarcely," he said. "There was no jug, only an empty meat can; and the water—well, the water was almost as thick, with mud, before the coffee was put in as afterward, and the men would [Pg 46] scarcely have had patience to wait for the patent process. Poor beggars! Some of them had not had a drop past their lips for twenty-four hours—and been fighting, too."

Nell listened, with her grave gray eyes fixed on his face.

"How sorry you must have been to leave the army!" she said thoughtfully.

"Does warfare seem so alluring?" he retorted, with a laugh. "But you're right; I was sorry to send in my papers, and I've been sorrier since the day I did it."

Nell curled herself up in the bottom of the boat like a well-fed and contented cat, and Vernon, having washed the plates by the simple process of dragging them backward and forward through the water, stretched himself and felt in his pockets. He relinquished the search with a sigh of resignation, and Nell, hearing it, looked up.

"Are you not going to smoke?" she asked. "Dick would have his pipe alight long before this; and, of course, I don't mind—if that is what you were waiting for. Why should I?"

"Thanks; but, like an idiot, I've forgotten my pipe. I've got some tobacco and cigarette paper."

"Then you are all right," she remarked.

"Scarcely," he said carelessly. "This stupid mummy of an arm of mine prevents me rolling a cigarette, you see."

"How stupid of me to forget that!" she said. "Give me the tobacco and the paper and let me try."

He produced the necessary articles promptly; and showed her how to do it.

"Not quite so much tobacco"—she had taken out enough for ten cigarettes, and spilled sufficient for another five—"and—er—if you could get it more equal along the paper. Like this—ah, thanks!"

In showing her, his fingers got "mixed" with hers, but Nell seemed too absorbed in her novel experiment to notice the fact.

"Like that? Rather like a miniature sausage, isn't it? And it will all come undone when I let go of it," she added apprehensively.

"If you'll be so good as just to wet the edge with your lips," he said, in a matter-of-fact way.

She looked at him, and a faint dash of color came into her face.

"You won't like to smoke it afterward," she said coolly.

He stared at her, then smiled.

"Try me!" he said succinctly.

She gave a little shrug of the shoulders, moistened the cigarette in the usual way, and handed it to him gravely.

"I'll try to make the next better," she said. "I suppose you will want another?" [Pg 47]

"I'm afraid I shall want more than you will be inclined to make," he said, "and I shouldn't like to trespass on your good nature."

"Oh, it's not very hard work making cigarettes," she said. "I'd better set about the next at once. How is that?" and she held up the production for inspection.

"Simply perfect," he said. "You would amass a fortune out in the East as a cigarette maker."

She looked up at him, beyond him, wistfully.

"I wish I could amass a fortune; indeed, I'd be content if I could earn my living any way," she said, as if she were communing with herself rather than addressing him. "If I could earn some money, and help Dick!"

Her voice died away, and she sighed softly.

He regarded her dreamily.

"Don't think of anything so—unnatural," he said.

She raised her eyes, and looked at him with surprise.

"Is it unnatural for a woman—a girl—to earn her own living?" she said.

"Yes," he said emphatically. "Women were made for men to work for, not to toil themselves."

Nell laughed, in simple mockery of the sentiment.

"What nonsense! As if we were dolls or something to be wrapped up in lavender! Why, half the women in Shorne Mills work! You see them driving their donkeys down to the beach for sand—haven't you seen them with bags on each side?—and doing washing, and making butter and going to market. Why, I should have to work if anything happened to mamma. At least, she has often said so. She has—what is it?—oh, an annuity or something of the kind; and if she died, Dick and I would have to 'face the world,' as she puts it."

He said nothing, but looked at her through the thin blue cloud of his cigarette. She looked so sweet, so girlish, so—yes, so helpless—lying there in the sunlight, one brown paw supporting her shapely head, the other—after the manner of girls—dabbling in the water. A pang of compassion smote him.

"It's a devil of a world," he muttered, almost to himself.

"Do you think so?" she said, with surprise. "I don't. At any rate, I don't think so this afternoon."

"Why this afternoon?" he asked, half curiously.

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps it's the sunshine, or—or—do you think it's the mackerel?"

She laughed.

"But I feel so happy and free from care. And yet all the old trouble remains. There's Dick's future—and—oh, all the rest. But this afternoon everything seems bright and hopeful. I wonder why?" [Pg 48]

She looked at him wistfully, as if he might perhaps explain; but Vernon said nothing.

"Have you really finished that cigarette? You smoke much less quickly than Dick. Well, there's another ready; and when you've finished that, I think we ought to be getting back. I want—let me see—yes, ten more fish, and I can get them when we get farther out."

They set the sail, and the *Annie Laurie* glided out of the placid little cove into the open sea.

As Vernon steered for the Head, behind which Shorne Mills sheltered, he sighed unconsciously. He, too, had been happy and free from care that morning, and the afternoon seemed full of indescribable peace and happiness. He, like Nell, wondered why. A day or two ago—or was it a month, a year?—he had been depressed and low-spirited, and firmly convinced that life was not worth living; but this afternoon——

What a pretty picture she made in her jersey, that fitted her like a skin, with the soft black hair rippling beneath the edge of the tam-o'-shanter!

Suddenly the pretty picture called out, "Sail ahead, sir!" and Vernon, taking his eyes from her, saw a yacht skimming along the sapphire waves, almost parallel with the *Annie Laurie*.

"That's a yacht," said Nell; "and a fine one, too."

He looked at it, shading his eyes with his practicable hand.

"I wonder who she is?" said Nell. "There's a field glass in the locker—get it. Can you see her name?"

He put the glass to his eyes and adjusted it; and, as he got the focus, an exclamation escaped him.

"What did you say?" inquired Nell.

"Nothing, only that she's a fine vessel," he said indifferently.

"Yes. I should like to be on her," said Nell. "Wouldn't you?"

He smiled grimly.

"I am content with the *Annie Laurie*," he replied.

She stared at him incredulously, then laughed.

"Thank you for the compliment; but you can't seriously prefer this dear old tub to that! I wonder whom she belongs to? How fast she travels. I should like to have a yacht like that."

"Would you?" he said, eying her rather strangely. "Perhaps some day——"

He stopped, and knocked the ash from his cigarette.

Nell laughed. [Pg 49]

"Were you going to say that perhaps some day I should own one like her? What nonsense! It is like the things one reads in books, when the benevolent and wise old gentleman tells the boy that perhaps, if he works hard, and is honest and persevering, he may own a carriage and a pair like that which happens to be passing at the moment."

Vernon laughed.

"Life is full of possibilities," he said, with his eyes fixed on the yacht, which, after sailing broadside to them for some time, suddenly put down the helm and struck out for sea.

"I thought they might be making for Shorne Mills," said Nell, rather regretfully. "Yachts put in there sometimes, and I should have liked to have seen this one."

"Would you?" he said, as curiously as he had spoken before.

"It doesn't matter whether I would or wouldn't; she's gone out into the channel now," said Nell.

He stifled a sigh which sounded like a sigh of relief, and steered the *Annie Laurie* for home.

Nell swept the fish into an old reed basket which had held many such a catch, and held it up to the admiring and anticipatory gaze of a small crowd of women and children which had gathered on the jetty steps at the approach of the *Annie Laurie*.

As she stepped on shore and distributed the fish, receiving the short but expressive Devonshire "Thank 'ee, Miss Nell, thank 'ee," Vernon looked at the beautiful girlish face pensively, and thought—well, who can tell what a man thinks at such moments? Perhaps he was thinking of the hundred and one useless women of his class who, throughout the whole of their butterfly lives, had never won a single breath of gratitude from the poor in their midst.

"Come along," she said, turning to him, when she had emptied the basket. "I'm afraid we're in for a scolding. I quite forgot till this moment that mamma did not know you had gone out."

"What about you?" he said, remembering for the first time that he had spent so many hours with this girl alone and unchaperoned.

Nell laughed.

"Oh, she would not be anxious about me. Mamma is used to my going out for a ride—when I can borrow a horse from some one—or sailing the *Annie Laurie* with old Brownie; but she'll be anxious about you. You're an invalid, you know."

"Not much of the invalid about me, saving this arm," he said.

As they climbed the hill, they came upon Dick mounted upon a horse the like of which Nell had never seen; and she stopped dead short and stared at him. [Pg 50]

"Hallo, Nell! Hallo, Mr. Vernon! Just giving him a run, after being shut up in that stuffy railway box."

"That's right," said Vernon. "Like him?"

"Like him?" responded Dick, with the superlative of approval; "never rode a horse to equal him, and the other is as good. And"—in an undertone—"the sidesaddle has come."

But Nell, whose ears were sharp, heard him.

"Who is the sidesaddle for?" she asked, innocently and ungrammatically.

Vernon took the bull by the horns.

"For you, if you will deign to use it, Miss Nell," he said.

It was the first time he had addressed her as "Miss Nell," but she did not notice it.

"For me?" she exclaimed.

They were opposite Sandy's stables, and Dick dropped off his horse and brought out the other.

"Look at her, Nell!" he exclaimed, with bated breath. "Perfect, isn't she?"

Nell looked at her with a flush that came and went.

"Oh, but I—I—could not!" she breathed.

Mr. Drake Vernon laughed.

"Why not?" he said argumentatively. "Fair play's a jewel. You can't expect to have all the innings your side, Miss Nell. You've treated me—well, like a prince; and you won't refuse to ride a horse of mine that's simply spoiling for want of exercise!"

Nell looked from him to the horse, and from the horse to him.

"I—I—am so surprised," she faltered. "I—I will ask mamma."

"That's all right," said Vernon, who had learned to know "mamma" by this time.

Nell left Dick and Vernon standing round the horses in man fashion. Dick was all aglow with satisfaction and admiration.

"Never saw a better pair than these, Mr. Vernon," he said. "I should think this one could jump."

She had just won a military steeplechase, and Vernon nodded assent.

"You must persuade your sister to ride her," he said.

As he spoke, he seated himself on the edge of the steep roadway which led to the jetty.

"Take the horses in," he said. "I'll come up in a few minutes."

But the minutes ran into hours. He looked out to sea with a meditative and retrospective mind. He was going over the past which seemed so far away, so vague, since he had gone sailing in the *Annie Laurie* this morning. [Pg 51]

Then suddenly the past became the present. There was a stir on the jetty below him. Voices—the voice of fashionable people, the voices of "society"—rose in an indistinguishable sound to his ears. He moved uneasily, and refilled and lit the pipe that he had borrowed of Dick. He heard the footsteps of several persons climbing the steep stairs. One seemed familiar to him. He pulled at his pipe, and crossed his legs with an air of preparation, of resignation.

The voices came nearer, and presently one said:

"I certainly, for one, decline to go any farther. I think it is too absurd to expect one to climb these ridiculous steps. And there is nothing to see up there, is there?"

At the sound of the voice, clear and bell-like, yet languid, with the languor of the fashionable woman, Mr. Drake Vernon bit his lips and colored. He half rose, but sank down again, as if uncertain whether to meet her, or to remain where he was; eventually he crossed his legs again, rammed down his pipe, and waited.

"Oh, but you'll come up to the top, Lady Lucille!" remonstrated a man's voice, the half-nasal drawl of the man about town—the ordinary club lounger. "There's a view, don't you know—there really is!"

"I don't care for views. Not another step, Archie. I'll wait here till you come back. You can describe the view—or, rather, you can't, thank Heaven!"

As she spoke, she mounted a few steps, and turned into the small square which offered a resting place on the steep ascent, and so came full upon Mr. Vernon.

He rose and raised his hat, and she looked at him, at first with the vagueness of sheer amazement, then with a start of recognition, and with her fair face all crimson for one instant, and, the next, pale, she said, in a suppressed voice, as if she were afraid of being overheard:

"Drake!"

He looked at her with a curious smile, as if something in the tone of her voice, in her sudden pallor following upon her; blush, were significant, and had told himself something.

"Well, Luce," he said; "and what brings you here?"

CHAPTER VI.

The girl who, with changing color, stood gazing at Lord Drake Selbie might have stepped out of one of Marcus Stone's pictures. She was as fair as a piece of biscuit china. Her hair was golden, and, strange to say in these latter days, naturally so. It was, indeed, like the fleece of gold itself under her fashionable yachting hat. Her eyes, widely opened, with that curious look of surprise and fear, were hazel—a deep hazel, which men, until they knew her, accepted as an indication of Lady Lucille's depth of feeling. She was slightly built, but graceful, with the grace of the fashionable modiste. [Pg 52]

She was the product of the marriage of Art and Fashion of this fin-de-siècle age. Other ages have given us wit, beauty allied with esprit, dignity of demeanor, and a nobility of principle; this end of the nineteenth century has bestowed upon us—Lady Lucille Turfleigh.

It is in its way a marvelous product. It is very beautiful, with the delicate beauty of excessive culture and effete luxury. It has the subtle charm of the exotic, of the tall and graceful arum, whose spotless whiteness cannot bear a single breath of the keen east wind.

It is charming, bewitching; it looks all purity and spirituality; it seems to breathe poetry and a Higher Culture. It goes through life like a rose leaf floating upon a placid stream. It is precious to look at, pleasant to live with, and it has only one defect—it has no heart.

We have cast off the old creeds like so many shackles; we are so finely educated, so cultivated, that we have learned to do more than laugh at sentiment; we regard it with a contemptuous pity.

There is only one thing which we value, and that is Pleasure. Some persons labor under the

mistaken notion that Money is the universal quest; but it is not so. The Golden God is set up in every market place, it stands at every street corner; but it is not for himself that the crowd worship at the feet of the brazen image, but because he can buy so much.

It is Money which nowadays holds the magician's rod. With a wave he can give us rank, luxury, power, place, influence, and beauty. This is the creed, the religion, which we teach our children, which is continually in our hearts if not on our lips; and it is the creed, the religion, in which Lady Lucille was reared.

Her history is a public one. It is the story of how many fashionable women? Her father, Lord Turfleigh, was an Irish peer. He had inherited a historic title, and thousands of acres which he had scarcely seen, but which he had helped to incumber. All the Turfleighs from time immemorial had been fast and reckless, but this Turfleigh had outpaced them all, and had easily romped in first in the race of dissipation. As a young man his name had been synonymous with every kind of picturesque profligacy. Every pound he could screw out of the land, or obtain at ruinous interest [Pg 53] from the Jews, had been spent in what he and his kind call pleasure.

He had married for money, had got it, and had spent it, even before his patient and long-suffering wife had expiated the mistake of her life in the only possible way. She had left Lady Lucille behind, and the girl had matriculated and taken honors in her father's school.

To Lady Lucille there was only one thing in life worth having—money; and to obtain this prize she had been carefully nurtured and laboriously taught. Long before she left the nursery she had grown to understand that her one object and sole ambition must be a wealthy and suitable marriage; and to this end every advantage of mind and body had been trained and cultivated as one trains a young thoroughbred for a great race.

She had been taught to laugh at sentiment, to regard admiration as valueless unless it came from a millionaire; to sneer at love unless it paced, richly clad and warmly shod, from a palace. She had graduated in the School of Fashion, and had passed with high honors. There was no more beautiful woman in all England than Lady Lucille; few possessed greater charm; men sang her praises; artists fought for the honor of hanging her picture in the Academy; the society papers humbly reported her doings, her sayings, and her conquests; royalties smiled approvingly on this queen of fashion, and not a single soul, Lady Lucille herself least of all, realized that this perfection was but the hollow husk and shell of beauty without heart or soul; that behind the lovely face, within the graceful form, lurked as selfish and ignoble a nature as that which stirs the blood of any drab upon the Streets.

"Drake!" she said. "Why! I'd no idea! What are you doing here?"

He motioned her to a seat with a wave of his pipe, and she sank down on the stone slab, after a careful glance at it, and eyed him curiously but with still a trace of her first embarrassment.

She looked a perfect picture, as she sat there, with the steep, descending wall, the red Devon cliffs, the blue, glittering sea for her background; a picture which might have been presented with a summer number of one of the illustrated weeklies; and all as unreal and as unlike life as they are. It is true that she wore a yachting costume exquisitely made and perfectly fitting; and Drake, as he looked at it, acknowledged its claims upon his admiration, but he knew it was all a sham, and, half unconsciously, he compared it with the old worn skirt and the serviceable jersey worn by Nell, who had gone up the hill—how long ago was it? Nell's face and hands were brown [Pg 54] with the kiss of God's sun; Lady Lucille's face was like a piece of delicate Sèvres, and her hands were incased in white kid gauntlets. To him, at that moment, she looked like an actress playing in a nautical burlesque at the Gaiety; and, for the first time since he had known her, he found himself looking at her critically, and, notwithstanding her faultless attire—faultless from a fashionable point of view—with disapproval.

"You are surprised to see me, Luce?" he said.

"Of course I am," she replied. "I'd no idea where you were. I've written to you—twice."

"Have you?" he said. "That was good of you. I've not had your letters; but that's my fault, not yours. I told Sparling not to send any letters on."

She looked down, as if rather embarrassed, and dug at the interstices of the rough stone pavement with her dainty, and altogether unnautical, sunshade.

"But what are you doing here?" she asked. "And—and what's the matter with your arm? Isn't that a sling?"

"Yes, it's a sling," he said casually. "I'd been hunting with the Devon and Somerset; I found London unbearable, and I came down here suddenly. I meant to write and tell you; but just then I wasn't in the humor to write to any one, even to you. I lost my way in one of the runs, and was riding down the top of the hill here, riding carelessly, I'll admit, for when the horse shied, I was chucked off. I broke my arm and knocked my head. Oh, don't trouble," he added hastily, as if to ward off her commiseration. "I am all right now; the arm will soon be in working order again."

"I'm very sorry," she said, lifting her eyes to his, but only for a moment. "You look rather pulled down and seedy."

"Oh, I'm all right," he said. "And now, as I have explained my presence here, perhaps you will

explain yours."

"I've come here in the *Seagull*," she said. "Father's on board. He said you'd offered to lend the yacht to him—you did, I suppose?"

Drake nodded indifferently.

"Oh, yes," he said. "The *Seagull* was quite at your father's service."

"Well, father made a party; Sir Archie Walbrooke, Mrs. Horn-Wallis and her husband, Lady Pirbright, and ourselves."

Drake nodded as indifferently as before. He knew the persons she had mentioned; members of the smart set in which he had spent his life—and his money; and Lady Lucille continued in somewhat apologetic fashion:

"We went to the Solent first, for the races; then, when they were all over, everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves so much that father—you know what he is—suggested that we should sail round the Devon coast. It hasn't been a bad time; and Sir Archie has been rather amusing, and Mrs. Horn-Wallis has kept things going. Oh, yes; it hasn't been so bad." [Pg 55]

"I'm glad you've been amused, Luce," he said, his eyes resting upon the beautifully fair face with a touch of cynicism.

"We'd no idea you were anywhere here," she said, "or, of course, I would have written and asked you to join us; though, I suppose, under the circumstances——"

She hesitated for a moment, then went on with a little embarrassment, which in no way detracted from her charm of voice and manner:

"I told father that, after what had happened, it was scarcely in good taste to borrow your yacht. But you know what father is. He said that though things were altered, your offer of the *Seagull* stood good; that you told him you didn't mean to use her this season, and that it was a pity for her to lie idle. And so they persuaded me—very much against my will, I must admit—to join them, and—and here I am, as you see."

Drake puffed at his pipe.

"I see," he said. "I needn't say that you are quite welcome to the yacht, Lucille, or to anything that I have. As you say, things are—altered. How much they are altered and changed, perhaps your letters, if I had received them, would have told me. What was it that you wrote me? Oh, don't be afraid," he added, with a faint smile, as she turned her head away and poked with her sunshade at the crack in the pavement. "I am strong; I can bear it. When a man has come a cropper in every sense of the word, his nerves are braced for the receipt of unwelcome tidings. I beg you won't be uncomfortable. Of course, you have heard the news?"

She glanced at him sideways, and, despite her training, her lips quivered slightly.

"Of course," she said. "Who hasn't? All the world knows it. Lord Angleford's marriage has come upon us like a surprise—a thunderbolt. No one would ever have expected that he would have been so foolish."

Drake looked at her as he never thought that he could have looked at her—calmly, waitingly.

"No one expected him to marry," she went on. "He was quite an old man—well, not old, but getting on. And you and he were always such great friends. He—he always seemed so fond and so proud of you. Why did you quarrel with him?" [Pg 56]

"I didn't quarrel with him," said Drake quietly. "As you say, we have always been good friends. He has always been good to me, ever since I was a boy. Good and liberal. We have never had a cross word until now. But you know my uncle—you know how keenly set he is on politics. He is a Conservative of the old school; one of those old Tories whom we call blue, and who are nearly extinct. God knows whether they are right or wrong; I only know that I can't go with them. He asked me to stand for a place in the Tory-Conservative interest. It was an easy place; I should have been returned without difficulty. Most men would have done it; but I couldn't. I don't go in very much for principle, either political or moral; but my uncle's views—well, I couldn't swallow them. I was obliged to decline. He cut up rough; sent me a letter with more bad language in it than I've ever read in my life. Then he went and married a young girl—an American."

Lady Lucille heaved a long sigh.

"How foolish of you!" she murmured. "As if it mattered."

Drake filled his pipe again, and smiled cynically over the match as he lit it.

"That's your view of it?" he said. "I suppose—yes, I suppose you think I've been a fool. I dare say you're right; but, unfortunately for me, I couldn't look at it in that way. I stuck to my colors—that's a highfalutin way of putting it—and I've got to pay the penalty. My uncle's married, and, likely enough—in fact, in all probability—his wife will present the world with a young Lord Angleford."

"She's quite a young woman," murmured Lucille, with the wisdom of her kind.

"Just so," said Drake. "So I am in rather a hole. I always looked forward to inheriting Anglemere and the estate and my uncle's money. But all that is altered. He may have an heir who will very properly inherit all that I thought was to be mine. I wrote and told you of this, though it wasn't necessary; but I deemed it right to you to place the whole matter before you, Lucille. I've no doubt that the society papers have saved me the trouble, and helped you thoroughly to realize that the man to whom you were engaged was no longer the heir to the earldom of Angleford and Lord Angleford's money, but merely Drake Selbie, a mere nobody, and plunged up to his neck in debts and difficulties."

She was silent, and he went on:

"See here, Luce, I asked you to marry me because I loved you. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met. I fell in love with you the first time I saw you—at that dance of the Horn-Wallises. Do you remember? I wanted you to be my wife; I wanted you more than I ever wanted anything else in my life. Do you not remember the day I proposed to you, there under Taplow Wood, at that picnic where we all got wet and miserable? And you said 'Yes'; and my uncle was pleased. But all is changed now; I am just Drake Selbie, with very little or no income, and a mountain of debts; with no prospects of becoming Lord Angleford and owner of the Angleford money and lands. And I want to know how this change—strikes you; what you mean, to do?" [Pg 57]

She glanced up at him sideways.

"You—you haven't got my letters?" she said.

He shook his head.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she said. "It isn't my fault. Father—you know what he would say. He may be right. He said that—that you were ruined; that our marriage would be quite impossible; that—that our engagement must be broken off. Really, Drake, it is not my fault. You know how poor we are; that—that a rich marriage is an absolute necessity for me. Father is up to his neck in debt, too, and we scarcely seem to have a penny of ready money; it's nothing but duns, and duns, and duns, every day in the week; why, even now, we've had to bolt from London because I can't pay my milliner's bill. It's simply impossible for me to marry a poor man. I should only be a drag upon him; and father—well, father would be a drag upon him, too; you know what father is. And—and so, Drake, I wrote and told you that—that our engagement must be considered broken off and at an end."

She paused a moment, and looked from right to left, like some feeble animal driven into a corner, and restlessly conscious of Drake Selbie's stern regard.

"Of course I'm very sorry. You know I'm—I'm very fond of you. I don't think there is any one in the world like you; so—so handsome and—and altogether nice. But what can I do? I can't run against the wish of my father and of all my friends. In fact, I can't afford to marry you, Drake."

He looked at her with a bitter smile on his lips, and a still more bitter cynicism in his eyes.

"I understand," he said; "I quite understand. When you said that you loved me, loved me with all your heart and soul, you meant that you loved Drake Selbie, the heir of Angleford, the prospective owner of Anglemere and Lord Angleford's money; and now that my uncle has married, and that he may have a child which will rob me of the title and the money, you draw back. You do not ask whether I have enough, you do not offer to make any sacrifice. You just—jilt me!" [Pg 58]

"You put it very harshly, Drake," she said, with a frown.

"I put it very truly and correctly," he said. "Can you deny it? You cannot! The man who sits here beside you is quite a different man to the one to whom you had plighted your troth. He is the same in bone and body and muscle and sinew, but he doesn't happen to be Lord Angleford's heir. And so you throw him over. No doubt you are right. It is the way of the world in which you and I have been bred and trained."

"You are very cruel, Drake," she murmured, touching her eyes with a lace handkerchief, too costly and elaborate for anything but ornament.

"I just speak the truth," he said. "I don't blame you. You are bred in the same world as myself. We are both products of this modern fin de siècle. To marry me would be a mistake; you decline to make it. I have only to bow to your decision. I accept your refusal. After this present moment you and I are friends only; not strangers; men and women in our set are never strangers. But I pass out of your life from this moment. Go back to the *Seagull* with Archie and Mrs. Horn-Wallis, and find—as I trust you will—a better man than I am."

She rose rather pale, but perfectly self-possessed.

"I—I am glad you take it so easily, Drake," she said. "You don't blame me, do you? I couldn't run against father, could I? You know how poor we are. I must make a good marriage, and—and——"

"And so it is 'good-by,'" he said.

He looked so stern, so self-contained, that her self-possession forsook her for a moment, and she stood biting softly at her underlip and looking by turns at the ultramarine sea and the stern face of the lover whom she was discarding. He held out his hand again.

"Good-by, Luce," he said. "You have taught me a lesson."

"What—do you mean?" she asked.

He smiled.

"That women care only for rank and gold, and that without them a man cannot hold you. I shall take it to heart Good-by."

She looked at him doubtfully, hesitatingly.

"You will take the *Seagull* south?" he said. "Be good enough to ask your father to wire me as to her whereabouts. I may need her. But don't hurry. I'm only too glad that you are sailing her. Good-by."

She murmured "Good-by," and went down the steps slowly; and Drake, Viscount Selbie, refilled [Pg 59] his pipe. Then he rose quickly and overtook her. She stopped and turned, and if he had expected to see signs of emotion in her beautiful face, he was doomed to disappointment; indeed, the look of apprehension with which she heard his voice had been followed by one of relief.

"One moment," he said. "I want to ask you not to mention that you have seen me here."

She opened her soft hazel eyes with some surprise and a great deal of curiosity.

"Not say that I have seen you?" she said. "Of course, if you wish it; but why?"

"The reason will seem to you inadequate, I am afraid," he said coldly; "but the fact is, I am staying here under another name—my own is being bandied about so much, you see," bitterly, "that I am a little tired of it."

"I see," she said. "Then I am not to tell father. How will he know how to address the wire about the yacht?"

"Send it to Sparling," he said. "I am sorry to have stopped you. Good-by."

She inclined her head and murmured "Good-by" for the second time, and went on again; but a few steps lower she stopped and pondered his strange request.

"Curious," she murmured. "I wonder whether there is any other reason? One knows what men are; and poor Drake is no better than the rest. Ah, well, it does not matter to me—now. Thank goodness it is over! Though one can always count upon Drake; he is too thorough a gentleman to make a scene or bully a woman. Heaven knows I am sorry to break with him, and I wish that old stupid hadn't made such a fool of himself; for Drake and I would have got on very well. But as things are——As father says, it's impossible. I wonder whether they are coming back; I am simply dying for tea."

Before she got down to the jetty, her fellow voyagers caught her up. They were in the best of spirits, and hilarious over the fact that Sir Archie had slipped on one of the grassy slopes and stained his white flannel suit with green; and Lady Lucille joined in the merriment.

"I'm sorry I didn't come, after all," she said. "It was rather boring waiting there all alone; but perhaps Sir Archie will kindly fall down again for my special benefit," and she laughed with the innocent, careless laughter, of a child. [Pg 60]

CHAPTER VII.

The laugh floated up to Drake as he sat and finished his pipe, waiting until the party should get clear away, and his lips tightened grimly. Then he sighed and shrugged his shoulders, as he rose and went slowly up the hill.

After all, Lucille had only acted as he had expected. As he had said, she had engaged herself to Viscount Selbie, the heir to Angleford—not to Viscount Selbie, whose nose had been put out of joint by his uncle's marriage. He could not have expected a Lady Lucille Turfleigh to be faithful to her troth under such changed circumstances. But her desertion made him sore, if not actually unhappy. Indeed, he was rather surprised to find that he was more wounded in pride than heart. It is rather hurtful to one's vanity and self-esteem to be told by the woman whom you thought loved you, that she finds it "impossible" to marry you because you have lost your fortune or your once roseate prospects; and though Drake was the least conceited of men, he was smarting under the realization of his anticipations.

"She never loved me," he said bitterly. "Not one word of regret—real regret. She would have felt and shown more if she had been parting with a favorite horse or dog. God! what women this world makes of them! They are all alike! There's not one of them can love for love's sake, who cares for the man instead of the money. Not one, from the dairymaid to the duchess! Thank Heaven! my disillusionment has come before, instead of after, marriage. Yes, I've done with them. There is no girl alive, or to be born, who can make me feel another pang."

As he spoke, he heard a voice calling him: "Mr. Vernon! Mr. Vernon!" And there, in the garden, which stood out on the hill like a little terrace, was Nell. She had taken off her hat, and the faint

breeze was stirring the soft tendrils on her forehead, and her eyes smiled joyously down at him.

"Tea is ready!" she said, her voice full and round, and coming down to him like the note of a thrush. "Where have you been? Mamma is quite anxious about you, and I have had the greatest difficulty in convincing her that there has not been an accident, and that I had not left you at the bottom of the bay."

He smiled up at her, but his smile came through the darkness of a cloud, and she noticed it.

"Has—has anything happened?" she asked, as she opened the gate for him; and her guileless eyes were raised to his with a sudden anxiety. "Are you ill—or—or overtired? Ah, yes! that must be it. I [Pg 61] am so sorry!"

He frowned, and replied, almost harshly:

"Thanks. I am not in the least tired. How should I be? Why do you think so?"

Nell shrank a little.

"I—I thought you looked pale and tired," she said, in a voice so low and sweet that he was smitten with shame.

"Perhaps I am a bit played out," he said apologetically, and passing his hand over his brow as if to erase the lines which the scene with Lady Lucille had etched. "Your convalescent invalid is a trying kind of animal, Miss Nell, and—and you must forgive it for snapping."

"There is nothing to forgive," she said quietly. "It was thoughtless of me to let you stay out so long, and I deserve the lecture mamma has been giving me. Please come in to tea at once, or it will be repeated—the lecture, I mean."

They went into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Lorton sat with due state and dignity before her tea table; and, having got him into the easy-chair, the good lady began at once:

"So thoughtless of Eleanor to keep you out so long! You must be exhausted, I am sure. I know how trying the first days of recovery from illness are, and how even a little exertion will produce absolute collapse. Now, will you have a little brandy in your tea, Mr. Vernon? A teaspoonful will sometimes produce a magical effect," she added, as if she were recommending a peculiarly startling firework. "No? You are quite sure? And what is this Richard is telling me about two horses? He came rushing in just now with some story of horses that he had brought from Shallop."

Drake looked up with a casual air.

"Yes; they're mine. I was obliged to have them sent down. They were spoiling for want of exercise. I must turn them out in some of the fields here, or get some one to ride them, unless Dick and Miss Nell will be good-natured enough to exercise them."

Nell laughed softly.

"That is one way of putting it, isn't it, mamma? But I tell Mr. Vernon that I really must not, ought not, to take advantage of his good nature. It's all very well for Dick to——"

"What's all very well for Dick? And don't you take my name in vain quite so freely, young party," remarked that individual, entering the room and making for the tea table. "Don't you be taken in by all this pretended reluctance, Mr. Vernon. It's the old game of Richard III. refusing the crown. See English history book. Nell will be on that mare to-morrow morning safe enough, won't you, Nellikins? And I say, sir, you must get your arm right and ride with her. Perhaps she would not be [Pg 62] too proud to take lessons from a stranger—from you, I mean—though she does turn up her nose at her brother's kindly meant hints, an operation which, as I am perpetually telling her, is quite superfluous, for it's turned up quite sufficiently as it is."

Nell glanced at Mrs. Lorton, who smiled with the air of a society lady settling a point of etiquette.

"If Mr. Vernon has really been so kind as to offer to lend you a horse, it would be ungrateful and churlish to refuse, Eleanor," she said.

"That's all right," said Dick. "Though you might say 'Thank you,' Nell. But, there; you'll never learn manners, though you may, after some long years, learn to ride. Did you see that yacht, sir?" he asked, turning to Drake.

Drake nodded carelessly.

"A spanker, wasn't she?" continued Dick. "Now, that's what I call a yacht. And hadn't she some swells on board! I met some of them coming up the hill. Talk about stylish togs!"

"No one talks of 'stylish togs' but savages in the wilds of London, and vulgar boys," remarked Nell.

Dick regarded her wistfully, and raised the last piece of the crust of his slice of bread and butter to throw at her, then refrained, with a reluctant sigh.

"I never saw anything like it out of a fashion plate. You ought to have been there, mamma," he put in, parenthetically. "You'd have appreciated them, no doubt, whereas I wasn't capable of

anything but staring. They were swells—real swells, too; for I spoke to one of the crew who had Strolled up from the boat. The yacht's that racer, the *Seagull*. Do you know her, Mr. Vernon?"

"I've heard of her," said Drake.

"I forget the name of her owner; though the man told me; but he's a nobleman of sorts. There were no end of titled and fashionable people on board. A Sir—Sir Archie something; and a Lord and Lady Turfleigh, father and daughter—perhaps you know them?"

Drake looked at him through half-closed eyes.

"Yes, I've heard of them," he said. "May I have another cup of tea, Mrs. Lorton? Thanks, very much. The sail this morning has made me ravenous."

"I am so delighted," murmured Mrs. Lorton. "What name did you say, Richard? Turfleigh! Surely I have heard or seen that name——"

"I beg your pardon," said Drake, "but if Dick has quite finished his tea, I think I'll stroll down to the stables and look at the horses." [Pg 63]

"Oh, right you are! Come on!" exclaimed Dick, with alacrity.

Mrs. Lorton looked after the tall figure as it went out beside the boy's.

"Mr. Vernon must be very well off, Eleanor," she said musingly, and with a little, satisfied smile at the corners of her mouth. "Three horses. And have you noticed that pearl stud? It is a black one, and must have cost a great deal; and there is a certain look, air, about him, which you, my dear Eleanor, are not likely to notice or understand, but which, to one of my experience of the world, is significant. Did he seem to enjoy his sail this morning?"

"Yes, I think so," absently replied Nell, who was watching the tall figure as it went down the hill.

Mrs. Lorton coughed in a genteel fashion, and her smile grew still more self-satisfied.

"He could not be in a better place," she said; "could not possibly, and I do trust he will not think of leaving us until he is quite restored to health. I must really impress upon him how glad we are to have him, and how his presence cheers our dull and lonely lives."

Nell laughed softly.

"Mr. Vernon does not strike me as being particularly cheerful," she remarked; "at least, not generally," she qualified, as she remembered the unwonted brightness which he had displayed in the *Annie Laurie*.

"In-deed! You are quite wrong, Eleanor," said Mrs. Lorton stiffly. "I consider Mr. Vernon a most entertaining and brilliant companion; and I, for one, should very deeply deplore his departure. I trust, therefore, you will do all you can to make his stay pleasant and to induce him to prolong it. Three horses; ahem!"—she coughed behind her mittened hand—"has he—er—hinted, given you any idea of his position and—er—income, Eleanor?"

Nell flushed and shook her head.

"No, mamma," she said reluctantly. "Why should he? We are not curious——"

"Certainly not!" assented Mrs. Lorton, bridling. "I may have my faults, but curiosity is certainly not one of them. I merely thought that he might have dropped a word or two about himself, or his people, and the—ahem!—extent of his fortune."

Nell shook her head again.

"Nary a word—I mean, not a word!" she corrected herself hastily; "and, like yourself, mamma, I am not curious. What does it matter what and who he is, or who his people are? He will be gone in a day or two, and we shall probably never see him again." [Pg 64]

She moved away from the window as she made the response, and began to sing, and Mrs. Lorton looked after her, and listened to the sweet young voice, with a smile on her weakly shrewd face.

"Eleanor has grown a great deal lately," she murmured to herself; "and I suppose some men would consider her not altogether bad-looking. I am quite certain he is a single man—he would have mentioned his wife; he couldn't have avoided it the first night I was talking to him. Three horses—yes; I suppose Eleanor really is good-looking. No one is more opposed than I am to the vulgar practice of matchmaking, which some women indulge in, but it really would be a mercy to get the girl settled. Yes; he must not think of leaving us until he is quite strong; and that won't be for some weeks, for some time, yet."

Drake went down to the stables with Dick and "looked at" the horses, every now and then casting a glance through the open door at the *Seagull* as it sailed across the bay.

Did he regret the woman who had jilted him? Did he wish that he were on board his yacht with his friends, with the badinage, the scandal of the women, the jests and the doubtful stories of the men? He scarcely knew; he thought that he was sorrowing for the fair woman who had deserted him; but—he was not sure. From the meadows above there came the tinkle of a sheep bell, a lowing of a cow calling to her calf; the scent of the tar from a kettle on the beach rose with sharp

pungency; the haze of the summer evening was blurring the hills which half ringed the sapphire sea. There was peace at Shorne Mills—a peace which fell upon the weary man of the world. He forgot his troubles for a moment; his lost inheritance, his debts, and difficulties; forgot even Woman and all she had cost him.

Then suddenly, faintly, there came floating down to him the clear, sweet voice of Nell. What was it she was singing?

"Though years have passed, I love you yet;
Do you still remember, or do you forget?"

A great wave of bitterness swept over him, and, between his teeth, he muttered:

"They are all alike—with the face and the voice of an angel, and the heart of the Man with the Muck-rake. God save me from them from this time henceforth!" [Pg 65]

CHAPTER VIII.

The weeks glided by, Drake's arm got mended, but he still lingered on at Shorne Mills.

There was something in the beauty, the repose, of the place which fascinated and held him. He was so weary of the world, sore with disappointment, and shrinking from the pity of his friends who were, as he knew, dying to commiserate with him over his altered prospects.

The weather was lovely, the air balmy, and for amusement—well, there was sailing in the *Annie Laurie*, lounging with a pipe on the jetty, listening, and sometimes talking, to the fishermen and sailors, and teaching Miss Nell Lorton to ride.

"Not that you need much teaching," he said on the first day they rode together—that was before his arm was quite right, and Mrs. Lorton filled the air with her fears and anxieties for his safety. "But you have 'picked it up,' as they say, and there are one or two hints I may be able to give you which will make you as perfect a horsewoman as one would wish to see."

"Isn't 'perfect' rather a big word?" said Nell.

She turned her face to him, and the glory of its young beauty was heightened by the radiance of the smile which was enthroned on her lips and shone in her eyes.

He looked at her with unconscious admiration and in silence for a moment.

"There is no reason why you shouldn't be perfect," he said. "You've everything in your favor—youth, health, strength, and no end of pluck."

"I ought to curtsy," said Nell, laughing softly. "But one can't curtsy on a horse, alas! Please let me off with a bow," and she bent low in the saddle, with all a girl's pretty irony. "But don't be sparing of those same hints, please. I really want to learn, and I will be very humble and meek."

He laughed, as if amused by something.

"I can scarcely fancy you either humble or meek, Miss Nell," he said. "Hold the reins a little nearer her neck. Like this. See? Then you've room to pull her if she stumbles; which, by the way, isn't likely. And you might sit a little closer at the canter. Don't trouble; leave the pace to the horse."

Nell nodded.

"I know!" she said. "How just being told a thing helps one! I should like to ride as well as you do. You and the horse seem one." [Pg 66]

He was not embarrassed by the compliment.

"Oh, I've ridden all my life," he said, "and under all sorts of circumstances, on all sorts of horses, and one gets au fait in time. Now, let her have her head and we'll try a gallop. Don't bear too hard on her if she pulls—as she may—but ride her on the snaffle as much as possible."

They had climbed the hill, and were riding along a road on the edge of one of the small moors, and after a moment or two of inspection of the graceful figure beside him, he motioned with his hand, and they turned on to the moor itself.

As they cantered and galloped over the springy turf and heather, Drake grew thoughtful and absent-minded.

The beauty of the scene, the azure sky, the clear, thin air, all soothed him; but he found himself asking himself why he was still lingering in this out-of-the-way spot in North Devon, and why he was content with the simple amusement of teaching a young girl to sit her horse and hold her reins properly.

Why was he not on board the *Seagull*, which Lord Turfleigh had left in Southampton waters, or in Scotland shooting grouse, with one of the innumerable house parties to which he had been invited, and at which he would have been a welcome guest, or climbing the Alps with fellow

members of the Alpine Club?

So they were silent as they rode over this green-and-violet moor, over which the curlew flew wailingly, as if complaining of this breach of their solitude.

And Nell was thinking, or, rather, musing; for though she was taking lessons, she was too good a rider to be absorbed in the management of her horse.

Had she not scampered over these same moors on a half-wild Exmoor pony, bare-backed, and with a halter for a bridle?

She was thinking of the weeks that had passed since the man who was riding beside her had been flung at her feet, and wondering, half unconsciously, at the happiness of those weeks. There had scarcely been a day in which he and she had not walked or sailed, or sat on the quay together. She recalled their first sail in the *Annie Laurie*; there had been many since then; and he had been so kind, so genial a companion, that she had begun to feel as if he were an old friend, a kind of second Dick.

At times, it was true, he was silent and gloomy, not to say morose; but, as a rule, he was kind, with a gentle, protective sort of kindness which, believe me, is duly appreciated by even such a simple, unsophisticated girl as Nell.

As she rode beside him, she glanced now and again at the handsome face, which was grave and [Pg 67] lined with thought, and she wondered, girllike, upon what he was musing.

Suddenly he turned to her.

"Yes, you don't need much teaching," he said, with a smile. "You ride awfully well, as it is. With a little practice—you won't forget about holding the reins a little farther; from you?—you will ride like Lady Lucille herself."

"Who is Lady Lucille?" she asked.

He looked just a shade embarrassed for a moment, but only for a moment.

"Oh, she's the crack fashionable rider," he said casually.

"I feel very much flattered," said Nell. "And I am very grateful for your lesson. I hope you won't discontinue them because I show some promise."

He looked at her with sudden gravity. Now was the time to tell her that he was going to leave Shorne Mills.

"You won't want many more," he said; "but I hope you will let me ride with you while I'm here. I must be going presently."

"Must you?" she said.

Girls learn the art of mastering their voices much earlier than the opposite sex can, and her voice sounded indifferent enough, or just properly regretful.

He nodded.

"Yes, I must leave Shorne Mills, worse luck."

"If it is so unlucky, why do you go? But why is it so unlucky?" she asked; and still her tone sounded indifferent.

"It's bad luck because—well, because I have been very happy here," he said, checking his horse into a walk.

She glanced at him as she paced beside him.

"You have been so happy here? Really? That sounds so strange. It is such a dull, quiet place."

"Perhaps it's because of that," he said. "God knows, I'm not anxious to get back to London—the world."

She looked at him thoughtfully with her clear, girlish eyes; and he met the glance, then looked across the moor with something like a frown.

"There is a fascination in the place," he said. "It is so beautiful and so quiet; and—and—London is so noisy, such a blare. And——"

He paused.

She kept the high-bred mare to a walk.

"But will you not be glad to go?" she asked. "It must be dull here, as I said. You must have so many friends who—who will be glad to see you, and whom you will be glad to see."

He smiled cynically.

"Friends!" he said grimly. "Has any one many friends? And how many of the people I know will, I [Pg 68] wonder, be glad to see me? They will find it pleasant to pity me."

"Pity you! Why?" she asked, her beautiful eyes turned on him with surprise.

Drake bit his lip.

"Well, I've had a piece of bad luck lately," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" murmured Nell.

He laughed grimly.

"Oh, it's no more than I had a right to expect. Don't forget what I told you about holding your reins—that's right."

"Is it about money?" she asked timidly. "I always think bad luck means that."

He nodded.

"Yes; I've lost a great deal of money lately," he replied vaguely. "And—and I must leave Shorne Mills."

"I am sorry," she said simply, and without attempting to conceal her regret. "I—we—have almost grown to think that you belonged here. Will you be sorry to go?"

He glanced at her innocent eyes and frowned.

"Yes; very much," he replied. "There is a fascination in this place. It is so quiet, so beautiful, so remote, so far away from the world which I hate!"

"You hate? Why do you hate it?" she asked.

He bit his lip again.

"Because it is false and hollow," he replied. "No man—or woman—thinks what he or she says, or says what he or she thinks."

"Then why go back to it?" she asked. "But all the people in London can't be—bad and false," she added, as if she were considering his sweeping condemnation.

"Oh, not all," he said. "I've been unfortunate in my acquaintances, perhaps, as Voltaire said."

He looked across the moor again absently. Her question, "Then why go back to it?" haunted him. It was absurd to imagine that he could remain at Shorne Mills. The quiet life had been pleasant, he had felt better in health here than he had done for years; but—well, a man who has spent so many years in the midst of the whirl of life is very much like the old prisoner of the Bastille who, when he was released by the revolutionary mob, implored to be taken back again. One gets used to the din and clamor of society as one gets used to the solemn quiet of a prison. Besides, he was, or had been, a prominent figure in the gallantry show, and he seemed to belong to it.

"One isn't always one's own master," he said, after a pause.

Nell turned her eyes to him. [Pg 69]

"Are not you?" she said, a little shyly. "You seem so—so free to do just what you please."

He laughed rather grimly.

"Do you know what I should do if I were as free as I seem, Miss Nell?" he asked. "I should take one of these farms"—he nodded to a rural homestead, one of the smallest and simplest, which stood on the edge of the moor—"and spend the rest of my life making clotted cream and driving cows and pigs to market."

She laughed.

"I can scarcely imagine you doing that," she said.

"Well, I might buy a trawler, and go fishing in the bay."

"That would be better," she admitted. "But it's very tough weather sometimes. I have seen the women waiting on the jetty, and on the cliffs, and looking out at the storm, with their faces white with fear and anxiety for the men—their fathers and husbands and sweethearts."

"There wouldn't be any women to watch and grow white for me," he remarked.

"Oh, but don't you think we should be anxious—mamma and I?" she said.

He looked at her, but her eyes met his innocently, and there was not a sign of coquetry in her smile.

"Thanks. In that case, I must abandon the idea of getting my livelihood as a fisherman," he said lightly. "I couldn't think of causing Mrs. Lorton any further anxiety."

"Shall we have another gallop?" she asked, a moment or two afterward. "We might ride to that farm there"—she pointed to a thatched roof just visible above a hollow—"and get a glass of milk. I am quite thirsty."

She made the suggestion blithely, as if neither her own nor his words had remained in her mind;

and Drake brightened up as they sped over the springy turf.

A woman came out of the farm, and greeted them with a cordial welcome in the smile which she bestowed on Nell, and the half nod, half curtsy, she gave to Drake.

"Why, Miss Nell, it be yew sure enough," she said pleasantly. "I was a-thinkin' that 'eed just forgot us. Bobby! Bobby! do 'ee come and hold the horses. Here be Miss Nell of Shorne Mills."

A barefooted, ruddy-cheeked little man ran out and laughed up at Nell as she bent down and stroked his head with her whip. Nell and Drake dismounted, and she led the way into the kitchen and living room of the farm.

The room was so low that Drake felt he must stoop, and Nell's tall figure looked all the taller and slimmer for its propinquity to the timbered ceiling. The woman brought a couple of glasses of milk and some saffron cakes, and Nell drank and ate with a healthy, unashamed appetite, and [Pg 70] apparently quite forgot Drake, who, seated in the background, sipped his milk and watched and listened to her absently. She knew this woman and her husband and the children quite intimately; asked after the baby's last tooth as she bent over the sleeping mite, and was anxious to know how the eldest girl, who was in service in London, was getting on.

"Well, Emma, her says she likes it well enough," replied the woman, standing, with the instinctive delicacy of respect, with her firm hand resting on the spotlessly white table; "leastways her would if there was more air—it's the want o' air she complains of. Accordin' to she, there bean't enough for the hoosts o' people there be. Oh, yes, the family's kind enough to her—not that she has much to do wi' 'em; for she's in the nursery—she's nursemaid, you remembers, Miss Nell—and the mistress is too grand a lady to go there often. It's a great family she's in, you know, Miss Nell, a titled family, and there's grand goin's-on a'most every day; indeed, it's turnin' day into night they're at most o' the time, so says Emma. She made so bold, Emma did, to send her best respects to you in her last letter, and to say she hoped if ever you came to London she'd have the luck to see you, though it might be from a distance."

Nell nodded gratefully.

"Not that I am at all likely to go to London," she said, with a laugh. "If I did, I should be sure to go and see Emma."

Emma's mother glanced curiously at Drake; and he understood the significance of the glance, but Nell was evidently unconscious of its meaning.

"And this is the gentleman as is staying at the cottage, Miss Nell?" she said. "I hope your arm's better, sir?"

Drake made a suitable and satisfactory response, and Nell, having talked to the two little girls, who had got as near to her as their shyness would permit, rose.

"Thank you so much for the milk and cakes, Mrs. Trimble," she said. "We were quite famishing, weren't we?"

"Quite famished," assented Drake.

Mrs. Trimble beamed.

"You be main welcome, Miss Nell, as 'ee knows full well; I wish 'ee could ride out to us every day. And that's a beautiful horse you're on, miss, surely!"

"Isn't it?" said Nell. "It's Mr. Vernon's; he is kind enough to lend it to me."

Mrs. Trimble glanced significantly again at Drake; but again Nell failed to see or understand the quick, intelligent question in the eyes.

"Speakin' o' Emma, I've got her letter in my pocket, Miss Nell; and I'm thinkin' I'll give it 'ee; for [Pg 71] the address, you know. It's on the top, writ clear, and if you should go to London——"

Nell took the precious letter, and put it with marked carefulness in the bosom of her habit.

"I shall like to read it, Mrs. Trimble. Emma and I were such good friends, weren't we? And I'll be sure to let you have it back."

The whole of the family crowded out to see Miss Nell of Shorne Mills drive off, and Drake had to maneuver skillfully to get a coin into Bobby's chubby, and somewhat grubby, hand unseen by Nell.

They rode on in silence for a time. The scene had impressed Drake. The affection of the whole of them for Nell had been so evident, and the sweet simplicity of her nature had displayed itself so ingenuously, that he felt—well, as he had felt once or twice coming out of church.

Then he remembered the woman's significant glance, and his conscience smote him. No doubt all Shorne Mills was connecting his name with hers. Yes; he must go.

She was singing softly as she rode beside him, and they exchanged scarcely half a dozen sentences on the way home; but yet Nell seemed happy and content, and as she slipped from her saddle in front of the garden gate, she breathed a sigh of keen pleasure.

"Oh, I have enjoyed it so much!" she said, as he looked at her inquiringly. "Is there anything more beautiful and lovable than a horse?"

As she spoke, she stroked the mare's satin neck, and the animal turned its great eyes upon her with placid affection and gratitude. Drake looked from the horse to the girl, but said nothing, and at that moment Dick came out to take the horses down to the stables.

"Had a good ride, Nell?" he asked. "Wants a lot of coaching, doesn't she, Mr. Vernon? But I assure you I've done my best with her; girls are the most stupid creatures in the world; and the last person they'll learn anything from is their brother."

Nell managed to tilt his cap over his eyes as she ran in, and Dick looked after her longingly, as he exclaimed portentously:

"That's one I owe you, my child."

Nell laughed back defiantly; but when she had got up to her own room, and was taking off the habit, something of the brightness left her face, and she sighed.

"I am sorry he is going," she murmured to her reflection in the glass. "How we shall miss him; all of us, Dick and mamma! And I shall miss him, too. Yes; I am sorry. It will seem so—so dull and [Pg 72] dreary when he has gone. And he does not seem glad to go. But perhaps he only said that to please me, and because it was the proper thing to say. Of course, I—we—could not expect him to stay for the rest of his life in Shorne Mills."

She sighed again, and stood, with her habit half unbuttoned, looking beyond the glass into the past few happy weeks. Yes, it would seem very dull and dreary when he was gone.

But he still lingered on; his arm got well, his step was strong and firm, his voice and manner less grave and moody. He rode or sailed with her every day, Dick sometimes accompanying them; but he was only postponing the hour of his departure, and putting it away from him with a half-hesitating hand.

One afternoon, Dick burst into the sitting room—they were at tea—with a couple of parcels; one, a small square like a box, the other, a larger and heavier one.

"Just come by the carrier," he said; "addressed to 'Drake Vernon, Esquire.' The little one is registered. The carrier acted as auxiliary postman, and wants a receipt."

Drake signed the paper absently, with a scrawl of the pen which Dick brought him, and Dick, glancing at the signature mechanically, said:

"Well, that's a rum way of writing 'Vernon'!"

Drake looked up from cutting the string of the small box, and frowned slightly.

"Give it me back, please," he said, rather sharply. "It isn't fair to write so indistinctly."

Dick handed the receipt form back, and Drake ran his pen quickly through the "Selbie" which he had scrawled unthinkingly, and wrote Drake Vernon in its place.

Dick took the altered paper unsuspectingly to the carrier.

"So kind of you to trouble, Mr. Vernon!" said Mrs. Lorton. "As if it mattered how you wrote! My poor father used to say that only the illiterate were careful of their handwriting, and that illegible caligraphy—it is caligraphy, is it not?—was a sign of genius."

"Then I must be one of the greatest geniuses that ever lived," said Drake.

"And I'm another—if indifferent spelling is also a sign," said Dick cheerfully; "and Nell must cap us both, for she can neither write nor spell; few girls can," he added calmly. "Tobacco, Mr. Vernon?" nodding at the box.

By this time Drake had got its wrapper off and revealed a jewel case. He handed it to Mrs. Lorton with the slight awkwardness of a man giving a present. [Pg 73]

"Here's a little thing I hope you will accept, Mrs. Lorton," he said.

"For me!" she exclaimed, bridling, and raising her brows with juvenile archness. "Are you sure it's for me? Now, shall I guess——"

"Oh, no, you don't, mamma," said Dick emphatically. "I'll open it if you can't manage it. Oh, I say!" he exclaimed, as Mrs. Lorton opened the case, and the sparkle of diamonds was emitted.

Mrs. Lorton echoed his exclamation, and her face flushed with all a woman's delight as she gazed at the diamond bracelet reposing on its bed of white plush.

"Really——My dear Mr. Vernon!" she gasped. "How—how truly magnificent! But surely not for me—for me!"

He was beginning to get, if not uncomfortable, a little bored, with a man's hatred of fuss.

"I'm afraid there's not much magnificence about it," he said, rather shortly. "I hope you like the pattern, style, or whatever you call it. I had to risk it, not being there to choose. And there's a gun in that case, Dick."

Dick made an indecent grab for the larger parcel, and, tearing off the wrapper, opened the thick leather case and took out a costly gun.

"And a Greener!" he exclaimed. "A Greener! I say, you know, sir——"

He laughed excitedly, his face flushed with delight, as he carried the gun to the window.

"Is it not perfect, simply perfect, Eleanor?" said Mrs. Lorton, holding out her arm with the bracelet on her wrist. "Really, I don't think you could have chosen a handsomer one, Mr. Vernon, if you had gone to London to do so."

"I am glad you are pleased with it," he said simply.

"Pleased? It is perfect! Eleanor, haven't you a word to say? No; I imagine you are too overwhelmed for words," said Mrs. Lorton, with a kind of cackle.

"It is very beautiful, mamma," she said gravely; and her face, as she leaned over the thing, was grave also.

Drake looked at her as he rose, and understood the look and the tone of her voice, and was glad that he had resisted the almost irresistible temptation to order a somewhat similar present for her.

"I say, sir, you must get your gun down, and we must go for some rabbits," said Dick eagerly. "And I can get a day or two's shooting over the Maltby land as soon as the season opens. I'm sure they'd give it me."

"That's tempting, Dick," said Drake; "and it adds another cause to my regret that I am leaving to-morrow."

"Leaving to-morrow!" exclaimed Mrs. Lorton, with a gasp. "Surely not! You are not thinking, dreaming of going, my dear Mr. Vernon?" [Pg 74]

"It's very good of you," he said, picking up his cap and nearing the door. "But I couldn't stay forever, you know. I've trespassed on your hospitality too much already."

"Oh, I say, you know!" expostulated Dick, in a deeply aggrieved tone. "I say, Nell, do you hear that? Mr. Vernon's going!"

"Miss Nell knows that I have been 'going' for some days past, only that I haven't been able to tear myself away. It's nearly five, Miss Nell, and we ordered the boat for half-past four, you know," he added, in a matter-of-fact way.

She rose and ran out of the room for her jacket and tam-o'-shanter, and they went out, leaving Mrs. Lorton and Dick still gloating over their presents.

CHAPTER IX.

Nell walked rapidly and talking quickly as they went down to the jetty, and it was not until the *Annie Laurie* was slipping out into the bay that she grew silent and thoughtful. She sat in the stern with her arm over the tiller, her eyes cast down, her face grave; and Drake, feeling uncomfortable, said at last:

"Might one offer a penny for your thoughts, Miss Nell?"

She looked up and met the challenge with a sweet seriousness.

"I was thinking of something that you told me the other day—when we were riding," she said.

"I've told you so much——" "And so little!" he added mentally.

"You said that you had been unlucky, that you had lost a great deal of money lately," she said, in a low voice.

He nodded.

"Yes; I think I did. It's true unfortunately; but it doesn't much matter."

"Does it not?" she asked. "Why did you give mamma so costly a present? Oh, please don't deny it. I don't know very much about diamonds, but I know that that bracelet must have cost a great deal of money."

"Not really," he said, with affected carelessness. "Diamonds are very cheap now; they find 'em by the bucketful in the Cape, you know."

She looked at him with grave reproach.

"You are trying to belittle it," she said; "but, indeed, I am not deceived. And the gun, too! That must have been very expensive. Why—did you spend so much?" [Pg 75]

He began to feel irritated.

"Look here, Miss Nell," he said; "it is true that I have lost some money, but I'm not quite a pauper, and, if I were, the least I could do would be to share my last crust with—with your people for their amazing goodness to me."

"A diamond bracelet and an expensive gun are not crusts," she said, shaking her head.

"Oh, dash it all!" he retorted impatiently. "The stupid things only very inadequately represent my ——Oh, I'm bad at speech making and expressing myself. And don't you think you ought to be very grateful to me?"

She frowned slightly in the effort to understand.

"Grateful! I have just been telling you that I think you ought not to have spent so much. Why should I be grateful?"

"That I didn't buy something for you," he said.

She colored, and looked away from him.

"I—I should not have accepted it," she said.

"I know that," he blurted out. "If I thought you would have done so—but I knew you wouldn't. And so I've got a grievance to meet yours. After all, you might have let me give you some trifle——"

"Such as a diamond bracelet, worth perhaps a hundred pounds?"

"To remember me by. After all, it's only natural I should want to leave something behind me to remind you of me."

"We shan't need such gifts to—to remind us," she said simply. "I think we had better luff."

The sail swung over as she put the helm down; there was silence for a moment or two, then he said:

"I'm sorry I've offended you, Miss Nell. Perhaps it was beastly bad taste. I see it now. But just put yourself in my place——" He slid over the thwart in his eagerness, and coiled himself at her feet. "Supposing you had broken your confounded arm—I beg your pardon!—your arm, and had been taken in and tended by good Samaritans, and nursed and treated like a prince for weeks, and had been made to feel happier than you've been for—for oh, years, would you like to go away with just a 'Oh, thanks; awfully obliged; very kind of you'? Wouldn't you want to make a more solid acknowledgment? Come, be fair and just—if a woman can be fair and just!—and admit that I'm not such a criminal, after all!"

She looked down at him thoughtfully, then turned her eyes seaward again.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked. [Pg 76]

"Oh, well; I see that you won't change your mind about these things, so perhaps I'd better be content if you'll say: 'I forgive you.'"

A smile flitted across her face as she looked down at him again, but it was rather a sad little smile.

"I—I forgive you!" she said.

He raised his cap, and took her hand, and, before she suspected what he was going to do, he put his lips to it.

Her face grew crimson, then pale almost to whiteness. It was the first time a man's lips had touched her virgin hand, and——A tremor ran through her, her eyes grew misty, as she looked at him with a half-pained, half-fearful expression. Then she turned her head away, and so quickly that he saw neither the change of color nor the expression in her eyes.

"I feel like a miscreant who had received an unexpected pardon," he said lightly, and yet with a touch of gravity in his voice, "and, like the miscreant, I at once proceed to take advantage of the lenity of my judge."

She turned her eyes to him questioningly; there was still a half-puzzled, half-timid expression in them.

"I want to be rewarded—as well as pardoned—rewarded for my noble sacrifice of the desire to bestow a piece of jewelry upon you."

"Rewarded?" she faltered.

He nodded.

"Yes. After the awful rebuke and scolding you have administered, you cannot refuse to accept some token of my—some acknowledgment of my gratitude, Miss Nell. See here——"

He felt in his waistcoat pocket, then in those of his coat, and at last brought out a well-worn silver pencil case.

"I want you to be gracious enough to accept this," he said. "Before you refuse with haughty displeasure and lively scorn, be good enough to examine it. It is worth, I should say—shall I say five shillings? That, I should imagine, is its utmost value. But, on the other hand, it is a useful article, and I display my natural cunning in selecting it—it's the only thing I've got about me that I could offer you, except a match box, and, as you don't smoke, you've no use for that—because you will never be able to use it, I hope and trust, without thinking of the unworthy donor and the debt of gratitude which no diamond bracelet could discharge."

During this long speech, which he had made to conceal his eager desire that she should accept, and his fear, that she should not, Nell's color had come and gone, but she kept her eyes fixed on his steadily, as if she were afraid to remove them. [Pg 77]

"Are you going to accept it—or shall I fling it into the sea as a votive offering? It would be a pity, for it is useful, a thing of sorts, and has been my constant companion for many a year. Yes, or no?"

He held the pencil up, as if he were offering it by auction.

Nell hesitated, then she held out her hand without a word. He dropped the battered pencil case into it, and his bantering tone changed instantly.

"Thank you!" he said gravely, earnestly. "I—I was afraid that you were going to refuse, and—well, that would have hurt me. And that would have hurt you; for I know how gentle-hearted you are, Miss Nell."

Her hand closed over the pencil case tightly until the silver grew warm, then she slipped the thing into her pocket.

"Please observe," he said, after a pause, during which he lit a cigarette, "that I am not in need of any token as a reminder. I am not likely to forget—Shorne Mills."

He turned on his elbow and gazed at the jetty and the cottages which straggled up from it in the narrow ravine to the heights above, to the unique and quaint village upon which the still hot sun was shining as the boat danced toward it.

"No. I shan't find it difficult to remember—or regret."

He stifled a sigh. A sigh rose to her lips also, but she checked it, and forced a smile.

"One does not break one's arm every day, and it is not easy to forget that," she said; "and yet, I dare say you will remember Shorne Mills. I don't think you will see many prettier places. Isn't it quite lovely this evening, with the sun shining on the cliffs and making old Brownie's windows glitter—like—like the diamonds in mamma's bracelet?"

She laughed with a girlish mischievousness, and ran on rapidly, as if she must talk, as if a pause were to be averted as a peril.

"I've heard people say that there is only one other place in the world like it—Cintra, in Portugal, isn't it?"

He nodded. He was gazing at the picturesque little place, the human nests stuck like white stones in the cleft of the cliffs; and something more than the beauty of Shorne Mills was stirring, almost oppressing, his heart. He had stayed at, and departed from, many a place as beautiful in other ways as this, and had left it with some little regret, perhaps, but never with the dull, aching feeling such as weighed upon him this evening.

"And at night it's lovelier still," went on Nell cheerfully, after a snatch of song, just sung under her breath, to show how happy and free from care she was at that moment. "To sail in on the tide of an autumn evening when the lights have been lit, and every cottage looks like a lantern; and the blue haze hangs over the village, and the children's voices come floating over the water as if through a mist; then, on nights like that, the sea is all phosphorescent, and the boat leaves a line of silvery light in its wake; and one seems to have all the world to oneself——" [Pg 78]

She stopped suddenly and sighed unconsciously. Was she thinking that, when that autumn night came, and Drake Vernon was not with her, she would indeed have all the world to herself, and that all the world is all the nicer when one has a companion? He lowered his eyes to her face.

"That was a pretty picture," he said, in a low voice. "I shall think of that—wherever I may be in the autumn."

Nell laughed as the boat ran beside the jetty slip, and she rose.

"Do you think you will? Perhaps you will be too much amused, engrossed with whatever you are doing. I know I should be, if—if I were to leave Shorne Mills, and go into the big world."

"You do yourself an injustice," he said, rather curtly; and she laughed, and flushed a little.

"I deserve that," she said. "Of course, I should not forget Shorne Mills; but you——Ah, it is different!"

She sprang out before he could get on shore and offer his hand.

"I shall want her to-morrow morning at eleven, Brownie," she said to the old fisherman who was

preparing to take the *Annie Laurie* to her moorings.

He touched his forehead.

"Aye, aye, Miss Nell! And you'll not be wanting me?" he asked, as a matter of form, and with a glance at Drake, who stood waiting with his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, yes, please," she said. "I forgot; Mr. Vernon is going away to-morrow," she added cheerfully; and she began to sing under her breath again as they climbed upward. But Drake did not sing, and his face was gloomy.

Throughout that evening, Mrs. Lorton contributed to the entertainment of her guest by admiring her bracelet and deploring his departure.

"Of course I am aware that you must be anxious to go," she said, with a deep sigh. "It has been dull, I've no doubt, very dull; and I am so sorry that the state of my health has prevented me going out and about with you. There are so many places of interest in the neighborhood which we could have visited; but I am sure you will make allowances for an invalid. And we will hope that this is not your last visit to Shorne Mills. I need not say that we shall be glad, delighted, indeed, [Pg 79] at any time——"

Every now and then Drake murmured his acknowledgments; but he made the due responses absently. He was left entirely at Mrs. Lorton's mercy that evening—for Nell had suddenly remembered that she ought really to go and see old Brownie's mother, a lady whose age was set down at anything between a hundred and a hundred and ten, and Dick was in his "workshop" cleaning the new and spotless gun.

Nell did not come in till late, was full of Grandmother Brownie's sayings and wonderfully maintained faculties, and ran off to bed very soon, with a cheerful "Good night, Mr. Vernon. Dick has ordered the trap for nine o'clock."

Drake got up early the next morning; there were the horses to be arranged for—he was going to leave two behind, for a time, at any rate, in the hope that Dick and Miss Nell might use them; and he had to say good-by—and tip—sundry persons. He performed the latter operation on so liberal a scale that amazement sat upon the bosom of many a man and woman in Shorne Mills for months afterward. Molly, indeed, was so overcome by the sight and feel of the crisp ten-pound note, and her face grew so red and her eyes so prominent, that Drake was seriously afraid that she was going to have a fit.

Nell had got up a few minutes after him, and had prepared his farewell breakfast; but she was not present, and Mrs. Lorton presided. It was not until the arrival of the trap that she came in hurriedly. She had her outdoor things on, and explained that she had had to go to the farm to order a fowl; and she was full of some story the farmer's wife had told her—a story which had made her laugh, and still seemed to cause her so much amusement that Mrs. Lorton felt compelled to remind her that Mr. Vernon was going.

"Ah, yes! I suppose it is time. The train starts at ten-forty-five. Have you got some lunch for Mr. Vernon, Dick?"

She had packed a neat little packet of sandwiches with her own hands, but put the question casually, as if she hoped that somebody had considered their departing guest's comfort.

The girl's bright cheerfulness got on Drake's nerves. His farewell to Mrs. Lorton lacked grace and finish, and he could only hold out his hand to Nell, and say, rather grimly and curtly:

"Good-by, Miss Nell."

Just that; no more.

Her hand rested in his for a moment. Did it tremble, or was it only fancy on his part? She said, [Pg 80] "Good-by, and I hope you will have a pleasant journey," quite calmly.

Dick burst in with:

"Now, Mr. Vernon, if you've kissed everybody, we'd better be starting," and Drake got into the trap.

Mrs. Lorton looked after the departing guest, and waved her hand with an expression of languid sorrow; then turned to Nell with a sigh.

"I might have known that he would go; but still I must say that it is a disappointment—a great disappointment. These trials are sent for our good, and——I do wish you would not keep up that perpetual humming, Eleanor. On an occasion like this it is especially trying. And how pale you look!" she added, staring unsympathetically.

"I've—I've rather a headache," said Nell, turning toward the door. "I suppose it was hurrying up to the farm. It is very hot this morning. I'll go and take off my hat."

She went upstairs slowly, slipped the bolt in her bedroom door, and, taking off her hat, stood looking beyond the glass for a moment or two; then she absently drew an old and somewhat battered pencil case from her pocket. She gazed at it thoughtfully, until suddenly she could not see it for the tears that gathered in her eyes, and presently she began to tremble. She slipped to

her knees besides the bed, and buried her forehead in the hands clasped over Drake's "token of remembrance and gratitude."

And as she struggled with the sobs that shook her, she still trembled; for there was something in the feeling of utter, overwhelming desolation which frightened her—something she could neither understand nor resist, though she had been fighting against it all through the long and weary night.

Oh, the shame of it! That she should cry because Mr. Drake Vernon had left Shorne Mills! The shame of it!

CHAPTER X.

All the way up to town Drake felt very depressed. It is strange that we mortals never thoroughly appreciate a thing until we have lost it, or a time until it has slipped past us; and Drake only realized, as the express rushed along and took him farther and farther away from Shorne Mills, how contented, and, yes, nearly happy, he had been there, notwithstanding the pain and inconvenience of a broken limb.

As he leaned back and smoked, he thought of the little village in the cleft of the cliffs, of the opaline sea, of the miniature jetty on which he had so often sat and basked in the sunlight; but, more than all, he thought of The Cottage, of the racketing, warm-hearted Dick, and—and of Nell of Shorne Mills. [Pg 81]

It seemed hard to realize, and not a little painful, that he should never again sit in the parlor which now seemed to him so cozy, and listen to the girl playing Chopin and Grieg; or ride beside her over the yellow and purple moor; or lie coiled up at her feet as she sailed the *Annie Laurie*.

He began to suspect that he had taken a greater interest in her than he was aware of; he had grown accustomed to the sweet face, the musical voice, the little tricks of manner and expression which went to make up a charm which he now felt she certainly possessed. He looked round the carriage and sighed as if he missed something, as if something had gone out of his life.

They had been awfully good to him; they had in very truth played the part of the good Samaritan; and in his mind he compared these simple folk, buried in an out-of-the-way fishing village, with some of his fashionable friends. Which of them would have nursed him as he had been nursed at The Cottage, would have treated him as one of the family, would have lavished upon him a regard nearly akin to affection? It was a hollow world, he thought, and he wished to Heaven he had been born in Shorne Mills, and got his living as a fisherman, putting in his spare time by looking after, say, the *Annie Laurie*!

He had wired to his man, and he found his rooms all ready for him. He wondered as he looked round the handsome and tastefully furnished sitting room, while Sparling helped him off with his coat, whether he should be able to afford to keep them up much longer.

"Any news, Sparling?" he asked. "Hope you've been all right," he added, in the pleasant and friendly way with which he always addressed those who did service for him.

"Thank you, my lord," said Sparling, "I've been very well; but I was much upset to hear of your lordship's accident, and very sorry you wouldn't let me come to you."

The man spoke with genuine sympathy and regret, for he was attached to Drake, and was fully convinced that he had the best, the handsomest, and the most desirable master in all England.

"Thanks; very much," said Drake; "but it was nothing to speak of, and there was no reason for dragging you down there. There wasn't any accommodation, to tell the truth, and you'd have moped yourself to death." [Pg 82]

"You're looking very well, my lord—a little thinner, perhaps," said Sparling respectfully.

Drake sighed at the naïve retort, then sighed unaccountably.

"Oh, I've done some fishing, boating, and riding," he said, "and I'm pretty fit—fitter than I've been for some time. There's an awful pile of letters, I see."

"Yes, my lord; you told me not to send them on. Will your lordship dine at home to-night?"

Drake replied in the affirmative, had a bath, and changed, and sat down to one of the daintily prepared dinners which were the envy and despair of his bachelor friends. It was really an admirable little dinner; the claret was a famous one from the Anglemere cellars, and warmed to a nicety; the coffee was perfection; Sparling's ministrations left nothing to be desired; and yet Drake sank into his easy-chair after the meal with a sigh that was weary and wistful.

There had never been anything more than soup and a plain joint, with a pudding to follow, at the dinners at The Cottage; but the simple meal had been rendered a pleasant one by Dick's cheerful and boyish nonsense; and whenever Drake looked across the table, there had been Nell's sweet face opposite him, sometimes grave with a pensive thoughtfulness, at others all alight with merriment and innocent, girlish gayety.

His room to-night seemed very dull and lonely. It was strange; he had never been bored by his own society before; he had rather liked to dine alone, to smoke his cigarette with the evening paper across his knee or a book on the table beside him. He tried to read; but the carefully edited paper, with its brilliant articles, its catchy little paragraphs, and its sparkling gossip, didn't interest him in the least. He dropped it, and fell to wondering, to picturing, what they were doing at that precise moment at The Cottage. Mrs. Lorton, no doubt, was sitting in her high-backed chair reading the *Fashion Gazette*; Dick was lounging just outside the window, smoking a cigarette, mending his rod, and whistling the last comic song. And Nell—what was Nell doing? Perhaps she was playing softly one of the pieces he had grown fond of; or leaning half out of the window squabbling affectionately with the boy.

Or perhaps they were talking of him—Drake. Did they miss him? At the thought, he was reminded of the absurd song—"Will They Miss Me When I'm Gone?" And, with something like a blush for his sentimental weakness, as he mentally termed it, he sprang up and took his letters. They consisted mostly of bills and invitations. He chucked the first aside and glanced at the others; both were distasteful to him. He felt as if he should like to cut the world forever. [Pg 83]

And yet that wouldn't do. Everybody would say that he was completely knocked over by the ruin of his prospects, and that he had run away. He couldn't stand that. He had always been accustomed to facing the music, however unpleasant it might be; and he would face it now. Besides, it would never do to sit there moping, and wishing himself back at Shorne Mills; because that was just what he was doing.

He turned over the gilt-edged cards and the scented notes—there seemed to be a great many people in town, notwithstanding the deadness of the season—and he selected one from a certain Lady Northgate. She was an old friend of his, and she had written him a pretty little note, asking him to a reception for that night. It was just the little note which a thorough woman of the world would write to a man whom she liked, and who had struck a streak of bad luck. Most of Drake's acquaintances who were in town would be there; and it would be a good opportunity of facing the situation and accepting more or less sincere sympathy with a good grace.

It was a fine night; and he walked to the Northgates' in Grosvenor Square; and thought of the evening he and Nell had sailed in to Shorne Mills with the lights peeping out through the trees, and the stars twinkling in the deep-blue sky. It already seemed years since that night, but he saw the girl's face as clearly as if she were walking beside him now.

The face vanished as he went up the broad staircase and into the brilliantly lighted room; and Shorne Mills seemed farther away, and all that had happened there like a dream, as Lady Northgate held out her hand and smiled at him.

She was an old friend, and many years his senior; but of course she looked young—no one in society gets old nowadays—and she greeted him with a cheerful badinage, which, however skillfully, suggested sympathy.

"It was a good boy to come!" she said. "I scarcely half expected you, and Harry offered to bet me ten to one in my favorite gloves that you wouldn't; but, somehow, I thought you would turn up. I wrote such a pretty note, didn't I?"

"You did; you always do," said Drake. "It was quite irresistible."

Lord Northgate, who was the "Harry" alluded to, came up and gave Drake a warm grip of the hand.

"What the deuce are you doing here?" he asked. "Thought you were shooting down at Monkwell's place, or somewhere. Jolly glad Lucy didn't take my bet. And where have you been?" [Pg 84]

"With the Devon and Somerset," replied Drake, with partial truth.

"Wish I had!" grumbled Northgate. "Kept at the Office." He was in the Cabinet. "There's always some beastly row, or little war, just going on when one wants to get at the salmon or the grouse. I declare to goodness that I work like a nigger and get nothing but kicks for halfpence! I'd chuck politics to-morrow if it weren't for Lucy; and why on earth she likes to be shut in town, and sweltering in hot rooms, playing this kind of game, I can't imagine."

"But then you haven't a strong imagination, Harry, dear," said his wife pleasantly.

"I've got a strong thirst on me," said Northgate, "and a still stronger desire to cut this show. Come down to the smoking room and have a cigar presently, old chap."

Drake knew that this was equivalent to saying, "I'm sorry for you, old man!" and nodded comprehendingly.

"You're looking very well, Drake," said Lady Northgate, as her husband, struggling with a fearful yawn, sauntered away. "And not at all unhappy."

Drake shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the use? Of course, it's a bad business for me; but all the yowling in the world wouldn't better it. What can't be cured must be endured."

Lady Northgate nodded at him approvingly.

"I knew you'd take it like this," she said. "You won't go down to Harry for a little while?"

"Oh, no," said Drake, with a smile. "I'm going the round; I'm not going to shirk it."

He was one of the most popular men in London, and there were many in the room who really sympathized with and were sorry for him; and Drake, as he exchanged greetings with one and another, felt that the thing hadn't been so bad, after all. He made this consoling reflection as he leaned against the wall beside a chair in which sat a lady whom he did not know, and at whom he had scarcely glanced; and he was roused from his reverie by her saying:

"May I venture to trouble you to put this glass down?"

He took the glass and set it on the pedestal of the statuette beside him, and, as in duty bound, returned to the lady. She was an extremely pretty little woman, with soft brown hair and extremely bright eyes, which, notwithstanding their brightness, were not at all hard. He felt, rather than knew, that she was perfectly dressed, and he noticed that she wore remarkably fine diamonds. They sparkled and glittered in her hair, on her bosom, on her wrists, and on her fingers. [Pg 85]

He had never seen her before, and he wondered who she was.

"You have just come up from the country?" she said.

The accent with which she made this rather startling remark betrayed her nationality to Drake. The American accent, when it is voiced by a person of culture and refinement, is an extremely pretty one; the slight drawl is musical, and the emphasis which is given to words not usually made emphatic, is attractive.

"Yes," said Drake. "But how did you know that?"

"Your face and hands are so brown," she replied, with a frankness which was robbed of all offense by her placidity and unself-consciousness. "Nearly all the men one meets here are so colorless. I suppose it is because you have so little air and sun in London. At first, one is afraid that everybody is ill; but after a time one gets used to it."

Drake was amused and a little interested.

"Have the men in America so much color?" he asked.

"Well, how did you know I was an American?" she inquired, with a charming little air of surprise. "I suppose my speech betrayed me? That is so annoying. I thought I had almost entirely lost my accent."

"I don't know why you should want to lose it," said Drake, honestly enough. "It's five hundred times better than our London one!"

"I didn't say I wanted to exchange it for that," she remarked.

"Don't exchange it for any other, if I may be permitted to say so."

"That's very good of you," she said; "but isn't it rather like asking the leopard not to change his spots? And after all, I don't know why we shouldn't be as proud of our accent as you are of yours."

"I'm quite certain I'm not proud of mine," said Drake.

She smiled up at him over her fan; a small and costly painted affair, with diamonds incrusted in the handle.

"You are more modest than most Englishmen," she said.

"I don't know whether to be grateful or not for that," remarked Drake. "Are we all so conceited?"

"Well, I think you are all pretty well satisfied with yourselves," she replied. "I never knew any nation so firmly convinced that it was the pick of creation; and I expect before I am here very long I shall become as fully convinced as you are that the world was made by special contract for the use and amusement of the English. Mind, I won't say that it could have been made for a better people."

"That's rather severe," said Drake. "But don't you forget that you were English yourself a few years ago; that, in a sense, you are English still." [Pg 86]

"That's very nicely said," she remarked; "more especially as I didn't quite deserve it. I was wanting to see whether I could make you angry."

Drake stared at her with astonishment.

"Why on earth should you want to make me angry?" he asked.

"Well, I've heard a great deal about you," she replied. "And all the people who talked about you told me that you were rather hot-tempered. Lady Northgate, for instance, assured me you could be a perfect bear when you liked."

Drake smiled.

"That was extremely kind of Lady Northgate."

"Well, so long as it wasn't true. I've heard so much about you that I was quite anxious to see you. I am speaking to Lord Drake Selbie, am I not?"

"That's my name," said Drake.

"The nephew of Angleford?"

Drake nodded.

She looked up at him as if waiting to see how he took the mention of his uncle's name; but Drake's face could be as impassive as a stone wall when he liked.

"You know my uncle?" he asked, in a tone of polite interest.

"Yes," she said; "very well. I met him when he was in America. His wife is a great friend of mine. You know her, of course?"

"I'm sorry to say I have not had that pleasure," said Drake. "I was absent from England when the present Lady Angleford came over, after her marriage."

"Oh, yes," said the lady. "I suppose I ought not to have mentioned her?"

"Good heavens! Why not?" asked Drake.

"Well, of course," she drawled slowly, but musically, "I know that Lord Angleford's marriage was a bad thing for you. It wouldn't be my fault if I didn't, seeing that everybody in London has been talking about it."

"Well, it's not a particularly good thing for me," Drake admitted; "but it's no reason why I should dislike any reference to my uncle or his wife."

"You don't bear her any ill will?" she asked.

This was extremely personal, especially coming from a stranger; but the lady was an American, with an extremely pretty face and a charming manner, and there was so much gentleness, almost deprecatory gentleness in her softly bright eyes, that Drake, somehow, could not feel any resentment.

"Not the very least in the world, I assure you," he replied. "My uncle had a perfect right to marry when he pleased, and whom he pleased." [Pg 87]

"I didn't think you'd be angry with him," she said, "because everybody says you were such friends, and you are so fond of him; but I thought you'd be riled with her."

Drake laughed rather grimly.

"Not in the least," he said. "Of course, I should have preferred that my uncle should remain single, but I can't be absurd enough to quarrel with a lady for marrying him. He is a very charming man, and perhaps she couldn't help herself."

"That's just it—she couldn't," said the lady naïvely. "And have you been to see your uncle since you've been back?" she asked.

"Not yet," replied Drake. "I only came back to London an hour or two ago, but I will look him up to-morrow."

"I knew you would," she said; "because that was such a nice letter you wrote, and such a pretty present you sent to Lady Angleford."

As she spoke, she transferred her fan to her left hand and raised her right arm, and Drake recognized upon her wrist a bracelet which he had sent Lady Angleford as a wedding present. He colored and frowned slightly, then he laughed as he met the now timid and quite deprecatory gaze of the upturned eyes.

"Was this quite fair, Lady Angleford?" he said, smiling.

"Well, I don't know," she said, a little pathetically. "I thought it was, but I'm not quite sure now. You see, I wanted to meet you and talk to you, and know exactly how you felt toward me without your knowing who I was."

Drake went and sat down beside her, and leaned toward her with one arm stretched on the back of her chair.

"But why?" he asked.

"Well, you see, I was a little afraid of you. When Lord Angleford asked me to marry him and I consented, I didn't quite realize how things stood between you and him. It was not until I came to Europe—I mean to England—that I realized that I had, so to speak, come between your uncle and you. And that made me feel bad, because everybody I met told me that you were such a—a good fellow, as they call it——"

"One Englishman will become conceited, if you don't take care, Lady Angleford," put in Drake, with a smile.

"That's what everybody says; and I found that you were so much liked and so popular; and it was hateful to me that I should cause a quarrel between you and Lord Angleford. It has made me very unhappy."

"Then don't be unhappy any longer, Lady Angleford," he said. "There has been, and there need be, no quarrel between my uncle and me." [Pg 88]

"Ah, now you make me happy!" she said; and she turned to him with a little flush on her face which made her prettier than ever. "I have been quite wretched whenever I thought of you or heard your name. People spoke of you as if you had died, or got the measles, with a kind of pity in their voices which made me mad and hate myself. You see, as I said, I didn't realize what I was doing. I didn't realize that I was coming between an hereditary legislator and his descendant and heir."

Drake could not help smiling.

"You had better not call my uncle an hereditary legislator, Lady Angleford. I don't think he'd like it."

"But he is, isn't he?" she said. "It is so difficult for an American to understand these things. We are supposed to have the peerage by heart; but we haven't. It's all a mystery and a tangle to us, even the best of us. But I try not to make mistakes. And now I want you to tell me that we are friends. That is so, isn't it?"

She held out her tiny and perfectly gloved hand with a mixture of timidity and impulsiveness which touched Drake.

"Indeed, I hope we are, Lady Angleford," he said.

She looked at him wistfully.

"You couldn't call me 'aunt,' I suppose?"

Drake laughed outright.

"I'm afraid I couldn't," he said. "You are far too young for that."

"I am sorry," she said. "I think I should have liked you to call me aunt. But never mind. I must be satisfied with knowing that we are friends, and that you bear me no ill will. And now, I think I will go. My little plot has been rather successful, after all, hasn't it?"

"Quite a perfect success," said Drake. "And I congratulate you upon it."

"Don't tell Lord Angleford," she said. "He'll say it was 'so American'; and I do hate him to say that."

Drake promised that he would not relate the little farce to his uncle, and got her cloak and took her down to the Angleford carriage. As he put her in and closed the door, she gave him her hand, and smiled at him with a little air of triumph and appeal.

"We are friends, aren't we?" she asked.

"The best of friends, Lady Angleford," he replied. "Good night."

He went back to say good night to Lady Northgate.

"You played it rather low down upon me, didn't you?" he remarked. [Pg 89]

"My dear Drake, what could I do?" she exclaimed. "That poor little woman was so terribly anxious to gain your good will. She didn't understand in the least the harm she was doing you. And what will you do? She is immensely rich—her father was an American millionaire——"

Drake's face hardened. One thing at least he knew he couldn't do: he could not bring himself to accept charity from Lady Angleford. Lady Northgate understood the frown.

"Don't kill me before all these people, Drake!" she said. "I dare say it's very silly of me, but I can't help plotting for your welfare. You see, I am foolish enough to be rather fond of you. There! Go down and drink that soda and whisky with Harry. If you won't let your friends help you, what will you do?"

"I give it up; ask me another. Don't you worry about me, my dear lady; I shall jog along somehow."

CHAPTER XI.

The next morning, while at breakfast, he received a little note from Lady Angleford, asking him to dinner that night. It was a charming little note, as pleading and deprecating as her eyes had been when she looked at him at the Northgates'.

Drake sent back word that he would be delighted to come, and at eight o'clock presented himself

at his uncle's house in Park Lane. Lord Angleford was, like Northgate, detained in London by official business. He was a very fine specimen of the old kind of Tory, and, though well advanced in years, still extremely good-looking—the whole family was favored in that way—and remarkably well preserved. His hair was white, but his eyes were bright and his cheeks ruddy, and, when free from the gout, he was as active as a young man. Of course, he was hot-tempered; all gouty men are; but he was as charming in his way as Lady Angleford, and extremely popular in the House of Lords, and out of it.

Though he had fallen in love with a pretty little American, perhaps he would not have married her but for the little tiff with Drake; but that little tiff had just turned the scale, and, though he had taken the step in a moment of pique, he had not regretted it; for he was very fond and proud of his wife. But he was also very fond and proud of Drake, and was extremely pleased when Lady Angleford had told him that she had met Drake, and was going to ask him to dinner. [Pg 90]

"Oh, all right," he had said. "I shall be very glad to see him—though he's an obstinate young mule. I think you'll like him."

"I do like him very much indeed," she had said. "He is so handsome—how very like he is to you!—and he's not a bit stand-offish and superior, like most Englishmen."

"Oh, Drake's not a bad sort of fellow," said Lord Angleford, "but he's too fond of having his own way."

At this Lady Angleford had smiled; for she knew another member of the family who liked his own way.

She was waiting for Drake in the drawing-room, and gave him both her hands with a little impulsiveness which touched Drake.

"I am so glad you have come," she said; "and your uncle is very glad, too. You won't—get to arguing, will you? You English are such dreadful people to argue. And I think he has a slight attack of the gout, though he was quite angry when I hinted at it this morning."

Drake sincerely hoped his uncle hadn't, for everybody's sake. At that moment the earl came into the room, held out his hand, and said, as if he had parted with Drake only the night before:

"How are you, Drake? Glad to see you. You've met Lady Angleford already? Isn't it nearly dinner time?"

Drake took Lady Angleford in. There were no guests besides himself, and they had quite a pleasant little dinner. Lady Angleford talked with all the vivacity and charm of a cultured American who has seen both sides of the world, and kept her eyes open, and Drake began to feel as if he had known her for years. The earl was in a singularly good humor and listened to, and smiled at, his young wife proudly, and talked to Drake as if nothing had happened. It was just like old times; and Drake, as he opened the door for Lady Angleford, on her way to the drawing-room, smiled down at her, and nodded as she looked up at him questioningly.

Then he went back to his chair, and the butler put the Angleford port in its wicker cradle before the earl.

"I oughtn't to touch a drop," he said, "for I've had a twinge or two lately; but on this occasion——"

He filled his glass, and passed the bottle to Drake—the butler had left the room.

"So you met Lady Angleford last night?"

"Yes, sir; and I take this, the first opportunity, to congratulate you. And Lady Angleford is as charming as she is pretty; and you won't mind my saying that I consider you an extremely lucky man."

Of course, the earl looked pleased. [Pg 91]

"Thanks," he said; "that's very good of you, Drake—especially as my marriage may make all the difference to you."

Drake looked at his cigarette steadily.

"I've no reason to complain, sir; and I don't," he said. "You might have married years ago, and I'm rather surprised you didn't."

The earl grunted.

"I don't suppose I should have done so now, if you hadn't been such a stubborn young ass. That put my back up. But though I don't regret what I've done—no, by Jove!—I don't want you to think I am utterly regardless of your future. This port improves, doesn't it? Of course, you may be knocked out of the succession now——"

"Most probably so, I should think," said Drake.

"Just so. And, therefore, it's only right that I should do something for you."

"You are very good, sir," said Drake.

The earl colored slightly.

"Now look here, Drake; I'm always suspicious of that d——d quiet way of yours! I was very glad when Lady Angleford told me that you were coming here, and I made up my mind that I would let bygones be bygones and act squarely by you. As I said, I'm not a bit sorry that I married; no, indeed!—you've seen Lady Angleford—but I don't want to leave you in the lurch. I don't want you to suffer more than—than can be helped. I've been thinking the matter over, and I'll tell you what I'll do. Have some more port."

Unluckily for Drake, the old man filled his own glass before passing the bottle. Drake sipped his port and waited, and the earl went on:

"Of course, I meant to continue your allowance; but I can see that under the circumstances that wouldn't be sufficient. Something might happen to me——"

"I sincerely trust nothing will happen to you, sir," said Drake.

The earl grunted.

"Well, I'm not so young as I was; and I might get chucked off my horse, or—or something of that sort; and then you'd be in a hole, I imagine; for I suppose you've got through most of your mother's money?"

"A great deal of it," admitted Drake.

"Yes; I thought so. Well, look here; I'll tell you what I'll do, Drake. As you may know, Lady Angleford has a fortune of her own. Her father was a millionaire. That leaves me free to do what I like with my own money. Now, I'll settle ten thousand a year on you, Drake—but on one condition." [Pg 92]

Drake was considerably startled. After all, ten thousand a year is a large sum; and though the earl was immensely rich, Drake had not expected him to be so liberal. On ten thousand a year one can manage very comfortably, even in England. Drake thought of his debts, of all that a settled income would mean to him, and his heart warmed with gratitude toward his uncle.

"You are more than kind, sir," he said. "Your liberality takes my breath away. What was the condition?"

The earl fidgeted a little in his chair.

"Look here, Drake," he said, "I've never worried you about your way of life; I know that young men will be young men, and that you've lived in a pretty fast set. That was your business and not mine, and as long as you kept afloat I didn't choose to interfere. But I think it's time you settled down; and I'll settle this money on you on condition that you do settle down. You're engaged to a very nice girl—just you marry and settle down, and I'll provide the means, as I say."

Drake looked straight before him. Had this offer been made a month before he would have accepted it without a moment's hesitation, for he had thought himself in love with Luce, and, more important, he had thought that she had cared for him. But now all was changed. He knew that if a hundred thousand a year were dependent upon marrying Luce he couldn't accept it.

The earl stared at him, and filled another glass with the port, which was a poison to him.

"Eh? What the devil do you mean? I say that if you'll settle down and marry Luce I will provide a suitable income for you. What the blazes are you hesitating about? Why—confound it!—aren't you satisfied? You don't want to be told that I'm not bound to give you a penny!"

The old man's handsome face was growing red, and his eyes were beginning to glitter; the port was doing its fell work.

"I know," said Drake, with a quietude which only made his uncle more angry, "and I'm very much obliged to you. I know what ten thousand a year means; but I'm afraid I can't fulfill the conditions."

"What the devil do you mean?" demanded the earl.

Drake smoked in silence for a moment or two. Most men would have said at once that Lady Lucille Turfleigh had, on his change of prospects, jilted him; but Drake had some old-world notions of honor in respect to women, and he could not give Lady Luce away.

"I'm afraid I can't marry Luce," he said. "Our engagement is broken off." [Pg 93]

The earl swore a good old Tory oath.

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" he said. "One of the nicest girls I know, and—devoted to you. More devoted to you than you deserve. And you don't mean to marry her? I suppose you've seen some one else?"

Drake grew hot, but he still clung to his notion of honor.

"I tell you what it is, Drake," said the earl, bringing down his port glass on the table so violently that it snapped off at the stem, "you young fellows of the present day haven't any idea of honor. Here's a girl, a beautiful girl, and nice in every way, simply devoted to you, and you go and throw her over. For some insane fancy, I suppose! Well, see here, I'm d——d if I'll countenance it. I abide by my condition. You make it up with Luce and marry her, and I'll settle this money on you,

as I've said. If not——"

Drake knocked the ash off his cigarette and looked straight before him. He could still save himself by telling the truth and sacrificing Lady Luce. But that was not his way.

"I'm sorry, sir——" he began.

"Sorry be d——d!" broke in the earl tempestuously. "Will you, or will you not?"

"I can't," said Drake quietly.

The old man rose to his feet, flinging his serviette aside.

"Then, by Heaven! I've done with you!" he exclaimed. "I made you a fair offer. I've only asked you to act like a gentleman, a man of honor. Am I to understand that you refuse?"

Drake had also risen slowly.

"I'm afraid I must, sir," he said.

"All right," said the earl, red with anger. "Then there's nothing more to be said. You can go your own way. But permit me to tell you——"

"Oh, don't, sir!" said Drake, rather sadly. "I can't do what you ask. God knows I would if I could, but—it's impossible. For Heaven's sake, don't let us quarrel——"

"Quarrel! I am as cool as a cucumber!" exclaimed the earl, his face the color of beetroot. "All I say is"—here a twinge of the gout checked his utterance—"that you're behaving shamefully—shamefully! We'd better join the ladies—I mean Lady Angleford——"

"I think I'll get you to excuse me, sir," said Drake. "There is no need to upset Lady Angleford. She asked me here with the very best intentions, and she would be disappointed if she knew we had—quarreled. There is no need to tell her. I'll clear out. Make my excuse to her."

"As you like," said the earl shortly. "But let me tell you that I think you are——"

"No end of a fool, I've no doubt," said Drake, with a rather weary smile. "I dare say I am. But I can't help it. Good night, sir." [Pg 94]

The earl muttered something that sounded like "good night," and Drake left the house. He ought to have said good night to Lady Angleford, but he shirked it. He bore her no animosity; indeed, he liked her very much—so much that he shrank from telling her about this quarrel with his uncle; and he knew that if he went to her she would get it out of him.

He walked home, feeling very miserable and down on his luck. How he hated London, and all that belonged to it! Like a whiff of fresh air the memory of Shorne Mills wafted across his mind. He let himself in with his latchkey, and, taking a sheet of note paper, made some calculations upon it. There was still something remaining of his mother's fortune to him. If he were not Lord Drake Selbie, but simply Mr. Drake Vernon, he could manage to live upon it. The vision of a slim and graceful girl, with soft black hair and violet-gray eyes, rose before him. It seemed to beckon him, to beckon him away from the hollow, heartless world in which he had hitherto lived. He rose and flung open wide the window of his sitting room, and the breath of air which came through the London streets seemed fragrant with the air which wafted over Shorne Mills.

No pen, however eloquent, can describe the weariness of the hours for Nell which had passed since "Mr. Drake Vernon" had left Shorne Mills. Something had seemed to have gone out of her life. The sun was shining as brightly, there was the same light on the sea, the same incoming and outgoing tide; every one was as kind to her as they had been before he left, and yet all life seemed a blank. When she was not waiting upon mamma she wandered about Shorne Mills, sailed in the *Annie Laurie*, and sometimes rode across the moor. But there was something wanting, and the lack of it made happiness impossible. She thought of him all day, and at night she tossed in her little bed sleeplessly, recalling the happy hours she had spent with him. God knows she tried hard to forget him, to be just the same, to feel just the same, as she had been before he had been thrown at her feet. But she could not. He had entered into her life and become a principal part of it, absorbed it. She found herself thinking of him all through the day. She grew thin and pale in an incredibly short time. Even Dick himself could not rouse her; and Mrs. Lorton read her a severe lecture upon the apathy of indolence.

Life had been so joyous and so all-sufficing a thing for her; but now nothing seemed to interest her. There was a dull, aching pain in her heart which she could not understand, and which she could not get rid of. She longed for solitude. She often walked up to the top of the hill, to the purple moor over which she had ridden with Drake Vernon; and there she would sit, recalling every word she had said, every tone of his voice. She tried to forget him, but it was impossible. [Pg 95]

One evening she walked up the hill slowly and thoughtfully, and seated herself on a mossy bank, and gave herself up to that reverie in which we dream dreams which are more of heaven than of earth.

Suddenly she heard the sound of footsteps. She looked up listlessly and with a slight feeling of

impatience, seeing that her reverie was disturbed.

The footsteps came nearer, a tall figure appeared against the sunset. She rose to her feet, trembling and filled with the hope that seemed to her too wild for hope.

In another moment he was beside her. She rose, quivering in every nerve.

Was it only a dream, or was it he? He held her hand and looked down at her with an expression in his eyes and face which made her tremble, and yet which made her heart leap.

"Nell!" he said.

CHAPTER XII.

They stood and looked at each other in silence for a moment; but what a silence!

It almost seemed to Nell as if it were not he himself who stood before her, but just a vision of her imagination, called up by the intensity of her thoughts of him. The color came and went in her face, leaving it, at last, pale and startled. And he, too, stood, as incapable of speech as any of the shy and bashful young fishermen on the quay; he, the man of the world, who had faced so many "situations" with women—women of the world armed with the weapons of experience, and the "higher culture." At that moment, intense as it was, the strength of the emotion which swept over him and mastered him, amazed him.

He knew, now that he was face to face with her, how he had missed this girl, how keen and intolerable had been his longing for her.

He remembered to hold out his hand. Had he done so yet? For the life of him, he could not have told. The sight of the sweet face had cast a spell over him, and he did not know whether he was standing or sitting. [Pg 96]

As she put her small hand in his, Nell recovered something of her self-possession; but not all, for her heart was beating furiously, her bosom heaving, and she was in agony lest he should see the mist of dew which seemed to cover her eyes.

"I'm afraid I startled you," he said.

Nell smiled faintly, and drew her hand away—for he had held it half unconsciously.

"I think you did—a little," she admitted. "You see, I—we did not expect you. And"—she laughed the laugh he had heard in his dreams, though it had not always been so tremulous, so like the flutelike quaver of this laugh—"and even now I am not quite sure it is you."

"It is I—believe me," he said. "It is the same bad penny come back."

Then it flashed upon him he must give some reason for his return. Incredible as it may seem, he was not prepared with one. He had made up his mind to come; he would have gone through fire and water to get back to Shorne Mills, but he had quite forgotten that some excuse would be necessary.

But she did not seem to see the necessity.

"Are you quite well now?" she asked, just glancing up at him.

"Quite," he said; "perfectly well."

"And how did you come? I mean when—have you been staying near?"

"I came by this morning's train," he said, "and I walked over; my luggage follows by the carrier. I enjoyed the walk."

"You must be quite strong again," she said, with a quiet little gladness. "Mamma—and Dick—will be so glad to see you!"

"They haven't forgotten me?" he asked insanely.

She laughed again.

"They have talked of very little else but you, since you have been gone, and Dick is like a boy who has lost a schoolfellow."

She said it so frankly that Drake's heart sank.

"Well—I've thought—I've missed you—Dick," he said, stumbling over the sentence. "Shorne Mills is, as you said, not the kind of place one forgets in a hurry."

"Did I say that?" she asked. "I don't remember it."

"Ah! but I do," he said. "I remember——"

"Hadn't we better walk on?" she said. "You must be tired, and will be glad of some tea—or

something."

He seemed to notice for the first time that they had been standing, and they walked on.

Her heart was still beating fast—beating with a new and strange happiness glowing through her. [Pg 97] Only a few minutes ago she had felt so weary and wretched; the familiar scene, which she loved so dearly, had seemed flat and dreary and full of melancholy, and now—oh! how lovely it was! how good it was to look upon!

Why had everything changed so suddenly? Why was every pulse dancing to the subtle music with which the air seemed full?

The question came to her with a kind of dread and fear; and her eyes, which shone like stars, grew momentarily troubled and puzzled.

He scarcely dared look at her. The longing to touch her, to take her in his arms—that longing of passionate love which he had never felt before—rose imperiously in his heart; but something restrained him. She was so young, so innocent and girlish that a kind of awe fell upon him. When, as she walked beside him, the sleeve of her jacket came in contact with his arm, a thrill ran through him, and he caught his breath.

But he would hold himself in check; not at this moment, when she was startled by his sudden appearance, would he tell her. It was more than likely that he would frighten her, and that she would fly from him.

"And is there any news?" he asked.

She looked up as if she had come from a reverie.

"News! There is never any news at Shorne Mills!" she said, smiling brightly. "Nothing ever happens. Dick has shot some rabbits—and there was a good catch of mackerel yesterday, and—that's all."

Her eyes shone up at him, and he looked into their depths. "I wish I'd been here," he said. "But perhaps they'll have another big catch."

"Are you going to stay?"

The question sprang from her lips almost before she knew it, and she bit them a moment after the words were spoken; for it seemed to her that he must have noticed the eagerness, the anxiety in the query; but Drake only thought that she had asked with some surprise.

"A—a little while," he replied.

"Mamma and Dick will be very pleased," she said, in as matter-of-fact a tone as she could.

"I wired to Mrs. Brownie, asking her if she could put me up—old Brownie lets some rooms, he told me——"

Her face fell for a moment.

"You are not coming to us—to The Cottage?" she said cheerily.

"No; I couldn't trespass upon Mrs. Lorton's hospitality," he replied. [Pg 98]

"I hope you will be comfortable——" She hesitated. "Mrs. Brownie's cottage is very small and——"

"Oh, I'm used to roughing it," he cut in; "and perhaps, when I find it too small, you will let me come up and see you——"

"In our palatial mansion—for a change."

She was bright again, and her eyes were sparkling. After all, though he would not be under the same roof, he would be near—would be in Shorne Mills.

"I think I'll go down to Mrs. Brownie's and see if it is all right, and then come up for a cup of tea, if I may," he said, as they neared The Cottage.

He opened the gate for her; she gave him a little nod, her sweet face radiant with the new-born happiness which suffused her whole being, and ran in.

"Mamma—guess who has come!" she exclaimed breathlessly, as she entered the sitting room where Mrs. Lorton was reclining on the sofa with the *Fashion Gazette* and a bottle of eau de Cologne beside her. "Dick, I will give you three guesses—with a box of cigarettes as a prize," as Dick sauntered in with the gun under his arm.

"My dear Eleanor, why this excitement?" asked Mrs. Lorton rebukingly. "Your face is flushed, and your hat is on one side——"

"You'll have to give up drinking in the daytime, Nell," remarked Dick. "No, mamma, the gun will not go off, because it is not loaded. I wish it would, because I'm stone-broke and haven't any more cartridges. If I had a sister worthy of the name, she would advance me a small sum out of her pocket money."

"Guess, guess!" broke in Nell impatiently.

Dick smiled contemptuously.

"Some conceited clown to lecture in the schoolroom?" he said. "We know you of old, my dear Nell. Is there to be any tea this afternoon?"

"Clown!" retorted Nell scornfully. "Really, I've a good mind not to tell you until he—he comes himself."

"He—who? I must ask you to restrain your excitement, Eleanor. My nerves are in a very sad condition to-day, and I cannot—I really cannot bear any mental strain."

"It's Mr. Drake Vernon," said Nell, more soberly.

Dick uttered the yell of a rejoicing red Indian; and Mrs. Lorton slid into an upright position with incredible rapidity.

"Mr. Vernon! Go on, you're joking, Nell!" cried Dick; "and yet you look pleased enough for it to be true! Mr. Vernon! Hurrah! Sorry, mamma, but my feelings, which usually are under perfect control——"

"Is my hair tidy, Eleanor? Take this eau de Cologne away. Where is he? Did you think to bring a tea cake for tea? No, of course not; you think of nothing, nothing! I sometimes wonder why you have not imitated some of the Wolfer tact and readiness." [Pg 99]

"I met Mr. Vernon on the moor, away from the village. I will make some toast. He is coming up presently. He is going to stay at the Brownies'—this is my best hat. Do be careful!"

For Dick, in his joy, had fallen against her in the passage and nearly knocked her hat off; then he seized her by the arm, and, fixing her with a gaze of exaggerated keenness, demanded in melodramatic tones, but too low for Mrs. Lorton to hear:

"What means this sudden and strange return of the interesting stranger? Speak, girl! Attempt not to deceive; subterfuge will not avail ye! Say, what means this unexpected appearance? Ah! why that crimson blush which stains your nose——"

Nell broke from him—half ashamedly, for was she, indeed, blushing?—and ran to make the toast, and Dick went to the gate to watch for Drake.

Drake found the Brownies expecting him, and was shown the tiny sitting room and bedroom they had hastily prepared; and, his luggage having arrived, he had a wash and a change.

And as he dried himself on the lavender-scented towel, he invented an excuse for his return. He was filled with a strange gladness; the surge of the waves as they beat against the jetty sang a welcome to him; he could hear the fishermen calling to each other, as they cleaned their boats, or whistling as they sat on the jetty spreading their nets to dry; it was more like coming back to his birthplace, or some spot in which he had lived for years, than to the little seaside village which he had seen for the first time a few weeks ago.

As he went up slowly to The Cottage, every man, woman, and child he met touched his hat or curtsied and smiled a welcome to him, and Dick's "Hallo, Mr. Vernon! then it is you, and Nell wasn't spoofing us. How are you? Come in!" went straight to his heart.

He went in with his hand on the boy's shoulder, and was received by Mrs. Lorton with a mixture of stately dignity and simpering pleasure, which, however, no longer roused his irritation and impatience.

"I am quite sure you will not be comfortable at the Brownies', Mr. Vernon," she said; "and I need not say that we shall be glad if you are not. Your room awaits you whenever you feel inclined to return to it—Richard, tell Eleanor that we are ready for the tea. And how did you leave London, Mr. Vernon? I am aware that it is not the season; but there are always some good families remaining in town," et cetera. [Pg 100]

Drake answered with as fair an imitation of interest as he could manage; then Nell came in, followed by Molly, with the tea. There was no longer any sign of a blush on the girl's face, but the gray eyes were still bright, and a smile—such a tender, joyous, sunny smile—lurked in ambush at the corners of her sweet lips. She did not look at him, and was quite busy with the teacups and saucers; but she listened to every word he said, as if every word were too precious to miss.

"I was obliged to come down—the horses, you know," he said, as if that fully explained his return; "and, to tell you the truth, my dear Mrs. Lorton, I was very glad of the excuse. London is particularly hateful just now; though, as you say, there are a good many people there still."

"Did you meet my cousin Wolfer?" asked Mrs. Lorton.

Drake expressed his regret at not having done so.

"I think you would like him," she said, with her head on one side, and with a long sigh. "It is years since I have seen him. When last we met——"

"'He wore a wreath of roses!'" murmured Dick, under his breath.

—"And no doubt he would find me much changed; one ages in these out-of-the-way places, where the stir and bustle of the great world never reaches one."

"Mamma dropping into poetry is too touching!" murmured Dick; then aloud: "Nell, my child, if you are going to have a fit you had better leave the room. This is the second time you have shot out your long legs and kicked me. You had better see Doctor Spence."

The boy's badinage, Nell's half-shy delight, filled Drake with joy; even Mrs. Lorton's folly only amused him. He leaned back and drank his tea and ate his toast—he knew that Nell had made it, and every morsel was sweet to him—with a feeling of happiness too deep for words. And yet there was anxiety mixed with his happiness. Was the delight only that which would arise in the heart of a young girl, a child, at the visit of a friend?

"Shall we go down and look at the boat?" he asked, after he had dutifully listened to some more of Mrs. Lorton's remarks on fashion and nobility.

"Right you are!" said Dick; "and if you will promise to behave yourself like a decent member of society, you shall come too, Nell. You won't mind my bringing my little sister, sir?" [Pg 101]

Drake smiled, but the smile died away as they walked down to the jetty; he could have dispensed with the presence of Nell's little brother.

"We might go for a short sail, mightn't we?" he said, as they stood looking at the boat. "Pity you didn't bring your gun, Dick!"

"Oh, I can fetch it!" said Dick promptly. "I shan't be ten minutes."

Drake waved to Brownie to bring the *Annie Laurie* to the steps, and helped Nell into the boat; then ran up the sail, and pushed off.

"Aren't we going to wait for Dick?" said Nell innocently.

"Oh, we'll just cruise about till he comes," said Drake. "Let me take the tiller."

He steered the boat for the bay, and lit his pipe. It was just as if he had not left Shorne Mills; and, as he looked around at the multicolored cliffs, the sky dyed by the setting sun with vivid hues of crimson and yellow, and at Nell's lovely and happy face, he thought of the world in which he had moved last night; and its hollowness and falsity, its restless pursuit of pleasure, its selfish interests appalled him. He had resolved, or only half resolved, perhaps, last night, that he would "cut it"—leave it forever. Why shouldn't he? Why should he go back?

Even before he had met Nell, he had been utterly weary of the old life; and, even if he had still hankered after it, it was now not possible for him. It was very improbable that he would inherit the title and estates; he had quarreled with his uncle; he had learned the bitter truth, that the women of his set were incapable of a disinterested love. And he had desired to be loved for himself alone. Does not every man desire it?

Why should he not remain as "Drake Vernon," without title or fortune? If he won a woman's love, it would be for himself, not for the rank he could bestow——

"There is Dick!" said Nell.

Drake awoke from his reverie.

"Scarcely worth while going back for him, is it?" he said. "Besides, he'll want to shoot something —and these gulls look so happy and contented——"

"Why, you told him to get his gun!" she said, with surprise. "But it doesn't matter. He's going out in Willy's boat, I see. I suppose he thinks we shan't turn back for him. Isn't it lovely this evening?"

"Yes," he assented absently.

If—if Nell, now, for instance, were to—to promise to be his wife, he would be sure that it was for himself she cared! She did not know that he was anything other than just Mr. Drake Vernon. No [Pg 102] carking doubts of the truth and purity of her love would ever embitter his happiness.

"Where are we going?" she asked, turning on her elbow as he steered for the cove where they had lunched the other day.

"I've a fancy to look into that cave," he said. "What a capital place it would be for a picnic! Shall we go ashore for a few minutes?"

He threw out the anchor, leaped to the shore, and pulled the boat in for her. She prepared to jump, as usual, but as she stood, her slight figure poised on the gunwale, he took her in his arms and lifted her out.

Her face went crimson for an instant, but she turned aside, and walked up the beach, and by the time he had overtaken her the crimson had gone; but the grip of his arms had set her tingling, and her heart was beating fast; and yet it was so foolish to—to mind; for had not Brownie and Willy, and half the fishermen of Shorne Mills, lifted her out of a boat when the sea was rough and the boat unsteady?

"Let us sit down," Drake said.

There was a big bowlder just within the cave, and Nell seated herself on it, and he slid down at her side.

"If Dick is angry, you will have to protect me," she said, breaking the silence which seemed to oppress her with a sense of dread.

"I will; especially as it was my fault," he said. "I didn't want Dick—for a wonder. I wanted to be—alone—with you again. I have wanted it every minute since I left you. Do you know why?"

She had grown pale; but she tried to smile, to meet the ardent gaze of his eyes; but she could not.

"Hadn't—hadn't we better be going back?" she faltered; "it is growing late."

But her voice was so low that she wondered whether she had spoken aloud.

"I want to tell you that I have missed you, how I have longed for you," he went on, not speaking with the fluency for which some of his men friends envied him, but brokenly, as if the words were all inadequate to express his meaning. "All the way up to London I thought of you—I could not help thinking of you. All the time I was there, whether I was alone or in the midst of a mob of people, I thought of you. I could see your face, hear your voice. I could not rest day or night. I felt that I must come back to you; that there would be no peace or contentment for me unless I could see you, hear you, be near you."

She sat, her hands clasped tightly, her eyes downcast and hidden by the long dark lashes. Every word he was faltering was making the strangest, sweetest music in her ears and in her heart. That he should miss her—want to come back to her!—oh, it could not—could not be true! [Pg 103]

"Do you know why?" he went on, looking up at her with a touch of anxiety, of something like fear in his eyes, for her downcast face told him nothing; her pallor might only be a sign of fear. "It was because I—love you."

She trembled, and raised her eyes for one instant; but she could not meet his—not yet.

"I love you," he said, his voice deepening, so that it was almost hoarse. "I love you."

Just the three words, but how much they mean! Is it any wonder that the poet and the novelist are never weary of singing and writing them? and that the world will never be weary of hearing and reading them? How much hangs upon the three little words! Love: it is the magic word which transforms a life. It means a heaven too great for mortals to imagine, or a hell too deep to fathom. To Nell the words spoke of a mystery which she could not penetrate, but which filled her heart with a joy so great as almost to still it forever.

"Dearest, I have frightened you!" he said, as she sat so silent and so motionless. "Forgive me! It seems so sudden to you; but I—I have felt it for days past, have known it so long, it seems to me. I have been thinking, dwelling on it. Nell, do you—care for me? Can you love me?"

Her hands unclasped and went with a swift motion to her eyes, and covered them. His heart sank with a sudden dread. She was not only frightened; she did not care for him—or was it because she did not know? She was so young, so girlish, so innocent!

"Forgive me—forgive me!" he pleaded, and he ventured to touch her arm. "I have—startled you; you did not expect—it was unfair to bring you here. But I can't take it back. I love you with all my heart and soul. See, Nell—you will let me call you that? It's the name I love above all others—the name I think of you by. I—I won't harass you. You—you shall have time to think. I will go away for—for a few days—and you shall think over——No, no!" he broke off, springing to his feet and bending over her with a sudden passion which swept all before it. "I can't go. I can't leave you again, unless—unless I go forever. I must have your answer now—now! Speak to me, Nell. 'Yes' or 'No'?"

He drew her hands from her face as she rose, and her eyes were lifted and met his. Love's sweet surrender shone in them; and, with a cry of wonder and joy, he caught her to him. [Pg 104]

"Nell, Nell!" was all that he could say. "Is it true? You—you love me, Nell?"

She hid her face on his breast, and her hands trembled on his shoulders.

"Yes—yes," she breathed, almost inaudibly. Then: "Do I?"

CHAPTER XIII.

He took her face in his hands and turned it up to him, but paused as her lips nearly met his.

"Do you? Why, don't you know, dearest?" he asked tenderly.

"Yes, ah! yes, I do," she said, and the tears sprang to her eyes as their lips met. "It was because I loved you that I was so sorry when you went; that every hour and day was a misery to me, and seemed to hang like lead; it was because I loved you that I could not think of anything else, and—and all the world became black and dark, and—and—I hated to be alive. It was because—because of that, was it not?"

He answered with the lover's mute language.

"And—and you love me! It seems so wonderful!" she murmured, looking at him with her eyes, now deep as violets and dewy with her tears. "So wonderful! Why—why do you?"

He laughed—the laugh that for the first time in his life had left his lips.

"Have you no looking-glass in your room, Nell?" he asked. "You beautiful angel! But not only because you are the loveliest——"

She put her hand to his lips, her face crimson; but he kissed it and laid it against his cheek.

—"You are not only the loveliest woman I know, but the sweetest, Nell," he said. "No man could help loving you."

"How foolish!" she breathed; but, ah! the joy, the innocent pride that shone in her eyes! "You must have met, known, hundreds of beautiful women. I never thought that I—that any one could care for me——"

"Because there's not a spark of vanity in my Nell, thank God!" he said. "See here, dearest, you speak of other women—it is because you are unlike any other woman I have ever known—thank God again!—because you are so. Ah, Nell! it's easier to love you than to tell you why. All I know is that I'm the happiest man on earth; that I don't deserve——" His voice grew grave and his face clouded. "The best of us doesn't deserve the love of the worst woman; and I, who have got the sweetest, the dearest——Ah, Nell! if you knew how bad a bargain you have made!" [Pg 105]

She laid her face against his hand, and her lips touched it with a kiss, and she laughed softly, as one laughs for mere joy which pants for adequate expression.

"I am satisfied—ah, yes! I am satisfied!" she whispered. "It is you who have made the bad bargain—an ignorant girl—just a girl! Why, Dick will laugh at you! And mamma will think you are too foolish for words."

He looked down at her—he was sitting on the bowlder now, and she was on the sand at his feet, her head resting against him, his arm round her.

"Mrs. Lorton knows nothing about me," he said. "I'm afraid, when she knows——"

His words did not affect her. In a sense, she was scarcely noting them. This new happiness, this unspeakable joy, was taking complete possession of her. That his lips should have touched hers, that his arm should be round her, that her head should be resting against him, his kisses upon her hair, was all so wonderful that she could scarcely realize it. Would she awake presently and find that she was in her own room, with the pillow wet with the tears that had fallen because "Mr. Drake Vernon" had left Shorne Mills forever?

"Does she not?" she said easily. "She knows as much about you as I do, and I am content. But mamma will be pleased, because she likes you. And Dick"—she laughed, and her eyes glowed with her love for the boy—"Dick will yell, and will tease me out of my life. But he will be glad, because he is so very fond of you. What do you do to make everybody like you so much, Mr. Vernon?"

"Oh, 'Drake, Drake, Drake'!" he said.

"Drake," she murmured, and he stifled the word on her lips with kisses.

"I'm by no means sure that Mrs. Lorton will be pleased," he said, after a moment. "See here, Nell—I never saw such hair as yours. It is dark, almost black, and yet it is soft and like silk——"

"And it is all coming down. Ah, no, you cannot coil it up. Let it be for a moment. Do you really like it? Dick says it is like a horse's mane."

"Dick is a rude young scamp to whom I shall have to teach respect for his sister. But Mrs. Lorton, dearest—I'm afraid she won't be pleased. I ought to have told you, Nell, that I'm a poor man."

"Are you?" [Pg 106]

She nestled a little closer, and scooped up the sand with her disengaged hand—the one he was not holding—and she spoke with an indifference which filled Drake to the brim with satisfaction.

"Yes," he said. "I was not always so poor; but I am one who has had losses, as Shakespeare puts it."

"I am sorry," she said simply, but still with a kind of indifference. "Mamma said you must be rich because you—well, persons who are poor don't keep three horses and give diamond bracelets for presents."

She spoke with the frankness and ingenuousness of a child, and Drake stroked her hair as he would that of a child.

"Yes, that's reasonable enough," he said. "But I've lost my money lately. See?"

She nodded, and looked up at him a little more gravely.

"Yes? I am sorry. I suppose it must have seemed very hard to you. I have never been rich, but I can imagine that one does not like losing his money and becoming poor. Poor—Drake!"

"Then, you don't mind?" he inquired. "You don't shrink from the prospect of being a pauper's bride, Nell?"

She laughed.

"Why should I?" she said simply. "We've always been poor—at least, nearly since I can remember; and we have always been happy, Dick and I. Now, it would not have been so nice if you had been very rich."

"Why not?" he asked, lifting a tress of her hair to his lips.

She thought for a moment.

"Oh, don't you see? I should have felt that you had been foolish to—to love me——" There was an interlude. Should he ever grow tired of kissing her? he asked himself. "And I should have been afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Well, that you would be ashamed of me when you took me into the society of fashionable people, and——Oh, I am very glad that you are not rich! That sounds unkind, I am afraid."

"Nell," he said solemnly, "I have long suspected that you were an angel masquerading as a mere woman, but I am now convinced of it."

She laughed, and softly rubbed her cheek against his arm.

"And I have long suspected that you were a rich man and a 'somebody' masquerading as a poor one, and I am delighted to hear that I was mistaken." [Pg 107]

He started at the first words of her retort, but breathed a sigh of relief as she concluded.

"Poor or rich, I love you, Nell," he said, with a seriousness which was almost solemn, "and I will do my level best to make you happy. When you are my wife——"

The blood rushed to her face, and her head dropped.

"That will be a long time hence," she whispered.

"No, no!" he said quickly, passionately. "I couldn't wait very long, Nell. But when you are my wife, I will try to prove to you that poor people can be happy. We shall just have enough to set up a house in some foreign land."

She looked up at him gravely.

"And leave mamma and—Dick? Yes?"

The acquiescence touched him.

"You won't mind, dearest—you won't mind leaving England?"

She shook her head.

"How cold and cruel I have become," she said, as if she were communing with herself. "But I do not care; I feel as if I could leave any one—go anywhere—if—if—I were with you!"

She moved, so that she knelt beside him, and her small brown hands were palm downward on his breast; her eyes shone like stars with the light of a perfect love glowing in them; her sweet lips quivered, as, with all a young girl's abandonment to her first passion, she breathed:

"Do you think I care whether you are poor or rich? I love you! Do you think I care whether you are handsome or ugly? It is you I love. Do you think I care where I go, so that you take me with you? I could not live without you. I would rather wander through the world, in rags, and starving, cold, and hungry, than—than marry a king and live in a palace! I only want you, you, you! I have wanted you since—since that first day—do you remember? I—turn your eyes away, don't look at me; I am so ashamed!—I came down to you that night—the first night! You were calling for water, and I—I raised you on my arm, and—and oh! I was so happy! I did not know, guess, why; but I know now. I—I must have loved you even then!"

She hid her eyes on his arm, and he kissed her hair reverently.

"And every day I—I grew to love you more. I was only happy when I was with you. I wondered why. But I know now! And you were always so kind and gentle with me; so unlike any other man I had met—the vicar, Doctor Spence—and I used to like to listen to you; and—and when you touched me something ran through me, something filled me with gladness." [Pg 108]

She paused for breath, her eyes fixed on his face, as if she were not seeing him, but the past, and her own self moving and being in that past.

"And then you went, and all the happiness, all the gladness, seemed to go, and—bend lower—I—I can only whisper it—the night you went I flung myself on the bed and—and cried."

"My Nell, my dearest!" was all he could say.

"I cried because it seemed to me that my life had come to an end; that never, so long as I should

live, should I know one moment of happiness again. It was as if all the light had gone out of the sky, as if the sun had turned cold—ah! you don't know!"

"Do I not, dearest?"

"And then, when I saw you to-day, all the light and warmth came rushing back, and I knew that it was you who were my light, my sun, and that without you I was not living, but only a shadow and a mockery of life."

Her hands fell from his breast, her head sank upon his knees, she sobbed in the abandonment of her passion.

And the man was awed by it, and almost as white as herself. He gathered her in his strong arms and murmured passionate words of love and gratitude and devotion.

"Nell, Nell, my Nell! God make me more worthy of your love!" he said brokenly, hoarsely.

She raised her head from his knees and offered him—of her own free will—her sweet lips, and then clung to him with a half-tearful, maidenly shame.

"Let me go!" she said.

The light that never was on earth or sky beamed on the *Annie Laurie* as it skimmed toward the jetty.

Nell sat in the stern, and Drake lay at her feet, his arms round her, his face upturned to hers.

God knows he was grateful for her love. God also knows how unworthy he felt. This love is such a terrible thing. A maiden goes through the ways of life, in maiden meditation fancy free, pausing beside the brook to pluck the flowers which grow on its bank, and thinking of nothing but the simple girlish things which pertain to maidenhood. Then suddenly a shadow falls across her path. It is the shadow of the Man, and the love which shall raise her to heaven or drag her down to the nethermost hell. A glance, a word, and her fate is decided; before her stretch the long years of joy or misery.

And, alas! she has no choice! Love is lord of all, of our lives, of our fate, and none can say him nay. No one of us can elect to love a little wisely, or unwisely and too well. [Pg 109]

But there was no doubt, no misgiving, in Nell's mind that night. She had given herself to this man who had fallen at her feet in Shorne Mills, and she had given herself fully and unreservedly. His very presence was a joy to her. It was a subtle delight to reach out her hand and touch him, though with the tips of her fingers. The gates of paradise had opened and she had entered in.

How short the hour seemed during which they had sailed toward the jetty! She breathed a sigh, which Drake echoed.

"Let me lift you out," he pleaded. "I want to feel you in my arms—once more to-night!"

She surrendered herself, and, for a moment, her head sank on his shoulder.

They walked up the hill almost in silence; but every now and then his hand sought hers, and not in vain.

She looked up at the starlit sky in a kind of wondering amazement. Was it she?—was it he?—were they really betrothed? Did he really love her? Oh, how wonderful—wonderful it was! And they said there was no real happiness in this world.

She could have laughed with the scorn of her full, complete joy!

They entered The Cottage side by side, and were met by Dick, with half-serious indignation.

"Well, upon my word, for a clear case of desertion, I never——Why didn't you wait for me? I've got a couple of gulls, and——What's the matter with you, Nell? You look as if you'd found a threepenny piece."

"Just in time for supper," simpered Mrs. Lorton.

Drake took Nell's hand and led her into the light of the lamp, which illumined the night and perfumed the day.

"I've brought Nell back, Mrs. Lorton," he said, with the shyness of the newly engaged man, "and —and she has promised to be my wife."

CHAPTER XIV.

Drake's announcement was received with amazed silence for a moment; then Dick flung up his piece of bread behind his back, caught it dexterously, and burst out with:

"See the conquering hero comes! Hurrah! Nell—Nell! Don't run away! Wait for the congratulations of your devoted brother!" [Pg 110]

But Nell had fled to her room, and, on pretense of chivying her, Dick discreetly withdrew, leaving Drake to the inevitable interview with Mrs. Lorton.

"I'm sure I don't know what to say," she murmured. "It is so unexpected, so quite unlooked for. It is like a bolt out of the green——" She meant blue, but had got the colors mixed. "I had no idea that you had any serious intentions!"

Then she remembered that she had to play the part of guardian, and endeavored to fill the rôle with the dignity due to a lady of her exalted birth.

"I need not say that I—er—congratulate you, Mr. Vernon. Eleanor is a—er—dear girl; she has been the comfort and consolation of my life, and—er—the parting with her will be a great—a very great—trial. Pardon my emotion!" She snuffed into a handkerchief, and wiped her eyes with a delicate touch or two. "But I should not dream of standing in the way of her happiness. No! If she has made her heart's choice, I shall not attempt to dissuade her. And I feel that she has chosen wisely. Of course, my dear Mr. Vernon, though we have had the pleasure of your presence with us for some time, we do not—er—know——"

Drake winced slightly. Should he tell her the truth? Should he say, "My name's Drake Vernon, right enough, but I happen to be Lord Selbie?"

But he shrank from the avowal, the confession. He knew that it would call forth quite a torrent of amazement and self-satisfaction; that he would be asked why he had concealed his full name and rank—and to-night, of all nights, he felt unequal to the scene which would most certainly follow the confession.

"I will tell you all—I can," he said, with a pause before the last words which, fortunately for him, Mrs. Lorton was too excited to notice. "I'm afraid Nell hasn't made a very wise choice. I'm not worthy of her; but that goes without saying; no man alive is. But even in the usual acceptation of the term, I'm not what is called a good match."

Mrs. Lorton looked blank and rather puzzled as she thought of the diamond bracelet and the three horses.

"I—we—er—imagined that you were well off," she said.

"I've met with reverses lately," said Drake; "and I'm poorer than I was a—er—little while ago."

Mrs. Lorton drew herself up a little, and her expression grew less complaisant.

"Indeed?" she said interrogatively.

"Yes," he went on quietly. "I am quite aware that Nell deserves——Perhaps I'd better tell you the income we shall have to get along on." [Pg 111]

He mentioned the sum which the remnant of his fortune would produce, and, though it was much smaller than Mrs. Lorton had expected, it was large enough to cause her countenance to relax something of its stiffness.

"It is not a large income," she said. "And I cannot but remember that Eleanor, though she is not a Wolfer by birth, is connected with the family; and that, if she were taken up by them, she might—one never knows what may happen under favorable circumstances. A season in London with my people——"

Drake nodded.

"I know," he said, "Nell is worthy of the best, and no doubt if she were in London I should stand a poor chance; but it's my luck that she isn't, you see. And"—his voice dropped—"and I'm conceited enough to believe that she cares for me; and I don't suppose my poverty will make any difference. Heaven knows, I wish I were rich, for her sake!"

"Well, we must make the best of it," said the good lady. "After all, money isn't everything." She spoke as if she were suffering from the burden of a million. "True hearts are more than coronets. I must write and tell my cousin, Lord Wolfer."

"I wouldn't! I mean, is it necessary—at any rate, just yet?" said Drake. It was just possible that Lord Wolfer might interest himself sufficiently to ask questions; he might, indeed, connect "Drake Vernon" with the two first names of Viscount Selbie. And Drake—well, this was the first bit of romance in his life, and he clung to it. The idea of marrying Nell, of marrying her as plain "Drake Vernon," down on his luck, was sweet to him. He could tell her after the wedding, when they were too far away to suffer from the fuss which Mrs. Lorton would inevitably make over the revelation.

"You see, we shall have to be married very quietly; and I'm thinking of spending some time abroad, on the Continent—Nell will like to see a foreign city or two—and, do you think it's worth while troubling your people?"

The "your people" flattered her, and she yielded, with a sigh.

"As you please, Mr. Vernon—but I suppose I must now call you 'Drake'?" she broke off, with a

simper; "though, really, it sounds so strange, and—er—so familiar."

Drake wondered whether he ought to kiss her as he murmured assent.

"I'll do my best to make Nell happy," he said; "and you must make the best of a bad bargain, my dear Mrs. Lorton; and if you feel like being very good to me, you'll help me persuade Nell to an early marriage." [Pg 112]

She brightened up at the word marriage, and at the prospect of playing a part in the function beloved of all women; and when Nell stole in, with pink cheeks and glowing eyes, drew the girl to her and bestowed a pecklike kiss upon her forehead.

Mrs. Lorton provided the conversation during that meal, and, while she prosed about the various marriages in the Wolfer family, Nell listened in dutiful silence, now and again flushing and thrilling as Drake's hand touched hers or his eyes sought her face.

And Dick behaved very well. He reserved his chaff for a future occasion, and only permitted himself one allusion to the state of affairs by taking Nell's hand and murmuring: "Beg pardon, Nell! Thought it was a spoon!"

As Drake walked down the hill to the Brownies' cottage his heart throbbed with the first pure happiness of his life. Nell's kiss, which she had given him at parting at the gate, glowed warm upon his lips. And if his happiness was alloyed by the reflection that he was deceiving her in the matter of his rank, he thrust it from him.

After all, what did it matter? What would she care? It was he, the man, not the viscount, whom she loved. Yes, the gods had been good to him, notwithstanding the ruin of his prospects; for was he not loved for himself alone?

He smiled, with a sense of the irony of circumstances, when he remembered that only a few weeks ago he had congratulated himself that he had "done with women!" But at that time he had not fallen in love with Nell of Shorne Mills, and won her love; which made all the difference!

And Nell? She lay awake in a sleepless dream. Every word he had spoken came back to her like the haunting refrain of a beautiful song; the expression in his eyes, the touch of his hand—ah! and more, the kiss of his lips—were with her still. It was her first love. No man before Drake had ever spoken of love to her; it was her virgin heart which he had won; and when this is the case the man assumes the proportions of a god to the girl.

And it seemed so wonderful, so incredible, that he should have fallen in love with her, that he should have chosen her; as his queen, as his wife. She tried to draw a mental picture of herself, to account for his preference for her, and failed to find any reason for it. He had said that she was—beautiful. Oh, no—no! He must have met a hundred women prettier than she was; but he had chosen her. How strange! how wonderful! Sleep came to her at last, but it was a sleep broken by dreams—dreams in which Drake—she could think of him as "Drake"—held her in his arms and murmured his love. She could feel his kisses on her lips, her hair. Once the dream turned and twisted somewhat, and he and she seemed separated—a vague something came between them, an intangible mist or cloud which neither could pass, though they stood with outstretched hands and yearning hearts; but this dream passed, and she slept the sleep of joy and peaceful happiness. [Pg 113]

Happiness! It is given to so few to know happiness that one would like to linger over the days which followed their betrothal. For every day was an idyl. Drake had resolved to send the horses up to London for sale; he had given Sparling notice, six months' wages, and a character which would insure him a good place; but he clung to the horses, and Nell and Dick and he had some famous rides before the nags went to Tattersall's.

And what rides they were! Dick, wise beyond his years, would lag behind or canter a long way in front; and Nell and Drake would be left alone to whisper together, or clasp hands in silent ecstasy.

And there was the *Annie Laurie*. To sail before the wind, with the sun shining brightly from the blue sky upon the opal sea; to hold his beloved in his arms; to feel the warmth of her lips on his; to know that in a few short weeks she would be his own, his wife!—the rapture of it made him catch his breath and fall into a rapt silence.

One day, as they were sailing homeward, the *Annie Laurie* speeding on a flowing tide and a favorable breeze, his longing became almost insupportable.

"See here, Nell," he said, with the timidity of the man whose every pulse is throbbing with passion, "why—why shouldn't we be married at once? I mean, what is the use of waiting?"

"Married!"

She drew away from him and caught her breath.

"Why not?" he asked. "I shan't be any the richer for waiting, and—and I want you very badly."

"But I am here—you have got me," she said, with all the innocence of a child. "Oh, why should we hurry?"

He bit his pipe hard.

"I know," he said, rather huskily. "But I want you altogether—for my very own. I don't want to have to part with you at the gate of The Cottage. You don't understand; but I don't want you to. But, Nell, as we are going to be married, we might as well be married now as months hence."

Her head sank lower; the *Annie Laurie* lost the wind, and fell off and rolled on the ground swell. [Pg 114]

"Do you—want to marry me—so soon?" she murmured.

"So soon!" he echoed. "Why, it is months—weeks—since we were engaged."

"But—but—aren't you happy—content?" she asked. "I—I am so happy. I know that you love me; that is happiness enough."

He drew her to him and kissed her with a reverence which he thought no woman would have received from him.

"No; it is not enough, dearest," he said. "You don't understand. I'll put the banns up to-morrow—no; I'll get a special license. I want you for my own, all my own, Nell."

When they sailed into the slip by the jetty, Dick was waiting for them.

"Hal-lo!" he yelled. "I've been waiting for you for the last two hours. I've news for you."

"News?" said Drake.

Nell was coiling the sheet in a methodical fashion, and thinking of Drake's words.

"Yes. The Maltbys are going to give a dance, and you and I and Nell are asked."

"And who are the Maltbys?" he inquired, with a lack of interest which nettled Dick.

"The Maltbys are our salt of the earth," he replied; "they are our especial 'local gentry'; and, let me tell you, an invitation from them is not to be sneezed at."

"I didn't sneeze," said Drake, clasping Nell's hand as he helped her out of the boat.

"It's for the fifth," said Dick; "and it's sure to be a good dance; better still, it's sure to be a good supper. Now, look here, don't you two spoons say you 'don't care about it,' for, I've set my mind upon going."

Drake laughed easily.

"Would you like to go?" he asked of Nell.

"Would you?" she returned.

Loverlike, he thought of a dance with her. She was, her girlish innocence, so sparing of her caresses, that the prospect of holding her in his arms during a waltz set him aching with longing.

"Yes," he said, "if you like."

"All right," she said. "Yes, I should think we might go, Dick."

"I should think so!" he shouted. "Fancy chucking away the chance of a dance!"

"How did they come to ask us?" Nell inquired. "We don't know them very well," she explained to Drake. "The Maltbys are quite grand folk compared with us; and, though Lady Maltby calls once in a blue moon, and sends us cards for a garden party now and again, this is the first time we have been invited to a dance." [Pg 115]

"You have to thank me, young people," said Dick, with exaggerated self-satisfaction. "I happened to meet young Maltby—he's home for a spell; fancy he's sent down from Oxford—and he asked me to go rabbiting with him. He's not much of a shot, though he is a baronet's son and heir, and I rather think I put him up to a wrinkle or two. Anyway, the other day he mentioned that they were going to have a dance—quite an informal affair—and asked if I'd care to go; and Lady Maltby's just sent a note."

"All right," said Drake.

Then he suddenly remembered his masquerade, and looked grave and thoughtful. Yes, it was just possible that some one there might recognize him.

"Who are the Maltbys?" he asked. "I never heard of them."

Dick's eyes twinkled.

"I can't truthfully say that that argues you unknown," he said; "for they are very quiet people, and only famous in their own straw yard. Old Sir William hates London, and he and Lady Maltby seldom leave the Grange."

"There is no daughter, only this one son," explained Nell. "They are not at all 'grand,' and I think you will like them. Lady Maltby is always very kind, and Sir William is a dear old man, who loves to talk about his prize cattle."

"Do you happen to know who is staying at the house?" asked Drake.

After all, perhaps, he would run no risk of detection; as he had never met the Maltbys, it was highly improbable that they had heard of him.

"Oh, it's not a large party. I remember some of the names, because young Maltby ran over them. He said there weren't enough in the house to make up a dance. I shrewdly conjectured that that's one reason why we were asked."

"Wise but ungrateful youth!" said Drake. "Let us hear the names."

Dick repeated all that he could remember.

"Know any of them?" he asked.

"No," replied Drake, with relief.

"The fifth," mused Nell, thinking of her dress. "It is very short notice."

"It's only a scratch affair; but, all the same, I should wear my white satin with Brussels lace, and put on my suite of diamonds and rubies, if I were you," advised Dick.

Nell laughed, as she glanced up at Drake.

"I am just wondering whether I have outgrown my nun's veiling," she said simply. "It's the only dress I have. I'm afraid"—she hesitated—"I'm afraid you will think it a very poor one!" [Pg 116]

"Are you?" he said significantly. "You never can tell. Perhaps I shall admire it."

As he spoke he asked himself whether he should send up to Bond Street for some jewels for her; but he resisted the temptation. Later on, when they were married, he would give himself the treat of buying her some of the things women loved. Even in the matter of the engagement ring he had held himself in check, and only a very simple affair encircled the third finger of Nell's left hand.

They found Mrs. Lorton in a flutter of excitement, and she handed Drake the note of invitation with the air of an empress conferring a patent of nobility.

"Very good people," she said; "though not, of course, the crème de la crème. I am included in the invitation, but I shall not accept. The scene would but recall others of a more brilliant description in which I once moved—er—not the least of the glittering throng. No, Eleanor, you will not need a chaperon. You have Drake, who, I trust, will enjoy himself in what may be novel circumstances," she added, with affable patronage.

"You will not need a new dress, Eleanor—Dick tells me that he must have a new suit."

"Oh, no; I am all right!" said Nell cheerfully.

She found that the old frock could, with a little alteration, be utilized, and for several evenings Drake sat and watched her as she lengthened the skirt and bestowed new lace and ribbons upon the thing, and, as he smoked, imagined how she would look on the night of the dance. He knew that not one of the other women, let them be arrayed in all the glory of the Queen of Sheba herself, would outshine his star.

CHAPTER XV.

On the night of the fifth Nell sang softly to herself as she stood before the glass putting the last touches to her toilet. She was brimming over with happiness, and as she looked at the radiant reflection she wondered whether her lover would be satisfied. It is the question which every woman who loves asks herself. It is for the man of her heart that she lives and has her being; it is that she may find favor in his sight that she brushes the hair he has kissed; it is with the hope that his eye may be caught, his fancy pleased, that she puts the flower at her bosom or winds the filmy lace around her neck. And it was of Drake—Drake—Drake—she thought and dreamed as she turned from the glass and went down the stairs. [Pg 117]

She had heard the wheels of the fly he had procured from Shallop, and she found him in the little hall waiting for her.

He looked up at the lovely vision with startled admiration, for hitherto he had only seen her in week-a-day attire; and this slight, graceful form, clad in soft white, seemed so pure, so virginal and ethereal, that, not for the first time, his joy in her loveliness was tempered with awe.

"Nell!" was all he could say, and he stretched out his arms, then let them fall. "I should crush you or break you," he said, half seriously. "Is that the dress I saw you making up—that! It looked like ——"

"A rag," she finished for him, her eyes shining down upon him with a woman's gratitude for his admiration. "Will it do? Do I look—passable?"

"No," he said; "no one could pass you! Nell, my angel—yes, you are like an angel to-night!" he broke off, in lower tones. "You—you frighten me, dearest. I dread to see you spread your wings

and fly away from me."

She laughed shyly and shook her head.

"And—and—how different you look!" she said; for it was the first time she had seen Drake in the costume which we share with the waiter; and her pride in him—in his tall figure and square shoulders—glowed in her eyes. If he had been lame and halt she would have still loved him; but—well, there is no woman who is not proud of her sweetheart's good looks. Sometimes she is prouder of them than of her own.

"Let me put this wrap around you," he said; and as he did so she raised her head with a blush and an invitation in her eyes, and he kissed her on the lips. "See here, dearest," he said, "your first dance! And as many as you will give me afterward. Did I ever mention that I was jealous? Nell, I inform you of the gruesome fact now; and that I shall endure agonies every time I see you dancing with another man."

"Perhaps you will be spared that pain," she said. "I may be a wallflower, waiting for you to take pity on me."

"Yes, I should think that very probable," he retorted ironically. "Oh, Nell, how I love you, how proud——"

Dick came out of the dining room at that moment, and at sight of Nell fell back against the wall in an assumed swoon.

"Is it—can it be—the simple little fishergirl of Shorne Mills? My aunt, Nell, you do look a swell! Got 'em all on, Drake, hasn't she? Miss Eleanor Lorton as Cinderella! Kiss your brother, Nell!" [Pg 118]

He made a pretended rush at her with extended arms, and Nell shrieked apprehensively:

"Keep him off, Drake! He'll crush my dress! Dick—Dick, you dare!"

Dick winked at Drake.

"You are requested not to touch the figure. Drake, have you observed and noticed this warning? But so it is in this world! One man may kiss this waxwork, while another isn't permitted to lay a finger on it. Now, are we going to the Maltbys' dance, or have you decided to remain here and spoon? And hasn't any one a word of approval for this figure? Between you and me, Drake, I rather fancy myself to-night. I do hope I shan't break any young thing's heart, for I'm not—I really am not—a marrying man. Seen too much of the preliminary business with other people, you know."

They got into the fly, laughing, and Drake, as they drove along, compared this departure for a simple country dance with his past experiences. How seldom had he gone to a big London crush without wishing that he could stay at home and smoke or read!

"Remember," he whispered to Nell, as they alighted at the Grange, "your first dance and as many as you can give me!"

One or two other carriages set down at the same time, and they entered the hall, a portion of a small crowd, so that Lady Maltby, a buxom, smiling lady of the good old type of the country baronet's wife, had only time to murmur a few words; and Drake passed on with Nell on his arm.

As they went up the room, a dance started, and he drew Nell aside, and standing by her, looked round curiously and a trifle apprehensively. But there was no person whom he knew, and Sir William, who came up to them, had even got Drake's name wrongly.

"Glad to see you, Miss Lorton. Dear, dear! how the young ones do grow! Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Verney Blake, and to congratulate you. I think I've met a relative of yours—an uncle, I fancy——"

Drake's face grew expressionless in an instant.

—"Sir Richard—or—was it Sir Joseph—Blake? He took the first for shorthorns in seventy-eight."

Drake drew a sigh of relief.

"No relation of mine, Sir William, I regret," he said.

"No? Same name, too. Funny! But there are a good many Blakes. So you're going to run off with the belle of Shorne Mills, eh? Lucky fellow!" [Pg 119]

With a chuckle he ambled off to his wife, to be sent to some one else, and Drake bent to Nell.

"Come!" was all he said, and he put his arm round her. The floor was good, the band from the garrison town knew its business, and Nell——Was he surprised that she should dance so well? Was not every ordinary movement of hers graceful? But the fact that she could dance like an angel, as he put it to himself, did not make his love for her any the less or his pride in her diminish, be certain. He himself had been the best dancer in his regiment, and this, his first waltz with the girl he adored, sent the blood spinning through his veins.

"Aren't we in step rather—nicely?" she whispered, trying to speak casually, but failing utterly; for the joy that throbbed in her heart made it impossible for her to keep her voice steady. "Oh,

Drake, I—I was afraid that I might not be able to dance, it is so long—ever so long—since—— Why, this is my first real ball, and I am dancing with you! And how well you waltz! But you have danced so often—this is not your first ball!"

He glanced at her with a pang of uneasiness, but her eyes shone up at him innocent of any other meaning than the simplest one, innocent of any doubt of him, any question of his past.

"He would be a rank duffer who couldn't dance with you, Nell," he said.

Her hand tightened on his with the faintest pressure, and she closed her eyes with a happy sigh.

"If it could only go on forever!" was her thought; and she prayed that no other man might want her to dance, for a long time.

She would have liked to sit out the dances she could not have with Drake, to sit and watch him. And she would not be jealous. Why should she be? Was he not her very own, her sweetheart, the man who loved her?

The waltz came to an end all too soon, and as Drake led her to a seat, young Maltby approached her with two young fellows. She was the prettiest girl in the room, though she was the simplest dressed, and the men were anxious to secure her.

Drake hastily scribbled his initials on several lines of her program, then had to resign her to her next partner, and, in discharge of his duty, seek a partner for himself.

Lady Maltby introduced him to a daughter of a local squire, a fresh young girl, with all a country girl's frankness.

"What a pretty girl that was with whom you were dancing!" she said, as they started. "She is really lovely!" [Pg 120]

"And yet they say that women never admire each other," he remarked.

"Do you mean that?" she asked, looking up at him with her frank, blue eyes. "What nonsense! I love to see a pretty woman; and I quite looked forward to coming here to-night, because we are to have a famous London beauty."

"Oh! Which one?" asked Drake absently; his eyes were following Nell, who happened to look across at him at the moment, and who smiled the smile which a woman only accords her lover.

"I don't remember her name," said the girl. "But she is very beautiful, I am told; though I find it hard to believe that she can be lovelier than she is," and she nodded in Nell's direction.

Drake felt very friendly toward the girl.

"She is as good as she is beautiful," he said; then, as the triteness and significance of the words struck him, he laughed slightly.

His partner glanced up at him shyly.

"Oh—I beg your pardon!" she said. "I didn't know. How—how proud you must be!"

"I am," said Drake.

"And of course you want to be dancing with her now? If I were you I should hate to have to dance with any one else. I wish—you would introduce me to her after this waltz!"

"With pleasure!" said Drake, wondering what on earth the girl's name was—for, of course, he had not caught it.

But the introduction was not made, for her next partner came up immediately the dance was finished and bore her off; and Drake leaned against the wall and watched Nell.

She was dancing with a subaltern from the garrison town, and was evidently enjoying herself. It was a pleasure to him to look at her; and it occurred to him that even if the bright little American, with the pleasant voice and tender heart, had not stepped in to ruin his prospects; if the title and estates were as near to him as they had been a few months ago; if he were moving in London society, in his own critical and exclusive set, he would not have made any mistake in asking Nell to be his wife. She would have justified his choice in any society, however high.

It occurred to him that where they were going on the Continent he might, perhaps, procure a little amusement for her; there might be a dance or two at the hotels at which they would stay; or he might take her to one of the big state balls for which there would be no difficulty in obtaining an invitation.

Yes, he thought as he watched her—her lips half parted with a smile of intense enjoyment, her eyes shining with the light of youth and ignorance of care—she should have a happy time of it or he would know the reason why; he would simply devote his life to watching over her, to screening her from every worry, to—— [Pg 121]

"Are you staying in the house, Mr. Blake?"

It was Sir William who had toddled up and addressed the reflective guest. Sir William never knew exactly how the house party was composed; and sometimes a man had been staying at the

Grange for a fortnight without Sir William comprehending that the man was sleeping beneath his roof.

"No? Beg your pardon! I should have liked to show you my Herefords to-morrow morning. I think you'd admire 'em; they're the best lot I've had, and I ought to do well with them at the show. But perhaps you don't take an interest in cattle-breeding?"

"Oh, yes, I do," said Drake pleasantly, and with his rather rare smile—he was brimming over with happiness and would have patted a rhinoceros that night, and Sir William was anything but a rhinoceros. "Every man ought to take an interest in cattle-breeding and horse-breeding. I did a little in the latter way myself." He pulled up short. "I shall be very glad to come over to-morrow morning, if you'll allow me."

"Do, do!" said Sir William genially, and evidently much gratified. "But, look here, you'll have to come over early, because I've got to go and sit on the bench, and shall have to leave here soon after ten. Why not come over to breakfast—say, nine o'clock?"

"Thanks!" said Drake; "I shall be very glad to."

At this moment Lady Maltby came up to them with a rather anxious expression on her pleasant face.

"I can't think what has come to the Chesney party, William," she said. "I didn't expect them very early, but it's getting rather late now. Do you think they've had an accident?"

"Not a bit of it!" returned Sir William cheerily. "They've had a jolly good dinner, and don't feel like moving. Don't blame them, either. Suppose we go and have a cigar, Mr. Blake?"

Drake glanced toward Nell, saw that she was surrounded, exchanged a smile with her, then went off with Sir William to the smoking room. They were in the middle of their cigars, and talking cattle and horses, when Drake heard a carriage drive up.

"That's the Chesney people, I dare say," said Sir William, and continued to dilate on a new rule which he was anxious that the Agricultural Society should adopt, and Drake and he discussed it exhaustively. [Pg 122]

Nell had just finished a dance when she saw Lady Maltby hurry across the room to receive four persons, two ladies and two men, who had just arrived. It was the belated Chesney party. Their entrance attracted a good deal of attention, and Nell herself was startled into interest and curiosity by the appearance of one of the new arrivals. She thought that she had never imagined—she had certainly never seen—so beautiful a woman, or one so magnificently dressed.

A professional beauty in all her war paint is somewhat of a rara avis in a quiet country house, and this professional beauty was the acknowledged queen of her tribe. Her hair shone like gold, and it had been dressed by a maid who had acquired her art at the hands of a famous Parisian coiffeur; her complexion, of a delicate ivory, was tinted with the blush of a rose; her lips were the Cupid-bow lips which Sir Joshua Reynolds loved to paint. Naturally graceful, her figure was indebted to her modiste for every adventitious aid the art of modern dressmaking can bestow. Nell knew too little of dress to fully appreciate the exquisite perfection of the *toilette de la danse*; she could only admire and wonder. It was of a soft cream silk, rendered still softer in appearance by cobweb lace, in which, as if caught by the filmy strands, as in a net, were lustrous pearls. Diamonds glittered in the hair which served them as a setting of gold. Her very gloves were unlike those of the other women, and seemed to fit the long and slender hands like a fourth skin.

"How beautiful!" she said involuntarily, and scarcely aware that she had spoken aloud.

The man who was sitting beside her smiled.

"Like a picture, is she not?" he said. "In fact, I never see her but I am reminded of a Lely or a Lawrence; one of those full-length pictures in Hampton Court, you know!"

"I don't know," said Nell. "I've never been there."

"Well, you won't think it a fair comparison when you do see them," he said; "for there isn't one of them half as beautiful as Lady Luce."

"What is her name?" asked Nell, who had not caught it.

He did not hear the question, for the music had struck up again, and with a bow he went off to his next partner. It was evident to Nell that the beauty was not known to Lady Maltby, for Nell saw the other lady introducing them. Nell felt half fascinated by the new arrival, and sat and watched her, looking at her as intently as one gazes at something quite new and strange which has swung suddenly into one's own ken. [Pg 123]

Nell was engaged for that dance, but her partner did not turn up. She was not sorry, for she wanted to rest; the room was hot, and, though she was by no means tired, she was not eager to dance the waltz—unless it were to be danced with Drake. She was sitting not very far from the window; some considerate soul had opened it a little, and Nell got up and went to it and looked out. It opened onto a wide terrace; the stars were shining brightly, the night air came to her softly and wooingly. How nice it would be to go out there! Perhaps if she stole out, and waited, presently Drake would come into the ballroom, and, missing her, would come in search of her, for he would guess that she would be out there, and they would have a few minutes by themselves

under the starlit sky. It was worth trying for.

She went out, without opening the window any wider, and leaning on the stone coping, looked up at the sky, and then to where, far away, the few lights which were still burning showed her where Shorne Mills nestled amid its trees.

As long as life lasted she would never be able to think of Shorne Mills without thinking of Drake; she thought of him now, and longed for him; and as she heard the window open wider she turned with a little throb of expectation. But instead of Drake's tall figure, two ladies came out. Nell recognized the beauty by her dress, and saw that the lady who was with her was the one who had accompanied her to the ball.

Nell's disappointment was so acute as to embarrass her for a moment, and, reluctant, with a girl's shyness, to be found there alone, she rather foolishly drew back quietly into the shadow accentuated by the contrast of the light streaming from the half-open window. She retreated as far as the corner of the terrace, and, finding a seat there, over which she had nearly stumbled, she sank into it. Beside her was a marble statue of the god Pan. The pedestal almost, if not quite, concealed her; and, although she was already ashamed of having taken flight, so to speak, she decided to remain where she was until the other two women returned to the ballroom, or Drake came out and she could call to him.

Lady Luce went and leaned upon almost the very spot where Nell had leaned; and she looked up at the sky and toward the twinkling lights, and yawned.

"Sorry you have come, dear?" said Lady Chesney, with a little laugh. "I know you so well that that yawn speaks volumes." [Pg 124]

"It is rather slow, isn't it?" admitted Lady Luce, with the soft little London drawl in her languid voice.

"My dear Luce, I told you it would be slow. What did you expect? These dear, good people are quite out of the world—they are antediluvians. The best people imaginable, of course, but not of the kind which gives the sort of hop you care for. I'm sorry you came; but I did warn you, dear, didn't I?"

"Yes, I know," assented Lady Luce.

"And, really, you seemed so bored—forgive me, dear; I don't want to be offensive—that I thought that perhaps, after all, this rustic entertainment might amuse you."

"I'm not bored, but I'm very sick and sorry for myself," said Luce. "One always is when one has been a fool."

"My dear girl, you did it for the best."

"That always seems to me such a futile, and altogether ineffectual, consolation," said Luce; "and people never offer it to you unless you have absolutely made a fool of yourself."

"But I think, and everybody thinks with me, that you acted very wisely under the circumstances. He could not expect you to marry a poor man. Good heavens! fancy Luce and poverty! The combination is not to be imagined for a moment! It is not your fault that circumstances are altered, and that if you had only waited——"

Lady Luce made a little impatient movement with her hand.

"If I had only waited!" she said, with a mixture of irritation and regret. "It was just my luck that I should meet him when I did."

There was a pause. It need scarcely be said that Nell was extremely uncomfortable. These two were discussing a matter of the most private character, and she was playing the unwelcome part of listener. Had she been a woman of the world, it would have been easy for her to have emerged from her hiding place, and to have swept past them slowly, as if she had seen and heard nothing, as if she were quite unconscious of their presence. But Nell was not a woman of the world; she was just Nell of Shorne Mills, a girl at her first ball, and her first introduction to society. She could not move—could only long for them to become either silent or to go away and leave her free to escape.

"I suppose he was very much cut up?" remarked Lady Chesney.

"That goes without saying," replied Luce. "Of course. He was very fond of me; or, why should he have asked me to marry him? You wouldn't ask the question if you had seen him the day I broke with him. I never saw a man so cut up. It made me quite ill." [Pg 125]

"Then the love was not altogether on one side, dear?" said Lady Chesney.

Lady Luce shrugged her white shoulders in eloquent silence.

"Where did the dramatic parting take place?" asked Lady Chesney.

"Here," said Lady Luce.

"Here?"

"Well, near here. At a little port—fishing place, called—I forget the name—something Mills."

"Oh! you mean Shorne Mills."

Nell's discomfort increased, and yet a keen interest reluctantly awoke in her. It seemed so strange to be listening to what seemed to her a life's drama, the scene of which was pitched in Shorne Mills.

"The yacht put in quite unexpectedly," continued Luce. "I didn't want to land at all, but Archie worried me into doing so. We climbed a miserable kind of steep place. I refused to go any farther. They went on, and I turned into a kind of recess to rest—and found Drake there."

For a moment the name did not strike with its full significance upon Nell's mind, and the soft voice had continued for a sentence or two before she realized that the man of whom this woman was speaking, the lover whose loss she was regretting, bore the same name as Drake. She had no suspicion that the men were the same; it only seemed strange and almost incredible that there should be two Drakes at Shorne Mills.

"I can imagine the scene," said Lady Chesney; "and I can quite understand how you feel about it. But, Luce, is it altogether hopeless?"

Lady Luce laughed bitterly.

"You don't know Drake," she said. There was a pause. "And yet"—she hesitated, and her tone became thoughtful and speculative—"sometimes I think that I could get him back. He is very fond of me; it must have nearly broken his heart. Yes; sometimes I feel sure that if I could have him to myself for, say, ten minutes, it would all come right."

"Don't you know where he is?"

"No. There was a row royal between his uncle and him, and he disappeared. No one knows where he is. It is just possible that he has gone abroad."

"There is danger in that," said Lady Chesney gravely. "One never knows what a man may do in a moment of pique. They are strange animals." [Pg 126]

"You mean that he might be caught on the rebound, and marry some 'dusky bride' or ruddy-cheeked dairymaid?" said Lady Luce, with a little laugh of scorn. "You don't know Drake. He's the last man to marry beneath him. If I were not afraid of seeming egotistical, dear, I would say that he has known me too long and loved me too well——But there! don't let us talk any more about it. The gods may send him to my side again. If they do, I shall avail myself of their gracious favor and get him back; if not——" She sighed, and shrugged her shoulders. "Heavens! how I wish I had a cigarette!"

"My dear, you shall have one," said Lady Chesney, with a laugh. "I know where the smoking room is. I'll go and get you one, you poor, dear soul!"

She went in, and Nell rose from her seat. She could not remain a moment longer, even if she had to tell this lady she had overheard their conversation, and beg her pardon for having played, most reluctantly, the eavesdropper. But as she stood fighting with her nervousness, a man came out through the window. Her heart leaped with relief and thanksgiving, for it was Drake.

"Is that you?" he said, as he saw the figure against the coping.

Lady Luce turned; the light streamed full upon her face, and he stopped dead short and stared at her.

"Luce!" he exclaimed, in a low voice.

She stood for a moment as motionless as one of the statues. Another woman would have started, would probably have shrunk back, with a cry of amazement or of joy; but she stood for just that instant, motionless and silent, and looking at him with her eyes dilating with surprise and delight. Then, holding out both hands, she moved toward him, murmuring:

"Drake! Thank God!"

CHAPTER XVI.

Lady Luce came forward to him with both hands extended; and the "Drake, thank God!" was perhaps as genuinely a devout an expression as she had ever uttered. For it seemed to her that Providence had especially intervened in her behalf and sent him to her side. We all of us have an idea that Providence is more interested in us than in other persons.

Drake stood and looked at her for an instant with the same surprise which had assailed him when he recognized her; then he took the small, exquisitely gloved hands. How could he refuse them? As he had said, the members of their set could not be strangers, though two of them had been lovers and one had been jilted. They had to meet as friends or acquaintances, as individuals of a community, which, living for pleasure, could not be bored by quarrels and estrangements. [Pg 127]

In the "smart" set a man lives not for himself alone, but for the other men with whom he plays and shoots and jokes and drinks; for the women with whom he drives and rides and dances. He must sink personal feeling, likes and dislikes, or the social ship which he joins as one of the crew, the ship which can sail only on smooth and sunlit waves, will founder. So Drake took her hands and smiled a greeting at her.

"Why! To find you here! What are you doing here, Drake?" she said.

She had no right to call him "Drake"; she had lost that right the day she had jilted him; but she called him "Drake," and the name left her lips softly and meltingly.

"I might ask the same of you, Luce," he replied gravely, and unconscious in the stress of the moment that he, too, had used the Christian name.

But, alas! Nell had heard it! She had, half mechanically, shrunk behind the pedestal; she shrank still farther behind it as Drake spoke, and she put up her hand on the cold marble as if for support. For she was trembling in every limb, and a sensation as of approaching death was creeping over her. The terrace and the two figures grew misty and indistinct, the music of the band sounded like a blurred discord in her ears, and the blood rushed through her veins like fire one moment and like ice the next.

She would have rushed out of her hiding place and into the house, but she could not move. Was she going to die? or was this awful, sickening weakness only a warning that she was going to faint? She pressed her forehead against the marble, and the icy coldness of the unsympathetic stone revived her. She found that she could hear every word, though the two had moved to the stone rail.

"It is quite a shock!" said Lady Luce. She put her handkerchief to her lips, her eyes, and then looked up at him with the smile, the confession of weakness, which is one of woman's most irresistible weapons.

"I—I am staying at the Chesneys'—you know the Chesneys? No? There is a small party—some of us came over to-night to this dance—they are old friends of the Maltbys. Drake, I can scarcely believe it is you!" [Pg 128]

He stood beside her patiently, and yet impatiently. He was thinking of Nell even at that moment; wondering where she was, how soon he could get away from Lady Luce and find Nell.

"You are staying here?" she asked, meaning at the Maltbys'.

He nodded, thinking it well to leave her misconception uncorrected.

"How strange! Drake, it—it is like Fate!" she murmured; and, indeed, she felt that it was.

"Like Fate?" he asked.

"Yes—that—that we should meet here, in this out-of-the way place, so soon. Oh, Drake, if you knew how glad I am!"

She put out her hand and touched his arm with the timid touch, the suggestion of a caress, which women can convey so significantly.

Drake glanced toward the open window apprehensively. Nell—any one—might come out any moment, and——

"Shall we walk to the end of the terrace?" he said. "You will catch cold——"

As he spoke he looked down at her. There was only a man's inquiry, and consideration for a woman's bare shoulders, in the look; but to Nell, whose eyes were fixed upon him with an agonized intentness, it seemed that the look was eloquent of tenderness and passion.

"Yes, yes," assented Lady Luce quickly. "Some one may come, and—and—we have so much to say, haven't we, Drake?"

He drew her arm within his mechanically, as he would have drawn it if he had been leading her to a dance, or in to dinner, and they moved beyond Nell's hearing.

Drake bit his lip, and glanced sideways toward the house. What could she have to say to him? and what did this sudden tenderness, this humility, of hers mean?

Suddenly it occurred to him that she had seen his uncle, and heard of the old man's offer. Ten thousand a year was not a large income for one in Lady Lucille Turfleigh's position; but—well, she might have been tempted by it. His face hardened with an expression of cold cynicism which Nell had never seen.

"What have we to say, Luce?" he asked. "I thought you and I had exhausted all topics of absorbing interest when we parted the other day."

She winced, and looked up at him reproachfully.

"Oh, how cruel of you, Drake!" she murmured, "As if I hadn't suffered enough!"

"Suffered!" [Pg 129]

He smiled down at her, with something as nearly approaching a sneer as Drake Selbie could bring himself to bestow upon a woman.

"Yes. Drake, did you think I was quite heartless? that—I—I—did what I did without suffering? Ah, no, you couldn't think that; you know me too well."

Her audacity brought a smile to his lips, and he found it difficult to restrain a laugh of amusement. It was because he had learned to know her so well that he himself had not suffered a pang at their broken engagement—at least, no pang since he had learned to know and love Nell.

Where was she? How could he get away from this woman, whose face was upturned to him with passionate pleading on it?

"Have you seen my uncle lately?" he asked grimly, but with a kind of suddenness.

"No," she replied, and the lie came "like truth"—so like truth that Drake felt ashamed of his suspicion of her motive.

She had not, then, heard of his uncle's offer? Then—then why was she moved at sight of him? Why were her eyes moist with unshed tears, the pressure of her hand on his arm tremulous and beseeching?

"No," she said; "I—I have been scarcely anywhere. I have—not been well. I came down here to the Chesneys' to bury myself—just to bury myself. I have been so wretched, so miserable, Drake."

"I'm sorry," he said gravely. "But why?"

She looked up at him reproachfully.

"Don't you—know? Ah, Drake, can't you guess? Don't—don't look at me like that and smile. It is not like you to be so—so hard."

"We men are hard or soft as you women make us, Luce," he said quietly. "Remember that I have been through the mill. I was not hard or cruel—once."

It was an unwise thing to say. Never, if you have done with a woman, or she has done with you, talk sentiment, says Rousseau. It was unwise, for it let Luce in.

"I know! Yes, it was all my fault. Drake, do you think I don't know that? Do you think that I don't tell myself so every hour of the day, every hour at night, when I lay awake thinking of—of the past?"

"The past is buried, Luce," he said, with a short laugh. "Don't let us dig it up again. After all, you acted wisely——"

"No; I acted like a fool!" she broke in; and she meant it. "If I had only listened to the cry of my own heart—if I had only refused to obey father, and—and stuck to you! But, Drake, though you think me heartless, and—and sneer——" [Pg 130]

"I didn't mean to sneer, Luce," he said. "Forgive me if I did so unintentionally. I quite understood your difficulty, and, as I told you the day we parted, I—well, I made allowances for you. You did what most women of our set would have done."

"Would they? But perhaps they really are heartless, while I——Drake, you can't tell what I have suffered; how—how terribly I have missed you! I—yes, I will tell you the truth. Do you know, Drake, that I had made a vow that whenever we met, whether it was soon, or not for years, I would tell you all. Yes—though, like a man, you should despise me for it!"

"I'm not likely to despise you for it, Luce," he said. As he spoke, Lady Chesney came out onto the terrace. She looked up and down, saw the two figures standing together, and, with a smile, returned to the house.

"No; you are too generous for that, Drake; even if I—I confess that I have not spent one happy—oh, the word is a mockery!—that I have been wretched since the hour I—I left you."

His face grew grave, almost stern.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "Candidly, I didn't think——"

"No, I know! You thought that I only cared for you because——You told me that I was heartless and mercenary, you remember, Drake. But, ah; it wasn't true! Yes, I've been brought up at a bad school. I've been taught that it's a sacred duty for every girl, as poor as I am, to make a good match; and I thought—see how frank I am!—that I could part from you, oh, not easily, but without breaking my heart. But I—I was mistaken! I miss you so dreadfully! There is not another man in the world I can care for, or even dream of caring for."

"Hush!" he said sternly.

There was always something impressive about Drake, a touch of the manliness which is somewhat rare nowadays, the manliness which women are so quick to acknowledge and bow to; and Lady Luce shrank a little; but her hand tightened on his arm, and her brown, velvety eyes dimmed with genuine tears—for she was more than anxious, and more than half in love with him—looked up at him penitently, imploringly. [Pg 131]

"Drake—you believe me?" she whispered. "Don't—don't punish me too badly! See, I am at your feet—a woman—Drake"—her voice sank to a whisper, became almost inaudible, and her head drooped forward until it nearly rested on his breast. "Drake—forgive—me and——"

Her voice broke suddenly.

He was moved to something like pity. Is there any man alive who can resist the prayer, the touch of a beautiful woman, especially if she is the woman he has once loved? If such a man there be, his name is not Drake Selbie.

"Hush!" he said again, but in a gentler voice. "God knows, I loved you, Luce——"

She uttered a faint cry. It was no louder than the sough of the night breeze.

"Drake—Drake! ah, Drake!" she breathed, her face lifted to his, her other hand touching his breast. "Say it again! It's the sweetest music I've heard since—since——Say it again, Drake. I won't ask for any more——"

"Don't!" he said hoarsely. The caress of her hand made him miserable; it had no power to thrill him now. "I want to tell you, Luce——"

"No—no," she said quickly, eagerly. "Don't scold me to-night. I am so happy now. It is as if I had come back to life. Say it once more, Drake. Just 'I forgive you'!"

"I forgive you; but, listen, Luce," he added quickly.

She slid her white arm round his neck, and drew his head down and kissed him. The next moment, before he could say a word, she drew away from him quickly.

"Go in—I will come presently," she said. "There is some one—there is a door."

Confused, almost hating her for the kiss she had stolen—with Nell flashing on his mind—he turned and entered the house by the door to which she had pointed.

She stood for a moment, then she went toward Lady Chesney. Her face was pale, but there was a smile on her lips, a glow of triumph in her brown eyes, as she paused in the light from the open window.

Lady Chesney looked at her, then laughed.

"My dear, you look transformed. Was that—but of course it was! Well? But one need not ask any questions. Your face tells its own tale."

Luce laughed, and touched her lips with her handkerchief.

"Yes, it was Drake," she said. "What luck! what luck! And they say there is no Providence!"

"And—and it is all right?" asked Lady Chesney, anxiously.

Lady Luce laughed softly.

"Oh, yes! Didn't I tell you that if I could have him to myself for ten minutes——And we have been longer, haven't we? You see, he was fond of me, and——Oh! have you brought a cigarette? I am simply dying for one now!" [Pg 132]

Lady Chesney held one out to her.

"Here it is. But hadn't you better go in? They will miss you——"

Lady Luce shrugged her shoulders as she struck a match from the gold box Drake had given her.

"What does it matter what these people think?" she retorted. "Nothing matters now. I have got Drake back, and——All the same, we will get out of sight of the window, lest we shock these simple folk. Yes, I am a lucky young woman."

They passed along the terrace, and Nell, as if released from a spell, fell into the seat and covered her face with her hands.

CHAPTER XVII.

Presently she let them fall slowly and looked vacantly with her brows drawn—as if waiting for the return of some sharp pain—in the direction of Shorne Mills. The lights had gone out; so also had died the light of her young life.

She tried to realize what this was that had happened to her; but it was so difficult—so difficult! Only a little while ago she had been happy in the possession of Drake's love. He had been hers—was her sweetheart, her very own; he was to have been her husband; she was to have been his wife.

And now—what had happened? Was she dead—had she done some evil thing which had turned his love for her to hate and driven him from her?

Slowly the numbed sensation, the feeling of stupor passed, and the truth, as she thought of it, came upon her with a rush and made her press her hand to her heart as if a knife had stabbed it.

Drake loved her no longer. He had never loved her. The woman he had loved was the most beautiful of God's creatures, and Drake had only turned to her—Nell—in a moment of pique. And this woman with the perfect face, and soft, lingering voice; this woman whose every movement was grace itself, who carried herself like an empress—an empress in the first flush of her beauty and power—had changed her mind and called him back to her. And he had gone.

The fact caused such intense misery as to leave no room for resentment. At that moment there was not one spark of anger, one drop of bitterness in Nell's emotion; only misery so acute, so agonizing, as to be like a physical pain.

It seemed to her so natural, so reasonable, that he should desert her when this siren with the melting eyes, the caressing laugh, should beckon him; for who could have resisted her? Not any man who had once loved her. [Pg 133]

Nell's head moved slowly from side to side, like that of an animal stricken to death. Her throat had grown tight, her eyes were hot and burning, the sound, as of the plash of waves, sang in her ears; but she could not cry. It seemed to her that she would never be able to cry again. She looked vaguely at the other women as they walked at the far end of the terrace, and she shivered as if with bodily fear. There was something terrible, Circe-like, to her in the face, the movements, the very voice of this woman who had taken Drake from her.

Presently the two exquisitely dressed figures passed into the house, and Nell rose, steadying herself by the pedestal. As she did so, she looked up. A streak of light shot right across the statue, and the cruel face with its leering eyes seemed to smile down upon her mockingly, jeeringly, and she actually shrank, as if she dreaded to hear the satyr lips shoot some evil gibe at her.

And all the while the music, a waltz of Waldteufel's, soft and ravishing and seductive, floated out to her, and mocked her with the memory of the happiness that had been hers but an hour—half an hour ago. She staggered to the edge of the terrace and leaned her head on her hands, and, closing her eyes, tried hard to persuade herself that it was only a dream; just a dream, from which she should wake shuddering at the unreal misery one moment, then laughing at its unreality the next.

But it was true. The dream had been the happiness of the last few weeks, and this was the awakening.

Before her mental vision passed, like a panorama, the days which the gods had given her—that they might punish her all the more cruelly for daring to be so happy.

Yes; how often had she asked herself what right she, Nell of Shorne Mills, had to so much joy? What had she done to deserve it?

She remembered now how, sometimes, she had been terrified by the intensity of her joy. That day Drake had told her that he loved her; the morning he had taken her in his arms and kissed her; the night he had looked down into her eyes and sworn that no man in all the world loved any woman as he loved her. She had not deserved it, had no right to it, and God had punished her for her presumption in daring to be so happy.

But now what was she to do?

She asked the question with a kind of despair.

It never for one moment occurred to her that she should accuse Drake of his faithlessness, much less that she should upbraid him. Indeed, what would be the use? Could she—she, an ignorant, half-taught girl, just Nell of Shorne Mills—contend against such a woman as this Lady Luce? [Pg 134]

Luce! Luce! She remembered—for the first time that night, strangely enough—how he had murmured the name in his delirium. She had forgotten that, she had not thought of it, and had not asked who the woman was whose visage haunted him in his fever.

If she had only done so! He would have told her—yes, for Drake was honest; he would have told her—and she would not have allowed herself to fall in love with him. Even as it was, she had fought against it; but her struggle had been of no avail. She had loved him almost from the first moment.

And now she had lost him forever!

"Drake, Drake, Drake!" her heart called to him, though her lips were mute.

What should she do?

No; she would not upbraid him. There should be no "scene." She knew instinctively how much he would loathe a scene. She would just tell him—what? That—that—it had all been a mistake; that—she did not love him, and—and ask him to give her back her freedom.

That was all. Not one word of Lady Luce would she say. He would go—go without a word; she knew that.

And now she must go back to the ballroom, and try and look and behave as if nothing had happened.

Was she very white? she wondered dully. She felt as if she had died, and was buried out of reach of any pain, beyond all possibility of further joy. Her life was indeed at an end. That kiss of Drake's—to her it had appeared as if indeed it had been his, and not Luce's only, stolen from him unawares—that kiss had killed her.

Let Ibsen be a great poet and dramatist, or a literary fraud, there are one or two things which he says which strike men with the force of a revelation; and when he speaks of the love-life which is given to every man and woman, and calls him and her a murderer who kills it, he speaks truly, and as one inspired.

Nell's love-life lay dead at her feet, and Drake, though all unconsciously, had slain it.

She wiped her lips, though they were dry and parched, and with trembling hands smoothed her hair—the lips and the hair Drake had kissed so often, with such rapture—and slowly, fighting for strength and self-possession, passed into the ballroom.

The brilliant light, the music, the dancers, acted upon her overstrained nerves as a dash of cold water upon a swooning man. For the first time since the blow had fallen pride awoke in her. She had lost Drake forever; but she would make no moan; other women before her had lost their lovers and their husbands by death, and they had to bear their bereavements; she must learn to bear hers. [Pg 135]

A young fellow hurried up to her with a mingled expression of relief and complaint.

"Oh, Miss Lorton; this is ours!" he said. "I have been looking for you everywhere, everywhere, on my honor, and I was nearly distracted!"

Nell moistened her lips and forced a smile.

"I have been out on the terrace; it—it was hot."

"And—you didn't feel faint? You look rather pale now!" he said apprehensively. "Would you rather not dance?"

"No, no; I would rather dance!" she replied, with a kind of feverish impatience. "I—I think I am cold." She shivered a little. "I shall be all the better for a dance!"

She went round like one moving in a dream; her eyes looking straight before her in a fixed gaze, her lips curved with a forced smile. After a moment or two she grew warmer; the blood began to circulate, a hectic flush started out on her cheeks.

Any one seeing her would have thought she was enjoying herself amazingly; would not have suspected that her heart was racked by agony; that the music was beating upon her brain, inflicting pain with every stroke; that she longed, with an aching longing, to be in the dark, in her own room, alone with her unspeakable misery.

One talks glibly enough of women's sufferings; but not one of us ever comes near gauging them, for the gods who have denied them some things have granted to the least of them the great power of enduring in silence, of smiling while they suffer, of murmuring commonplaces while the iron is cutting deeper and deeper into their souls. The nobler the woman the greater this power of hers; and there was much that was noble in poor Nell. And as she danced, those who looked at her were full of admiration or envy. She was so young; her loveliness was so untainted by the world; the delicate droop of the pure lips was so childlike, while it hinted of the deeper nature of the woman, that many who regarded her and then glanced at the professional beauty, mentally accorded Nell the palm.

And among them was Drake. He had gone straight to the smoking room, had lit a cigarette, and, pacing up and down, had, with stern lips and frowning brows, revolved the problem which fate had set him.

He swore under his breath, after the manner of men, as he went over the scene with Luce. What devil of ill chance had sent her down there? And why—why had she changed her mind? Was it really true that she—cared for, him still? He could scarcely believe it; and yet the caress of her hand, the look in her eyes, the—the—kiss——He flung the cigarette away—for he had bitten it in two—and fumed mentally. And what did she mean, think? Was it possible that she thought he could go back to her? [Pg 136]

He laughed grimly, in mockery of the idea. Why, even if there had been no Nell, he could not have gone back to Luce. And there was Nell! Yes, thank God! there was Nell, his dear, sweet, beautiful Nell! His girl love, the girl who was like a pure star shining in God's heaven compared with a flame from—yes, from the nethermost pit. Love! He, who now knew what love meant, laughed scornfully at the idea in connection with Lady Luce. Passion it might be—but love! And she had left him with a kiss, as if she were convinced that she had recovered him! Oh, it was damnable, damnable!

Why—why, she might even behave in the ballroom as if—as if she had a right to claim him! She might even tell the Chesneys that—that——

He strode out of the smoking room in time to see the Chesney party taking their departure. As

Lady Luce shook hands with the hostess and murmured her thanks for "a delightful evening"—and for once they were genuine and no idle formula—he saw her glance round the room as if in search of some one; but he drew back out of sight.

Then, when they had gone, he reëntered the ballroom and his eyes sought Nell. She met them, and he smiled, but rather anxiously, with a feeling of disquietude; for there was——Was there something strange in the expression of her face? But as she smiled back—can one imagine what that smile cost Nell?—he drew a breath of relief, found a partner, and joined in the dance.

By this time the party had reached the after-supper stage, and the waltzes had grown faster. A set of lancers had been danced with so much spirit and enjoyment that it had been encored. Some of the men were talking and laughing just a little loudly, and the women's faces were flushed with the one glass of champagne which is generally all they permit themselves, the spell of the music, and the excitement of rapid and rhythmical movement. Couples found their way into the anterooms and recesses, or sat very close together in corners of the great, broad staircase.

Some of the men had boldly deserted the ballroom and retreated to the smoking room, where they could play whist and drink and smoke: "Must wait for my womenfolk, you know." [Pg 137]

Dick, at this, his first dance, was enjoying himself amazingly. He had gone steadily through the program, and as steadily through most of the dishes at supper, and he was now flirting, with all a boy's ardor, with a plump little girl, the niece of Lady Maltby.

She was "just out," and Dick had danced three dances in succession with her before she remembered that she was committing a breach of etiquette.

"Dance again with you? Oh, I couldn't!" she said, when Dick, with inward tremors but an outward boldness, begged for the fourth. "I mustn't—I really mustn't!"

"Why not?" demanded Dick innocently.

"If you weren't such a boy you wouldn't ask," she retorted severely, but with a smile lurking in her bright young eyes.

"I bet I'm as old as you are," he said.

"Are you? I don't think you are. You look as if you'd just come from school. I'm——No, I won't tell you. It was just a trick to learn my age. But if you must know why I won't dance again with you, it is because no lady ought to dance three times in succession with a man."

"But I'm only a boy, which makes all the difference, don't you see?" said Dick naïvely. "Nobody cares what a boy does, you know. Come along."

She pretended to eye him severely.

"No; I won't 'come along.' And I think it's very rude of you not to take an answer."

"All right," he said cheerfully. "Then will you come and have some supper?"

"Why, it isn't half an hour ago since we had some."

"Then come and see me eat some more," he suggested.

"Thank you; but I am never very fond of seeing animals fed, even at the Zoo!"

"That was rather good," he said, with a grin. "My sister, Nell couldn't have put that one in more neatly."

"Your sister Nell? That's the girl over there, dancing with Captain White? How pretty she is!"

"Think so? Yes, she is, now you mention it. We are considered very much alike."

The girlish laughter, which he had been waiting for, rang out, and, taking advantage of it, Dick coaxed her into a corner on the stairs, where they could flirt to their hearts' content.

"I wonder whether you'd be offended if I told you that you were the jolliest—I mean nicest—girl I've met?" said the young vagabond, with an assumption of innocence and humility which robbed the remark of any offense—at any rate, for his hearer, whose eyes sparkled. [Pg 138]

"Not at all. And I wonder whether you'd mind if I told you that I think you are the rudest and most—most audacious boy I ever met?"

"Not the least in the world, because it's no news—I mean that I'm—what was it—the rudest and most audacious? I have a sister, you know, and she deals in candor, candor in solid blocks. But what a mission my condition opens up before you, Miss Angel!"

"A mission?" she asked reluctantly, young enough to know that she was going to be caught somehow.

"Yes," he said, with demure gravity. "The mission of my reformation. If you think me so bad to-night, I don't know, I really don't, what you would have thought of me yesterday, before I had had the advantage of your elevating society. Now, Miss Angel, here is a chance for you—the great chance of your life! Continue your elevating influence. Your cousin has asked me to a rabbit shoot to-morrow."

"You'll shoot somebody. They really ought not to allow boys to carry guns——"

"Who's rude now?" he asked, with a grin. "I was going to say, when you interrupted me, that if you came out with the luncheon party, I should have the opportunity of a lesson in—in deportment and manners. See?"

"I shouldn't think of coming," she declared promptly.

"Oh, yes, you will," he said teasingly, and with an air of conviction. "Women always do what they wouldn't think of doing."

"Really!" she retorted, with mock indignation. "There is only one thing I can do, and it is my duty. I shall tell your sister——Oh, look!" she broke off suddenly, and with something like dismay in her voice, as she pointed downward.

Dick leaned over, and saw Nell, sitting on an old oak bench just below them. She was leaning back; her eyes were closed, and her face white.

"Oh, go to her; she is not well. I am so sorry! Go to her at once!"

Dick ran down the stairs, and the girl followed a step or two, then stood watching them timidly.

"Hallo, Nell! What's the matter?" asked Dick.

She opened her eyes and rose instantly, struggling with all a woman's courage beating in her heart to renew the fight, to play her part to the end of that never—never-ending night.

"Nothing, nothing. I am just a little tired, I think." [Pg 139]

At this moment Drake came up.

"This is my dance, Nell," he said. His face, his voice were grave, for his soul was still disquieted within him. "I have been looking for you——"

He stopped suddenly and put out his hand, for her face had grown white again. She had raised her eyes to his for a moment with the look of a dumb animal in pain; but she lowered them instantly and bent aside to take up her dress.

"I am tired," she said, forcing a smile. "The heat—could we not go home? I—I mean, Dick and I—there is no need for you——"

"Yes, yes; at once; this instant!" he said. "Wait while I get you some water—wait——"

He went off quickly, and Nell turned to Dick.

"Will you order the fly, Dick?" she said, in a tone that was quite new to him.

It was, though the boy did not know it, the voice of the woman who has just parted with her girlhood.

"Don't wait, please. I shall be all right."

Dick left her, and Miss Angel came down to her timidly.

"Is there anything I can do—I know what it is. You feel faint——"

Nell smiled.

"God grant you may never know what it is," she thought, looking up at the girl's face, and feeling years and years older than she.

"Perhaps it is," she said. "But I shall be all right the moment I get into the air."

Miss Angel whipped off her shawl, which Dick had insisted upon her wearing.

"Come with me—you can wait just outside the hall. I know what it is; you want to get outside at once—at once!"

Nell went out with her, and as she felt the cool, fresh air, she drew a breath of relief; then she turned to the girl.

"I am all right now; you must not wait. I have your wrap——"

Dick came up with the fly, and Drake appeared with her cloak and a glass of wine. He had got his hat and coat as he came along. She drank some of the wine, and turned to hold out her hand to the girl and wish her good night and thank her.

"I am quite, quite right now!" Drake heard her say; and his fears—for to a man a woman's fainting fit is a terrible thing—were somewhat dispelled.

They got into the fly, and it drove off. Nell, instead of sinking into the corner, sat bolt upright and forced a smile.

"What a jolly evening!" said Dick, with a deep sigh. "Don't wonder you girls are so fond of parties." [Pg 140]

"Yes," she said, with a brightness which deceived both of them, "it has been very jolly. What a

pretty girl that is with whom you were sitting out, Dick!"

"I always thought you had great taste," he said approvingly. "She was the nicest girl there—as I ventured to tell her."

Nell laughed—surely the hollowness of the laugh must strike them, she thought—but neither of the two noticed its insincerity, and Dick rattled on, suspecting nothing.

Drake sat almost silent. To be near her, to have her so close to him, was all the sweeter after the hateful scene with Luce. Heaven! how different was this love of his to that other woman from whom he had escaped! It was a terrible word, but it was the only fitting one to his mind.

He would tell Nell in the morning. Yes, he would tell Nell who he was, and—and—of his engagement to Luce. It would be an unpleasant, hateful story, but he would tell it. There had been too much concealment, too much deceit; he had been a fool to yield to the temptation to hide his identity; he would make a clean breast of it to-morrow. Once he stretched out his hand in the direction of hers, but Nell, though her eyes were not turned in his direction, saw the movement, and quickly removed her hand beyond his reach.

The fly drew up at The Cottage, and Dick jumped out and opened the door with his key, and purposely went straight into the house. As Drake helped Nell out, she drew her hand away to gather up her dress, and went quickly into the little hall, and he followed her.

Her heart beat fast and painfully. She felt as if she could not lift her eyes; as if she were the guilty one. Would he—would he attempt to kiss her? Oh, surely, surely not! He could not be so false. She held out her hand.

"I am so sleepy," she said. "Good night!"

He looked at her as he held her hand, and at that moment the kiss which Luce had taken burned like fire upon his lips. He shrank from touching the pure lips of the girl he loved while the other woman's kiss still lingered on his consciousness. It would be desecration.

"You are all right now—not faint?" he said; and there was a troubled expression in his face and voice.

Nell thought she could read his mind, and knew the reason of his hesitation. A few hours ago he would have lost no time in catching her to his heart. But now—he loved her, no longer.

Her face went white, though she strove to keep the color in it.

"Yes, oh, yes!" she said. "I am only tired and—sleepy."

"Then I won't keep you," he said gravely. "Good night." [Pg 141]

He had turned; but even as he turned, the longing in his heart grew too fierce for restraint. He swung round suddenly and caught her to him, drew her head upon his breast, and kissed her with passionate love—and remorse.

Nell strove for strength to repulse him, to free herself from his arms; but the strength would not come. For a moment she lay motionless, her lips upturned to his, her eyes seeking his, with an expression in them which haunted Drake for many a long year afterward.

"Nell," he said hoarsely, "I—I have something to tell you to-morrow. I—I have to ask your forgiveness. I would tell you to-night, but—I haven't courage. To-morrow!"

The words broke the spell. The flush of a hot, unbearable shame burned in her veins and shone redly in her face. With an effort, she drew herself from his arms and blindly escaped into the sitting room.

Drake raised his head and looked after her, biting his lip.

"Why not tell her to-night?" he asked himself. There was no guardian angel to whisper, "The man who hesitates is lost!" and thinking, "Not to-night; she is too tired—to-morrow!" he left the house.

Nell stood in the center of the room, her face white, her hands shaking; and Dick, as he peeled off what remained of his gloves, surveyed her critically.

"If I were you, young person, I'd have a stiff glass of grog before I tumbled into my little bed. Look here, if you like to go up now, I'll have a smoke, and bring you some up presently. You look—well, you look as if you were going to have the measles, my child."

Nell laughed discordantly.

"Do I?" she said, pushing the hair from her forehead with both hands, and staring before her vacantly. "Perhaps I am."

"Measles—or influenza," he said, with a pursing of the lips. "Get up to bed, Nell."

"I'm going," she said.

She came round the table, and, leaning both hands on his shoulders, bent her lovely head and kissed him.

"Dick, you—you care for me still?" she asked, in a strained voice.

He stared at her, as, brother like, he wiped the kiss from his lips.

"Care for you? What——Look here, Nell, you're behaving like a second-class idiot. And your lips are like fire. I'm dashed if I don't think you are going to have something."

She laughed and shook her head, and went upstairs. How long the few stairs seemed! Or was it that her legs seemed to have become like lead? [Pg 142]

As she passed Mrs. Lorton's room, that lady's voice called to her. Nell opened the door, leaning against it.

"Is that you, Eleanor?" said Mrs. Lorton. "What a noise you made coming in! Really, I think you might have shown some consideration. You know how lightly I sleep. I've the news for you." There was a touch of self-satisfaction in her voice. "A letter has come. Here it is. You had better read it and think over it."

Nell crossed the room unsteadily in the dim flicker of the night light, and took the letter held out to her—took it mechanically—wished Mrs. Lorton good night, and went to her own room.

Before she had got there she had forgotten the letter, and it fell from her hand as she dropped on her knees beside the bed, her arms flung wide over the white counterpane, her whole frame shaking.

"Drake, Drake, Drake!" rose from her quivering lips. "Oh, God! pity me—pity me! I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

Nell woke with that sickening sense of loss which all of us have experienced—that is, all of us who have gone to bed with sorrow lying heavily upon our hearts. The autumnal sun was pouring in through the windows, the birds were singing; some of them waiting on the tree outside for the crumbs which Nell had been in the habit, ever since she was a child, of throwing to them. Even in her misery of last night she had not forgotten the birds; in the misery of her awakening she remembered them, and went unsteadily to the lattice window.

The keen air, as it blew upon her face, brought the full consciousness of the sorrow that had befallen her.

Yesterday morning she was the happiest girl in all the world; this morning she was the most wretched.

She put her hands to her face, as if some one had struck her, and she called all her woman's courage to meet and combat her trouble. The bright world seemed pressing down upon her heavily, the shrill notes of the birds clamoring their gratitude as they greedily fought for the crumbs, pierced through her head. She swayed to and fro, as if she were about to fall; for, in the young, mental anguish produces an absolute physical pain, and her head as well as her heart was aching. [Pg 143]

She would have liked to have thrown herself upon the bed, but Dick would be clamoring for his breakfast presently, and Mrs. Lorton would want her chocolate. Life is a big wheel, and one has to push it round, though its edges are set with spikes of steel, and our hands are torn in the effort to keep it moving.

As she dressed herself with trembling hands, she kept saying to herself—her lips quivering with the unspoken words:

"I have lost Drake—I have lost Drake; I have got to bear it!"

He would be here presently—or, perhaps, he would not come. Perhaps he would write to her. And yet, no; that would not be like him; he was no coward; he would come and tell her the truth, would ask her to forgive him.

And what should she say? Yes; she would forgive him; she would make no "scene" with him; she would not utter one word of reproach, but just tell him that he was free. She would even smile, if she could; would assure him that she was not going to break her heart because the woman he had loved before he had met her—Nell—had won him back. After all, he was not to blame. How could any man resist such a woman as Lady Luce? She—Nell—was just an interlude in his life's story; he had thought himself in love with her; and, perhaps, if this beautiful creature, before whom all hearts seemed to go down, had not desired to lure him back, he would have remained faithful to the "little girl" whom he had chanced to meet at that "out-of-the-way place in Devonshire, don't you know." Nell could almost hear Lady Luce referring to the episode in these terms, if ever it should come to her ears.

No; there should be no scene. She would give him both her hands, would say "good-by" quite calmly, and would then take her broken heart to the solitude of her own room, and try to begin to repair it.

Dick shouted for his breakfast, and she went downstairs. He was busy reading a letter, and his face was full of eagerness, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"I say, Nell, what a good chap Drake is!" he exclaimed. "He never said a word to me about it; but he's been worrying Bardsley & Bardsley for weeks past, and they've written to say that they think they can take me on. Just think of it! Bardsley & Bardsley! The biggest firm in the engineering line! Drake must have a great deal of influence; and I don't know how on earth he managed it. I didn't know he knew any one connected with the profession. It's a most splendid chance, you know!" [Pg 144]

Nell went round beside him, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"I am very glad, Dick," she said.

Something in her voice must have struck him, for he looked up at her quickly, and with surprise.

"Why, what's the matter, Nell?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I have a headache."

"Just so. 'After the opera is over,' you know. That's the penalty one pays for one's first dance. And you were queer last night, too, weren't you? Why didn't you lie in bed?"

"Never mind me," said Nell. "Tell me about this letter. When are you going, Dick?"

A fresh pang smote her. Was she going to lose the boy as well?

"Oh, they don't say," he replied. "They're going to let me know. They may send me abroad; you can't tell. What a good chap Drake is, and what a lot we owe him? Upon my word, Nell, you're a lucky girl to have got hold of such a fellow for your young man."

Nell turned away with a sickening pain about her heart. No; she would not tell the boy at this moment. She wouldn't spoil his happiness with the wet blanket of her own misery. She must even, when she came to tell him, make light of the broken engagement, take the blame upon herself, and prevent any rupture of the friendship between Drake and Dick.

He was almost too excited to eat any breakfast; certainly too excited to notice Nell's untouched cup and plate.

"I must see Drake about this at once," he said. "I think I'll go down and meet him. He's sure to be coming up here, isn't he?" he added, with a bantering smile; and Nell actually tried to smile back at him.

As she took the chocolate up to Mrs. Lorton, she tried to put her own trouble out of her head, and to think only of Dick's good fortune. How she had longed for some such chance as this to come to the boy, and now it had come. But who had sent it? Drake! Well, all the more reason that she should forgive him, and utter no word of reproach or bitterness.

"You are ten minutes late, Eleanor!" said Mrs. Lorton peevishly. "And, good heavens! what a sight you look! If one late night has this effect upon you, what would half a dozen have? I am quite sure that I never looked half as haggard and colorless as you do, even when I'd been through a whole season." For a moment the good lady was quite convinced that she had been a fashionable belle. "I should advise you to keep out of Drake's sight for an hour or two; at any rate, until you have [Pg 145] got some color in your face, and your eyes have ceased to look like boiled gooseberries."

The mention of Drake brought the color to Nell's face quickly enough, but for an instant only. It was white again, as she resolved to tell Mrs. Lorton that the engagement was broken off.

"It doesn't matter, mamma," she said; and she tried to smile.

Mrs. Lorton stared at her over the chocolate.

"Doesn't matter?" she echoed. "You think he's so madly in love with you that it doesn't matter how you look, I suppose? Don't lay that flattering unction to your soul, Eleanor. I've known many an engagement broken off in consequence of the man coming suddenly upon the girl when she had a bad cold and had got a red nose and eyes."

"Perhaps I've had a bad cold without knowing it, mamma, and Drake must have come upon me when my nose and eyes were appallingly red, for our engagement—is—broken—off."

Mrs. Lorton nearly dropped the cup of chocolate, and stared and gasped like a fish out of water.

"Broken off!" she exclaimed. "Take this cup away! Give me the sal volatile. Open the window! No, don't open the window! What are you talking about? Are you out of your mind?"

Nell took the cup, got the sal volatile, and soothed the flustered woman in a mechanical fashion.

"Hush, hush, mamma!" she said. "I don't want Dick to know yet."

"But why—how——What have you been doing?" demanded Mrs. Lorton; and Nell could have laughed.

"Nothing very bad, mamma," she said.

"But you must have," insisted Mrs. Lorton. "Of course it's your fault."

"Is it absolutely necessary that there should be any fault?" said Nell wearily. "But let us say that it is my fault. Perhaps it is!" She laughed unconsciously, and with a touch of bitterness. "What does it matter whose fault it is? The reason isn't of any consequence at all; the fact is the only important thing, and it is a fact that our engagement is broken. It was broken last night, and I tell you at once, mamma; and I want to beg you not to ask me any questions. Drake—Mr. Vernon—will no doubt go away to-day, and we shan't see him any more." She went to the window to arrange the blind, and Mrs. Lorton didn't see the twitching of the white lips which spoke so calmly. "And I want to forget him; I want you, too, to try and forget him, and not to remind me of him by a single word. It was very foolish, my thinking that he cared for me——Oh, I can't say another word——" [Pg 146]

She stopped suddenly, her hands writhing together.

Mrs. Lorton stared at the counterpane with a half-sly, half-speculative expression in her faded eyes.

"After all," she said meditatively, "it was not such a particularly good match. One knows nothing about him or his people, and—and I suppose you've not felt quite satisfied. Yes, perhaps you might do better. You may have some chances now. You've read the letter, and made up your mind, of course?"

"The letter?" echoed Nell stupidly.

Mrs. Lorton stared at her angrily, and with a flush of resentment on her peevish face.

"The letter I gave you last night, of course," she said. "Do you mean to tell me that you haven't read it? The most important letter I have ever received! At least, it is of the greatest importance to you. It is from my cousin, Lord Wolfer. What have you done with it, Eleanor?"

Nell put her hand to her head.

"I must have left it in my room," she said. "I will go and fetch it."

Mrs. Lorton snorted.

"Such gross carelessness and indifference is really shameful!" she flung after Nell.

Nell found the letter beside the bed, and returned with it to Mrs. Lorton's room.

"Why, it's all crumpled up, as if you had been playing shuttlecock with it!" exclaimed Mrs. Lorton indignantly. "It is absolutely disrespectful of you, not to say ungrateful. Read it, if you please, and slowly; I could not bear to have my cousin's letter gabbled over. I, at least, know what is due to a Wolfer."

It was a moment or two before Nell's burning eyes could accomplish the task of deciphering the lines of handwriting which seemed to have been formed by a paralytic spider that had fallen into the ink and scrambled spasmodically across the paper. There was no need to tell her to read slowly, and she stumbled over every other word of the letter, which ran thus:

"My Dear Sophia: You will doubtless be surprised at hearing from me, and, indeed, I should not have written, for, as you are aware, my time is fully occupied with public affairs, and I rarely write private letters; but I have promised Lady Wolfer to communicate with you directly, as, for obvious reasons, which you will presently see, she does not desire my secretary to know of the proposal which I am about to make you; as, in the event of your declining the proposition, there would be no need for the fact of its having been made to become the common knowledge of my household and the servants' hall. As you are doubtless aware, by reading the public prints, Lady Wolfer takes a great interest and a prominent part in the movement which is being made toward the amelioration of the position of woman; indeed, I may say, with pardonable pride, that she is one of the great leaders in this social revolution, which, we trust, will place woman upon the throne from which man has hitherto thrust her. [Pg 147]

"This being so, Lady Wolfer's time is, as you will readily understand, much absorbed; so completely, indeed, that she is unable to pay any attention to those smaller and meaner; household cares to which women less highly gifted very properly devote so much of their time. Having no daughter of our own, it occurred to us that it might, perhaps, be a beneficial arrangement for your stepdaughter, Miss Lorton, if she would come to us and render Lady Wolfer such assistance as is afforded by the ordinary housekeeper. You will say: Why not engage a duly qualified person for the post? I reply: We have done so, and do not find the ordinary person, though apparently duly qualified, satisfactory. Lady Wolfer is of an extremely sensitive and delicate organization, and it is absolutely necessary that the person with whom she would be brought in daily contact should be young and docile.

"I have referred to the photograph of Miss Lorton which you were good enough to send me some months ago, and you will be pleased to hear that Lady Wolfer approves of the young lady's personal appearance. I take it for granted—you, her guardian, being a Wolfer—that she has been properly trained; and if she should be willing to come to us on what is termed a month's trial, we shall be very pleased to receive her. She may come at any moment, and without any notice beyond a mere telegram. I will not speak of the advantages accruing from such a position as that which she would hold, for I am quite sure you will be duly sensible of them, and will point them out to her.

"I trust that you are in good health, and with best wishes for your prosperity and happiness,

"I remain, dear Sophia, yours very truly,

"WOLFER.

"P. S.—I omitted to say that I should be pleased to pay Miss Lorton an honorarium of fifty guineas per annum."

At another time Nell would have found it difficult to refrain from laughing at the stilted phraseology of the letter, at the pomposity with which the proposal was made, and the meanness which strove to hide itself in a postscript; but a Punch and Judy show would have seemed a funereal performance at that moment, and she stared as blankly at the letter when she had finished it as if she had been reading some language which had no meaning for her. [Pg 148]

Mrs. Lorton emitted a cough of self-satisfaction.

"It is extremely kind and thoughtful of my Cousin Wolfer," she said; "and I must say that I think you are an extremely fortunate girl, Eleanor, to have had such an offer made you. Of course, if you had been still engaged to Mr. Vernon, you would have been obliged to have sent a refusal to Lord Wolfer; but, as it is, I presume you will not hesitate for a moment, but will jump at such an opportunity."

Nell looked before her blankly, and remained silent.

"It will be a chance such as few girls of your position ever meet with; for, of course, when my cousin speaks of a housekeeper, he does not wish us to infer that you would be expected to take the position of a menial. No; he will not forget that though you are not my daughter, I married your father, and that you are, therefore, connected with the family. Of course, you will go into society, you will meet the elite and the crème de la crème, and will, therefore, enjoy advantages similar to those which I enjoyed, but which I, alas! threw away. Really, when one comes to consider it, this breach of your engagement with this Mr. Vernon is quite providential, as it removes the only obstacle to your accepting my cousin's noble offer."

Nell woke with a start when the stream of self-complacent comment had ceased, and realized that she was being asked to decide. What should she do? To leave Shorne Mills, to go into the world among strangers, to enter a big house as a poor relation—she shrank from the prospect for a moment, then she nerved herself to face it. After all, she could never be happy at Shorne Mills again. Every tree, every rock, every human being would remind her of Drake, of the lover she had lost. With Dick gone, there would be nothing for her to do, nothing to distract her mind from the perpetual brooding over the few past weeks of happiness, and the long, gray life before her. With these people there would be sure to be some work for her, something that would save her from spending every hour in futile regret and hopeless longing.

"Well, Eleanor?" demanded Mrs. Lorton impatiently.

"I have made up my mind; I will go," said Nell.

Mrs. Lorton flushed eagerly.

"Of course you will," she said. "It would be wicked and ungrateful to neglect such a chance. When will you go? Fortunately, you have some new clothes, and you will get what else you want in London. There are one or two things I should like you to get for me. You could pick them up at some of the sales; they are all on now, and things are sold ridiculously cheap. And, Eleanor, be sure and send me a full description of Lady Wolfer's dresses. You might snip off a pattern, perhaps. And I shall want to hear all about the people who go to the house, and the dinner parties and entertainments. I should say that it is not at all unlikely that Lady Wolfer may ask me to go and stay there. Of course, she will be curious to know what I am like—have I mentioned that we have never met?—and you will tell her that I—I—have been accustomed to the society in which she moves; and you might say that you are sure the change will do me good. Write often, and be sure and tell me about the dresses." [Pg 149]

"But I shall leave you all alone, mamma," said Eleanor. "Are you sure you won't be lonely?"

Mrs. Lorton drew a long sigh, and assumed the air of a martyr.

"You know me too well to think that I should allow my selfish comfort to stand in the way of your advancement, Eleanor. Of course, I shall miss you. But do not think of that. Let us think only of your welfare. I shall have Molly, and must be content."

Nell checked a sigh at the evident affectation of the profession. It was not in Mrs. Lorton to miss any human being so long as her own small comforts were assured.

"Then I think I will go at once—to-night," said Nell. "Why should I not? They want me—some one—at once, and——"

"Certainly," assented Mrs. Lorton eagerly. "I should go at once. You will write immediately, and tell me what the house is like, and the dresses."

Nell went downstairs, feeling rather confused and bewildered by the sudden change in her life. She was to have been Drake's wife; she was now to be—what was it, companion, housekeeper?—to Lady Wolfer!

Dick met her at the bottom of the stairs.

"I can't find Drake," he said, of course, with an injured air. "They say he left the cottage early this morning—they thought he was coming up here, as usual; but he hasn't been, has he?"

Nell shook her head.

"See, Dick, I've some news for you," she said. "I am going to London."

She gave him the letter to read, and he read it, with a running commentary of indignant and scoffing exclamations.

"Of all the pompous, stuck-up letters, it's the worst I ever imagined! And you say you're going? [Pg 150] Oh, but look here! What will Drake say?"

Nell turned away.

"I don't think he will object," she said, almost inaudibly.

Dick stared at her.

"Look here, young party, what is up between you two? Is there anything wrong? Oh, dash it! don't look as if I'd said there was a ghost behind you! What is it?"

"Drake—Drake and I are not going to be married," she said, trying to smile, but breaking down in the attempt. "We—we have agreed—to—to part!"

Dick uttered a low whistle, and gazed at her, aghast.

"All off!" he said. "Phew! Why—when—how?"

She began to collect some of her small belongings—a tiny workbasket, some books, and such like, and answered as she moved to and fro, studiously keeping her face turned away from him:

"I can't tell you; don't ask me, Dick. Don't—don't ask him. It—it is all right. It is all for the best, as mamma would say; and—and——" She went behind him and laid her hand on his shoulder, her favorite attitude when she was serious or pleading. "And mind, Dick, it is to make no difference between you—and Drake. It—is—yes, it is all my fault. I—I was foolish and——"

She could bear no more; and, with a quick movement of her hand to her throat, hastened from the room.

Dick looked after her ruefully for a moment or two, then his face cleared, and he winked to himself.

"What an ass I am to be upset by a lovers' quarrel. Of course, it's all in the game. The other business would pall after a time if there wasn't a little of this kind of thing chucked in for a change. I wonder whether that jolly girl, Miss Angel, will come down to the lunch? Now, there's a girl no chap could have even a lovers' quarrel with. Poor old Drake! Bet I shall find 'em billing and cooing as usual when I come back," And Dick grinned as he marched off with his gun.

CHAPTER XIX.

Drake rode over to the Grange for breakfast, according to his promise. He was glad of the ride, glad of an hour or two in which he could think over the dramatic events of the preceding night, and, so to speak, clear his brain of the unpleasant glamour which Lady Luce's words and behavior had produced.

Not for a moment did he swerve from his allegiance to Nell; never for a moment did the splendor [Pg 151] of Luce's beauty, the trick of her soft voice, her passionate caress, eclipse the starlike purity of Nell's nature and personality. If it were possible, he loved Nell better and more devotedly, longed for her more ardently, since his meeting with Luce, than he had done before.

All the way to the Grange he rehearsed what he would say to Nell when he rode back to The Cottage. He would tell her everything; would beg her to forgive him for his deception, his concealment of his full name and title, and—yes, he would admit that he had once loved, or thought that he had loved, Lady Luce; but that now——Well, there was only one woman in the world for him, and that was Nell.

He found Sir William standing on the lawn, dressed in riding cords of the good old kind, loose in fit and yellow in color, and surrounded by dogs of divers shapes and various breeds. He was as ruddy-cheeked and bright-eyed as if he had been to bed last night at ten o'clock, and he scanned the well-set-up Drake as he rode up, with a nod of approval.

"Up to time, Mr. Vernon—got your name right at last, eh? None the worse for the hop last night, I suppose? Don't look any, anyway. That's a good nag you're riding. Bred him yourself, eh? Gad! It's the best way, if it's the dearest."

He called for a groom to take the horse, and bade Drake come in to breakfast.

"You'll find nobody down, and we shall have it all to ourselves. That's the worst of women: keep 'em up half an hour later than usual, or upset their nerves with a bit of a row or anything of that kind, and, by George! they've got to lie abed the next morning! Now, help yourself to anything you see—have anything else cooked if you don't fancy what's here. I always toy with half a pound of steak, just to lay a foundation; been my breakfast, man and boy, for longer than I can remember."

Drake ate his breakfast and listened to the genial old man—not very attentively, it is to be feared, for he was thinking of Nell most of the time—and when the baronet had demolished his steak, they went to the farm, followed by the motley collection of dogs which had waited outside with more or less patience for the reappearance of their master, and welcomed him with a series of yappings and barkings which might have been heard a mile off.

The farm was a good one, and Drake gradually got interested in the really splendid cattle which Sir William exhibited with the enthusiasm of a breeder. The morning slipped away, but though Drake glanced at his watch significantly now and again, Sir William would not let him go; and at last he said: [Pg 152]

"What's your hurry, Vernon? Why not ride to Shallop with me? You could look around the town while I'm on the bench—unless you care to step into court and see how we administer justice—hah! hah! it's only a few 'drunk and disorderlies' or a case of assault that we get nowadays; or perhaps a petty larceny—anyway, you will ride into the town with me, and we will have a bit of lunch together at the Crown and Scepter. No, I won't take any refusal! To tell you the truth, I want to have a chat with you about that last bull I showed you."

Drake, thinking that it would be quicker to consent—that is to say, to ride into Shallop and cut across the country to Shorne Mills, yielded; the horses were brought round, and after Sir William had disposed of a tankard of ale, by way of a good, old-fashioned stirrup cup, the two men started.

Sir William talked and joked as they rode along, and Drake pretended to listen, while in reality he continued his rehearsal of all he would say to Nell when presently he should be by her side, with his arms round her and her head on his breast.

It was market day at Shallop, and the usual crowd of pigs and sheep and cattle, with their attendant drovers and farmers, blocked the streets. Sir William pulled up occasionally, throwing a word to one and another, but the two men reached the Town Hall at last, and Drake was just on the point of remarking that he would be off, when he saw Sir William grow very red in the face and very bulgy about the eyes, while at the same time his big hand went in a helpless kind of fashion to his old-fashioned neck stock.

Drake could not imagine what was the matter, and was still in the first throes of amazement when Sir William suddenly swayed to and fro in the saddle, and then fell across his horse's neck to the ground.

Drake was off his horse in a moment, and had raised the old man's head as quickly. A crowd collected almost as rapidly as if the place had been London, and cries of "Dear, dear! it's Sir William! it's a fit! Fetch a doctor!" rose from all sides.

A doctor presently pushed his way through the gaping mob of farmers and tradesmen, and knelt beside Drake.

"Apoplexy," he said, pursing his lips and shaking his head. "Always thought it would happen. Let us get him to the hotel."

Between them they carried the stricken man to the Crown and Scepter, at which—irony of fate!— Sir William would have lunched, and got him to bed. [Pg 153]

"I've warned him once or twice," said the doctor, with a shrug of the shoulders. "But what's the use! You tell a man to cut tobacco and spirits, or they will kill him, or to refrain from rump steak and old ale for breakfast, and he obeys you—until the next time!"

"Is he going to die?" asked Drake sadly, for he had taken a fancy to the old man.

"No-o; I don't think so. Not this time. We shall have to keep him quiet. Lady Maltby ought to know—ought to be here. And we mustn't frighten her. Would you mind riding over for her—bringing her, I mean? She'll want some one with her who can keep a cool head, and I fancy you can do that, sir."

"That's all right," said Drake at once; "of course I'll go."

So it happened that, instead of riding to Shorne Mills and seeing Nell, and telling her the truth, the whole truth, which would have turned her misery to happiness, he was going as fast as his horse could carry him back to the Grange.

It was not the first time he had broken bad news—he had seen men fall in the hunting field, and on the race course, and had had more than once to carry the tidings to the bereaved—and he fulfilled his sad task with all the tact of which he was capable. So well, indeed, that even if he had intended permitting Lady Maltby to proceed to Shallop without him, she would not have let him go. The poor woman clung to him, as women in their hour of need always cling to the strong man near them.

They found Sir William coming back to consciousness—a condition which, though fortunate for him, was unfortunate for Drake; for the sick man seemed to cling to him and to rely upon him just as Lady Maltby had done. He implored Drake not to leave him, and Drake sat on one side of the bed, with the frightened wife on the other, until Sir William fell into a more or less refreshing slumber.

It was just four when he mounted his horse and rode to Shorne Mills. The performance of a good deed always brings a certain amount of satisfaction with it, and, as he rode along, Drake felt more at ease than he had done since the scene with Lady Luce. Indeed, last night seemed very far away, and the incident on the terrace of very little consequence. Death, or the warning of death, is so solemn a thing that other matters dwarf beside it. But his resolution to tell Nell everything had not weakened, and he urged his rather tired horse along the steep and switchbacky road.

At a place called Short's Cross he caught sight of the Shorne Mills carrier on his way to the station. But Drake did not guess that Nell was sitting under the tilt cover, that by just turning his [Pg 154] horse and riding hard for a minute or two he could be beside her. He glanced at the cart, thought of the day he had first seen it, and of all that had happened since, and, gently touching his horse with his whip, rode on.

The sun was sinking as he crossed the moor, and the cliffs were dyed a fiery red as he came in sight of them and The Cottage on the brow of the hill. His heart beat fast during the few minutes spent in reaching the garden gate. What would she say? Would she be much startled when she learned that he was "Lord Selbie"? Would she understand that he had never really loved Luce; that it was she—Nell—whom he wanted for his wife, had wanted almost from the first day of his seeing her?

At the sound of the horse's hoofs Dick came out of The Cottage, and down to the gate.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Why, where on earth have you been?"

Drake explained as he got off the horse.

"I breakfasted at the Grange. I don't think I mentioned it last night, did I? Then I rode into Shallop with Sir William, and he had a fit of some sort—apoplexy, I fancy—and I had to come back and fetch Lady Maltby. Then the poor old chap came to, and—well, he felt like wanting company, and I couldn't leave him until he fell asleep."

"Poor old chap! I haven't heard a word of it," said Dick. "I say, come in! Mamma will be delighted to hear news of that kind—no, no; I don't mean—you know what I mean. Something exciting like that is like a bottle of champagne to her."

"I'll take the horse in; he's had rather a hard day of it," said Drake. "I've bucketed him up hill and down dale; obliged to, you know."

As he spoke, he looked beyond Dick and toward the open door of The Cottage wistfully. Why didn't Nell come out? As a rule, it was she who first heard the sound of his footsteps or his horse's.

"I'll take it. Oh, I say, Drake, how awfully kind of you to—to——Bardsley & Bardsley, you know! Upon my word, I don't know how to thank you! I don't, indeed!"

"That's all right," said Drake. "Hope it's what you want, Dick. If it isn't, we must find something else. Anyway, you can try it."

"What I want! Rather! I should think so! As I told Nell——"

"Where is Nell, by the way?" cut in Drake, with all a lover's impatience.

Dick looked rather taken aback. [Pg 155]

"Oh—ah—that is—I say, you know, what's this shindy between you and Nell?" he said, with a somewhat uneasy grin.

"Shindy? What do you mean?" demanded Drake.

Dick began to look uncomfortable.

"I don't know anything about it," he said hesitatingly, "only what she told me. She was awfully upset this morning; red-eyed and white about the gills, and all I could understand was that it was 'all over' between you." He grinned again, but more uncomfortably. "Of course, I knew it was only a lovers' tiff—'make it up and kiss again,' don't you know."

His voice and the grin died away under the change in Drake's expressive countenance.

"What is the matter, anyway?" he demanded. "Is there a real quarrel?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Drake, speaking as a man speaks when a cold fear is beginning to creep about his heart.

"Well, I don't know myself," said Dick desperately. "Oh, I've got a letter for you somewhere—perhaps that will explain. Now, what did I do with it? Oh, I know! Wait a moment!"

He ran into the house, and Drake waited, mechanically stroking his horse's sweating neck.

Dick came out and held out a letter.

"She gave me this for you."

Drake opened the letter, and read:

"DEAR DRAKE: I may call you so for the last time. I am writing to tell you that our engagement must come to an end. I have found that I have, that we both have, made a mistake. You, who are so quick to understand, will know, even as you read this, that I have discovered all that you have kept secret from me, and that, now I know it all, it is impossible, quite impossible, that I should ——" Here a line was hastily scratched through. "I want you to believe that I don't blame you in the least; it is quite impossible that I could care for you any longer, or that I could consent to remain your promised wife; indeed, I am sorry, very, very sorry, that we should have met. If I had known all that I know now, I would rather have died than have let you speak a word of love to me.

"So it is 'good-by' forever. Please do not make it harder for me by writing to me or attempting to see me—but I know that you have cared, perhaps still care enough for me not to do so. Nothing would induce me to renew our engagement, though I shall always think kindly of you, and wish you well. I return the ring you gave me. You will let me keep the silver pencil as a souvenir of one [Pg 156] who will always remain as, but can never be more than, a friend.

"Yours, ELEANOR LORTON."

Men take the blows of Fate in various fashions. Drake's way was to take his punishment with as little fuss as possible. His face went very white, and his nostrils contracted, just as they would have done if he had come an ugly cropper over a piece of timber.

"Where—where is Nell?" he asked, in so changed and strained a voice that Dick started, and gaped at him, aghast.

"She's——Didn't I tell you? Didn't she tell you? She's gone——"

"Gone!" repeated Drake dully.

"Yes; she's gone to London, to some relations of ours—that is, mamma's, you know!"

Drake didn't know where she had gone, but he thought he understood why she had gone. She meant to abide by her resolution to break with him. Her love had changed to distrust, perhaps—God knew!—to actual dislike.

He turned to the horse and mechanically arranged the bridle.

"It—it doesn't matter," he said. "I'll take the horse down. Oh, by the way, Dick, I may have to go to London to-night."

"What, you, too!" said Dick. "I say, there's nothing serious the matter, is there? It's only a lovers' tiff, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid not," said Drake, as calmly as he could. "See here, Dick, we won't talk about it; I can't. Your—your sister has broken our engagement——Hold on! there's no use discussing it. She's quite right. Do you hear? She's quite right," he repeated, with a sudden fierceness. "Everything she says is right. I—I admit it. I am to blame."

"Why, that's what she said!" exclaimed the mystified and somewhat exasperated Dick.

"What she has said is true—too true," continued Drake; "and there's no more to be said. When you write—if you see her, tell her that—that—I obey her—it's the least I can do—and that I won't—won't worry her. Her word, her wish, is law to me. And—and you may say I deserve it all. You may say, too, that——"

He broke off, and slowly, with the heaviness of a man become suddenly tired, got on his horse.

"No; say nothing, excepting that I obey her, and that I won't worry her. Good-by, Dick."

He held out his hand, and Dick, with an anxious face and bewildered eyes, clung to it. [Pg 157]

"Here, I say, Drake; this is awful! You don't mean to say it's 'good-by'! I don't understand."

"I'm afraid it is," said Drake, pulling himself together, and forcing a smile. "I'm sorry to leave you, Dick; you and I have been good friends; but—well, the best of friends must part. I shall have gone to-night. I can catch the train. Look up Bardsley & Bardsley."

With a nod—the nod which we give nowadays when we are saying farewell with a broken heart—he turned the horse down the hill and rode away.

He tossed his things into a portmanteau, got the one available trap to carry them to the station, and caught the night mail. At Salisbury he changed for Southampton, and reached that flourishing port the next morning.

The sailing master of the *Seagull* happened to be on board when the owner of that well-known yacht was rowed alongside, and he hastened to the side and touched his hat as Drake climbed the

ladder.

"Did you wire, my lord?" he asked. "I haven't had anything."

"No; I came rather unexpectedly," said Drake quietly. "Is everything ready?"

"Quite, my lord, or nearly so. I think we could sail, say, in half a dozen hours."

Drake nodded.

"If my cabin is ready, I'll go below and change," he said. "We'll sail as soon as possible."

"Certainly, my lord. Where are we bound for?" asked Mr. Murphy, in as casual a manner as he could manage; for, though he was used to short notice, this, to quote his expression to the mate later on, "took the cake."

Drake looked absently at the sky line.

"Oh, the Mediterranean, I suppose," he said listlessly. He stood for a moment with his hand upon the rail of the saloon steps, and Mr. Murphy ventured to inquire:

"Quite well, I hope, my lord?" for there was a pallor on his lordship's face which caused the worthy skipper a vague uneasiness. He had seen his master under various and peculiar circumstances, but had never seen him look quite like this.

"Perfectly well and fit, thanks, captain," said Drake. "Will you have a cigar? Wind will just suit us, will it not?"

About the same time Nell's cab arrived at Wolfer House, Egerton Square. There were several other cabs and carriages standing in a line opposite the house, and Nell's cab had to wait some little time before it could set her down; but at last she was able to alight, and a footman escorted her and her box into a large and rather gloomy hall. He seemed somewhat surprised by her box, and eyed her doubtfully as she inquired for Lady Wolfer. [Pg 158]

"Lady Wolfer? Yes, miss. Her ladyship is in the dining room. The meeting is now on. Perhaps you had better walk in."

Sharing the man's hesitation, Nell followed him to the door. As he opened it, the sound of a woman's voice, thin, yet insistent and rasping, came out to meet her. She saw that the room was crowded. Nearly all who were present were women—women of various ages, but all with some peculiarity of manner or dress which struck Nell at the very first moment. But there were some men present—men with fat and rather flabby faces, men small and feeble in appearance, men long-haired and smooth-shaven.

At the end of the room, behind a small table, stood a woman, still young, dressed in a tailor-made suit of masculine pattern and cut. Her hair was pretty in color and texture, but it was cut almost close, and just touched the collar of her covert coat. She wore a bowler hat, her gloves were on the table in front of her—thick, dogskin gloves, like a man's. She held a roll of paper in her hand, which was bare of rings, though feminine enough in size and shape. A pince-nez was balanced on her nose, and her chin—really a pretty chin—was held high in an aggressive manner.

Nell had an idea that this was Lady Wolfer, and she edged as close to the wall as she could, and watched and listened to the speaker with a natural curiosity and anxiety.

"To conclude," the orator was saying, with a wave of the roll of paper and a jerk of the chin, "to conclude, we are banded together to wage a war against our old tyrant—a war of equity and right. Oh, my sisters, do not let us falter, do not let us return the sword to the scabbard until we have cleaved our way to that goal toward which the eyes of suffering womanhood have been drawn since the gospel of equal rights for both sexes sounded its first evangel!"

It was evidently the close, the peroration, of the speech; there was a burst of applause, much clapping of hands, and immediately afterward a kind of stampede to some tables, behind which a couple of footmen were preparing to dispense light refreshments.

Nell, much mystified, and rather shy and frightened, remained where she was; and she was just upon the point of inquiring for Lady Wolfer, when the recent speaker came down the room, talking with one and another of the presumably less hungry mob, and catching sight of Nell's slight and rather shrinking figure, advanced toward her. [Pg 159]

"This is a new disciple, I suppose," she said, smiling through her eyeglasses.

"I—I wish to see Lady Wolfer," said Nell, trying not to blush.

"I am Lady Wolfer," said the youngish lady with the short hair and mannish suit; and she spoke in a gentler voice than Nell would have been inclined to credit her with.

"I am—I am Nell Lorton."

Lady Wolfer looked puzzled for a moment; then she laughed and held out her hand.

"Really? Why, how young and——" She was going to say "pretty," but stopped in time. "Did you

wire? But of course you did. I must have forgotten. I have such a mass of correspondence!" She laughed again. "I thought you were a new disciple! Come with me!"

And, with what struck Nell as scant courtesy, her ladyship left the other ladies, took her by the hand, and led her out of the room.

CHAPTER XX.

Lady Wolfer led Nell to her ladyship's own room. It was as unlike a boudoir as it well could be; for the furniture was of the simplest kind, and in place of the elegant trifles with which the fair sex usually delight to surround themselves, the tables, the couch, and even the chairs were littered with solid-looking volumes, blue books, pamphlets, and sheets of manuscript paper.

There was a piano, it is true; but its top was loaded with handbills and posters announcing meetings, and the dust lay thick on its lid. The writing table was better suited to an office than a lady's "own room," and it was strewn with the prevailing litter.

Lady Wolfer cleared a chair by sweeping the books from it, and gently pushed Nell into it.

"Now, you sit down for a moment while I ring for a maid to take you to your room. Heaven only knows where it is, or in what condition you will find it! You see, I quite forgot you were coming. Candid, isn't it? But I'm always candid, and I begin at once with you. By the way, oughtn't you to have come earlier—or later?"

Nell explained that she had had her breakfast at the station, and spent an hour in the waiting room, so as not to present herself too early.

"How thoughtful of you!" said Lady Wolfer. "You don't look—you look so young and—girlish." [Pg 160]

"I'm not very old," remarked Nell, with a smile. "Perhaps I'm not old enough to fill the position."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't throw a doubt upon your staying!" said her ladyship quickly. "I'm so tired of old, or what I call old, people, and I am sure you will do beautifully. For, though you are so young, you look as if you could manage; and that is what I can't do—I mean manage a house. I can talk—I can talk the hind leg off a donkey, as Archie says"—she stopped, looking slightly embarrassed for a moment, and Nell supposed that her ladyship alluded to Lord Wolfer—"but when it comes to details, fortunately there is always somebody else."

While she had been speaking, Lady Wolfer had taken off her hat and jacket, and flung them onto the book-and-paper-strewn couch.

"I'm just come in from a breakfast meeting to attend this one at home," she explained. "And I've got to go out again directly to a committee—the Employment of Women Bureau. Have you ever heard of it?"

Nell shook her head.

"No? I'm half inclined to envy you. No, I'm not! If it weren't for my work, I should go out of my mind."

She put her hand to her head, and for an instant a wearied, melancholy expression flitted across her face, as if some hidden trouble had reared its head and grinned at her.

The door opened, and a maid appeared.

"Burden, this is Miss Lorton," said Lady Wolfer. "Is her room ready?"

Burden looked exceedingly doubtful.

"I expected it! Please have it got ready at once; and send some wine and biscuits, please."

A footman brought them, and Lady Wolfer poured some wine out for Nell.

"Oh, but you must! Heaven knows when we shall have lunch; they'll very likely consider that scramble downstairs as sufficient. But you'll see to all that for the future, won't you?"

"You must tell me, Lady Wolfer——" began Nell, but her ladyship, with a grimace, stopped her.

"My dear girl, I can't tell you anything, excepting that Lord Wolfer takes his breakfast early—not later than nine—is seldom in to lunch, and still less frequently at home to dinner; but when he does dine here, he dines at eight. The cook, who is, I believe, rather a decent sort of man, knows what Lord Wolfer likes, and you can't go very far wrong, I fancy, if you have a joint of roast beef or a leg of mutton on the menu; the rest doesn't matter." [Pg 161]

Nell began to feel daunted. There was just a little too much carte blanche about it.

"And as to the other servants, why, there's an old person named Hubbard—Old Mother Hubbard, I call her—who is supposed to look after them."

Nell could not help smiling.

"I don't quite see where I come in," she remarked.

Lady Wolfer laughed.

"Oh, don't you?" she replied, as if she had been explaining most fully. "You are the figurehead, the goddess of the machine. You will see that all goes right, and give Lord Wolfer his breakfast, and preside at the dinner when I'm out on the stump——"

"On the what?" asked the mystified Nell.

"Out speaking at meetings or serving on committees," said Lady Wolfer. "And you will arrange about the dinner parties and—and all that kind of thing, you know—the stupid things that I'm expected to do, but which I really haven't any time for. Do you quite see now?"

"I will do all I can," Nell said, and she laughed.

Lady Wolfer glanced at her rather curiously.

"How pretty you look when you laugh—quite different. You struck me as looking rather sad and sobered when I first saw you; but when you laugh——I should advise you not to laugh when you first see Lord Wolfer, or he'll think you too absurdly young and girlish for the post. Do take your hat and jacket off! It will be some time before your room is ready. Let me help you."

Nell got her outdoor things off quickly, and Lady Wolfer looked at her still more approvingly.

"You really are quite a child, my dear!" she said, and for some reason or other she sighed. "Why didn't Wolfer tell me about you before, I wonder? I wish he had; I should like to have had you come and stay with us. But he is so reserved——" she sighed again. "But never mind; you are here now. And how tired you must be! You are looking a little pale now. Why don't you drink that wine? When you are rested—quite rested—to-night, after dinner, perhaps—let me see, am I going anywhere?"

She consulted a large engagement slate of white porcelain which stood erect on the crowded table.

"Hem! yes, I have to speak at the Sisters of State Society. Never mind; to-morrow, after lunch—if I'm at home. Yes, I can see that we shall be great friends, and that is what I wanted. The others—I mean your predecessors—were such terrible old frumps, without any idea above cutlets and clean sheets, that they only bored and worried me; but you will be quite different——" [Pg 162]

"Perhaps I shan't be able to rise to the cutlet and clean sheets," suggested Nell diffidently; but her ladyship laughed.

"Oh, yes, you will!" she declared. "I am an excellent judge of character—it's one of my qualifications for the work I'm engaged in—and I can see that you are an admirable manager. I suppose you ran the house at home?"

Nell smiled.

"'Home' meant quite a small cottage," she said. "This is a mansion."

"Same thing," commented Lady Wolfer encouragingly. "It's all a question of system. I haven't any; you have; therefore you'll succeed where I fail. You've got that quiet, mousy little way which indicates strength of character——What beautiful hair you have, by the way."

Nell blushed.

"It's no prettier than yours. Why do you wear it so short, Lady Wolfer?"

Lady Wolfer laughed—just a little wearily, so it struck Nell.

"Why? Oh, I don't know. All we advanced women get our hair cut. I imagine we have a right to do so, and that by going cropped we assert that right."

"I see," said Nell. "But isn't it—a pity?"

Lady Wolfer looked at her curiously, with an expression which Nell did not understand at that early period of their acquaintance.

"Does it matter?" she said. "We women have been dolls too long——"

"But there are short-haired dolls," said Nell, with her native shrewdness.

Lady Wolfer did not seem offended.

"That was rather smart," she remarked. "Take care, or we shall have you on a public platform before long, my dear."

"Oh, I hope not! I mean—I beg your pardon."

"Not at all," said Lady Wolfer, with no abatement of her good humor. "There's no danger—fortunately, for you. No, my dear; I can see that yours is a very different métier. Your rôle is the 'angel of the house'—to be loved and loving." She turned to the desk as she spoke, and did not see the flush that rose for an instant to poor Nell's pale face. "You will always be the woman in chains—the slave of man. I hope the chain will be of roses, my dear."

She stifled a sigh as she finished the pretty little sentence; and Nell, watching her, saw the expression of unrest and melancholy on her ladyship's face again. Nell wondered what was the matter, and was still wondering when there came a knock at the door. [Pg 163]

"Come in!" said Lady Wolfer; and a gentleman entered. He was young and good-looking, his tall figure clad in the regulation frock coat, in the buttonhole of which was a delicate orchid. The hat which he carried in his lavender-gloved hands shone as if it had just left the manufacturer's hands, and his small feet were clad in the brightest of patent-leather boots.

"I beg pardon!" he began, in the slow drawl which fashion had of late ordained. "Didn't know you weren't alone. Sorry!"

At the sound of his voice a faint flush rose to Lady Wolfer's rather pretty face.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she said, nodding familiarly. "I thought it was Burden."

"I've come to take you to the meetin'," said the beautifully dressed gentleman, clipping off his "g" in the manner approved by the smart set.

"Thanks. This is Sir Archie Walbrooke," said Lady Wolfer, introducing him; "and this is my cousin—we are cousins, you know, my dear—Miss Lorton."

Sir Archie bowed, and stared meditatively at Nell.

"Goin' to the meetin', too?" he asked. "Hope so, I'm sure. Great fun, these meetin's."

"No; oh, no," explained Lady Wolfer. "Miss Lorton has come to set us all straight, and keep us so, I hope."

"Trust I'm included; want it," said Sir Archie—"want it badly."

"Oh, you're incorrigible—incorrigibly stupid, I mean," retorted Lady Wolfer. "She has come to take care of us—Wolfer and me."

"Run the show—I see," he said gravely. "If it isn't a rude question, I should like to ask: 'Who's goin' to take care of Miss Norton?'"

"Lorton, Lorton," corrected Lady Wolfer. "And it is a rude question, to which you won't get an answer. Go downstairs and smoke a cigarette. I'll be ready presently."

"All right—delighted; but time's up, you know," he said; and, with a bow to Nell, sauntered out.

Lady Wolfer sat down at the desk, and wrote rapidly for a moment; then she said casually—a little too casually, it would have struck a woman of the world:

"That is a great friend of mine—and Lord Wolfer's," she added quickly. "He is an awfully nice man, and—and very useful. He is a kind of tame cat here, runs in and out as he likes, and plays escort when I'm slumming or attending meetings. I hope you'll like him. He's not such a fool as he looks, and though he does clip his 'Gees'—sounds like a pun, doesn't it?—and cuts his sentences short, he—he is very good-natured and obliging." [Pg 164]

"He seems so," said Nell, a little puzzled to understand why Lady Wolfer did not take her maid or one of her lady friends to her meetings, instead of being taken by Sir Archie Walbrooke.

Burden knocked at the door at this moment, and announced that Miss Lorton's room was ready.

"Very well," said Lady Wolfer, as if relieved. "Be sure that Miss Lorton has everything she wants. And, oh, Burden, please understand that all Miss Lorton's orders are to be obeyed—I mean, obeyed without hesitation or question. She is absolutely in command here."

"Yes, my lady," responded Burden respectfully.

Nell followed her to a corridor on the next floor, and into a large and handsomely furnished room with which the bedchamber communicated. Her box had been unpacked, and its modest contents arranged in a wardrobe and drawers. The rooms looked as if they had been got ready hurriedly, but they were handsome and richly furnished, and Burden apologized for their lack of homeliness.

"I'll get some flowers, miss," she said. "There's a big box of them comes up from the country place every morning. And if you think it's cold, I'll light a fire——"

"Oh, no, no," said Nell, as brightly as she could.

"And can I help you change, miss? I'm your maid, if you please."

Nell shook her head, still smiling.

"It is all very nice," she said, "and I shall only be a few minutes. I should like to go over the house," she asked, rather timidly.

"If you ring that bell, miss, I will come at once; and I will tell Mrs. Hubbard that you want to go round with her," said Burden.

Nell, after the ardently desired "wash and change," sat down by the window and looked onto the grimy London square, whose trees and grass were burned brown, and tried to convince herself

that she really was Nell of Shorne Mills; that she really was housekeeper to Lady Wolfer; that this really was life, and not a fantastic dream. But it was difficult to do so. Back her mind would travel to Shorne Mills and to—to Drake.

What had he done and said when he had got her letter? Ah, well, he would understand; yes, he would understand, and would take it as final. He would go away, to Lady Luce. They would be married. She would not think.

Providence had sent her work—work to divert her mind and save her from despair, and she would not look back, would not dwell upon the past. But how her tender, loving heart ached and [Pg 165] throbbed with the memory of those happy weeks, with the never-to-be-forgotten kisses of the man who had won her heart, whose face and voice haunted her every moment of the day.

She sprang to her feet and rang the bell, and Burden came in and led her along the broad corridors and across the main hall. A middle-aged woman in a stiff, black dress stood waiting for her, and gave her a stately bow.

"I am Mrs. Hubbard, miss," she began, rather searchingly; but Nell's sweet face and smile melted her at once. "I shall be pleased to take you hover, miss," she commenced, a little less grumpily. "It's a big 'ouse, and not a heasy one to manage; but per'aps, your ladyship—I beg your pardon, miss—per'aps you have been used to a big 'ouse?"

"No, indeed," said Nell, whose native shrewdness told her that this was a woman who had to be conciliated. "I have never lived in anything bigger than a cottage, and I shall need all your help, Mrs. Hubbard. You will have to be very patient with me."

Mrs. Hubbard had been prepared to fight, or, at any rate, to display a haughty stand-offishness; but she went down before the sweet face and girlish voice, and, if the truth must be told, by a certain something in Nell's eyes, which shone there when the *Annie Laurie* was beating before a contrary wind; a directness of gaze which indicated a spirit, not easily quelled, lurking behind the dark-gray eyes.

Mrs. Hubbard instantly realized that this beautiful girl, young as she was, was compounded of different material to the "old frumps" who had preceded her, and whom Mrs. Hubbard had easily vanquished, and the old lady changed her tactics with rather startling promptitude.

She conducted Nell over the large place; the footmen and maidservants stood up, questionably at first, but respectfully in the end, and Nell tried to grasp the extent of the responsibility which she had undertaken.

"I think it all rests with you, Mrs. Hubbard," she said, as she sat in the housekeeper's room, Mrs. Hubbard standing respectfully—respectfully!—in front of her. "I am too young and inexperienced to run so large a place without your help; but I think—I only think—I can do it, if you stand by me. Will you do so? Yes, I think you will."

She looked up with the smile which had made slaves of all Shorne Mills in her gray eyes, and Mrs. Hubbard was utterly vanquished.

"If you come to me every morning after breakfast, we can talk matters over," said Nell, "and can decide between us what is to be done, and what not to be done; but you must never forget, [Pg 166] please, that I know so little about anything."

And Mrs. Hubbard went back to the servants' hall with her mouth and her eyes set firmly.

"Now, mind," she said, with an imperial dignity to the curious and expectant servants, "there's to be no more goings-on from this time forth. No more coming in by the area gate after eleven, and no more parties in the servants' 'all when 'is lordship and ladyship is dining out! An' I'll 'ave the bells answered the first time, an' no waitin' till they're rung twice or three times, mind! An' if you want to see the policeman, Mary Jane, you can slip out for five minutes; he don't come into the house, you understan'!"

Little dreaming of the domestic reformation she had brought about, Nell went back to her room, and resumed her endeavor to persuade herself that she was not moving in a dream.

Presently a gong sounded, and, guessing that it rang for lunch, she went down to the smaller dining room, in which Mrs. Hubbard had told her that meal was usually served.

The butler and footman were in attendance, but, though covers were laid for three, there was no one present but herself.

She looked round the richly decorated and handsomely furnished room, and felt rather lonely and helpless, but it occurred to her that either Lord or Lady Wolfer might come in, and that it was her place to be there; so she sat at the head of the table—where the butler had drawn back her chair for her—and began her lunch.

By this time, she was feeling hungry—for she had eaten nothing since her very early breakfast, excepting the biscuit in Lady Wolfer's room; and she was in the middle of her soup when the footman went in a leisurely manner to the door and opened it, and a gentleman entered.

Now, Nell, from Mrs. Lorton's talk of him, and his letter, had imagined Lord Wolfer as, if not an old man, one well past middle age; she was, therefore, rather startled when she saw that the gentleman who went straight to the bottom of the table, thus proving himself to be Lord Wolfer,

was anything but old; indeed, still young, as age is reckoned nowadays. He was tall and thin, and very grave in manner and expression; and Nell, as with a blush she rose and eyed him, noticed, even in that first moment, that—strangely enough—his rather handsome face wore the half-sad, half-wistful expression which she had seen cross Lady Wolfer's pretty countenance.

He had not noticed her until he had gained his chair, then he started slightly, as if aroused from a reverie, and came toward her. [Pg 167]

"You are—er—Miss Lorton?" he said, with an intense gravity in his voice and eyes.

"Yes," said Nell. "And you are—Lord Wolfer?"

"Your cousin—I am afraid very much removed," he responded. "When did you arrive? I hope you had a pleasant journey?" he replied and asked as he sank into his seat.

Nell made a suitable response.

"You will take some soup? Oh, you have some. Yes; it was a long journey. Have you seen my wife—Lady Wolfer? Yes? I'm glad she was in. She is very seldom at home." He did not sigh, by any means; but his voice had a chilled and melancholy note in it. "And Sophia—Mrs. Lorton—is, I hope, well? It is very kind of you to put in an appearance so soon. I'm afraid you ought to be in bed and resting."

Nell laughed softly, and he looked as if the laugh had startled him, and surveyed her through his eyeglasses with a more lengthened and critical scrutiny than he had hitherto ventured on. The fresh, young loveliness of her face, the light that shone in her dark-gray eyes, seemed to impress him, and he was almost guilty of a common stare; but he remembered himself in time, and bent over his plate.

"I am not at all tired, Lord Wolfer," said Nell. "I am not used to traveling—this is the first long journey I have made—but I am accustomed to riding"—she winced inwardly as she thought of the rides with Drake—"and—and—sailing and yachting."

The earl nodded.

"Put the—the cutlets, or whatever they are, on the table, and you may go," he said to the butler; and when the servants had left the room he said to Nell:

"I seldom lunch at home, and I like to do so alone."

Nell smiled. Grave as he looked, she did not feel at all afraid of him.

"I did not mean that," he said, with an answering smile. "I meant without the servants. And so you have come to our assistance, Miss Lorton?"

"I don't know whether that is the way to put it," said Nell, with her usual frankness. "I'm afraid that I shall be of very little use; but I am going to try."

His lordship nodded.

"And I think you will succeed—let me hand you a cutlet. Our great trouble has been—may I trouble you for the salt? Perhaps you would prefer to have the servants in the room?"

"No, oh, no!" replied Nell, quickly, as, reaching to her fullest extent, she pushed the salt. "It is much nicer without them—I mean that I am not used to so many servants." [Pg 168]

He inclined his head.

"As you please," he said courteously. "Our great trouble has been that my wife's public duties have prevented her from taking any share in domestic matters. She is—er—I presume she is not coming in to lunch?" he asked, with a quick glance at Nell, and an instant return to his plate.

"N-o; I think not," replied Nell. "Lady Wolfer has gone to a meeting—I'm sorry to say I forget what it is. Some—some Sisters—no, I can't remember. It is very stupid of me," she wound up penitently.

"It is of no consequence. Lady Wolfer is greatly in request; there is no movement of the advanced kind with which she is not connected," said his lordship; and though he spoke in a tone of pride, he wound up with a stifled sigh which reminded Nell of the sigh which she had heard Lady Wolfer breathe. "She is—er—an admirable speaker," he continued, "quite admirable. Did she go alone?"

The question came so suddenly, so unexpectedly, and apparently so irrelevantly, that Nell was almost startled.

"No," she replied. "A gentleman went with her."

The earl laid down his knife and fork suddenly, then picked them up again, and made a great fuss with the remains of his cutlet.

"Oh! Did you—er—did you hear who it was?"

"Yes," said Nell, "but I can't remember his name. It has quite gone for the moment;" and she knit her brows.

The earl stared straight at the épergne.

"Was it—Sir Archie Walbrooke?" he said, in a dry, expressionless voice.

Nell laughed, as one laughs at the sudden return of a treacherous memory.

"Of course, yes! That was the name," she said brightly. "How stupid of me!"

But Lord Wolfer did not laugh. He bent still lower over the cutlet, and worried the bone a minute or two in silence; then he consulted his watch, and rose.

"I beg you will excuse me," he said. "I have an appointment—a meeting——"

He mumbled himself out of the room, and Nell sat and gazed at the door which had closed behind him.

She was too innocent, too ignorant of the world, to have even the faintest idea of the trouble which lowered over the house which she had entered; but a vague dread of something intangible took possession of her. [Pg 169]

CHAPTER XXI.

If Nell wanted work that would prevent her dwelling upon her heart's loss, she had certainly found it at Egerton House. Before a week had passed she had slipped into her position of presiding genius; and, marvelous to relate, seeing how young and inexperienced she was, she filled it very well.

At first she was considerably worried by the condition of domestic affairs. Meals were prepared for persons who might or might not be present to eat them. Sometimes she would sit down alone to a lunch sufficient for half a dozen persons; at others, Lady Wolfer would come down at the last moment and say:

"Oh, Nell, dear"—it had very quickly come to "Nell"—"ever so many women are coming to lunch—nine or ten, I forget which. I ought to have told you, oughtn't I? And I really meant to, but somehow it slipped out of my head. And they are mostly people with good appetites. Is there anything in the house? But, there! I know you will manage somehow, won't you, dear?"

And Nell would summon the long-suffering Mrs. Hubbard, and additions would hastily be made to the small menu, and Nell would come in looking as cool and composed as if the guests had run no risk of starvation.

The dinner hour, as Lady Wolfer had said, was eight, but it was often nine or half-past before she and Lord Wolfer put in an appearance; and more than once during the week the earl had been accompanied by persons whom he had brought from the House or some meeting, and expected to have them provided for.

The cook never knew how many guests to expect; the coachman never knew when the horses and carriages would be wanted; the footmen were called upon to leave their proper duties and wait upon a mob of "advanced women" collected for a meeting—and a scramble feed—in the dining room, when perhaps a proper lunch should have been in preparation for an ordinary party.

There was no rest, no cessation of the stir and turmoil in the great house, and amid it all Nell moved like a kind of good fairy, contriving to just keep the whole thing from smashing up in chaotic confusion.

Presently everybody began to rely upon her, and came to her for assistance; and the earl himself was uneasy and dissatisfied if she were not at the head of the breakfast table, at which he and she very often made a duet. He seemed to see Lady Wolfer very seldom, and gradually got into [Pg 170] the habit of communicating with her through Nell. It would be:

"May I trouble you so far, Miss Lorton, as to ask Lady Wolfer if she intends going to the Wrexhold reception to-night?" Or: "Lady Wolfer wishes for a check for these bills. May I ask you to give it to her? Thank you very much. I am afraid I am giving you a great deal of trouble."

Sometimes Nell would say: "Lady Wolfer is in her room. Shall I tell her you are here?" and he would make haste to reply:

"Oh, no; not at all necessary. She may be very much engaged. Besides, I am just going out."

Grave and reserved, not to say grim, though he was, Nell got to like him. His pomposity was on the surface, and his stiffness and hauteur were but the mannerisms with which some men are cursed. At the end of the week he startled her by alluding to the salary which he had offered her in his letter.

"I am afraid you thought it a very small sum, Miss Lorton," he said. "I myself considered it inadequate; but I asked a friend what he paid in a similar case, and I was, quite wrongly, I see, guided by him."

"It is quite enough," said Nell, blushing. "I think it would have been fairer if you had not paid me anything—at any rate, to start with."

"We will, if you please, increase it to one hundred pounds," he said, ignoring her protest. "I beg you will not refuse; in fact, I shall regard your acceptance as a favor."

He rose to leave the room before Nell could reply, and Lady Wolfer, entering with her usual rapidity, nearly ran against him. He begged her pardon with extreme courtesy, and was passing out, when she stopped him with a:

"Oh, I'm glad I've seen you. Will the twenty-fourth do for the dinner party? Are you engaged for that night? I'm not, I think."

The earl's grave eyes rested on her pretty, piquant face as she consulted her ivory tablets, but his gaze was lowered instantly as she looked up at him again.

"No," he said. "Is it a large party?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm afraid so. I'm going over the list with Nell, here. Oh, for goodness' sake, don't run away, dear!" she broke off, as Nell, thinking herself rather de trop, moved toward an opposite door; and Nell, of course, remained.

"She's the most awful girl to get hold of!" said her ladyship. "If ever you want to speak to her, to have a nice, quiet chat with her, she has always got to go and 'see to something.'" [Pg 171]

"I can understand that Miss Lorton's time must be much occupied," said the earl, with a courteous little inclination of the head to Nell.

"Yes, I know; but she might occupy it with me sometimes," remarked her ladyship.

"I can give you just five minutes," said Nell, laughing. "This is just my busiest hour."

The earl waited for a minute, waited as if under compulsion and to see if Lady Wolfer had anything more to say to him, then passed out. On his way across the hall he met Sir Archie Walbrooke.

"Mornin', Wolfer," said the young man, in his slow, self-possessed way. "Lady Wolfer at home? Got to see her about—'pon my honor, forget what it was now!"

The earl smiled gravely.

"You will find her in the library, Walbrooke," he said, and went on his way.

Sir Archie was shown into the room where Lady Wolfer and Nell were conferring over the dinner party, and Lady Wolfer looked up with an easy:

"Oh, it's you, is it? What brings you here? Oh, never mind, if you can't remember; I dare say I shall presently. Meanwhile, you can help us make out this list."

"Always glad to make myself useful," he drawled, seating himself on the settee beside Lady Wolfer, and taking hold of one side of the piece of paper which she held.

They were soon so deeply engaged that Nell, eager to get to Mrs. Hubbard, left them for a while.

When she came in again, the list was lying on the floor, Lady Wolfer was leaning forward, with her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her pretty face lined and eloquent of some deep emotion, and Sir Archie was talking in a low, and, for him, eager tone.

As Nell entered, Lady Wolfer rose quickly, and Sir Archie, fumbling at his eyeglass, looked for the moment somewhat disconcerted.

"If we're goin' to this place, hadn't we better go?" he said, with his usual drawl; and Lady Wolfer, murmuring an assent, left the room. Nell, following her to her room to ask a question about the dinner party, was surprised and rather alarmed at finding her pale and trembling.

"Oh, what is the matter?" Nell asked. "Are you ill?"

"No, oh, no! It is nothing," Lady Wolfer replied hastily. "Where is my hat? No, don't ring for my maid. Help me—you help me——" [Pg 172]

She let her hand rest for a moment on Nell's arm, and looked into her grave eyes wistfully.

"Were you—were you ever in trouble, Nell?" she asked. "I mean a great trouble, which threatened to overshadow your life—not a death; that is hard enough to fight, but—how foolishly I am talking! And how white you have gone! Why, child, you can't know anything of such trouble as I mean! What is it?" she broke off, as the maid knocked at the door and entered.

"The phaëton is ready, my lady; and Sir Archie says are you going to drive, or is he? because, if so, he will change his gloves, so as not to keep your ladyship waiting."

"I don't care—oh, he can drive," said Lady Wolfer. She spoke as if the message, acting as a kind of reminder, had helped her to recover her usual half-careless, half-defiant mood. "About this dinner, Nell; will you ask Lord Wolfer if there is any one he would like asked, and add them to the list? Where did I leave it? Oh, it's in the library."

Nell went down for it, and, as she opened the door, Sir Archie came forward with an eager and

anxious expression on his handsome face—an expression which changed to one of slight embarrassment as he saw that it was Nell.

"The list? Ah, yes; here it is. I'm afraid it's not fully made out; but there's plenty of time. Is Lady Wolfer nearly ready?"

Nell went away with a vague feeling of uneasiness. Had Lady Wolfer been telling Sir Archie of her "trouble"? If so, why did she not tell her husband? But perhaps she had.

Nell had no time to dwell upon Lady Wolfer's incoherent speech, for the coming dinner party provided her with plenty to think about. She had hoped that she herself would not be expected to be present, but when on the following evening she expressed this hope, Lady Wolfer had laughed at her.

"My dear child," she said, "don't expect that you are going to be let off. Of course, you don't want to be present; neither do I, nor any of the guests. Everybody hates and loathes dinner parties; but so they do the influenza and taxes; but most of us have to have the influenza and pay the taxes, all the same."

"But I haven't a dress," said Nell.

"Then get one made. Send to Cerise and tell her that I say she is to build you one immediately. Anyway, dress or no dress, you will have to be present. Why, I shouldn't be at all surprised if my husband refused to eat his dinner if you were not."

Nell laughed.

"And I know that Lord Wolfer would not notice my presence or my absence," she said. [Pg 173]

Lady Wolfer looked at her rather curiously, certainly not jealously, but gravely and wistfully.

"My dear Nell, don't you know that he thinks very highly of you, and that he considers you a marvel of wisdom and cleverness?"

"I should be a marvel of conceit and vanity if I were foolish enough to believe that you meant some of the pretty things you say to me," remarked Nell. "And have I got the complete list of all the guests? I asked Lord Wolfer, and he said that he should like Lord and Lady Angleford invited."

Lady Wolfer nodded.

"All right. You will find their address in the *Court Guide*. But I think he has the gout, and Lady Angleford never goes anywhere without him. Did—did my husband say anything more about the party—or—anything?" she asked, bending over the proofs of a speech she was correcting.

"No," said Nell. "Only that he left everything to you, of course."

"Of course," said her ladyship. "He is, as usual, utterly indifferent about everything concerning me. Don't look so scared, my child," she added, with a bitter little laugh. "That is the usual attitude of the husband, especially when he is a public man, and needs a figure to sit at the head of his table and ride in his carriages instead of a wife! There! you are going to run away, I see. And you look as if I had talked high treason. My dear Nell, when you know as much of the world as you know of your prayer book——Bah! why should I open those innocent eyes of yours? Run away—and play, I was going to say; but I'm afraid you don't get much play. Archie was saying only yesterday that we were working you too hard, and that we ought to be ashamed of ourselves."

Nell flushed rather resentfully.

"I am much obliged to Sir Archie's expression of sympathy," she began.

"Yes! You sound like it!" said Lady Wolfer, laughing. "My dear, why don't you get angry oftener? It suits you. Your face just wants that dash of color; and I'd no idea your eyes were so violety! You can give me a kiss if you like—mind the ink! Ah, Nell, some day some man will go mad over that same face and eyes of yours. Well, don't marry a politician, or a man who thinks it undignified to care for his wife! There, do go!"

As Nell went away, puzzled by Lady Wolfer's words and manner, her ladyship let her head fall upon her hand, and, sighing deeply, gazed at the "proof" as if she had forgotten it. [Pg 174]

Nell did not send for Madame Cerise, but purchased a skirt of black lace, and set to work to make up the bodice. She was engaged on this one evening two nights before the dinner, when Burden came in with:

"A gentleman to see you, miss. He's in the library. It's Mr. Lorton, your brother, I think——"

Nell was on the stairs before the maid had finished, and running into the library, had got Dick in her arms—and his brand-new hat on the floor.

"Dick! Oh, Dick! Is it really you?"

"Yes; but there won't be much left of me if you continue garroting me; and would you mind my picking up my hat? It is the only one I've got, and we don't grow 'em at Shorne Mills! Why, Nell,

how—yes, how thin you've got! And, I say, what a swagger house! I'd always looked upon mamma's swell relations as a kind of 'Mrs. Harrises,' until now."

He nodded, as he endeavored to smooth the roughened silk of his hat.

"Mamma—tell me; she is all right, Dick?"

"Oh, yes. I've got no end of messages. She's had your letters, all of 'em; and she hopes that you are taking advantage of your splendid position. Is it a splendid position, Nell? They seemed to think me of some consequence when I mentioned, dissembling my pride in the connection, that I was your brother."

Nell nodded.

"Yes, yes; it is all right, and I am quite—happy. And Shorne Mills, Dick, are they all well?"

"And kicking. I've got a hundred messages which you can sum up in 'love from all.' And, Nell, I've only time to say how are you, for I'm going to catch the Irish mail. Fact! Bardsley & Bardsley are sending me to some engineering work there. How's that for high? Ah, would you!" gingerly whisking his hat behind him. "Keep off; and, Nell, how's Drake?"

The abrupt question sent the blood rushing through Nell's face, and then as suddenly from it, leaving it stone white.

"Drake—Mr. Vernon?" she said, almost inaudibly. "I—I do not know. I—I have not seen—heard."

"No? That's rum! I should have thought that tiff was over by this time. Can't make it out! What have you been doing, Miss Lorton?"

Nell bravely tried to smile.

"You—you have seen him? You never wrote and told me, Dick! You—you gave him my note?"

Dick nodded rather gravely.

"Yes." [Pg 175]

"And—and——" She could not speak.

"Oh, yes; I gave it him, and he said——Well, he looked broken up over it; quite broken up. He said—let me see; I didn't pay very much attention because I thought he'd write to you and see you. They generally wind up that way, after a quarrel, don't they?"

"It does not matter. No, I have not seen or heard," said Nell.

"Well, he said: 'Tell her that it's quite true.' Dashed if I know what he meant! And that he wouldn't worry you, but would obey you and not write or see you. I think that was all."

It was enough. If the faintest spark of hope had been left to glow in Nell's bosom, Drake's message extinguished it.

Her head dropped for a moment, then she looked up bravely.

"It was what I expected, Dick. It—was like him. No, no; don't speak; don't say any more about it. And you'll stay, Dick? Lady Wolfer will be glad to see you. They are all so kind to me, and——"

"I'm so glad to hear that," said Dick; "because if they hadn't been I should have insisted upon your going home. But I suppose they really are kind, and don't starve you, though you are so thin."

"It's the London air, or want of air," said Nell. "And mamma, does she"—she faltered wistfully—"miss me?"

"We all miss you—especially the butcher and the baker," replied Dick diplomatically. "And now I'm off. And, Nell—oh, do mind my hat!—if you know Drake's address, I should like to write to him."

She shook her head.

"Strange," said Dick. "I wrote to the address in London to which I posted the letters when he was ill, and it came back 'Not known.' I—I think he must have gone abroad. Well, there, I won't say any more; but—'he was werry good to me,' as poor Joe says in the novel, you know, Nell."

Yes, it was well for Nell that she had no time to dwell upon her heart's loss; and yet she found some minutes for that "Sorrow's crown of sorrow," the remembrance of happier days, as she leaned over her black lace bodice that night when the great house was silent, and the quiet room was filled with visions of Shorne Mills—visions in which Drake, the lover who had left her for Lady Luce, was the principal figure.

On the night of the big dinner party, she, having had the last consultation with Mrs. Hubbard and the butler, went downstairs. The vast drawing-room was empty, and she was standing by the fire and looking at the clock rather anxiously—for it was quite on the cards that Lady Wolfer would be [Pg 176] late, and that some of the guests would arrive before the hostess was ready to receive them—when the door opened and her ladyship entered. She was handsomely dressed, and wore the family diamonds, and Nell, who had not before seen her so richly attired and bejeweled, was

about to express her admiration, when Lady Wolfer stopped short and surveyed the slim figure of her "housekeeper companion" with widely opened eyes and a smile of surprise and friendly approval.

"My dear child, how—how——Ahem! no, it's no use; I must speak my mind! My dear Nell, if I were as vain as some women, and, like most, had a strong objection to being cut out in my own house by my own cousin, I should send you to bed! Where did you get that dress, and who made it?"

Nell laughed and blushed.

"I bought it in Regent Street—half of it—and made the rest; and please don't pretend that you like it."

"I won't," said Lady Wolfer succinctly. "My dear, you are too pretty for anything, and the dress is charming! Oh, mine! Mine is commonplace compared beside it, and smacks the modiste and the Louvre; while yours——Archie is right; you have more taste than Cerise herself——" She broke off as the earl entered. "Don't you admire Nell's dress?" she said, but with her eyes fixed on one of her bracelets, which appeared to have come unfastened.

The earl looked at Nell—blushing furiously now—with grave attention.

"I always admire Miss Lorton's dresses," he said, with a little bow. Then his eyes wandered to the white arm and the open bracelet, and he made a step toward his wife; then he hesitated, and, before he could make up his mind to fasten it, she had snapped to the clasp.

"I tell her she will cause a sensation to-night," she said, moving away.

He looked at his wife gravely.

"Indeed, yes," he said absently. "Is it not time some of them arrived?"

As he spoke, the footman announced Lady Angleford.

She came forward, her train sweeping behind her, a pleasant smile on her mignonne face.

"Am I the first, Lady Wolfer? That is the punishment for American punctuality!"

"So good of you!" murmured Lady Wolfer. "And where is Lord Angleford?"

"I'm sorry, but he has the gout!"

Lady Wolfer expressed her regret. [Pg 177]

"And Lord Selbie?" she asked. "Shall we see him?"

"Did you ask him?" asked Lady Angleford, her brow wrinkling eagerly. "Is he in England? Have you heard that he has returned?"

Another woman would have been embarrassed, but Lady Wolfer was too accustomed to getting into scrapes of this kind not to find a way out of them.

"Isn't that like me? Nell, dear—this is my cousin and our guardian angel, Miss Lorton—Lady Angleford! Did we ask Lord Selbie?"

Nell smiled and shook her head.

"N-o," she said; "his name was not on the list, I think."

Lady Angleford, who had been looking at her with interest, went up to her.

"It wouldn't have been any use," she said. "He is abroad—somewhere."

She stifled a sigh as she spoke.

"Then there is no need for us to feel overwhelmed with guilt, Nell," said Lady Wolfer. "Come and warm yourself, my dear. Oh, that gout! No wonder you won't join the 'Advance Movement!' You've quite enough to try you. Nell, come and tell Lady Angleford how hard I work."

Nell came forward to join in the conversation; but all the time they were talking she was wondering where she had heard Lord Selbie's name!

CHAPTER XXII.

Lord Selbie?—Lord Selbie? Nell worried her memory in vain. She had read extracts from the *Fashion Gazette* so often, the aristocratic names had passed out of her mind almost before she had pronounced them, and it was not surprising that she should fail to recall this Lord Selbie's.

She had not much time or opportunity for reflection, for the other guests were arriving, and the party was almost complete. As she stood a little apart, she noticed the dresses, and smiled as she felt how incapable she would be of describing their magnificence to mamma. It was her first big

dinner party, and she was amused and interested in watching the brilliant groups, and in listening to the small talk.

Lady Wolfer's clear voice could be heard distinctly; but though she talked and laughed with apparent ease and freedom, Nell fancied that her ladyship was not quite at her ease, that there was something forced in her gayety, and that her laugh now and again rang false. Nell saw, too, that Lady Wolfer's glance wandered from time to time to the door, as if she were waiting for some one. [Pg 178]

The earl came up to Nell.

"Are we all here? It is late," he said, in his grave way, and glancing at the clock.

Nell looked around and counted.

"One more," she said, in as low a tone. As she spoke, the door opened, and Sir Archie Walbrooke entered.

Nell heard Lady Wolfer hesitate in the middle of a sentence, and saw her turn away, with her back to the door.

Sir Archie came across the room in his usual deliberate fashion, as self-possessed and impassive as if he were quite ignorant that he had kept a roomful of people waiting.

Lady Wolfer gave him her hand without breaking off her conversation with the prime minister, who was chatting and laughing with the carelessness of a boy, and as if he had never even heard of a ministerial crisis.

"Afraid I'm late," said Sir Archie, in slow and even tones. "Cab horse fell down—nearly always does when I'm behind one. Strange."

"I will hand your excuse to the cook," said Lady Wolfer. "I hope he will believe it. None of us do, I assure you."

The butler announced dinner, and the party coupled and filed in, the earl taking a dowager duchess, a good-natured lady with an obvious wig and cheeks which blushed—with rouge—like unto those of a dairymaid. Nell fell to the lot of an undersecretary for the colonies, who was so great a favorite of the prime minister's that no one dreamed of asking the great man without sending an invitation to his friend, who was generally known as "Sir Charles." Like most clever men, he was simplicity itself, and he watched Nell through his pince-nez as she surveyed the brilliant line of guests round the long, oblong table, with an interest in her interest.

"How well Lady Wolfer is looking to-night," he said, staring at the hostess at the head of the table. Her eyes were bright, a faint flush on her cheeks, and her soft hair, which her maid had arranged as advantageously as short hair can be dressed, shone in the subdued light of the shaded candles. "One is so accustomed to seeing her in—well," and he smiled, "strictly business garb, that full war paint strikes one with the revelation of her prettiness."

"Yes; isn't she pretty?" said Nell eagerly. "But I always think she is; though, of course, I like her best in evening dress."

He smiled at the promptitude of her ingenious admiration. [Pg 179]

"If I had my way, your sex should always wear one of two costumes: a riding habit or dinner dress."

"That would be rather inconvenient," said Nell. "Imagine walking out on a wet day in a habit or a ball frock!"

"I know," he said. "But I don't think you ought to walk out on a wet day."

"You ought to live in Turkey," said Nell, with a laugh.

"That is rather neat," he said approvingly; "but pray, don't repeat my speech to Lady Wolfer; she would think me exceedingly frivolous, and I spend my time in the endeavor to convince her of my gravity and discretion."

"Are all politicians supposed to be grave?" asked Nell, glancing at the prime minister, who had just related an anecdote in his own inimitable manner, and was laughing as heartily as if he had not a care in the world.

Sir Charles followed her eyes and smiled.

"Judging by Mr. Gresham, one would answer with an emphatic negative," he said. "But he is an exception to the rule. He is only grave when he is in the House—and not always then. I have known him crack a joke—and laugh at it—at the very moment the fate of his ministry swung in the balance. Some men are born boys, and remain so all their lives, and some——" He stopped and involuntarily looked at his host, who sat at the end of the table, his tall, thin figure bolt upright, his face with a kind of courteous gravity. He had heard the anecdote and paid it the tribute of a smile, but the smile had passed quickly, and his countenance had resumed its wonted seriousness in a moment.

"I always regard Lord Wolfer as a model of what a statesman should seem," said Sir Charles. "I

mean that he, more than any man I know, comes up to the popular idea of a great statesman—that is, in manner and bearing."

Nell remained silent. It was not befitting that she should discuss her host and employer; and she wondered whether the clever undersecretary beside her knew who she was and the position she held in the house. She did not know enough of the world to be aware that nowadays one discusses one's friends—even at their own tables—with a freedom which would have shocked an earlier generation.

"I often think," he continued, "that Lord Wolfer would have served the moralists as an instance of the vanity of human wishes."

"Why?" Nell could not help asking.

"Think of it!" he said, with a slight laugh. "He is the bearer of an old and honored title, he is passing rich, he is a cabinet minister, he is married to an extremely clever and charming lady—we agreed that she is pretty, too, didn't we?—and——" He paused a moment. "Should you say that Lord Wolfer is a happy man?" [Pg 180]

As he put this significant question, which explained his remark about the vanity of human wishes, Nell looked at the earl. He was apparently listening to the duchess by his side; but his eyes, under their straight, dark brows, were fixed upon his wife, who, leaning forward slightly, was listening with downcast eyes and a smile to Sir Archie, a few chairs from her.

Nell flushed.

"N-o, I don't know," she said, rather confusedly. "Lord Wolfer has so much on his mind—politics, and——He is nearly always at work; he is often in his study writing until early morning."

Sir Charles looked at her quickly.

"You know them very well. You are staying here?" he asked.

"I live here," said Nell simply. "I am what Sir Archie Walbrooke calls 'general utility.' Lady Wolfer has so much to do, and I help her keep house, or try and persuade myself that I do."

Sir Charles was too much a man of the world to be discomfited; but he laughed a little ruefully as he said:

"That serves me right for discussing people with a lady with whom I haven't the honor and pleasure of an acquaintance. It reminds me of that very old story of the man at the evening party, which you no doubt remember."

"No; I've heard so few stories, old or new," said Nell, smiling. "Please tell it me."

"I will if you'll tell me your name in exchange; mine is Fletcher, but I am usually called Sir Charles because Mr. Gresham honors me with his close friendship. 'Charles, his friend,' as they used to put it in the old play books, you know."

"I see; and my name is Lorton, Eleanor Lorton, commonly called Nell Lorton—because I have a brother. And the story?"

Sir Charles laughed.

"Oh, it's too old; but, old as it is, I had forgotten to take its moral to heart. A man was leaning against the wall, yawning, at an evening party. He was fearfully bored, for he knew scarcely any one there, and had been brought at the last moment by a friend. As he was making up his mind to cut it, another man came and leaned against the wall beside him and yawned, also. Said the first: 'Awful slow, isn't it?' 'Yes,' replied Number Two, 'frightful crush and beastly hot.' 'Dreadful. I could stand it a little longer if that woman at the piano would leave off squalling. Come round to [Pg 181] my club, and let us get a drink and a smoke.' 'Nothing would give me more pleasure! Wish I could!' replied Number Two. 'But you see, unfortunately for me, this is my house, and the lady at the piano is my wife.'"

Nell laughed.

"It is a good story," she said. "The first man must have felt very foolish."

"Yes," assented Sir Charles; "I know exactly how he felt. I hope you forgive me, Miss Lorton? Can I make amends in any way for my stupidity?"

"You might tell me who some of the people are," said Nell. "I only know them by name—and scarcely as much as that. I have not been here very long, and this is my first dinner party."

"How I envy you!" he said, with a sigh. "Dear me! I seem fated to put my foot into it to-night! But you know what I mean, or you would if you dined out as often as I—and Mr. Gresham do. Whom would you like me to tell you about? I think I know everybody here. One moment! Mr. Gresham is going to tell the story of his losing himself in London; it was in one of the new streets, for the making of which he had been a strong advocate."

They waited until the story was told, and the prime minister had enjoyed the laughter, and then Nell said:

"That little lady with the diamond tiara and the three big rubies on her neck is Lady Angleford—I know her name because I was introduced to her before dinner. I like the look of her so much; and she has so pleasant a voice and smile. Please tell me something about her."

"An easy task," said Sir Charles. "She is Lord Angleford's young wife—an American heiress. I like her very much. In fact, though I have not known her very long, I am honored with her friendship. And yet I ought not to like her," he added, almost to himself.

Nell opened her eyes upon him.

"Why not?" she asked.

Sir Charles was silent for a moment; then he said, as if he were weighing his words, and choosing suitable ones for his auditor:

"Lord Angleford has a nephew who is a great, a very great friend of mine—Lord Selbie. He was Lord Angleford's heir; but—well, his uncle's marriage may make all the difference to him."

Nell knit her brows and made another call on her memory.

"Of course!" she exclaimed, in a tone of triumph, which rather surprised Sir Charles. "I remember reading about it. Lord Selbie! Yes—oh, yes; I recollect."

Her voice grew sad and absent, as she recalled the afternoon when Mrs. Lorton had insisted upon her reading the stupid society paper to Drake. How long ago it seemed! How unreal! [Pg 182]

"I dare say," said Sir Charles. "It's one of those things which the world chatters about, and the newspapers paragraph. Poor Selbie!"

"Was he a very great friend of yours?" asked Nell, rather mechanically, her eyes wandering from one face to another.

"Yes, very great," replied the undersecretary, with a warmth which one does not look for in a professional politician. "We were at Eton together, and we saw a great deal of each other afterward, though he went into the army, and I, for my sins, fell into politics. He is one of the best of fellows, an Admirable Crichton, at once the envy and the despair of his companions. There is scarcely anything that Selbie doesn't do, and he does all things well—the best shot, the best rider, the best fencer, the best dancer of his set, and the best-hearted. Poor old chap!"

It was evident that he had, in his enthusiasm, almost forgotten his auditor.

"Where is he now?" asked Nell. "I heard Lady Angleford say that he is abroad."

"Yes. No one knows where he is. He has disappeared. It sounds a strong word, but it is the only one that will meet the case. And perhaps it was the best thing he could do. When a man's prospects are blighted, and his ladylove has jilted him——"

Nell turned quickly. She had tried to remember the whole of the paragraph she had read to Drake, but she could not.

"What was the name of the lady who—who jilted him?" she asked.

Sir Charles was about to reply, and if he had spoken, Nell would have learned Drake's identity; but at that moment there came a lull in the conversation, and before it had recommenced, the prime minister leaned forward and asked a question of his friend. The answer led to a general discussion, and at its close Lady Wolfer smiled and raised her eyebrows at the duchess, received a responsive nod, and the ladies rose.

Sir Archie was the gentleman nearest the door, and he opened it for them. As Lady Wolfer was passing through, a flower fell from the bosom of her dress. He picked it up and held it out to her, with a bow and a smile; but she had turned to say something to the lady behind her, and he drew his hand back and concealed the flower in it.

Nell, who chanced to be looking at him, was, perhaps, the only one who saw the action, and she thought little of it. He could scarcely interrupt Lady Wolfer by a too-insistent restoration of the blossom. [Pg 183]

With the flower in his hand, Sir Archie went back to the table. The other men had closed up near the earl, but Sir Archie retained his seat. He allowed the butler to fill his glass and raised it to his lips with his right hand; then, after a moment or two, he took the flower from his left and fixed it in the buttonhole of his coat.

It was a daring thing to do; but he had been—well, not too sparing of the wine, and his usually pale and impassive face was flushed, and indicative of a kind of suppressed excitement.

Perhaps he thought that no one would recognize the flower, and probably no one did—no one, that is, but the earl. His eyes, as they glanced down the row of men, saw the blossom in its conspicuous place in Sir Archie's coat, and the earl's face went white, and his thin lips twitched.

"Have you any wine, Walbrooke?" he asked.

The butler had left the room.

Sir Archie started, as if his thoughts had been wandering.

"Eh? Oh—ah! thanks!" he said.

He took the decanter from the man next him, and filled his glass. The earl's eyes rested grimly upon the flower for a moment, then, as if with an effort, he turned to Mr. Gresham and got into talk with him. No man in the whole world was more ready to talk than the prime minister. The other men joined in the conversation, which was anything but political—all but Sir Archie. He sat silent and preoccupied, filling his glass whenever the decanter was near him, and drinking in a mechanical way, as if he were scarcely conscious of what he was doing. Now and then he glanced at the flower in his coat, deeming the glance unnoticed; but the earl saw it, and every time he detected the downward droop of the eyes, his own grew sterner and more troubled.

Meanwhile, in the drawing-room, the ladies were sipping their coffee and conversing in the perfunctory fashion which prevails while they are awaiting the arrival of the gentlemen.

Lady Wolfer, who had, up to the present, borne her part in the entertainment extremely well, suddenly appeared to have lost all interest and all desire to continue it. She seated herself beside the fire and next the easy-chair into which the duchess had sunk, and gazed dreamily over the screen which she held in her hand. Some of the ladies gathered in little groups, others turned to the books and albums, one or two yawned almost openly. A kind of blight seemed falling upon them. Nell, who was unused to the phenomena of dinner parties, looked round, aghast. Were they all going to sleep? Suddenly she realized that it was at just such a moment as this that she was [Pg 184] supposed to come in. She went up to Lady Wolfer and bent down to her.

"Won't somebody play or sing?" she asked. "They all seem as if they were going to sleep."

"Let them!" retorted Lady Wolfer, almost loudly enough for those near to hear. "I don't care. Ask some one to sing, if you like."

Nell went up to a young girl who stood, half yawning, before a picture of Burne-Jones'.

"Will you play or sing?" she asked.

The girl looked at her with languid good humor.

"I'd sing; but I can't. I have no parlor tricks," she said. "Besides, what's the use? Nobody wants it," and she smiled with appalling candor.

Nell turned from her in despair, and met Lady Angleford's eyes bent upon her with smiling and friendly interest. Nell went up to her appealingly.

"I want some one to sing or play—or do something, Lady Angleford," she said.

Lady Angleford laughed, the comprehensive, American laugh which conveys so much.

"And they won't? I know. It isn't worth while till the gentlemen come in," she said. "I know that—now. It used to puzzle me at first; but I know now. You English are so—funny! In America a girl is quite content to sing to her lady friends; but here—well, only men count as audience. They will all wake up when the men appear. I have learned that. Or perhaps you will play or sing?"

Lady Wolfer was near enough to hear.

"Yes, Nell, sing," she said, with a forced smile.

Nell looked round shyly, then went to the piano.

"That's the sweetest girl I've seen in England," said Lady Angleford to her neighbor, who happened to be the dowager duchess. Her grace put up her eyeglasses, with their long holder, and surveyed the slim, girlish figure on its way to the grand piano.

"Yes? She's awfully pretty. And very young, too. A connection of the Wolfers', isn't she? Rather sad face."

"A face with a history," said Lady Angleford, more to herself than the duchess. "Do you know anything about her, duchess?"

Her grace shrugged her fat shoulders sleepily.

"Nothing at all. She's here as a kind of lady companion, or something of the sort. Yes, she's pretty, decidedly. Are you going on to the Meridues' reception?"

Nell sat down and played her prelude rather nervously; then she sang one of the songs which she had sung in The Cottage at Shorne Mills—one of the songs to which Drake had never seemed [Pg 185] tired of listening. There was a lull in the lifeless, perfunctory conversation, and one or two of the sleepy women murmured: "Thank you! Thank you very much!"

"Bravo! Sing us something else, Nell!" said Lady Wolfer.

Nell was in the middle of the second song when the men filed in. Some of them came straight into the room and sought the women they wanted, others hung about the doors, and, hiding their yawns, glanced quite openly at their watches.

The earl made his way to his wife where she was sitting by the fire, her eyes fixed on the flames, which she could just see over the top of her hand screen.

"I have to go on to the Meridues' when these have gone," he said. "Are you coming, Ada?"

She glanced up at him. His eyes were fixed on the bosom of her dress, on the spot where the white blossom had shone conspicuously, but shone no longer; and there was a wistful, yearning expression on his grave face.

She did not raise her eyes.

"I don't know. I may be tired. Perhaps I may follow you."

He bowed, almost as he would have bowed to a stranger; then, as he was turning away, he said casually, but with a faint tremor in his voice:

"You have lost your flower!"

She raised her eyes and looked at him coldly.

"My flower? Ah, yes. My maid must have put it in insecurely."

The earl said nothing, but his grave eyes slowly left her face and wandered to Sir Archie and the flower in his buttonhole.

"I will wait for you until twelve," he said, with cold courtesy.

Lady Wolfer rose and went toward Lady Angleford.

"I wish you'd join us, my dear," she said. "Why, the woman movement sprang from America. You ought to sympathize with us."

"Oh, but I'm English now," said Lady Angleford, "and, being a convert, I'm more English than the English. What a charming specimen of your country you have in Miss Lorton! I don't want to rob you of her, but do you think you could spare her to come to us at Anglemere? We are going there almost directly."

Lady Wolfer replied absently:

"Yes, certainly; ask her. It will not matter to me."

"Not matter!" said Lady Angleford. "Why, I should have thought you would have suffered pangs at the mere thought of parting with her. She is an angel! Did you hear her sing just now? I don't know much about your English larks, but I was comparing her with them——" [Pg 186]

Lady Wolfer fanned herself vigorously.

"Ask her, by all means," she said. "Oh, yes; of course I shall miss her."

As she spoke, Sir Archie came toward her. A faint flush rose to her face. Her eyes fell upon the white flower in his buttonhole.

"Why—how——Is that my flower?" she said, in a low voice.

"Yes," he replied. "It is yours. You dropped it, and I picked it up. Has any one a better right to it?"

She looked up at him half defiantly, half pleadingly.

"You have no right to it," she said, in a low voice, which she tried in vain to keep steady. "You—you are attracting attention——"

She glanced at the women near her, some of whom were eying the pair with sideway looks of curiosity.

"I am desperate," he said; "I can bear it no longer. I told you the other day that I had come to the end of my power of endurance. You—you are cold—and cruel. I want your decision; I must have it. I cannot bear——"

"Hush!" she said warningly, the screen in her hand shaking. "I will speak to you later—after—after some of them have gone. No; not to-night. Do not remain here any longer."

"As you please," he said, with a sullen resentment; and he crossed the room to Nell, and began to talk to her. As a rule, he talked very little; but the wine had loosened his tongue, and he launched out into a cynical and amusing diatribe against society and all its follies.

Nell listened with surprise at first; then she began to feel amused, and laughed.

He drew a chair near her and bent toward her, lowering his voice and speaking in an impressive tone quite unusual with him. To the casual observer it might well have seemed that they were carrying on a desperate flirtation; but every now and then he paused absently, and presently he rose almost abruptly and went into an anteroom.

An antique table with writing materials stood in a recess. He wrote something rapidly on a half sheet of note paper, and placing it inside a book, laid the volume on the pedestal of a Sèvres vase standing near the table.

When he left Nell, Lady Wolfer crossed over to her.

"Sir Archie has been amusing you, dear?" she said, casually enough; but the smile which [Pg 187]

accompanied the remark did not harmonize with the unsmiling and anxious eyes.

"Oh, yes," said Nell, laughing. "He has been talking the most utter nonsense."

"He—he is very strange to-night," said Lady Wolfer, biting her lip softly. Not to innocent Nell could she even hint that Sir Archie had taken more wine than was good for him. "He has been talking utter nonsense to me. Did you notice the flower in his coat?"

"No," said Nell, with some surprise. "Why?"

Lady Wolfer laughed unnaturally.

"Nothing. Yes! Nell, I want you to get that flower from him. It—is a bet."

"I—get it from him?" said Nell, opening her gray eyes.

Lady Wolfer flushed for a moment.

"It is only a piece of folly," she said. "But—but I want you to get it. Ask him for it—he cannot refuse. Oh, I can't explain! I will, perhaps; but get it!"

She moved away as Sir Archie reappeared in the doorway. He came straight up to Nell.

"I think I'll be off," he said. "Some of the others have gone already."

He went toward Lady Wolfer as if to say "Good night," but, with the skill which every woman can display on occasion, Lady Wolfer turned from him as if she did not see him, and joined in the conversation which was being carried on by the duchess and Lady Angleford.

"I've come to say good night, Lady Wolfer," he said.

She met his gaze for a moment.

"Good night," she said, in the conventional tone. He bowed over her hand, looked at her with an intense and questioning gaze for an instant, then left her and came back to Nell.

"Oh, I've forgotten!" he exclaimed, half turning as if to rejoin the group he had left; then he hesitated, and added: "Will you be so kind as to give Lady Wolfer a message for me?"

"Yes, certainly," said Nell, rather absently; for she was wondering how she could ask for the flower, on which her eyes were unconsciously fixed.

"Thanks! You are always so kind. Will you tell her, please, that the book she wants is on the Sèvres pedestal, just behind the vase. She will want it to-night."

Nell nodded.

"I won't forget," she said. "Are you going to take that poor flower into the cold, Sir Archie?"

She blushed as she asked the question; but he was too absorbed in the fatal game of passion to notice her embarrassment. [Pg 188]

"The flower?" he said unthinkingly. "It is nearly faded already; too poor an offering to make you, Miss Lorton; but if you will accept it——"

He had expected her to refuse laughingly, but she replied simply:

"Thank you; yes, I should like to have it," and in his surprise he took it from his coat, and, with a bow, handed it to her, wished her good night, and left her. At the door he paused and looked in the direction of Lady Wolfer, met her eyes for an instant, then went out.

Nell was about to place the flower on the table, but, quite unthinkingly, stuck it in the bosom of her dress. As she was crossing the room to some people who were taking their departure, the earl came up to her.

"I am going to the library presently, and may not see Lady Wolfer before I leave. Will you please tell her that I hope she will not go out to-night? I think she is looking tired—and—and overstrained. Do you not think so?"

His tone was so full of anxiety, there was so sad and strained an expression in his grave face, as he looked toward his young wife, who was talking rather loudly and laughing in a way women will when there is anything but laughter in their hearts, that Nell's sympathy went out to him. It was as if suddenly she understood how much he cared for the woman who was wife to him in little more than the name.

"Yes, yes! I will tell her," she said. "I am sure she will not go if you do not wish it."

He smiled bitterly, and, for once dropping the cold reserve which usually masked him, said, with sad bitterness:

"You think she considers my wishes so closely?"

Nell looked up at him, half frightened by the intensity of his expression.

"Why—yes!" she faltered.

He smiled as bitterly as he had spoken; then his manner changed suddenly, and his eyes became fixed on the flower in her dress.

"Where did you get that flower? Who——" he asked, almost sternly.

Nell's face flamed; then, ashamed of the uncalled-for blush, she laughed.

"Sir Archie Walbrooke gave it me," she said.

The earl looked at her with surprise, which gradually changed to a keen scrutiny, under which Nell felt her blush rising again. But she said nothing, and, after a moment during which he [Pg 189] seemed to be considering deeply, he passed on, his hands clasped behind his tall figure, his head bent.

Immediately the last guest had gone, Lady Wolfer went to her own apartments. Nell stood in the center of the vast and now empty room, and looked round her absently, and with that sense of some pending calamity which we call presentiment.

Innocent of the world and its intrigues, as she was, she could not fail to have seen that neither the earl nor the countess was happy; and that the endless work and excitement in which they endeavored to absorb themselves only left them dissatisfied and wretched.

She liked them both; indeed, she had grown very fond of Lady Wolfer, and her heart ached for the woman who had striven to hide her unhappiness behind the mask of a forced gayety and recklessness. For a moment, a single moment, as she caught sight of the flower, a vague suspicion of the danger which threatened the countess arose in Nell's mind; but she put the suspicion from her with a shudder, for it was too dreadful to be entertained.

Sometimes she went to Lady Wolfer's room after she had retired, and, remembering the earl's message, she went now upstairs and knocked at the countess' door.

A low voice bade her come in, and Nell entered and found Lady Wolfer sitting on a low chair before the fire. She was alone, and the figure crouching before the blaze, as if she were cold, aroused Nell's pity. She crossed the room and bent over her.

"Are you ill, dear, or only tired?" she asked gently.

Lady Wolfer started and looked up at her, and Nell saw that her face was white and drawn.

"Is it you?" she said. "I thought it was Wardell"—Wardell was her maid. "Yes, I am tired."

"Lord Wolfer has asked me to beg you not to go out to-night. He saw that you looked tired," she said.

Lady Wolfer gazed in the fire, and her lips curled sarcastically.

"He is very considerate," she said. "Extraordinarily so! One would think he cared whether I was tired or not, wouldn't one, eh, dear?"

"Why do you say that, and so bitterly?" Nell said, in a low voice. "Of course he cares. He is always kind and thoughtful."

Lady Wolfer rose abruptly and, with a short, hard laugh, began to pace up and down the room.

"He does not care in the least!" she said, in a harsh, strained voice. "Why did you come in to-night? I wish you hadn't! I—I wanted to be alone. No, do not go! Stay, now you are here," for Nell [Pg 190] had moved to the door. She went back and laid her hand on the unhappy woman's arm.

"Won't you tell me what is the matter?" she said.

Lady Wolfer stopped and sank into the chair again.

"I'm almost tempted to!" she said, with a reckless laugh. "It might be useful to you—as a 'frightful example,' as the temperance people say. Oh, don't you know? You are young and innocent, Nell, but—but you cannot fail to have seen how wretched I am! Nell, you are not only young and innocent, but beautiful. You have all your life before you—you, too, will have to choose your fate—for we do choose it! Don't wreck your life as I have wrecked mine; don't, don't marry a man who does not love you—as I did!"

"Hush!" said Nell, startled and shocked. "You are wrong, quite wrong!"

Lady Wolfer laughed bitterly.

"I've said too much; I may as well tell you all," she said, with a shrug of her white shoulders. "It was a marriage of convenience. We—my people—were poor, and it was a great match for me. There was no talk of love—love!" She laughed again, and the laugh made Nell wince. "It was just a bargain. Such bargains are made every day in this vile marriage market of ours. I was as innocent as you, Nell. The glitter of the thing—the title, the big house, the position—dazzled me. I thought I should be more contented and satisfied. Other girls have done the same thing, and they seemed happy enough. But I suppose I am different. I wearied of the whole thing—the title, the big house, the diamonds, everything—before the first month. I wanted something else; I scarcely knew what——Ah, yes, I did! I did! I wanted love—the thing they all laugh and sneer at! I had sold myself for gold and place and power, and when I had gotten them they all turned to Dead

Sea fruit, dust and ashes, on my lips!"

She gripped her hands tightly, and bent lower over the fire, and Nell sank on her knees beside her, pale herself, and incapable of speech.

"For a time I tried to bear it, to live the weary, dragging life; then, when I was nearly mad—I tried to find relief in the world outside my own home. I was supposed to be clever—clever! I could write and talk. I took up this woman's rights business!" She laughed again. "All the time they were lauding me to the skies and flattering and fooling me, I knew how stupid the whole thing was. But it seemed the only chance for me, the only way of forgetting myself and—and my slavery. At any rate, it served as an excuse for getting out of the house, for not inflicting my presence upon the man who had bought me, and who regarded me simply as the figurehead for his table, the person to receive his guests and play the necessary part in his public life." [Pg 191]

"No, no! You're wrong, wrong!" said Nell earnestly.

Lady Wolfer seemed scarcely to have heard her.

"I ought to have known that it would not help me long. It has come to an end. I am going to end it. I cannot bear this life any longer—I cannot, I cannot! I will not! I have only one life—that I know of——"

"Oh, hush, hush!" Nell implored. "You are all wrong! I know it, I am sure of it! You think he does not care for you. He does, he does! If you had seen his face to-night—had heard his voice!"

Lady Wolfer looked at her with a half-startled glance; then she shook her head and smiled bitterly.

"No, I am not wrong," she said. "I know what love is—at last! It beckons me—I have resisted—God knows I have struggled with and fought against it—have kept it from me with both hands—but my strength has failed me at last, and——"

Nell caught her arm and clung to it.

"Oh, what do you mean?" she asked, in vague terror.

Lady Wolfer started, and slowly unclasped Nell's hands.

"I have said too much," she said, panting and moistening her parched lips. "I did not mean to tell you—no, I will not say another word. I don't know why I am so unnerved, why I take it so much to heart I think—Nell, I am fond of you; you know it?"

Nell made a gesture of assent, and touched the countess' clasped hands lovingly, tenderly.

"I—I think it is your presence here that—that has made me hesitate—has made me realize the gravity of what I am going to do. I—I never look at you, hear you speak, but I am reminded that I was once, and not so long ago, as innocent as you. But I can hesitate no longer. I have to decide, and I have decided!"

She rose and stood with her hands before her face for the moment; then she let them fall with a sigh, and forced a smile.

"Go now, dear!" she said. "I—I wish I had not spoken so freely; but that tender, loving heart of yours is hard to resist."

"What is it you have decided to do?" Nell asked, scarcely above her breath.

A deep red rose slowly to the countess' face, then slowly faded, leaving it pale and wan, and set with determination.

"I cannot tell you, Nell," she said. "You—you will know soon enough. And when you know, I want you—I want you to think not too badly of me, to remember how much I have suffered, how hard and cruel my life has been—how I have hungered and thirsted for one word, one look of love; that I have struggled and striven against my fate, and have yielded only when I could endure no longer. Oh, go now, dear!" [Pg 192]

"Let me stay with you to-night! I can sleep on this couch—on this chair—beside you, if you like," pleaded Nell, confused and frightened, but aching with pity and sympathy. "I know that it is all wrong, that you are mistaken. If I could only convince you! If I could only tell you what I saw in Lord Wolfer's eyes as he looked at you to-night!"

The countess shook her head.

"It is you who are mistaken," she said, "and it is too late. No, you shall not stay. I have done wrong to say so much. Try—try and forget it. But yet—no, don't forget it, Nell. Remember me and my wretchedness, and let it be a warning to you, if ever you are tempted to marry a man who does not love you, whom you do not love. Ah, but you must go, Nell! I am worn out!"

Nell went to her and put her arm round her neck, and drew her face down that she might kiss her, but the countess gently put Nell's arm from her, and drew back from the proffered kiss.

"No; you shall not kiss me!" she said, in a low voice. "You will be glad that you did not—presently! Stay—give me that flower!" she said, holding out her hand, but looking away.

Nell started, and drew the flower from her bosom as if it had been something poisonous, and flung it in the fire.

The countess shrugged her shoulders with an air of indifference, and turned to watch the flower withering and consuming in the fire, and Nell, with something like a sob, left her.

What should she do? She understood that her friend stood on the verge of a precipice; but how could she—Nell—with all her desire to save her, drag her back?

As she was going to her room she heard a step in the hall, and, looking over the balustrade, saw the earl pass from the library to the drawing-room. For an instant she was half resolved to go down to him, to—what? How could she tell him? She dared not!

Lord Wolfer wandered into the drawing-room and stood before the fire, looking into it moodily, as he leaned against the great mantelpiece of carved marble.

He was thinking of the flower which he had seen first in his wife's possession, then in Sir Archie's, and lastly in Nell's; and of her blush and confusion when he had asked her how she [Pg 193] came by it. He knew Sir Archie, knew him better and more of his life than Sir Archie suspected. The man was a perfect type of the modern lover; incapable of a fixed passion, as fickle as the wind. Could it be that he had transferred, what he would have called his "devotion," from the countess to Nell? It seemed at first sight too improbable; but Wolfer knew his world and the ethics of the smart set of which Sir Archie Walbrooke was a conspicuous member too well to scout the idea as impossible. The fact that Sir Archie had spent the last three months flirting with one woman would be no hindrance to his transferring his attentions to a younger and prettier one.

The harassed man turned away with a weary sigh, wandered purposelessly into the anteroom, and, in a mechanical fashion, fingered the various articles on the writing table. His eye fell on the book on the pedestal, and he took up the volume absently, intending to restore it to its place in the bookcase. On his way he opened the book, and a half sheet of note paper fell from it and fluttered to his feet. He picked it up, read what was written on it, and stood for a moment motionless, his eyes fixed on the carpet, his lips writhing.

How long he stood there he did not know, but presently he was aroused by the sound of footsteps. He listened. Some one—the rustling of a dress—was approaching the room. He slipped the note into the book and replaced the volume on the pedestal, and quickly stepped behind the portière curtains.

He expected his wife. Should he come forward and confront her? His stern face grew red with shame—for her, for himself. Then, with a sudden leap of the heart, with a sensation of relief which was absolutely painful in its intensity, he saw Nell enter the room and go straight to the pedestal. Her face was pale and troubled, and she looked round with what seemed to him a guilty expression in the gray eyes. Then she opened the book as he had done, but, as if she expected to find something, took out the note, and after a moment of hesitation read it. He saw her face flush hotly, then grow white, and her hand go out to the pedestal as if for support. For a moment she stood as motionless as he had done, then she thrust the note into her pocket, dropped the book from her hand—it fell on the floor unregarded by her—and slowly left the room.

Wolfer passed his hand over his brow with a bewildered air, then, as if obeying an irresistible impulse, he followed her up the stairs.

Quietly but slowly. He knew that she had not seen him, did not know that he was following her, and he waited at the end of the corridor, watching her with a heart throbbing with an agony of [Pg 194] anxiety. Was she going to carry the note to his wife? But she did not even hesitate at the door of Lady Wolfer's room, but went straight to her own, and he heard the key turn as she locked it.

The sweat was standing in great drops upon his forehead, and he put up a trembling hand and wiped them away as he looked toward his wife's door. Should he go in and question her? Should he ask her straightly whether the note was intended for her or Nell? It seemed too horrible to suspect the girl who had seemed innocence and purity itself, and yet had he not seen her go straight for the book, as if she had known that it was there waiting for her?

Like a man in a dream he went down to the library, and, locking the door, flung himself into a chair, and buried his face in his hands. What was he to think?

CHAPTER XXIII.

Nell stood in the middle of the room with the note which she had found in the book in her hand. She had read it half mechanically and unsuspectingly, as one reads a scrap of paper found in a volume, or in some unexpected place; and, trembling a little, she went to the electric light and read the note again. It ran thus—and with every word Nell's face grew pale:

"I can wait no longer. You cannot say I have been impatient—that I haven't endured the suspense as well as a man could. If you love me, if you are really willing to trust yourself to me, come away with me to-morrow. God knows I will try and make you happy, and that you can never be under

this roof with a man who doesn't care for you. I will come for you at seven to-morrow morning—we can cross by the morning boat. Don't trouble about luggage; everything we want we can get on the other side. For Heaven's sake, don't hesitate! Be ready and waiting for me as the clock strikes. Don't hesitate! The happiness of both our lives lies in your hands. ARCHIE."

Nell sank into a chair and stared at the wall, trying to think; but for a moment or two the horror and shame of the thing overwhelmed her. She had read of such incidents as these, for now and again one of the new school of novels reached The Cottage; but there is a lot of difference between reading, say, of a murder, and watching the committal of one. She was almost as much [Pg 195] ashamed and shocked as if the note had been intended for herself.

She was not ashamed of having read it—though the mere touch of the paper was hateful to her—for she felt that Providence had ordained it that she should stand between Lady Wolfer and the ruin to which Sir Archie was beckoning her.

But what should she do? Should she take the letter to Lady Wolfer and implore her to send Sir Archie a refusal? This was, of course, Nell's first impulse, but she dared not follow it; dared not run the risk of letting Lady Wolfer see the note. The unhappy woman's face haunted Nell, and her reckless words, and her tone of desperation, still rang in Nell's ears. No; she dared not let Lady Wolfer know that this man would be waiting for her. Few women in the position of the countess could resist such a note as this, such an appeal from the man who, she thought, loved her. But if she did not take the note to the countess, what was she to do?

Sir Archie would be, then, in the library at seven o'clock; he would ask for the countess; she would go to him, and—Nell shuddered, and walked up and down. If there were any one to whom she could go for advice! But there was no one. At all costs, the truth must be kept from the earl; his wife must be saved.

It was a terrible position for a young and inexperienced girl; but, despite her youth and inexperience, the note could scarcely have fallen into better hands than Nell's; for she possessed courage, and was not afraid for herself. Most girls, keenly though they might desire to save their friend, would have destroyed the note and left the rest to Providence; but Nell's spirit had been trained in the bracing air of Shorne Mills, and her views tempered by many a tussle with tide and wind in the *Annie Laurie*; and the pluck which lay dormant in the slight figure rose now to the struggle for her friend's safety. She had grown to love the woman who had confided her heart's sorrow to her that night, and she meant to save her. But how? Sir Archie would be there at seven, and Lady Wolfer must be kept in ignorance of his presence; and he must be sent away convinced of the hopelessness of his passion.

Nell walked up and down, unconscious of weariness, ignorant that in his own room the earl was listening to her footsteps, and putting his own construction upon her agitation. Now and again she thought of Drake and her own love affair. Were all men alike? Were there no good men in the world? Were they all selfish and unscrupulous in the quest of their own interest and amusements? Love! The word sounded like a mockery, a delusion, a snare. Drake had loved, or [Pg 196] thought he loved her, until Lady Luce had beckoned him back to her; and this other man, Sir Archie—how long would he continue to love the unhappy woman if she yielded to him?

The silver clock on the mantelshelf struck five, and Nell, worn out at last, and still apparently far away from any solution of the problem which she had set herself, flung herself on the bed. She had scarcely closed her eyes before a way of helping Lady Wolfer presented itself to her.

Her face crimsoned, and she winced and closed her eyes with a slight shudder; but though she shrank from the ordeal, she resolved to make it. Lady Wolfer had been kind to her, had won her love, and, more than all else, had confided in her, and she—Nell—would save her at any cost.

A little before seven she rose, and changed her dinner dress for a plain traveling one, and, putting on her hat and jacket, went down to the library slowly and almost stealthily. A maidservant was sweeping the hall, and she looked up at Nell, clad in her outdoor things, with some surprise.

"I expect Sir Archie Walbrooke at seven o'clock," said Nell. "I am in the library, please."

She spoke quite calmly and casually, buttoning her glove in a leisurely fashion as she passed on her way; and the maid responded unsuspiciously, for the coming and going at Wolfer House were always somewhat erratic.

Nell went into the library, and, closing the door, turned up the electric light a little—for the maids had not yet been to the room, and the shutters were still closed. The morning was a wet and chilly one, and Nell shuddered slightly as she sat and watched the second hand of the clock, which at one moment seemed to move slowly and at the next appeared to fly. She had not decided upon the words she would use; she would be guided by those which Sir Archie might speak; but she was resolved to fight as long as possible, to hide every tremor which, at these moments of waiting and suspense, quivered through her.

Then she heard his voice, his slow step—no quicker than usual this morning—crossing the hall; the door opened, and he was in the room. Nell rose, and stood with her back to the light; and, closing the door, he came toward her with a faint cry of satisfaction and relief.

"Ada!" he said. "You have come——"

Nell raised her veil, but, before she had done so, he had seen that she was not the countess; and he stopped short and stared at her.

"Miss Lorton!" he exclaimed, under his breath, so taken aback that the shock of his disappointment was revealed in his face and voice. "I—I thought—expected—to see Lady Wolfer. [Pg 197] Is—is she up? Does she know that I am here? You have a message for me?"

He tried to speak casually, and forced a smile, as if the appointment was quite an ordinary one; but Nell saw that the hand that held his hat shook, and that his color, which had risen as he entered the room and greeted her, had slowly left his face, and her courage rose.

"Yes, I have a message for you, Sir Archie," she said, keeping her voice as steady as she could, and saying to herself: "It is to save her—save her!"

"Yes?" he said, with suppressed eagerness and anxiety. "What is it? I—I am rather pressed for time." He glanced at his watch. "Won't she see me? If you would go up and ask her. I shan't detain her more than a minute."

"No; she cannot see you," said Nell. "I am to ask you to go—where you are going—without seeing her."

He looked at her steadily, gnawing his lip softly.

"I—I don't understand," he said, still trying to smile. "She—told you that I am going—abroad?"

Nell inclined her head gravely.

"Yes? But didn't she tell you that—that I must see her before I go? That—that it is important?"

"She cannot see you," said Nell, her heart beating fast. "She wishes you to go, and—and to remain abroad——"

His face crimsoned, then went pale.

"You know—she has told you why—why I have come this morning?" he said, in a low voice.

"Yes, I know," assented Nell, the shame, for him, dyeing her face.

He stared at her for a moment in silence; then he said, half defiantly, half sullenly:

"Very well, then. If you know why I am here, you must know that I cannot take such a message, that I cannot go—without her. For Heaven's sake, Miss Lorton, go and fetch her! There is no time to lose. Her—my happiness is at stake. I beg your pardon; I'm afraid I'm brusque; but——For Heaven's sake, bring her! If I could see her, speak to her for a moment——"

Nell shook her head.

"I cannot," she said. "It would be of no use. Lady Wolfer would not go with you."

He came nearer to her and lowered his voice, almost speaking through his teeth.

"See here, Miss Lorton, you—you have no right to be in this business—to interfere with it. You—you are too young to understand——"

Nell crimsoned. [Pg 198]

"No," she said, almost inaudibly. "I understand. I—I have seen your letter." Her calm, almost her courage, broke down, and, clasping her hands, she pleaded to him. "Oh, yes, I do understand! Sir Archie, go; do, do go! It is cruel of you to stay. If—if you really love her, you will go and never come back."

His face went white and his eyes flashed.

"No, you don't understand, although you think you do. You say that I am cruel. I should be cruel if I did what she asks me, what you wish me to do, to leave her in this house, to the old life of misery. I love her; I want to take her away with me from the man who doesn't care an atom for her, whom she does not love."

"It isn't true!" said Nell, with a sudden burst of indignation, and with a sudden insight as inexplicable as it was sudden. "He loves her, and she, though she does not know it, cares for him. They would have discovered the truth if you had not come between them and made them hard and cold to each other. Yes, you are cruel, cruel and wicked! But—but perhaps it has not been all your fault—and—I'm sorry if—if I have spoken too harshly."

He scarcely seemed to have heard her concluding words, but repeated to himself: "She cares for him. She cares for Wolfer—her husband!"

"Yes, yes!" said Nell eagerly, anxiously. "I know it; I have seen her when she was most unhappy. I have heard the truth in her voice—I remember little things—the way she has behaved to him, spoken to him, when she was off her guard. Yes, it is true she cares for him as much as he cares for her; but they have hidden it from each other—and you—you have made it harder for them to show their love! But you know the truth now, and—and you will go, will you not?"

In her anxiety she laid her hand on his arm imploringly, and looked up at him with eyes moist with tears.

He looked at her, his brows knit, his lips set closely.

"By Heaven, if I thought you were right!" broke from him; then his tone changed, and his eyes grew hard with resentment. "No; you are wrong, quite wrong! And it is you who have come between us, and will rob us of our happiness! I—I—beg your pardon!" he faltered, for this slave of passion was, after all, a gentleman. "I beg your pardon! If you knew what I am suffering, what she must be suffering at this moment! Miss Lorton, you are her friend—you have no reason to bear me any ill will—I honor you for—for your motives in all this—but I implore you to stand aside. If you will go and bring her, I will wait here, and you shall hear from her own lips that you are wrong in supposing that any affection exists between her and him. I will wait here. Go, I beg of you! There is no time to lose!" [Pg 199]

"I will not!" said Nell, her slight figure erect, her eyes more eloquent than the tone of her resolution to save her friend.

"Then I will ring and ask her to come," he said, and he went toward the bell.

Nell sprang in front of it.

"No," she said, in a low voice. "It is I who will ring, and it is the earl who shall come."

Sir Archie stood, his hand outstretched to push her aside. Men of his class and character dislike a scene. He was not physically afraid of Lord Wolfer, but—a scene and a scandal which would leave Lady Wolfer at Wolfer House, while he was turned out, was a contretemps to be avoided, if possible.

"You must be mad!" he said, between his teeth. "Worse; you are laboring under a hideous mistake. She loves me, and you know it—she has never cared for Lord Wolfer. Please stand aside."

He put out his hand to gently remove her from before the bell, and at his touch the strain which Nell was undergoing became too tense for endurance. The color left her face and left it deathly white. With a faint moan she put her hand to her throat as if she were choking, and swayed to and fro as if she were giddy.

Sir Archie caught her just in time.

"Good heavens, don't faint!" he exclaimed, in a horrified whisper.

At the sound of his voice, at his touch, Nell recovered her full consciousness.

"Let me go! Don't touch me!" she breathed, with a shudder; but, before she could free herself from his hold, the door opened, and the earl entered.

With an oath, Sir Archie turned and glared at him, and Nell sank against the mantelshelf, and leaned there, faint and trembling.

The two men stood quite still and looked at each other. In these days we have taught ourselves to take the most critical moments of our lives quietly. There is no loud declamation, no melodramatic denunciation, no springing at each other's throats, or flashing of swords. We carry our wrongs to the law courts, and an aged gentleman in an ermine tippet, and a more or less grimy wig, avenges us—with costs and damages.

The earl was pale enough, and his eyes wore a stern expression as they rested upon his "friend"; but yet there was something in his face which seemed to indicate relief; and, presently, after a moment which seemed an age to Nell, his gaze left the other man's face and fixed itself on her. [Pg 200]

"Were you going out with Sir Archie Walbrooke, Miss Lorton?" he asked coldly.

Sir Archie started slightly, and would have spoken, but Nell looked at him quickly, a look which smote him to silence. She, too, remained silent, her hands clasped, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Is my inference a correct one?" said the earl, still more coldly. "I find you here—at this unusual hour—and dressed for traveling. And he is here—by appointment, I presume? Ah, do not deny it! It is too obvious."

Sir Archie opened his lips, but once more Nell looked at him, and once more her eyes commanded, rather than asked, his silence. He suppressed an oath, and stood with clenched hands, waiting in helpless irresolution. What was this girl going to do? Was she—was it possible that she was going to screen Lady Wolfer at the cost of her own reputation! The man was not altogether bad, and the remnant of honor which still glowed in his breast rose against the idea of such a sacrifice. And yet—it was for the woman he loved!

The perspiration broke out on his pale face, and he looked from the stern eyes of the earl to Nell's downcast ones.

"I can't stand this!" broke from his lips. "Look here, Wolfer!"

The earl raised his head.

"I have nothing to say to you. I decline to hear you," he said grimly. "I am addressing Miss Lorton. I have asked her a question; but it is not necessary to inflict the pain of an answer. I am

aware that I have no legal right to interfere in Miss Lorton's movements, but she is under my roof, she is a connection"—his voice grew a shade less stern—"I am, indeed, almost in the position of her guardian. Therefore, I deem it my duty to acquaint her with the character of the man with whom she proposes to—elope."

Nell raised her head, the crimson staining her whole face; and it seemed to Sir Archie as if her endurance had broken down; but she checked the indignant denial which had sprung to her lips, and, closing her lips tightly, sank back into her former attitude—an attitude which convinced Lord Wolfer of her guilt.

"Are you aware that this gentleman, who has honored you by an invitation to fly with him, is already a married man, Miss Lorton?"

Nell made no sign, but Sir Archie started and ground his teeth. [Pg 201]

"He has carefully concealed the fact; but—well, I happen to know it, and I think he will not venture to deny it."

He paused, but Sir Archie remained silent.

"Were you ignorant of it?" asked the earl.

Nell opened her lips, and they formed the word "Yes."

"I expected as much," said the earl. "And now that you know the truth, are you still desirous of accompanying him?"

Nell, with her eyes fixed on the ground, shook her head.

"No!" she whispered.

Sir Archie swore under his breath.

"I can't stand this!" he said desperately. "Look here, Wolfer, you are making a damnable mistake. Miss Lorton——"

The earl turned to him, but looked above his head.

"Excuse me," he said, "I have no desire to hear any explanation of your conduct—it would be impossible for you to defend it. But, having received Miss Lorton's reply to my question, I have the right to ask you to quit my house—and I do so!"

Sir Archie went up to Nell and looked at her straight in the face.

"Do you—do you wish me to remain silent?" he said hoarsely. "Think before you speak! Do you?"

Nell looked up instantly.

"Yes!" she replied, in a low voice. "If you will go—forever!"

Sir Archie gazed at her as if he had suddenly become unconscious of the earl's presence.

"My God!" he breathed. "You—you are treatin' me better than I deserve. Yes, I am goin'," he said, turning fiercely to the earl, who had made a slight movement of impatience. "But I want to say this. I want"—he moistened his lips, as if speech were difficult—"to tell you—and—and her—that—that what has taken place will never be spoken of by me while I live. I am goin'—abroad. I shall not return for some time."

The earl made a gesture of indifference.

"Your movements can be of no interest to me," he said, "and I trust that they may be of as little importance to this unhappy girl, now that she knows the character of the man whom she was about to trust."

Sir Archie laughed—a laugh that sounded hideously grotesque at such a moment; then he took up his hat and gloves; but he laid them down again.

"Will you give me a minute—three—with Miss Lorton, alone?" he asked, biting his lip. [Pg 202]

The earl hesitated for a moment, and glanced at Nell searchingly; then, as if satisfied, he said:

"Yes, I will do so, on condition that you leave this house at the expiration of that time. I will rejoin you when he has gone."

As he left the room, Sir Archie turned to Nell.

"Do you know what you have done?" he asked hoarsely, and almost inaudibly. "Do you know what this means: that you have sacrificed yourself for—for her?"

Nell had sunk into a chair, and she looked up at him, and then away from him; but in that momentary glance he had read the light of an inflexible resolution, an undaunted courage in the gray eyes.

"Yes, I know," she said. "He—he thinks, will always think, that it was I——" She broke off with an irrepressible shudder.

Sir Archie's hand went to his mustache to cover the quiver of his lips.

"My God! it's the noblest thing! But—have you counted the cost—the consequences?"

"Yes," she said. "But it does not matter. I—I am nobody—only a girl, with no husband, no one who loves, cares for me; while she——Yes, I know what I have done; but I am not sorry—I don't regret. I have your promise?" she looked up at his strained face solemnly. "You will keep it?—you will not break your word? You will go away and—and leave her?"

His hands clenched behind him, and he was silent for a moment; then he said:

"Yes, by Heaven! I will! The sacrifice shall not be all on your side. Tell her—no, tell her nothin', or you will have to tell her all. Tell her nothin'. Miss Lorton——" His voice broke, and he hesitated. Nell waited, and he found his voice again. "When I hear that there are no good women, no noble ones, I—I shall think of what you have done this mornin'. Good-by. I—I can't ask you to shake hands. My God! I'm not fit for you to touch! I see that now. Good-by!"

He went out of the room with drooping head, but he raised it as he passed the earl, and the two men nodded—for the benefit of the footman who opened the door.

Nell hid her face in her hands and waited, and presently the earl reëntered the library. [Pg 203]

CHAPTER XXIV.

Lord Wolfer stood, with his hand resting upon the table, in silence for a moment or two, regarding Nell, no longer sternly, but with an expression of pity which was novel in him. Nell sat with her head resting in her hands, her eyes downcast. She was still pale, but her lips were set firmly, as if she were prepared for rebuke and reproach.

"Do not be afraid," he said, at last. "I have not returned to—to blame you. You are too young to understand the peril—perhaps, too, the sin—of the step which you meditated taking. I am a man of the world, and I can appreciate the temptation to which you have been subjected. Sir Archie—well, all the world knows that such men are difficult to resist, and—and your inexperience betrayed you. I know the arts by which he gained your affections and hoped to mislead you."

It was almost more than she could bear; but Nell set her teeth hard and held her breath; for she felt it well-nigh impossible to resist the aching longing to utter the cry of the unjustly accused. "I am innocent—innocent!" But she remembered the unhappy woman whom she had saved, and suffered in silence.

"That you bitterly regret your—your weakness I am convinced," said Lord Wolfer; "and I am quite satisfied with your promise that you will not see him—I wish I could add, not think of him—again. He is a dangerous man, Miss Lorton"—he paused and paced to the window, and his lips twitched—"such men are a peril to every woman upon whom they—they chance to set their fickle fancy. At one time—yes, I owe it to you to be candid—at one time I feared"—he stopped again, and drummed upon the windowsill with his forefinger—"I feared he was paying Lady Wolfer too much attention. Even now I am not sure that my fears were groundless. He came to the house frequently, and was at my wife's side perpetually, before you came."

Nell held her breath. Had her sacrifice been in vain? Had he got an inkling of the truth? But he went on sternly and in a low voice:

"If there were any reason for my suspicions, it is evident that he transferred his affections to you. It is a terrible thing to say, but—but I feel as if—as if—your presence here had averted a dreadful catastrophe from us. Yes; that letter might have been meant for my wife, and I might have found her here instead of you. Do not think it heartless of me if I say that, deeply as I sympathize with [Pg 204] you and grieve for your—your trouble, I am relieved—relieved of an awful apprehension on—on Lady Wolfer's account. I have suffered a great deal during the past few months."

"Yes," said Nell, forgetting her own misery in sympathy for him.

He looked at her quickly.

"You have noticed it?"

Nell inclined her head.

"I have lived in the house—I have seen——" she faltered.

He nodded once or twice.

"Yes; I suppose that you could not help seeing that there has been a—a gulf between us; that we are not as other, happier, husbands and wives."

He sighed, and passed his hand across his brow wearily.

"But we are not the only couple who, living in the same house, are asunder. I am not the only man who has to endure, secretly and with a smiling face, the fact that his wife does not care for him."

Nell raised her head, and the color came to her pale face.

"You are wrong—wrong!" she said, in a low voice, but eagerly.

"Wrong? I beg your pardon?" he said gravely.

"It is all a terrible mistake," said Nell. "She does care for you. Oh, yes, yes! It is you who have been blind; it is your fault. It is hers, too; but you are the man, and it is your place to speak—to tell her that you love her——"

He reddened as he turned to her with a curious eagerness and surprise.

"I don't understand you," he said, with a shake in his voice. "Do you mean me to infer that—that I have been under a delusion in thinking that my wife——"

Nell rose and stretched out her hands with a gesture of infinite weariness.

"Oh, how blind you are!" she said, almost impatiently. "You think that she does not care for you, and she thinks that of you, and you are both in love with each other."

His face glowed, and a strange brightness—the glow of hope—shone in his eyes.

"Take care!" he said huskily. "You—you use words lightly, perhaps unthinkingly——"

Nell laughed, with a kind of weary irritation.

"I am telling you the truth; I am trying to open your eyes," she said. "She loves you."

"Why—why do you think so? Have you ever heard her address a word to me that had a note of tenderness in it?"

"Have you ever addressed such a word to her?" retorted Nell. [Pg 205]

He started, and gazed at her confusedly.

"You have always treated her as if she were a mere acquaintance, some one who was of no consequence to you. Oh, yes, you have been polite, kind, in a way, but not in a way a woman wants. I am only a girl, but—but"—she thought again of Drake, of her own love story, and her lips trembled—"but I have seen enough of the world to know that there is nothing which will hurt and harden a woman more than the 'kindness' with which you have treated her. I think—I don't know, but I think if I cared for a man, I would rather that he should beat me than treat me as if I were just a mere acquaintance whom he was bound to treat politely. And did you think that it was she who was to show her heart? No; a woman would rather die than do that. It is the man who must speak, who must tell her, ask her for her love. And you haven't, have you, Lord Wolfer?"

He put his hand to his brow and bit his lips.

"God forgive me!" he murmured. Then he looked at her steadily. "Yes, you have opened my eyes! Heaven grant that I may see this thing as you see it! Heaven grant it! My dear"—his voice shook with his gratitude—"where—where did you learn this wisdom, this knowledge of the human heart?"

Nell drew a long breath painfully, and her gray eyes grew dark.

"It isn't wisdom," she said wearily. "Any schoolgirl knows as much, would see what I have seen—though a man might not. You have been too busy, too taken up with politics—politics!—and she—she has tried to forget her troubles in lecturing, and meetings and committees. And all the while her heart was aching with longing, with longing for just one word from you."

The earl turned his head aside.

"Ah! if you doubt it still, go to her!" said Nell. "Go and ask her!"

"I will," he said, raising his head, his eyes glowing. "I will go."

He moved to the door, then stopped and came back to her; he had forgotten her, forgotten the tragic scene in which he had just taken part.

"I beg your pardon! Forgive me! It was ungrateful of me to forget your trouble, my dear!"

Nell made a gesture of indifference.

"It does not matter," she said dully. "I—I will go."

"Go?" he said.

"Yes. I will go—leave the house at once. I could not stay."

She looked round as if the walls were closing in on her. [Pg 206]

Wolfer knit his brows perplexedly.

"I—I do not like the idea of your going. Where will you go?"

"Home," she said; and the word struck across her heart and almost sent the tears to her eyes.

He went to the window and came back again.

"If—if you think it best," he said doubtfully. "I know that—that it must be painful to you to remain here, that the associations of this house——"

"Yes—yes," said Nell, almost impatiently.

"I need not say—indeed, I know that I need not—that no word of—of what has occurred this morning will ever pass my lips," he said in a low voice.

Nell looked up swiftly.

"Yes. Promise me, promise me on your honor that you will not tell Lady Wolfer!" she said.

"I promise," said the earl solemnly.

Nell glanced at the clock and mechanically took up her gloves, which she had torn from her hands.

"I will go straight to the station."

"You do not wish to see Ada?" he said, speaking of his wife by her Christian name, for the first time in Nell's hearing.

"No," she said, quietly but firmly.

"Perhaps it is best," he murmured. "I will order a carriage for you—you will have something to eat?"

"No, no; I will not! The carriage, please! Tell—tell Lady Wolfer that I had to go home suddenly. Tell her anything—but the truth."

He inclined his head; then he went to the bureau and took out some notes.

"You will let me give you these?" he asked, very humbly and anxiously.

Nell looked at the money with a dull indifference.

"What is owing to me, please. No more," she said.

"If I gave you that, it would leave me beggared," he said gravely. "Please give me your purse."

He folded some notes and put them in her purse, and held out his hand.

"You will let me go to the station?" he asked.

"No, no!" said Nell. "I would rather go alone."

"You are not afraid?" he ventured, in a low voice.

Nell was puzzled for a minute; then she understood that he meant afraid of Sir Archie. It was the last straw, and she broke down under it; but, instead of bursting into tears, she laughed—so wild, so eerie a laugh, that Wolfer was alarmed. But the laugh ceased suddenly, and she lowered her veil. He held out his hand again, and held hers in a warm and grateful grasp. [Pg 207]

"God bless you, my dear!" he said. "If you are right, I—I shall owe my life's happiness to you!"

Nell went up to her room and told Burden to pack a small hand bag. "I am going away for a few days," she said; and though she endeavored to speak easily, the maid looked at her anxiously.

"Not bad news, miss, I hope?" she said.

"No; oh, no!" replied Nell.

The earl was waiting for her in the hall, and put her into the brougham; and he stood and looked after the carriage with conflicting emotions.

Then he went upstairs, and, after pausing for a moment or two, knocked at his wife's door.

"It is I," he said.

He heard her cross the room, and presently she opened the door. She was in her dressing robe, and she looked at him as if she were trying to keep her surprise from revealing itself in her face.

"May I come in?" he said, his color coming and going. "I—I want to speak to you."

She opened the door wide, and he entered and closed it after him.

She moved to the dressing table, and took up a toilet bottle in an aimless fashion.

"I have come to tell you that I have to go abroad," he said. He had thought out what he would say, but his voice sounded strange and forced, and, by reason of his agitation, graver even than usual.

"Yes," she said, with polite interest. "When do you go?"

"To-day—at once," he said. "Can you be ready in time for us to catch the afternoon mail?"

She turned her head and looked at him. The sun had come out, and shone through the muslin curtains upon her pretty face and soft brown hair.

"I!" she said, surprised and startled. "I! Do you want me to go?"

"Yes," he said.

He stood, his eyes fixed on hers, his brows knit in suspense and anxiety.

"Why?" she asked.

He came a little nearer, but did not stretch out his hands, though he longed to do so.

"Because—I want you," he replied.

She looked at him, and something in his eyes, something new, strange, and perplexing, made her heart beat fast, and caused the blood to rush to her face. [Pg 208]

"You—want—me?" she said, in a low voice, which quavered. Its tremor drew him to her, and he held out his arms.

"Yes; I have wanted you—I have always wanted you. Ada, forgive me! Come to me!"

She half yielded, then she shrank back, her face white, her eyes full of remorse and something like fear.

"You—you don't know!" she panted.

"Yes, I know all—enough!" he said. "It was my fault as much—more than yours. Forgive me, Ada! Let us forget the past; let us begin our lives from to-day—this hour! No, don't speak! It is not necessary to say a word. Don't let us look back, but forward—forward! Ada, I love you! I have loved you all along, but I was a fool and blind; but my eyes are opened, and——Do you care for me? Or is it too late?"

She closed her eyes, and seemed as if about to fall, but he caught her in his arms, and, with a sob, she hid her face on his breast, weeping passionately.

Nell sank into a corner of the luxurious carriage, and stared vacantly before her. The reaction had set in, and she felt bewildered and confused. She was leaving Wolfer House "under a cloud." For all her life one person, at least—Lord Wolfer—would deem her guilty of misconduct. She shuddered and closed her eyes. How should she account to mamma for her sudden return? Then she tried to console herself, to ease her aching heart with the thought of the meeting, the reconciliation of the husband and wife. She had not sacrificed herself in vain, not in vain!

What did it matter that the earl deemed her guilty? As she had said, she was nobody, a girl for whom no one cared. She was going back to Shorne Mills. Well, thank God for that! In six hours she would be home. Home! Her heart ached at the word, ached with the longing for rest and peace.

She found that a train did not start until three, and she walked up and down the station for some time, trying to forget her unhappiness in the bustle and confusion which, even at the end of this nineteenth century, make traveling a burden and a trial.

Presently she began to feel faint rather than hungry, and she went into the refreshment room and asked for a glass of milk. While she was drinking it a gentleman came in. She saw that it was Lord Wolfer, and set down the glass and waited. The man seemed totally changed. The sternness had disappeared from his face, and his eyes were bright with his newly found happiness. [Pg 209]

"Why have you come?" she asked dully.

"I had to," he said. "I—I wanted to tell you—you were right—yes, you were right! I was blind. We were both blind! We are going abroad to-day—together. She has asked for you—almost directly—almost as if she—she suspected that you had brought us together! I told her that you had been sent for by Sophia. I wish you were not going; I wish you were coming with us!"

Nell shook her head wearily; and he nodded. He seemed years younger; and his old stiffness had disappeared from his manner, the grave solemnity from his voice.

"That is my train," said Nell.

He looked at her wistfully, as if he longed to take her back with him, but Nell walked resolutely down the platform, and he put her into a first-class compartment. Then he got some papers and magazines, and laid them on the seat beside her. It was evident that he did not know how sufficiently to express his gratitude.

"Your going is the only alloy to my—our happiness!" he said.

Nell smiled drearily.

"You will soon forget me," she could not help saying.

"Never! Don't think that!" he said. "Have you wired to say that you are coming?"

Nell shook her head.

"I will do so," he said.

The guard made his last inspection of the carriages, and Wolfer held her hand.

"Good-by," he said. "And—and thank you!"

The words were conventional enough, but Nell understood, and was comforted.

As the train left the station, the boys from the book stall came along with the early edition of the evening papers.

"Paper, miss?" asked one, standing on the step. "Evening paper? Sudden death of the Hearl of Hangleford!"

But Nell had no desire for an evening paper, and, shaking her head, sank back with a sigh.

CHAPTER XXV.

Beaumont Buildings is scarcely the place one would choose in which to spend a summer's day; for, though they reach unto the heavens, they are, like most of their kind, somewhat stuffy, the dust of the great city in all their nooks and corners, and the noise of the crowded life penetrates even to the topmost flat. [Pg 210]

The agent, a man of fine imagination and unlimited descriptive powers, states that Beaumont Buildings is "situated in a fashionable locality"; but though Fashion may dwell close at hand, and its carriages sometimes roll luxuriously through the street in which the Buildings tower, the street is a grimy and rather squalid one, in which most of the houses are shops—shops of the cheap and useful kind which cater for the poor.

There is always a noise and a blare in Beaumont Street. The butcher not only displays his joints and "block ornaments" outside his shop, but proclaims their excellence in stentorian tones; and the grocer and fruiterer and fishmonger compete with the costermongers, who stand yelling beside their barrows from early morn to late and gaslit night.

The smells of Beaumont Street are innumerable, and like unto the sea shells for variety; and the scent of oranges, the pungent odor of fried fish, from the shop down the side street, and that vague smell familiar to all who dwell in the heart of London, rise and enter the open windows.

On the pavement and in the roadway, among the cabs and tradesmen's carts, the children play and yell and screech; and at night the song of the intoxicated as he rolls homeward, or is conveyed to the nearest cell by the guardian of the peace he is breaking, flits across the dreams of those in the Buildings who are so unfortunate as to sleep lightly; and they are many.

And yet in a small room of a small flat on the fourth floor of this Babel of noise and unrest sat Nell.

Eighteen months had passed since she made her sacrifice and left Wolfer House. The black dress in which she looked so slight, and against which the ivory pallor of her face was accentuated, was worn as mourning for Mrs. Lorton; for that estimable lady had genteelly faded away, and Nell and Dick were alone in this transitory world.

The sun was pouring through the open window, and Nell had dragged her chair into the angle of the wall just out of the reach of the hot beams, but still near the window, in the hope of catching something of the smoke-laden air which away out in the country must be blowing so fresh and sweetly.

As she bent over the coat which she was mending for Dick, she was thinking of one place over which that same air was at that moment wafting the scent of the sea and the flowers—Shorne Mills; and, as she raised her eyes and glanced at the triangular patch of sky which was framed by the roofs of the opposite houses, she could see the picture she loved quite distinctly, and almost hear—notwithstanding the intermezzo banged out by the piano organ in the street below—the [Pg 211] songs and whistling of the fishermen, and the flap of the sails against the masts. Let the noise in and outside the Buildings be as great as it might, she could always lose herself in memories of Shorne Mills; and if sorrow's crown of sorrow be the remembering of happier days, such remembrance is not without its consolation.

When Dick and she had come to the Buildings, two months ago, Nell felt as if she should never get used to the crowded place and its multitudinous discomforts; but time had rendered life, even amid such surroundings, tolerable; and there were moments in which some phase of the human comedy always being played around her brought the smile to her pale face.

Presently she glanced at the tiny clock on the mantelshelf, and, laying the coat aside, put the kettle on the fire, and got ready for tea; for Dick would soon be home from the great engineering works on the other side of the water, and he liked his tea "to meet him on the stairs."

As she was cutting the bread for the toast there came a knock at the door, and in answer to her "Come in!" the door was opened halfway, and a head appeared around it.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lorton. Lorton not in? I thought I heard his step," said a man's voice, but one almost as soft as a woman's.

Nell scarcely looked up from her task; the tenants of Beaumont Buildings are sociable, and their visits to one another were not limited to the fashionable hours. For instance, the borrowing and returning of a saucepan or a sewing machine, or some lump sugar, went on all day, and sometimes late into the night; and the borrower or lender often granted or accepted a loan without stopping the occupation which he or she happened to be engaged in at the entrance of the other party.

"Not yet. It is scarcely his time, Mr. Falconer. Is it anything I can do?"

The young man came in slowly and with a certain timidity, and stood by the mantelshelf, looking down at her as she knelt and toasted the bread. He was very thin—painfully so—and very pale. There were shadows round his large, dark eyes—the eyes of a man who dreams—and his black hair, worn rather long, swept away from a forehead as white as a woman's, but with two deep lines between the eyes which told the story of pain suffered patiently and in silence.

His hands were long and thin—the hands of a musician—and the one on which his chin rested as he leaned against the mantelshelf trembled slightly. He had been practicing for three hours. He wore an old, a very old black velvet jacket, and trousers bulgy at the knees and frayed at the [Pg 212] edges; but both were well brushed, and his shirt and collar were scrupulously clean, though, like the trousers, they; showed signs of wear.

He occupied a room just above the Lortons' flat, and the sound of his piano and violin had entered so fully into Nell's daily life that she was sometimes conscious of a feeling of uneasiness when it ceased, and often caught herself waiting for it to begin again.

"Is it anything I can do?" she asked again, as he remained silent and lost in watching her.

"Oh, no!" he said. "I wanted him to help me lift the piano to another part of the room. The sun comes right on to it now, and it's hot. I tried by myself, but——" He stopped, as if he were ashamed of his weakness. "You've no idea how heavy a piano can make itself, especially on a hot day."

"He will be in directly, and delighted to help you. Meanwhile, help me make the toast, and stop to tea with us."

"I'll help you with the toast," he said. "But I've had my tea, thanks."

It was a falsehood, for he had run out of tea two days before; but he was proud as well as poor, which is a mistake.

"Oh, well, you can pretend to drink another cup," said Nell lightly; for she knew that the truth was not in his statement.

He stuck a slice of bread on a toasting fork, but did not kneel down before the fire for a moment or two.

"Your room faces the same way as mine," he said. "But it always seems cooler." His dark eyes wandered round meditatively. Small as the room was, it had that air of neatness which indicates the presence of a lady. The tea cloth was white, the few ornaments and pictures—brought from The Cottage—the small bookcase and wicker-work basket gave a touch of refinement, which was wholly wanting in his own sparsely furnished and always untidy den. "Coming in here is like—like coming into another world. I feel sometimes as if I should like to suggest that you should charge sixpence for admission. It would be worth that sum to most of the people in the Buildings, as a lesson in the use and beauty of soap and water and a duster."

Nell smiled.

"I think it is wonderful that they keep their rooms as clean as they do, seeing that every time one opens the windows the blacks pour in——"

"Like Zulus into a zareba—if that's what they call it. Yes; no denizen of the Buildings would feel strange in Africa, for, whatever the weather may be, the blacks are always with us. Should you [Pg 213] say that this is done on this side?"

He held up the slice on the toasting fork for her inspection.

"Beautifully! Turn it, please."

"I hope to Heaven I shan't drop it! There you are! I knew I should."

"Well, you can keep that one for yourself," said Nell, laughing.

He listened to the laugh, with his head a little on one side.

"I like to hear that," he said, almost to himself, "though, sometimes, I wonder how you can do it—you, who must always be longing for the fresh air—for the country."

Nell winced.

"What is the use of longing for that which one cannot have?" she said lightly, but checking a sigh.

He looked at her quickly, strangely, and a faint dash of color rose to his pale face.

"That's true philosophy, at any rate," he said, in a low voice; "but, all the same, one can't help longing sometimes."

As he spoke, he stole a glance at the beautiful face; and, in looking, forgot the toast, which promptly showed its resentment of his neglect by "catching," and filling the apartment with the smell of scorched bread.

"I think that's burning," said Nell.

"And I'm sure of it," he said penitently. "If ever you are in doubt as to the statement that man is a useless animal, set me to some simple task, Miss Lorton, and I'll prove it beyond question. Never mind, it's my slice, and charcoal is extremely wholesome."

"There's another; and do be careful! And how are you getting on?"

He jerked his head toward the sitting room above, where the piano was.

"The cantata? Slowly, slowly," he said thoughtfully. "Sometimes it goes, like a two-year-old; at others it drags and creeps along, and more often it stops altogether. You haven't heard it lately; perhaps that's the reason I'm sticking. I notice that I always get on better and faster after you—and Lorton—have been up to mark progress. Perhaps you'll come up this evening? It's cruel to ask you, I know, for you must hate the sound of my piano and fiddle, just as much as I hate the sound of Mrs. Jones spanking Tommy, or the whizzing of the sewing machine of that poor girl in the next room. And you must hear them, too—you, who have been so used to the quiet of the [Pg 214] country, the music of the sea, and the humming of bees! Yes, it is harder for you, Miss Lorton, than for any of the rest of us; and I often stop in the middle of the cantata and think how you must suffer."

"Then don't think of it again," said Nell cheerfully, "for, indeed, there is no cause to pity me. At first——" She stopped, and her brows knit with the memory of the first few weeks of Beaumont Buildings. "Well, at first it was rather—trying; but after a while one gets used——"

"Used to the infernal—I beg your pardon—the incessant bangings on a piano, and the wailings of Tommy Jones. But you wouldn't complain even if you still suffered as keenly as you did when you first came. I know. Sometimes I feel that I would give ten years of my life if I could hear you say 'Good-by, Mr. Falconer; we are going!' though God knows I—we—should all miss you badly enough."

There came a knock at the door—a soft, dull knock, followed by a rattle of the handle—and a mite of a boy stood in the opening, inhaling the scent of the tea and toast, and gazing wide-eyed at the two occupants of the room.

"Please, mother ses will 'oo lend her free lumps o' sugar, Miss 'Orton; 'cos she've run out."

"Of course I will! And come in, Tommy!" said Nell. "There you are!"

She wrapped half the contents of the sugar basin in a piece of paper and gave it him; then, seeing his eyes fixed wistfully on the pile of buttered toast, she took a couple of slices, arranged them in sandwich fashion, butter side inward, and put them into his chubby and grimy fist. "There you are. And, Tommy, you'll be a good boy, and won't eat any of the sugar, will you?"

"No; I'll be dood, Miss 'Orton. I'll promise I'll be dood."

"Then there's one lump all to yourself!" she said, sticking it into the other fist. "Open the door for him, Mr. Falconer; and don't watch him up the stairs; he'll keep his promise," she added, in a low voice, as she searched for a comparatively clean spot on Tommy's face on which to kiss him.

"Go on—you lucky young beggar!" said Falconer, under his breath, and eying Tommy enviously.

"If you've any pity to waste, spend it on the children," said Nell, with a sigh. "Oh, what would I give to be a fairy, just for one day, and whisk them off to the seaside, into the open fields, anywhere out of Beaumont Buildings. Sometimes, when I see the women drive by in their carriages, with a lap dog on their knees or stuck up beside them, it makes me feel wicked! I want to stick my head out of the window and call put: 'Come up here and fetch some of the children for [Pg 215] a drive; I'll take care of the dog while you're gone!' Dick's late!" she broke off; "we'd better begin. Help me wheel the table down to the window."

He attempted to do it by himself, but the color rose to his face and his breath came fast, and Nell insisted on bearing a hand.

"That's better!" she said cheerfully, and ignoring the signs of his weakness. "You can reach the toast——"

He stood by the window, looking down absently and regaining his breath which the effort, slight as it was, had tried.

"There's a brougham stopped at the door," he said. "Doctor, I suppose. No, it's a lady—a fashionable lady. Perhaps she's come to take one of the children for a drive?"

Nell looked out and uttered an exclamation.

"I—I know her," she said, with some agitation. "I'm afraid she's coming here—to see me!"

He moved to the door at once.

"Oh, but stay! Why do you run away?" she exclaimed.

He glanced at his seedy coat with a grave shyness.

"I'll come back if you're mistaken," he said. "Your swell visitor would be rather astonished at my appearance; and I'm afraid there isn't time to get my frock coat out of pawn."

"Don't go!" begged Nell; but he shook his head and left her; and as she heard his step going slowly up the stone stairs, she glanced at the tea, and thought pitifully of the meal he was losing; then she stood by the table and waited, trying to steady the beating of her heart, to assure herself that she had been mistaken; but presently some one knocked, and, opening the door, she saw Lady Wolfer standing before her.

Lady Wolfer drew the slight figure to her and kissed her again and again.

"You wicked girl!" she said, gazing at her with tender reproach. "Aren't you going to let me come in? Why do you stand and look at me with those grave eyes of yours, as if you were sorry to see me? Oh, my dear, my dear!"

"Yes, come in," said Nell, with something like the sigh of resignation.

Lady Wolfer still held her by the arm, and turned her face to the light. There had been a dash of color in it a moment ago, but it had faded, and Lady Wolfer's eyes filled with tears as she noticed the thinness and pallor of the face.

"Nell, Nell! it is wicked of you! I only knew it last night, when we came back. I thought you were at Shorne Mills still! You wrote from there—you said nothing about coming to London." [Pg 216]

"That was more than two months ago," said Nell, with a grave smile. "And—and I said nothing because I knew that you—that Lord Wolfer—would want to—to help us. And there was no need—is none."

"No need!" Lady Wolfer looked round the room, listened for a moment to the strains of the piano mingling with the squeals of the children in the house, the yells of those playing in the street, and scented the various odors floating in at the window. "No need! Oh, Nell! isn't it wicked to be so stubborn and so proud? And we knew nothing! We thought that you had enough——"

"So we have," said Nell. "They have been very good to Dick at the works, and he is earning wages, and there—there was some money left—a little—but enough."

"Only enough to permit you to live here! In this prison! Nell, you must let me take you away——"

Nell shook her head, smiling still, but with that "stubborn" expression in her eyes which the other woman remembered.

"And leave Dick!" she said. "No, no! Don't say another word! Call us proud and stiff-necked, if you like—we're not, really—but neither Dick nor I could take anything from any one while we have enough of our own. If we could—if ever we 'run short,' and are in danger of starvation, then—— But that won't happen. You don't know how clever Dick is, and how much they think of him at the works! He'll be in directly, with his hands and face all smutty, and famishing for his tea——" She laughed as she fetched another cup. "And you've come just in time. Sit down and leave off staring at me so reproachfully, and tell me all the news."

"No," said Lady Wolfer. "You tell me; yes, tell me all about it, Nell."

Nell smiled as she poured out the tea—the smile which bravely checks the sigh.

"There is not much to tell," she said. "When I got home—to Shorne Mills"—should she never be able to speak the words without a pang?—"I found mamma unwell, very unwell. She was quite changed——"

"That is why she sent for you, of course," said Lady Wolfer. "Nell, why did you go without seeing me, without saying good-by?"

"I had to leave at once," said Nell timidly, and fighting with her rising color.

"That day! I shall never forget it," said Lady Wolfer softly, and looking straight before her. "Yes, I have something to tell you, dear. But go on." [Pg 217]

"Mamma was ill; but I was not frightened—not at first. She was always an invalid, you know, and I thought that she would get better. But she did not; she got weaker every day, and——" The tears came to her eyes, and she turned away to the fire for a moment. "Molly and I nursed her. Molly was our servant, and like a friend indeed, and the parting with her——She did not suffer much, and she was so patient, so changed. She was like a child at last; she could not bear me to leave her. I used to think that she—she was not very fond of me; but—but all that was changed before she died, and she grew to like me as much as she liked Dick. He had always been her favorite. To the last she did not think she was going to die, and—and—the evening before she went we"—she laughed, the laugh so near akin to tears—"we cut out a paper pattern for a new dress for her—one of your patterns."

"My poor Nell!" murmured Lady Wolfer.

"Then she died; and the Bardsleys offered Dick a situation—it was very kind and unusual, Dick says, and he cannot quite understand it even now—and, of course, we had to come to London ——"

She stopped, and Lady Wolfer looked round and out of the window.

"No; we had to live in London, to be near the works, you know. We are very comfortable and happy."

"My poor Nell!"

"Oh, but don't pity us," said Nell, smiling. "You don't know how jolly we are, and how full of amusement our life is. We even go to the theater sometimes, and sometimes Dick brings a friend home to tea; and there are friends here in the Buildings—one has just left me. And Dick is going to be a great man, and rich and famous. Oh, there is not a doubt about it. Though Beaumont Buildings are pretty large, we have several castles in the air quite as big. And now tell me—about yourself," she broke off suddenly, and with a touch of embarrassment. "You are looking very well; yes, and younger; and your hair is long; and what a swell you are!"

"Am I?" said Lady Wolfer, in a low voice, and smiling softly. "I am glad. Nell, while you have been in such trouble—my poor, dear Nell!—I have been so happy. How can I tell you? I feel so ashamed." Her face grew crimson, and she looked down as if smitten with shame; then she raised her eyes. "It began—my happiness, I mean—the day you left us. Do you remember the night before, and—and the wild, wicked words I spoke to you?" [Pg 218]

Nell nodded slightly, and bent over the tea things.

"I was mad that night—reckless and desperate. I—I thought that my husband didn't care for me."

Nell shook her head.

"Yes; you said I was wrong—that it was all a mistake. How did you know, dear? But I did not believe you; and I—I thought—God forgive me!—that I owed it to the man who did love me—that other. Nell, I cannot bear to speak his name now—now that all is altered! I thought that I was bound to go away with him! He had asked me—implored me more than once. I knew that he would ask me again, and soon, and—and I should have yielded!"

"No, no!" said Nell, going round to her, and putting her arms round her.

"Yes, ah, yes, I should!" said Lady Wolfer. "I had made up my mind. I was reckless and desperate. That very morning I had decided to go, whenever he asked me; and that very morning, quite early, while I was dressing, my husband came to me, and—Nell, you were right, though even now I cannot guess how you knew."

"Spectators see more of the game, dear," said Nell softly.

"And in a moment everything was changed; and I knew the truth—that he loved me—had loved me from the first. We had both been blind. But I was the worst; for I, being a woman, ought to have seen that his coldness was only the screen which his pride erected between his heart and the woman whom he thought had only married him for position. We went away together that day—our real honeymoon. Forgive me, Nell, if—if I almost forgot you! Happiness makes us selfish, dear! But I did not forget you for long. And he—Nell, why does he always speak of you as if he owed you something——"

She broke off, looking at Nell with a puzzled air.

Nell smiled enigmatically, but said nothing.

"Nell, dear, he bade me bring you back with me."

Nell shook her head.

"You will not? But you will come and stay with us; you will bring your brother? Make your home with us while we are in town, at any rate, dear. Ah, don't be stubborn, Nell! Somehow, I feel as if—as if I owed my new happiness to you—that's strange, isn't it? But it is so. And you will come?"

But Nell was wise in her generation, and remained firm.

"I must stay with Dick," she said. "We are all and all to each other. But you shall come and see me sometimes, if you will promise to be good, and not try and persuade me into leaving that sphere in which the Fates have placed me."

Lady Wolfer sighed.

"You little mule! You always had your own way while you were at Wolfer House, and I see you haven't changed. But I give you fair warning, Nell, that one day I shall take you at your weakest, and bear you away from this—this awful place! It is not fitting that you should be here! Dear, don't forget that you are a relation of mine!" [Pg 219]

"A poor relation," said Nell, laughing softly. "And, like all poor relations, to be kept at a proper distance. Go now, dear; that coachman of yours is getting anxious about his horses."

Lady Wolfer pleaded hard, but Nell remained firm.

Her ladyship was welcome to visit at Beaumont Buildings as often as she chose, but Beaumont Buildings would keep itself to itself; and, at last, her brougham drove away.

It had scarcely turned the corner before Falconer knocked at the Lortons' door.

"Gone!" he said.

"Yes, quite gone," said Nell cheerfully, but thoughtfully. "Come and have your tea; and I'll have another cup."

He sat down at the table. Tea is a serious meal at Beaumont Buildings, and is eaten at the table, not in chairs scattered over the room. But Falconer set his cup down at the first sip and pushed his plate away.

"I know the sequel of this comedy," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Nell, staring at him.

"Enter swell friend. 'Found at last! Ah, leave this abode of poverty and squalor. Come with me!' and the heroine goeth."

Nell laughed.

"How foolish you are, Mr. Falconer! The heroine—if you mean me—does not 'goeth,' but remains where she is."

"Do you mean it?" he asked, the color rising to his pale face.

"Yes," she said, with a cheerful nod.

"Then pass the toast," he said. "I breathe again, and tea is possible. But she wanted you to go? Don't deny it!"

Nell's pale face flushed.

"Yes. She wanted me to go; but I would not. I am going to remain at Beaumont Buildings," said Nell resolutely.

As she spoke, the door opened, and Dick entered quickly. His face and hands were smudgy, but his eyes were bright in their rings of smoke and smut.

"Hallo, Nell; hallo, Falconer!" he cried. "Eaten all the tea? Hope not, for I'm famishing. Nell, I've got some news for you—wait till I've cleaned myself."

"No, you don't!" said Falconer, catching him by the arm. "What is it?"

"Oh, not much. Only there's a chance of our leaving these beastly Buildings. I've got to go down to a place in the country to manage some water works, and install the electric light." [Pg 220]

Falconer's face fell for a moment, then he smiled cheerfully.

"Congratulations, old fellow!" he said. "When do you go?"

"Oh, in about a fortnight. That's what kept me late. Think of it! The country, Nellakins! Jump for joy, but don't upset the tea things!"

"Where is it, Dick?" she asked, as he went to the door.

"At a place called Anglemere. One of the ancestral halls, don't you know. 'Historic Castles of England' kind of place."

"Anglemere?" said Nell, wrinkling her brows. "I seem to remember it."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Dick, having "cleaned" and "stoked" himself with tea and toast, vouchsafed for further information:

"Anglemere's in Hampshire. It's a tremendous place, so a fellow at the works says, who's seen it; one of the show places, you know; 'a venerable pile,' with a collection of pictures, and a famous library, and all that. Lord Angleford——"

"I remember!" Nell broke in, "I met Lady Angleford at Wolfer House; a little woman, and very pretty. She was exceedingly kind to me."

"Sensible as well as pretty," murmured Falconer. He had drawn his chair to the window, and was gazing down at the crowded street rather absently and sadly. In a fortnight the girl who had brightened his life, who had transformed Beaumont Buildings into an earthly paradise for him, would be gone!

"Oh!" said Dick. "That would have been the late earl's wife. The present one isn't married. He's a young chap—lucky bargee! The late earl died about eighteen months ago, suddenly. I heard old Bardsley talking about it while I was in the office with him. He's been away traveling——"

"Who—old Bardsley?" asked Nell.

"No, brainless one," said Dick; "the young earl, Lord Angleford. Rather a curious sort of customer, I should fancy, for nobody seems to know where he has been, or where he is. Left England suddenly—kind of disappearance. They couldn't find him in time for the funeral, and he's away still; but he's sent orders that this place—the beggar's got three or four others in England [Pg 221] and elsewhere, I believe—should be put in fighting trim—water supply, new stables, electric light —the whole bag of tricks. And I—I who speak to you—am going to be a kind of clerk of the works. No need to go on your knees to me, Falconer; just simply bow respectfully. You will find no alteration in me. I shall be as pleasant and affable as ever. No pride in me."

"Thank you—thank you," said Falconer, with exaggerated meekness. "But—pardon the curiosity of an humble friend—I don't quite see where Miss Lorton comes in."

"Oh, it's this way," said Dick, reaching for his pipe—for your engineer, more even than other men, must have his smoke immediately after he has stoked: "the place is empty—nobody but caretakers and a few servants—and the agent has offered me the use of one of the lodges. There is no accommodation at the inn, I understand."

"I see," said Falconer.

"Just so, perspicacious one. It happens to be a tiny-sized lodge, with two or three bedrooms. My idea is that Nell and I could take possession of the lodge, hire a slavey from the village, and have a good time of it."

"Pleasure and business combined," said Falconer. "And it will be nice, when the Buildings are as hot as—as a baker's oven, to think of Miss Lorton strolling through the woods—there must be woods, of course—or sitting with a book beside the stream—for equally, of course, there is a stream."

"Get your fiddle and play us a 'Te Deum' for the occasion," said Dick suddenly.

When Falconer had left the room, Nell told Dick of Lady Wolfer's visit.

"Oh!" he said, by no means delightedly. "And wants you to go and live with her; or offered to make us an allowance, I suppose? At any rate, I won't have anything of that kind, Nell," he added, with fraternal despotism.

"You need not be afraid. I shall not go—there are reasons——" She turned away to hide the sudden blush. "And I am as proud as you, Dick. I should like to ask Mr. Falconer to come down to us at this place. He has not been looking well lately."

Dick shook his head.

"No, poor beggar! I'm afraid he's in a bad way. Do you hear him cough at night? It's worse than he pretends."

"Hush!" said Nell warningly, as the musician reëntered, his violin held lovingly under his arm.

Soon the small room was filled with the strains of jubilant music—a "Te Deum" of thanksgiving and rejoicing.

"That's for you," he said. [Pg 222]

Then suddenly the tune changed to a sad yet delicious melody whose sweetness thrilled through Nell, and made her think of Shorne Mills—and Drake; and as he played on she turned her face away from him and to the open window through which the wailing of the music floated, causing more than one of the passers-by in the street beneath to pause and look up with wistful eyes.

"And that is for me," said Falconer; "for me—and the rest of us—whom you will leave behind. Good night." And with an abrupt nod he left the room.

As a rule he played, in his own room, late into the night; but to-night the piano and violin were silent, and he sat by the window looking at the stars, in each of which he saw the beautiful face of the girl in the room below.

"She doesn't even guess it," he murmured. "She will never know that I—I love her. And that's all right; for though she wouldn't laugh at the love of a pauper with one leg in the grave, she'd pity me, and I couldn't stand that. She'd pity me and make herself unhappy over my—my folly; and she's unhappy enough as it is. I wonder what it is? As I watch her eyes, with that sad, wistful look in them, I feel that I would give the world to know, and another world on top of it to be able to help her. Sometimes I fancy that the look is a reflection of that in my own eyes, and that would mean that she loved some one as I love her. Is that the meaning? Is there some one of whom she is always thinking as I think of her? The look was in her eyes while I was playing to-night; I saw it as I have seen it so often."

He sighed, and hid his face in his long, thin hands.

"They paint love as a chubby, laughing child," he mused bitterly. "They should draw him as a

cruel, heartless monster, with a scourge instead of a toy dart in his hands. If I wrote a love song, it should be the wail of a breaking heart. Only two months! It seems as if I had known her for years. Was that look always in her eyes? Will it always remain there? Oh, God! if I could change it, if I could be the means——Yes; I'd ask for nothing more, nothing better, but just to see her happy. They might carry my coffin down the stairs as soon as they pleased afterward."

He stretched out his hand for his violin, but drew his hand back.

"Not to-night. They are talking over the brother's slice of luck, and I won't break in upon their joy. Good night, my love—who never will be mine."

Every evening Dick came home with fresh items of information about the work to be done at Anglemere, and Nell began to catch something of the excitement of his anticipation. [Pg 223]

Sometimes Falconer came down to listen, and he tried to hide the pain the prospect of their departure cost him, as now and again he joined in the discussion of their plans; but more often he sat gazing out of the window, and stealing glances at the beautiful face as it bent over some needlework for Dick or herself—more often for Dick.

But one night—it was the night before they were to start—he almost betrayed himself.

"To-morrow you will have escaped the piano and violin, Tommy's squeals and the yowling of the cats, the manifold charms of Beaumont Buildings, and the picturesque cabbages of the costers' barrows, Miss Lorton. I wonder whether you will ever come back?"

"Why, of course," said Nell, smiling. "Dick is not going to spend the remainder of his life at Anglemere. Oh, yes; we shall be back almost before you have missed us, Mr. Falconer."

"Think so?" he said, smiling, too, but with a strange look in his eyes, and a tremulous quiver of the thin and too-red lips. "Then you will have to be back in a very few minutes after the cab has left the door. No; somehow I fancy that Beaumont Buildings is seeing the last of you. Tommy must share my dread, for he howled with more than his accustomed vehemence when he said 'Good-by' just now."

"That was because you said I ought not to kiss him, because he was so dirty," said Nell. "Poor little Tommy! Yes, I think he'll miss me!"

"It's not improbable," he said, in his ironical way. "I wish I were seven years old, with a smudgy face and a perpetual sniff. Who knows! You might have some pity to spare for me."

Nell laughed with the unconscious heartlessness of the woman who does not suspect that the man she is laughing at loves her better than life itself.

"Oh, I hope you will miss us, too," she said. "But you will be freer to get on with your work. I'm afraid Dick—and I, too!—have often interrupted you and interfered with your composing. You must set at the cantata while we are away, and have it finished for us to hear when we come back. And, Mr. Falconer, you will take care of yourself, won't you? You are so careless, you know—about going out in the rain and at night without an umbrella or overcoat. I heard you coughing last night."

"Did you?" he said. "I hope I didn't keep you awake! I kept my head under the bedclothes as much as I could! Yes, I'll take care, though I don't think it matters very much." [Pg 224]

Nell looked up at him, startled and rather shocked.

"Why do you say that?" she said reproachfully. "Do you think that Dick—and I—wouldn't be sorry if you were ill?"

"Yes," he said, smiling gravely, "you would be sorry. So you would be if Tommy got the measles, or the black cat opposite were to slip off the tiles and break its neck, or Giles came home sober enough one night to kill his wife. There! I've hurt you! I didn't mean to! It's sheer cussedness on my part, and I'm an ill-conditioned cur to say a word." Then suddenly the smile vanished, and his misery showed itself in his dark eyes. "Ah! can't you see what your going means to me—can't you see?" He caught his emotion by the throat and checked it. "That—that I shall miss you—and Dick; that I shan't have any one to come to with my cantata and my cough. There's Dick calling, and good-by. I—I shall be out at a music lesson when you start to-morrow."

He held her hand for a moment or two, half raised it slowly, but, with a wistful smile and a tightening of his lips, let it fall.

He was not out when they drove away next morning, but his door was closed, and he watched them from behind the ragged curtains drawn closely over the grimy window. Then, when the cab had rattled away, he went out on the landing and found Tommy seated on the stairs, bewailing his desertion, with his two chubby, sooty fists kneading his swollen eyes.

"Come inside, Tommy," he said. "Let us mingle our tears together. You ungrateful young sweep, how dare you cry! She kissed you!"

Nell, of the tender heart, had grown somewhat fond of Beaumont Buildings, and she sighed

rather wistfully as she looked back at it, and thought of the humble friends who would, she knew, miss her; but her spirits rose as the train left the tops of the houses and carried Dick and her into the fresh air of the great Hampshire downs.

"It seems years, ages, since I saw the country!" she exclaimed. "Dick, do you see those sheep? They are white! Think of it! Think of the grimy ones in the parks! Couldn't we have a Society for Washing the Poor London Sheep, Dick? And look at that farmhouse! Oh, Dick, it isn't Devonshire and—and Shorne Mills, but it is the country at last!"

"All right; keep your hair on, young woman," said Dick, looking out of the window in a patronizing fashion. "This is all very well; but wait until you get to Anglemere. Then you can shout and carry [Pg 225] on if you like. Old Bardsley—nice old chap when he steps off his perch—says it is one of the most delightful 'seats' in England; as if it were a kind of armchair! Lucky beggar, this young lord! Nell, I've a kind of feeling that I ought to have been the heldest son of an hearl, but that I was changed in the cradle, don't you know. I should advise you not to stick your head too far out of the window, or one of these tunnels will knock it off. A brainless sister I can bear with, but one without any head at all would be rather too much."

He was pretty jubilant himself, though, boylike, he tried to play the cynic; and when the ramshackle fly drove through the picturesque village, and they came in sight of a huge palace of a house which gleamed redly through the trees of an English park, and the flyman, pointing with his whip, informed them that it was Anglemere, Dick emitted a whistle of surprise and admiration.

"I say, that is something like! What signifies the Maltbys' and the other places we know, after that?"

But Nell's eyes, after a glance at the great house, were fixed upon the lodge at which the fly had stopped.

"Oh, Dick, how pretty!" she exclaimed, her beautiful face radiant with delight as she gazed at the ivy-covered little house with its latticed windows and Gothic porch.

A young girl—the village slavey Dick had engaged—stood under the porch to welcome them, and demurely conducted Nell over the lodge.

They scrambled through a hasty meal, and Dick invited Nell—with a touch of importance and dignity which made her smile, to "come up and see the house."

They walked up a magnificent avenue, and stood for a moment or two looking upon one of the finest specimens of Gothic domestic architecture in England.

"Fine, isn't it?" said Dick, with bated breath. "Like a picture in a Christmas number, eh, Nell? See the carving along the front, and the terrace? And there's the peacock, there, perched behind that stone lion. Fancy such a place as this belonging to you, your very own. Yes, Lord Angleford's a lucky chap!"

They went up the stone steps to the terrace steps, up which Queen Bess had ascended with stately stride, and, crossing the terrace, into the hall.

The staircase, broad enough for a coach and four, had sheets of brown holland hanging from it, and the pictures, statuary, cabinets, and figures in armor were swathed in protecting covers; but enough was visible of the magnificence, the antiquity of the grand old hall to impress Nell.

Some men were at work, whitewashing and decorating, and they stopped their splashing to [Pg 226] permit Nell and Dick to go upstairs; and one or two of them touched their hats respectfully to the pretty young lady and her brother.

The corridors were wide and newly decorated, and lined with priceless pictures which Nell longed to linger over; but Dick led her on from one room to another; from suites in which the antique furniture had been suffered to remain to others furnished with modern luxury.

As they went downstairs again they were met by a dignified old lady who introduced herself as the housekeeper; and who, upon being informed that Dick was "the gentleman from Bardsley & Bardsley," graciously conducted them over the state apartments. Most of us know Anglemere, either from having visited it, or from the innumerable photographs of it, but Nell had not seen any pictorial representation of it, and its glories broke upon her with all the force of freshness. In silent wonder she followed the stately dame as she led them from one magnificent room to another, remarking with a pleasant kind of condescension:

"This is the great drawing-room. Designed by Onigo Jones. Pictures by Watteau. Queen Elizabeth sat in that chair near the antique mantelpiece of lapis-lazuli; this chair is never moved. This, the adjoining room, is the ballroom. Pictures by Bouchier; notice the painted ceiling, the finest in Europe, and costing over twenty thousand pounds. The next room is the royal antechamber, so called because James II. used it for writing letters while visiting Anglemere. We now pass into the banquet hall. Carved oak by Grinling Gibbings. You will remark the lifesized figures along the dado. It was here that Charles I., the Martyr, dined with his consort, Henrietta. That buffet, large as it is, will not hold the service of gold plate. That painted window's said to be the oldest of any, not ecclesiastic, in Europe. It is priceless. The pictures round the room are by Van Dyck and Carlo Dolci. The one over the mantelpiece is a portrait of the seventh Earl of Angleford."

Nell looked up at it. She was half confused by the splendors of the place and her efforts to follow the descriptions and explanations of the stately housekeeper; but as she raised her eyes to the portrait she was conscious of a sensation of surprise. For in some vague way the portrait reminded her of Drake. The pictured Angleford wore a ruff, and was habited in satin and armor, but the face——

"Come on! What are you staring at?" said Dick, impatiently; and she followed the cicerone into another room, and listened to the monotonous voice repeating the well-learned lesson.

"We have here the library, the famous Angleford library. There are twenty thousand volumes, many of them unique. They are often consulted by savants—with the permission of the earl. Many of them are priceless. That portrait is Lord Bacon," et cetera, et cetera. [Pg 227]

"Let us go," whispered Nell, in Dick's ear. "The greatness of the house of Angleford is getting on my nerves! I—I can't help thinking of Beaumont Buildings! It is too great a contrast!"

"Shut up!" retorted Dick, who was intensely interested.

Nell went through the remainder of the inspection with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. What right had any one man to such luxury, to such splendor, while others were born to penury and suffering?

While she was asking herself this question, the housekeeper had led them to the picture gallery, the gallery which artists came from all corners of the world to visit.

"Portraits of the earls of Angleford," she said, waving a black-clad, condescending arm.

"Is the portrait of the present Earl of Angleford here?" asked Dick, with not unnatural interest.

"No, sir. The present earl is not here. You see, it was not thought that he would be the earl. That is the late earl. Would you like to see the stables? If so, I will call the head coachman——"

But they had seen enough for one day, and, almost in silence, walked back to the lodge.

"I wonder whether Lord Angleford knows, realizes, how big a man he is?" said Dick, as he smoked his last pipe that night in the sitting room of the lodge. "We've seen the house, but we haven't seen the park or the estates or the farms, which extend for miles around. Fancy owning all this, and a title, a name, which every boy and girl learns about when they read their English history!"

"I decline to fancy to realize anything more," said Nell, with a laugh. "That old woman's voice rings in my ears, and I feel as if I were intoxicated with, overwhelmed by, the grandeur of the Anglefords. I am going to bed now, Dick. To bed in a house in the country, with the scent of the flowers stealing in at the windows! Oh, think of it! and think of—Beaumont Buildings! Dick, would it be possible to obtain the post of lodgekeeper to Anglemere House? I envy the meanest laborer on the estate. Next to being the earl himself, I think I would like to be keeper of one of the lodges, or—or chief of the laundry!"

She went up to her room—a room in which the ceiling was "covered" to the shape of the thatched roof.

She was brushing the long tresses of soft, fluffy black hair which Drake had loved to kiss, when she heard the sound of a horse trotting up the avenue. [Pg 228]

She went to the window, and, screened by the curtain, looked out. A full moon was shining and flooding the avenue With light.

She waited, looking out absently. The sound came nearer, and suddenly the horseman came in sight. Holding the muslin curtain for a screen, she still waited and watched for him. Then, with a faint cry—a cry almost of terror—she shrank back.

For the man who was riding up the avenue to Anglemere was strangely like Drake!

He had passed in an instant; his head was bowed, his face only for a moment in the moonlight, and yet—and yet! Was she dreaming—was fancy only trifling with her—or was it indeed and in truth Drake himself?

CHAPTER XXVII.

Nell lay awake for hours, dwelling on the appearance of the horseman who had ridden by in the moonlight.

It seemed to her that it was impossible that she, of all persons in the world, could be mistaken; and yet how could Drake be here, and why should he be riding up the avenue of Anglemere at this time of night?

The sight of him, if it was he, aroused all the love in her heart, which needed little, indeed, to arouse it. She had tried to forget him during the vicissitudes of the last two years, but she knew that he was still enshrined in her heart, that while life lasted she must love him and long for him.

She endeavored, by thinking of him as betrothed—perhaps married—to Lady Luce, as belonging to her, to oust her love for him as a sin, as shameful as it was futile; but there was scarcely an hour of the day in which her thoughts did not turn to him, and at night she awoke from some dream, in which he was the central figure, with an aching heart.

Life is but a hollow mockery to the woman, or the man, whose unrequited love fills the hours with an unsatisfied longing.

When she awoke in the morning, the likeness to Drake of the man she had seen had grown vaguer to her mind, and she persuaded herself that it was a likeness only; but her restless night had made her pale and preoccupied; but Dick, when he came in to breakfast, was too engrossed and excited to notice it. [Pg 229]

"I've just been up to the house," he said, as he flung his cap on the sofa and lifted the cover from the savory dish of ham and eggs. "By George! we shall have to slip into it and look alive! The contractors have had a letter from Lady Angleford. It seems the earl's in England, and wants the place as soon as possible. The foreman has sent to London for more hands. I've wired the Bardsleys, telling them we've got to hurry up. It's always the way with these swells; when they want anything, they want it all in a minute. Something like ham and eggs! Rather different to the measly rasher and the antediluvian eggs from the grocer's opposite. But you don't seem to be very keen?" he added, as Nell pushed her plate away and absently took a slice of toast. "Miss the good old London air, Nell, or the appetizing smells of Beaumont Buildings?"

"I've got a little headache; only a tiny one," said Nell, apologetically. "I shall go for a long walk after breakfast, and you will see that I shall be all right by lunch."

"Don't talk of lunch to me!" he said. "I shan't have time for it. I shall take a hunk of bread and butter in my pocket, and nibble at it for a few minutes during the workman's dinner hour; you bet the noble British workman won't cut short his precious meal, bless him!"

He was off again as soon as he had swallowed his breakfast, with his pipe in his mouth, and a roll of plans and drawings in his hand; and Nell, after gazing from the window at the avenue up which the horseman had ridden, put on her things and went down to the village, marketing.

It was a picturesque one, and showed every sign of the sleepy prosperity which distinguishes a self-respecting English village lucky enough to lie outside the gates of such a place as Anglemere.

It was like old Shorne Mills times to Nell, and her spirits rose as she walked along with her basket on her arm.

The butcher touched his forehead and smiled with respectful admiration as she entered the tiny and scrupulously clean shop.

"You be the young lady from the lodge, miss?" he said, with a pleasant kind of welcome. "I heard as you'd come with the electric gentleman. Ah! there's going to be grand changes at the Hall, I'm told. Well, miss, it's time. Not that I've got aught to say against the old earl, for he was a good landlord and a kind-hearted gentleman. But, you see, he wasn't here very much—just a month or two in the shooting season, and perhaps at Christmas; but we're hoping, here at Anglemere, that the new earl will come oftener. It will be a great thing for us, of course, miss. But there! you can't expect him to stay for long, he's got so many places; and I'm told that some of 'em are finer and [Pg 230] grander even than the Hall, though it's hard to believe. A piece of steak, miss? Certainly; and it's the best I've got you shall have. And about Sunday, miss? What 'u'd you say to a leg of mutton—a small leg, seem' that there's only two of you?"

"That will do," said Nell.

"Yes, miss. Perhaps you'd like to see it? It's in the meadow there—the sheep near the hedge."

The butcher grew radiant at the sweet, low-toned laugh with which Nell received this practical suggestion.

"I am afraid I shouldn't be able to judge it through that thick fleece," she said. "But I am more than willing to trust you, thank you."

"Thank you, miss," he said, as he cut the steak with critical care. "I'm told that Lord Angleford's in England, and is coming to the Hall sooner than was expected. And that's good news for all of us. Fine gentleman, the earl, miss! A regular credit to the country that bred him. I've knowed him since he was a boy, for, of course, he used to stay here in his holidays, and durin' the shootin' and Christmas. A great favorite of his uncle's, the old earl, miss, and no wonder, for there wasn't a more promising young gentleman among the aristocracy. Always so pleasant and frank spoken, and not a bit of side about him. It 'u'd be, 'Hallo, Wicks'—which was me, miss—'how are you? And how's the brindle pup?' And he'd take his hat off to the missus just as if she was one of his grand lady friends."

Nell moved toward the open door, but Mr. Wicks followed her as if loath to let her go.

"Rare cut up we was, miss, when we heard that him and the old earl had quarreled and the old gentleman had gone and got married, which was just like the Anglefords—always so hotheaded and flyaway. Yes, it was a cruel blow to Lord Selbie, or so it seemed; but it all turned out right, seeing that there wasn't a heir born to cut him out. Not that any of us had a word to say about the lady the old earl married. As nice and as pretty—begging her pardon—a little lady, though a

foreigner, as ever you met. Yes, it's all right, and our young gentleman as we was all so fond of is coming into his own, as the saying is. Yes, miss, it shall be sent up at once, certainly. And good day to you, miss!"

Wherever she went, Nell found the people rejoicing at the coming advent of the new lord, who was anything but new to most of them, who, like Wicks, knew and were attached to him. Before she had finished her shopping, Nell found herself quite interested in the new master of Anglemere, and wondered whether she should see him and what he would be like. By the time [Pg 231] she had got back to the lodge, her headache had gone, and she was singing to herself as she arranged some flowers she had picked on her way through the woods.

In the afternoon, she went for a long walk; but, long as it was, it did not by any means take her out of the domains of the Earl of Angleford, which stretched away for miles round the great house. She saw farms dotted here and there on the hillsides, and looking prosperous with their cattle and sheep feeding in the fields, and the corn waving like a green sea on the slopes of the hills. There were large plantations, in which she disturbed the game; and parklike spaces, in which colts frisked beside the brood mares, for which Anglemere was famous all the world over.

Everything spoke in an eloquent and emphatic way of wealth, and Nell sighed and grew rather pensive, now and again, as she thought of the denizens of Beaumont Buildings, and the grinding poverty in which their lives were spent. But that was like Nell—tender-hearted Nell of Shorne Mills.

Dick came home to dinner, tired, and approved of the steak, which, he declared, beat even the ham and eggs.

"We're getting on first-rate," he said, in answer to Nell's inquiry; "and I'm afraid we shan't make a very long stay here. I'd hoped that this job would spin out for—oh, ever so long; but it will have to be pushed through in a few weeks. They're waking up at the house like mad. Money makes the mare go! And there's no end to the money this young lord has got. But, from all I hear, he's a decent sort——"

Nell laughed.

"Please don't you begin to sing his praises, Dick," she said. "I've heard a general chorus of laudations all the morning, and I think I am just a wee bit tired of my Lord of Angleford! Though I'm very grateful to him for this change! I wish we could turn lodgekeepers, Dick! Fancy living here always!"

They were seated in the porch—Dick smoking away furiously—and she gazed wistfully at the greensward, and the trunks of the great elms glowing like copper in the rays of the setting sun.

"And, oh, Dick!" she cried, "if only Mr. Falconer could be here! How he would enjoy it! He's always talking of the country, and how much good it would do him!"

"Poor beggar—yes!" said Dick, with a nod of sympathy. "I say, Nell, why shouldn't we ask him to pay us a visit?"

Nell grew radiant at the suggestion; then looked doubtful.

"But may we?" she asked. "This isn't our lodge, Dick; though I have begun to feel as if it were."

"Nonsense!" said Dick emphatically. "The agent placed it absolutely at our disposal. A nice state [Pg 232] of things if we couldn't ask a friend! Have Britons—especially engineers—become slaves? I pause for a reply. No? Good! Then I'll write him a line that will fetch him down—with his fiddle! What a pity we haven't got a piano!"

Nell laughed.

"Yes, we could put it in the sitting room, and look at it through the window; for there certainly wouldn't be room inside for it and us together!"

Dick wrote the next day, and Falconer walked up and down his bare and narrow room, with the letter in his hand, his thin face flushing and then paling with longing and doubt. To be in the country, in the same house with her! And yet—would it not be wiser to refuse? His love grew large enough when it was only fed on memory; it would grow beyond restraint in such close companionship. Better to refuse and remain where he was than to go near her, and so increase the store of agony which the final parting would bring him. And so, after the manner of weak man, he sat down and wrote a line, accepting.

Dick stole half an hour to go with Nell to meet him at the station, and Dick's hearty greeting and Nell's smile brought the blood to his face and made the thin hand he gave them tremble.

"The fact is, we couldn't get on without the violin—brought it? That's all right. Because if you hadn't, you'd be sent back for it, young man. Pretty country, isn't it? All belongs to our young swell. I say 'our,' because we feel as if we'd got a kind of share in him, as if he belonged to us. You'll hear nothing but 'Lord Angleford,' 'the earl,' all day long here; and you'll speedily come to our conviction, that the earth, or this particular corner of it, with all that it contains, man, woman, and child, birds, beasts, and fishes, was made for his lordship's special behoof. Nice little place—kind of fishing box, isn't it?" he said, nodding to the vast pile as it came in sight. "That's where I spend my laborious days, putting on water for his lordship to drink and wash with, and

setting up electric light for his lordship to shave himself by, though I suppose his lordship's valet does that. And what price the lodge? For this is our residence pro tem."

Falconer was almost speechless with delight and happiness; his dark eyes glowed with a steady light, which grew brighter and deeper whenever they rested on Nell's beautiful face.

His obvious happiness reflected itself on her mood, and it was a merry trio which sat down to the simple dinner, that, simple as it was, seemed luxurious to the fare which he had left behind at Beaumont Buildings. [Pg 233]

After dinner he got out his violin and played for them.

Dick sprawled on the sofa, and Nell leaned back in her cozy chair with some useful and necessary darning, and—with unconscious cruelty—thought of Drake and Shorne Mills, as the exquisite strains filled the tiny room.

Some of the workmen, as they tramped by from their overtime, paused to listen, and nodded to each other approvingly, and carried the news to the village that "a swell musician fellow" was on a visit at the lodge; and the next day, when Nell walked through the village, with Falconer by her side, carrying her basket, the good folk eyed his pale face and long hair with awed curiosity and interest, and then, when the couple had passed, exchanged winks and significant smiles, none of which Nell saw, or, if she had seen, would, in her unconsciousness, have understood. For it never occurs to the woman whose whole being is absorbed in love for one man, that any other man may be in love with her. So Nell was placidly happy in the musician's happiness, and never guessed that the music he played for her delight was but the expression of the longing of his heart, and that when she was not looking, his dark eyes dwelt upon her with a sad and wistful tenderness, which was all the more tender because of its hopelessness.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Now, while all Anglemere talked of its lord and master, it had no suspicion that he was near at hand.

Two days before Nell and Dick had arrived at the lodge, the *Seagull* sailed, with all the grace and ease of its namesake, into Southampton water, with my Lord of Angleford on board.

Drake leaned against the rail and looked with grave face and preoccupied air at his native land. Two years had passed since he had last seen it, and they had scored their log upon his face. It was handsome still, but the temples were flecked with gray, and there were certain lines on the forehead and about the mouth which are graven by other hands than Time's.

It was the face of one who lived in the past, and could find no pleasure in the present; and the expression in his eyes was that of the man to whom the gods have given everything but the one thing his heart desired.

As he leaned against the side, with his hands in his pockets, his yacht cap tilted over his eyes, he pondered on the vanity of human wishes. [Pg 234]

Here he was, the Earl of Anglemere, owner of an historic title, the master of all the Angleford estates and wealth. Almost every man who heard his name envied him—some doubtless hated him—because of his wealth and rank. And yet he would have given it all if by so doing he could have been the "Drake Vernon" who had been loved by a certain Nell Lorton; and as he looked at the blue water, rippling in the sunlight round the stately yacht, his thoughts went back sadly to the *Annie Laurie* and its girl owner, and he sighed heavily.

He had intended to be absent from England for some years—perhaps forever, and even when the cable informing him of his uncle's death and his own succession to the title had reached him, he had clung to his resolution of remaining abroad, for when the news got to him his uncle had been long buried, and there seemed to him no need of his return. It was easier to forget, or to persuade himself that he forgot, Nell, while he was sailing from port to port, or shooting big game in the wild and desolate places of the earth, than it would be in England. If Nell had still been pledged to him, how differently he would have received this gift which the gods had bestowed on him! To have been able to go to her and say: "Nell, you will be the Countess of Angleford; take my hand, and let me show you the inheritance you will share with me!" That would have been a happiness which would have doubled and trebled the value of his title and estates. But now! Nell was no longer his; he had lost her, and, having lost her, all the good things which had fallen to him were of as little value as a Rubens to the blind, or a nocturne of Chopin to the deaf.

When the lawyers worried him he sent curt and evasive replies, telling them in so many words to do the best they could without him, and when Lady Angleford wrote, begging him to return and take up his duties, he answered with condolences on her loss, and vague assurances that he would be back—some time. Then she wrote again; the kind of letter a clever woman can write; the letter which, for all its gentleness, stings and irritates:

"Much as you may dislike it, much as it may interfere with your love of wandering, the fact

remains that you are the Earl of Angleford, my dear Drake. And the Earl of Angleford has higher duties than ordinary men. The lawyers want you, the estate want you, the people—do you think they do not want you? And, most of all, I think, I want you. Do you remember our first meeting? It was thought that I had come between you and yours; but the fact that I have not done so, the consolation I find in the thought, is made of no avail by your absence. You are too good a fellow [Pg 235] to inflict pain upon a lonely and sorrow-stricken woman, Drake. Come back and take your place among your peers and your people. Sometimes I think there must be some reason, some mysterious cause, for your prolonged absence, your reluctance to take up the duties and responsibilities of the position which has fallen to you; but if there should be, I beg of you to forget it, to set it aside. You are, you cannot help being, the Earl of Angleford. Come and play your part like a man."

It was the kind of letter which few men, certainly not Drake, could resist. Wondering bitterly whether she guessed at the reason, the cause of his reluctance to return to England, to take up the purple and ermine which had fallen from her husband's shoulders, he wrote a short note saying that he would "come back." In a second letter he asked her to get Angleford ready for him, not dreaming that she would take his request as a carte blanche, and turn the old place inside out and make it fit, as she considered fitness, for its new lord and master.

As the *Seagull* glided to her moorings, his expression grew harder and sterner. He was a man of the world, and he knew what would be expected of him. An earl, the owner of an historic title and vast estates, has a paramount duty—that of providing an heir to his title and lands.

Now that he had come back, he would be expected, would be hustled and goaded into marrying. Marrying! He swore under his breath, and began to pace up and down restlessly, so that Mr. Murphy, the yacht's master, thinking that his lordship was in a hurry to land, bustled the crew a bit. But when the dingy was lowered and the man-o'-warlike sailors were in their places, their lord and master lingered, for he was loath to leave the *Seagull*. How many nights had he paced her deck, thinking of Nell, calling up the vision of the clear, oval face, the soft, dark hair, the eyes that had grown violet-hued as they turned lovingly to him. That vision had sailed with him through many a stormy and sunlit sea, and he was loath to part with it. On shore, there he would have to plunge into his "duties," would have to sign leases, and read deeds, and listen to stewards and agents. There would be little time to think, to dream of Nell.

The dinghy took him ashore, and he put up at the large and crowded hotel, and spent the evening wishing that he was on the *Seagull*. The next day it occurred to him that he was within a ride of Anglemere, and he procured a horse and rode out to it. He had very little desire to see the chief of his "places," and when he had ridden up to the terrace he turned his horse down a side road [Pg 236] and regained his hotel, little thinking that he had passed the window of Nell's room, that her eyes had rested upon him.

The sight of the old place had awakened memories which saddened him. He had played on that terrace, on the lawn beneath, when a boy. Even as a boy he had learned to regard Anglemere as his future home; and he had been, in a childish way, proud of the fact. It was his now—and what little pride and pleasure could be found in its possession! If Nell——With something like an oath he dragged himself up the grandiose stairs of the hotel, and went to bed.

In the morning the mate of the yacht brought him a letter from Lady Angleford. It said that she had heard that he had arrived at Southampton, and that she hoped he would go on to Anglemere and see and approve of the alterations and improvements she was attempting, and that he would "go into residence" in three weeks' time, as she had asked a housewarming party to welcome him.

Drake stared at the letter moodily, and wished himself among the big game in Africa, or salmon fishing in Norway; but he felt that Lady Angleford was trying to do her duty by him, and knew that he ought to follow suit.

He gravitated between the hotel and his yacht for a few days, his face growing sterner and more moody each day, then he rode out to Anglemere again.

It was a lovely afternoon, and, if he had not been haunted by the vision of Nell, Drake would have reveled in the blue sky, the soft breeze, the singing of the birds, and the scent of the flowers; but all these recalled Nell and Shorne Mills, and only made the aching of his heart more acute.

He wondered, as he rode along the well-kept roads, whether she was still at Shorne Mills; whether she had forgotten him, whether she was married. At the last thought, the blood rushed to his head, and he jerked the reins so that the good horse broke into a gallop which carried Drake to the southern lodge, where—if he could but have known it!—dwelt Nell herself!

The gates were open, and he rode through; but as he passed the lodge, the sound of a violin played by a master hand smote upon his ear. He pulled the horse into a walk, and approached the house in a dream.

Workmen were all over the place, and he stared about him like a stranger; and they eyed him with half-indifferent, half-curious scrutiny. He got off his horse and walked up the stone steps of the terrace into the hall. Here the foreman of the firm of decorators approached him.

"Do you want to see any one, sir?" he asked.

"No," said Drake diplomatically. He was reluctant to announce himself. "You are making some alterations?" he said. [Pg 237]

"Rather, sir," assented the foreman, with a self-satisfied smile. "We're just turning the old place inside out. For the new lord, you know."

"I see," said Drake.

He knew that he ought to have said: "I am the new lord—I am Lord Angleford." But he shrank from it. The whole thing, the transformation of the old place, though he knew it was necessary, was distasteful to him.

"What is that?" and he nodded toward a cluster of small globes in the center of the hall.

"Oh, that! That's the electric light," said the man. "There's going to be electric lights all over the house. Wait a minute, and I'll turn some of it on; though perhaps I'd better not, for the gentleman who manages it is away to-day. He's gone to Southampton to see after some things which ought to have come this morning."

"Don't trouble," said Drake absently.

"Well, perhaps I'd better not," said the man. "He mightn't like it. He's the gent that lives in the lodge."

"In the lodge!" said Drake. "The south lodge?"

The man nodded.

"He plays the violin?" said Drake.

The man grinned.

"No, no! That's his friend. He's a musician—the gentleman his sister is engaged to."

Drake got on his horse and rode away, leaving the park by the east lodge.

The three weeks slipped away, and the day for the great gathering at Anglemere was near at hand. By dint of working day and night, the contractors had succeeded in getting the house finished in time; and Lady Angleford, who had come down, with an army of servants, at the week's end, expressed her approval and her astonishment that so much should have been effected in so short a time.

The lord and master was not to arrive until the evening of the twenty-first, the date of the ball, and most of the house party had reached Anglemere before him. He had pleaded urgent business as an excuse for not putting in an appearance earlier; but, beyond seeing his lawyers and listening to their complaints at his absence, he had done very little business, and had been cruising in the Solent to while away the interval.

The villagers wanted to "receive" him at the station, and talked of a "welcome" arch; but no one could find out at what hour to expect him; and Lady Angleford, who, with native quickness, had learned a great deal of his character in her short acquaintance with him, and was quite aware that he disliked fuss of any kind, had discouraged the idea. [Pg 238]

The dogcart was sent to the station to meet the six-o'clock train, on chance, and he arrived by it, and was driven home, cheered by a few groups of the villagers who had hung about in the hope of seeing him.

Lady Angleford met him in the hall, and they went at once to the library.

"I can't tell you how glad I am that you have come, Drake—I suppose I may call you Drake?" she said, holding out her hand again to him.

"You shall call me by any name that pleases you," he said, smiling at her, and speaking very gently, for she was still in mourning, and looked very fragile and petite.

"Thanks. And yet I am not a little nervous. I don't know how you'll quite take the alterations I have made, whether you will think I have been too presumptuous. I shall watch your face with an anxious eye when I take you over the place presently."

"My only feeling is one of intense gratitude," he said; "and I can't express my thanks and surprise that you should have taken so much trouble. I had an idea that the place was all right, that what was good enough for my uncle——"

She winced slightly, but smiled bravely.

"No, Drake; he was an old man, and came here but seldom; you are young, and, I hope, will spend a great deal of time here. After all, it is your real English home."

He nodded, but not very assentingly.

"I don't know," he said, rather moodily. "I am rather a restless mortal, and find it difficult to settle in any one place."

"Have you been well?" she asked, as she saw his face plainly, for he had turned to the window.

"Oh, yes; quite," he replied.

She looked at him rather doubtfully.

"You are thinner, and——"

"Older," he said, with a smile.

"I was not going to say that; but I was going to say that you looked as if you had not been sparing yourself lately."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I had rather a rough time of it in Africa—and a touch of fever. It always leaves its mark, you know."

She nodded as if she accepted the explanation; but she was not satisfied. A touch of fever does not leave behind the expression of weariness which brooded in his eyes.

"If you are not too tired, will you come round with me?" she said. "There's an opportunity now, for all the people are out riding or driving, and we shall be more free than we shall be when they come bustling in." [Pg 239]

"Certainly," he said, opening the door for her. "I suppose you have filled the house? Is it a large party?"

"I am afraid it is," she said, apologetically; "but the house is not quite full, for some of the people who are coming to the dance to-morrow will have to stay the night. By the way, I asked you if there was any one to whom you would like me to send a card, but you did not reply."

"Didn't I? I humbly beg your pardon, countess! No, there was no one."

He looked round the hall admiringly.

"You have done wonders!" he said; "and in such a short time! I rode over here from the hotel the other day, and imagined they would take at least a month to finish. And is that the old drawing-room? Can it be possible! It is charming! Ah, you have left the dining room untouched—that's right."

Lady Angleford laughed.

"There is not an inch of it that has not been touched; but with reverent hands, I hope. It is upstairs that we have done most. The bedrooms, you will admit, wanted thorough renovating."

"Yes, yes," he said, as he walked beside her. "It's all perfect. It must have cost a great deal of money."

She nodded.

"Oh, yes; but it does not matter, you know."

He glanced at her questioningly.

"It really does not," she said. "Have you any idea how rich you are, Drake?"

He shook his head.

"I'm ashamed to say that I don't quite know how I stand. The lawyers jawed about it the other day, and I did fully manage to understand that my uncle had left me everything. Was that fair, countess?" he added gravely.

"Yes," she replied simply. "He wanted to leave me all he could; but I would not let him. You know that I have enough, and much more than enough, of my own. So why should he leave me any more?"

Drake took her hand, and kissed it gratefully.

"You have been very good to me," he said, in a low voice. "Better than I have any right to expect, or deserve."

"No," she said. "And there is no need of gratitude. I wanted to atone——No, that's not the right word. I wanted to make up to you for the trouble I had, all unconsciously, caused between you and him. And—there was another reason, Drake. Don't get conceited; but I took a fancy to my nephew the first time I saw him." She laughed softly. "And just at present I have no other object in life than the attempt to make him happy." [Pg 240]

Drake suppressed a sigh.

Happy? Oh, Nell, Nell! How vain and foolish all this splendor, now he had lost her!

"So you turned my rambling old place into a palace? Well, it was a substantial attempt, and if I am not happy, I shall be the most mulish and ungrateful of men. The place is perfect; it lacks nothing, I should say," he added, as they descended to the hall again.

"Only a mistress," thought Lady Angleford; but she was too wise to say so.

"You haven't told me who is here," he said, as he watched her pour out the tea which had been laid in a windowed recess from which was an exquisite view of the lawns and the park beyond.

"Oh, a host of your friends," she said. "Do you like sugar, Drake? Fancy an aunt having to ask her nephew that! I shall get used to all your fads and fancies presently. There are the Northgates, and the Beeches, and old Lord Balfreed"—she ran through the list, and he listened absently until she came to—"and the Turfleighs."

"The Turfleighs?" he said, with something that was almost a frown; and, seeing it, the countess noticed how stern his face had become.

"Yes. Lady Luce and her father will arrive to-morrow, just in time for the dance. They are staying at a place near here—the Wolfers'. You remember them? They are coming with her, of course."

"Quite a gathering of the clans," he said, as brightly as he could. "It is a long time since Anglemere had such a beau fête. Who is that?" he broke off to inquire. "One of the guests?"

Lady Angleford looked out of the window.

"I am so near-sighted——"

"A tall, thin man, with long hair," he said. "He has just gone round the corner toward the lodge."

"That must be the man who is staying at the south lodge," she said. "His name is Falconer, and he is a musician."

"A musician staying at the south lodge?" said Drake, with surprise. "Ah, yes! I remember hearing the violin, as I passed the other day."

"Yes," said Lady Angleford. "The young fellow the engineers sent down is staying at the lodge with his sister and their friend, this Mr. Falconer. They were to have gone yesterday, when the work was completed; but I thought they had better stay a few days, until after the dance, at any rate, in case anything should go wrong with the electric light. It is such a nuisance if they happen to pop out all of a sudden; and they generally do when there is something on. You don't mind their being here?" [Pg 241]

He smiled.

"Why should I? It was a good idea to keep him. I suppose there is to be a resident engineer?"

"Yes; I suppose so. It would not be a bad idea to keep this young fellow, for I'm told that he has done the work very well. I've not seen him or his sister. I hear that she is an extremely pretty girl, and very ladylike, and I meant calling at the lodge and asking if they were comfortable; but I have been so busy."

"I can quite understand that," he said. "I only hope you will not have tired yourself out for to-morrow night."

She laughed.

"I am not easily tired; and I'm tough, though I'm small," she retorted, with her pretty twang. "By the way, speaking of to-morrow night. I wonder whether this Mr. Falconer would come up and play——"

She hesitated, and looked at him doubtfully.

Drake smiled.

"You think he may be some swell musician?" he said. "Too swell to play for money? It's likely."

"No, it wasn't that; I was thinking that I could scarcely ask him without asking the girl. He's engaged to her, I'm told."

"That's one of those problems which a man is quite unqualified to solve," he said indifferently.

"Well, I'll ask them, and chance it. Oh, here are some of the carriages. Would you like to run away, or will you——"

But he went to the front to meet and greet his guests.

A couple of hours later, while the trio at the lodge were at supper, the servant brought in two notes.

"One for me, and one for you, Mr. Falconer. And from the house! Do you see the coronet on the envelope? I wonder what it is? Perhaps a polite intimation that we are to clear out!" said Nell.

"Or an equally polite request that we will keep off the grass," said Dick. "Do you know how to find out what's in that envelope, Nell?"

"No," she said, holding it up to the light.

"By opening it, my brainless one!"

"Mr. Falconer, you are nearer him than I am; will you oblige me by kicking him? Oh, Dick! It's an

invitation to the dance to-morrow—for you and me."

"And for me," said Falconer. "And will I be so very kind as to bring my violin?"

"Very kind of 'em," said Dick. "I should like it very much," as he lifted his tankard, "but there won't be any dancing for me to-morrow night, unless I indulge in a hornpipe in the engine room. I'm going to stick there on guard right away from the beginning to the end of the hop. I should never forgive myself if anything went wrong with those blessed lights. But you and Falconer can go and foot it to your heart's content." [Pg 242]

"Quite impossible," said Nell emphatically. "I haven't a dress. So that settles me. Besides, Mrs. Hawksley, the housekeeper, has been kind enough to ask me to go into the gallery and look on, and I accepted gratefully."

"Among the servants?" said Dick, rather dubiously.

"Why not?" said Nell, stoutly. "I don't in the least mind. I shall enjoy looking down—for the first time in my life—upon Mr. Falconer."

Falconer smiled and shook his head.

"I haven't a dress suit, and I can't dance, Miss Lorton; and if I had and could, I shouldn't go without you. But I'd like to go and play. I owe these people a heavy debt for permitting me, through you, to spend the happiest days of my life—yes, I'll go and play. They won't mind my old velvet jacket, I'm sure."

"Quite the correct thing, my boy," said Dick. "You look no end of a musical swell in it; a Paderewski and Sarasati rolled into one. And to tell you the truth, I'm relieved to think you're disposed of; for I was afraid you'd offer to keep me company in the engine room; and the last time you were there you very nearly got mixed up with the engines and turned into sausage meat."

Nell was looking at her envelope.

"Lady Angleford addresses me as Miss 'Norton,'" she said, with a smile. "I wonder if she would know me if she saw me. Very likely not."

"The right honorable the earl arrived this afternoon, I'm told," said Dick. "'I very nearly missed missing him,' as the Irishman said. He'd gone into the house just before I came out. There's to be a fine kick-up to-morrow night. Not sure that I shan't come up to the gallery for a minute or two, after all; only the conviction that the beastly lights will know that I am gone and all go out, will prevent me."

On the following evening Dick and Falconer went up to the house before Nell, Dick wanting to be present at the lighting up, and Falconer being desirous of ascertaining exactly where he "came in" with his violin; and Nell, having donned her best dress, went round to the housekeeper's room. She had found Mrs. Hawksley "partaking" of a cup of tea, in which Nell was easily induced to join, and Mrs. Hawksley chatted in the stately way which thinly hid a wealth of motherly kindness. [Pg 243]

"I am so glad you have come, Miss Lorton; for it will be a grand sight, the like of which you have probably not seen, and may not see again."

And Nell nodded, suppressing a smile as she thought of her short sojourn in the world of fashion.

"Some of the dresses, the maids tell me, are magnificent; and the jewels! But, there; none of them can be finer than the Angleford diamonds. I do hope the countess will wear them, though it's doubtful, seeing that her ladyship's still in mourning. You say you've seen the countess, Miss Lorton? A sweet-looking lady. It's quite touching to see her ladyship and his lordship together, she so young, and his aunt, too! You haven't seen the earl yet, have you?"

"No; tell me what he is like, Mrs. Hawksley," said Nell, knowing how delighted the old lady would be to comply.

"Well, Miss Lorton, though I suppose I shouldn't, seeing he kind of belongs to us, I must say that his lordship will be the handsomest and finest gentleman in the room to-night, let who will be coming. Not but what he's changed. It gave me quite a turn—as the maids say," she picked herself up apologetically—"when he came right into this very room, with his hand stretched out, and his 'Well, Mrs. Hawksley, and how are you, after this long time?'"

"Because he was so friendly?" asked Nell innocently.

The old lady drew herself up.

"No, Miss Lorton. The Anglefords were always friendly to their old servants, because they know that we shouldn't take advantage of it and forget our proper places. No, but because he was so changed. He used to be so bright and—and boyish, as one may say, with all respect; but now he's as grave as grave can be—almost stern-looking, so to speak—and there's gray hairs at his temples, and he's a way of looking beyond you in a sad sort of fashion. His lordship's had some trouble, I know. I said so to his man, but he wouldn't say anything. He hasn't been with the earl for some time, and mightn't know——There's the music; and, hark; I can hear them moving into the ballroom. We'd better be going up to the gallery; and I do hope you will enjoy yourself, Miss

Lorton."

Nell followed the old lady into the small gallery, where some chairs had been placed for the servants, behind the musicians. She saw Falconer in front, his whole soul absorbed in his business; but he turned his eyes as she entered, and smiled for a moment.

"Can you see?" asked Mrs. Hawksley. "Go a little nearer to the front. Make room for Miss Lorton, please." [Pg 244]

Nell shook her head.

"I can see very well," she said, also in a whisper, for she did not want to be seen.

She craned forward and looked down on the brilliant, glittering crowd. The lights of which Dick was so proud dazzled her for a moment or two; but presently her eyes became accustomed to them, and she recognized Lady Angleford, the Wolfers, and others. Lady Angleford was in black satin and lace, and, at Drake's request, had put on the family diamonds.

"You are right, Mrs. Hawksley," said Nell. "They are magnificent. What a lovely scene!"

"I am glad you are pleased, Miss Lorton," responded the old lady, as if she had got up the whole show for Nell's sole benefit. "I am looking for the earl, to point him out to you; but I don't see him. He must be under the gallery at this moment. Ah! yes; here he comes. Now, quick! lean forward. There! that tall gentleman with the fair lady on his arm. Lean forward a little more, and you will see him quite plainly. The lady's in a kind of pale mauve silk——"

Nell leaned forward with all a girl's eager curiosity; then she uttered a faint cry, and drew back. The couple Mrs. Hawksley had pointed out were Drake and Lady Luce. Drake!

"What is the matter? Did any one squeeze you? Did you see his lordship?" asked Mrs. Hawksley.

"No," said Nell, trying to keep her voice steady. "I—I saw that gentleman with the lady in mauve; but——"

Mrs. Hawksley stared at her.

"Well, that is the earl. That is Lord Angleford with Lady Luce Turfleigh on his arm."

CHAPTER XXIX.

Nell sat still—very, very still. The vast room seemed to rise and sway before her like a ship in a heavy sea; the lights danced in a mad whirl; the music roared a chaos of sound in her ears, and a deathly feeling crept over her.

"I will not faint—I will not faint!" she said to herself, clenching her teeth hard, and gripping her dress with her cold hands. "It is a mistake—a mistake. It is not Drake. I thought I saw him the other night; it is thinking, always thinking of him, that makes me fancy any one like him must be he! Yes; it is a mistake."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them and found that the room had ceased rocking, and the lights were still, she leaned forward, calling all her courage to her aid, and looked again. [Pg 245]

A waltz was in progress, and the rich dresses, the flashing jewels whirled like the colored pieces of a kaleidoscope, and for a moment or two she could not distinguish the members of the glittering crowd; but presently she saw the tall figure again. He was dancing with Lady Luce; they came down toward the gallery end of the room, floating with the exquisite grace of a couple whose steps are in perfect harmony, and Nell saw that she had made no mistake—that it was Drake indeed.

She drew a long breath, and sank back; Mrs. Hawksley leaned toward her.

"Do you feel faint, Miss Lorton? It's very hot up here. Would you like to go down——"

"No, no!" said Nell quickly, almost anxiously. She did not want to go. It was agony to see him dancing with this beautiful woman, whose hair shone like gold, whose grace of form and movement were conspicuous even among so many graceful and beautiful women; but a kind of fascination made Nell feel as if she could not go, as if she must drain her cup of misery to the dregs. "No, no; I am not faint—not now. It is hot, but I am—all right."

She gazed with set face and panic-stricken eyes at the couple, as they floated down the room again. It was Drake, but—how changed! He looked many years older—and his face was stern and grave—sterner and graver and sadder even than when she had first seen it that day the horse had flung him at her feet. It had grown brighter and happier while he had stayed at Shorne Mills—it had been transformed, indeed, for the few short weeks he had been her lover; but the look of content, of joy in life which it wore in her remembrance, had gone again. Had he been ill? she wondered. Where had he been; what had he been doing?

But it did not matter, could not matter to her. He was back in England, and dancing with the

woman he loved—with the beautiful Lady Luce, whom he had kissed on the terrace.

"And what do you think of his lordship?" Mrs. Hawksley asked, as if the Right Honorable the Earl of Angleford were her special property. "I wasn't far wrong, was I, Miss Lorton, when I said that he would be the finest, handsomest man in the room?"

"No," said Nell, scarcely knowing what she answered. "That is——" She put her hand to her lips. Even now she had not realized that her Drake and the earl were one and the same man. "Oh, yes; he is handsome, and——" she finished, as the old lady eyed her half indignantly. "But I—I have [Pg 246] made a mistake. I mean——What was Lord Angleford called before he succeeded to the title?"

Mrs. Hawksley looked at her rather curiously.

"Why, Lord Selbie, of course," she said. "He ought, being one of the Anglefords, to have been Lord Vernon, Drake Vernon; but his father was a famous statesman, a governor of New South Wales and they made him a viscount. Do you understand?" she asked, proud of her own knowledge of these intricacies of the earl's names and titles.

Poor Nell looked confused. But it did not matter. She had learned enough. Drake Vernon, who had made her love him, and had asked her to be his wife, had been Lord Selbie. Why had he concealed his rank? Why had he deceived her? He had seemed so honest and true, that she would have trusted him with her life as freely as she had given him her love; and all the while——Oh, why had he done it? Was it worth while to masquerade as a mere nobody, to pretend that he was poor? Had he, even from the very first, not intended to marry her? Was he only—amusing himself?

Her face was dyed, with the shame of the thought, for a moment, then the hot flush went and left her pale and wan.

Drake was the Earl of Angleford, and she—she the girl whose heart he had broken, was in his house, looking on at him among his guests! The thought was almost unendurable, and she slowly rose from her chair; then she sat down again, for she was trembling and quite incapable of leaving the gallery.

How long she sat in this state she did not know. The ball went on. She saw Drake—no, the earl—would she never realize it?—dancing frequently. Sometimes he joined the group of dowagers and chaperons on the dais at the other end of the room, or leaned against the wall and talked with the nondancing men; and wherever he went she saw that he was received with that subtle empressement with which the children of Vanity Fair indicate their respect for high rank and wealth.

"You can see how high his lordship stands not only in the county, but everywhere," said Mrs. Hawksley proudly. "They treat him almost as if he were a prince of the blood; and he is the principal gentleman here, though there's some high and mighty ones down there, Miss Lorton, I assure you. That's the Duchess of Cleavemere in that big chair on the dais; and that's her eldest daughter—she'll be as big as the duchess, mark my words—seated beside her; and that's the Marquis of Downfield, that tall gentleman with the white hair. He's a great man, but he can't hold a candle, in appearance, to our earl; and he's a poor man compared with his lordship. And that's [Pg 247] Lord Turfleigh, that old gentleman with the very black hair and mustache; dyed, of course, my dear. The 'wicked Lord Turfleigh' they call him—and no wonder. He's the father of Lady Luce. Ah! his lordship's going to dance with her again! Look how pleased her father looks. See, he's nodding and smiling at her; I'll be bound I know what he's thinking of! And I shouldn't be surprised if it came off. Lord Selbie and she used to be engaged, but it was broken off when his lordship's uncle married. The Turfleighs are too poor to risk a marriage without money. But his lordship's the earl now, and, of course——"

Nell understood. It was because the woman he loved had jilted him that Drake had hidden himself from the world at Shorne Mills. That was why he had looked so sad and cast down the day she had first seen him.

"It's a pity your brother doesn't come up," said Mrs. Hawksley, who was standing behind Nell, and could not see the white, strained face. "He'd enjoy the sight, I'm sure. I'm half inclined to send a word to him."

Nell caught her arm. Dick must not come up here and recognize Drake, must not see her white face and trembling lips. If possible, she must leave Anglemere in the morning; must induce Dick to go before he could learn that Drake and Lord Angleford were one and the same.

"My brother would not come," she said. "Please do not send for him. He—the lights——"

Mrs. Hawksley nodded.

"As you think best, my dear," she said. "But it's a pity. Here's the interval now. What is going on in the orchestra?"

Nell looked toward the band, which had ceased playing; but Falconer was softly tuning his violin. About half the dancers had left the room, and those that remained were pacing up and down, talking and laughing, or seated in couples in the alcoves and recesses.

Falconer finished tuning, glanced toward Nell—the gallery was too dimly lit for him to see the pallor of her face—then began to play a solo.

Coming after the dance music, the sonata he had chosen was like a breath of pure, heather-scented air floating in upon the gas-laden atmosphere of the heated room; and at the first strains of the delicious melody the people below stopped talking, and turned their eyes up to the front of the gallery, where the tall, thin form in its worn velvet jacket stood, for that moment, at least, the supreme figure.

Nell, as she listened, felt as if a cool, pitying hand had fallen upon her aching heart; as if a voice of thrilling sweetness were whispering tender consolation. Never loud, but with an insistent force [Pg 248] which held the listeners in thrall, sometimes so low that it was but a murmur, the exquisite music stole over the senses of all, awakening tender memories, reviving scattered hopes, softening, for the short space it held its sway, world-hardened hearts.

The tears gathered in Nell's eyes, bringing her infinite relief; but she could see through her tears that the great hall was filling with the hasty return of those who had been within hearing of the music, and when it ceased there rose a burst of applause, led by the earl himself.

"How very beautiful!" exclaimed the duchess, who was on his arm. "The man must be a genius. Where did you find him, Lord Angleford?"

Drake did not reply for a moment, as if he had not heard her. The music had moved him more deeply, perhaps, than it had moved any other. His face was set, his brows knit, and his head drooped as if weighed down by some memory. He had been so occupied by his duties as host that he had forgotten the past for that hour or two, at any rate; but at the first strains of the music Nell came back to him. It was the swell of the tide against the *Annie Laurie*; it was Nell's voice itself which he heard through the melody of the famous sonata. He listened with an aching longing for those past weeks of pure and perfect love, with a loathing for the empty, desolate present. "Nell! Nell!" his heart seemed to cry.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I did not find him. He is here by chance."

"He must be a very great musician," said the duchess enthusiastically. "What is his name?"

"Falconer," replied Drake. "He's staying at one of the lodges."

"He played superbly. Do you think I could persuade him to come on to the court for the ninth? I wish you'd ask him. But surely he is going to play again?" she added eagerly.

"I will ask him," said Drake.

"Yes, do, Drake," murmured Lady Luce, who had reëntered the room and glided near him. The divine music had not touched her in the least; indeed, she had thought the solo rather out of place at a dance—quite too sad and depressing; but as she seconded the duchess' request, her blue eyes seemed dim with tears, and her lips tremulous. "It was so very beautiful! I am half crying!" and the perfectly shaped lips pouted piteously.

Drake nodded, led the duchess to a chair, and went slowly up the room toward the gallery stairs.

Nell, who had been watching him in a dull, vacant way, lost him for a moment or two; then she [Pg 249] heard his voice near her, and saw him dimly standing in the gallery doorway.

She stifled a cry, and shrank back behind Mrs. Hawksley, so that the stout form of the old lady completely hid her.

"Mr. Falconer?" she heard the deep voice say gravely.

Falconer bowed, his violin under his arm, his pale, thin face perfectly composed. His music was still ringing in his ears, vibrating in his soul, too great to be stirred by the applause which had again broken out.

"I have come to thank you for the sonata, Mr. Falconer, and to ask you to be so kind as to play again," said Drake, in the simple, impassive manner of the Englishman.

"I shall be very pleased, my lord," said Falconer quietly; and he placed his violin in position.

Drake looked absently round the gallery. It was only dimly lit by the candles in the music stands, and the servants had respectfully drawn back, so that Nell was still hidden; but she trembled with the fear that those in front of her might move, and that he might see her; for she knew how keen those eyes of his could be.

Drake felt that the dim light was a pleasant contrast to the brilliance of the room below, and he lingered, leaning against the wall, his arms folded, his head drooped. He was so near Nell that she could almost have touched him—so near that she almost dreaded that he must hear the wild throbbings of her heart. Once, as the violin wailed out a passionate, despairing, yet exquisitely sweet passage of the Raff cavatina Falconer was playing, she heard Drake sigh.

The cavatina came to an end, the last notes—those wonderful notes!—floating lingeringly like a human voice, and yet more exquisite than any human voice. Falconer lowered his violin, the applause broke out again as vehemently and enthusiastically as if the crowd below were at an ordinary concert, and Drake made his way to the player. As he did so, he stumbled over a violin case, the servants with a little cry—for the stumble of an Earl of Angleford is a matter of importance—moved apart, and Drake, putting out his hand as he recovered himself, touched Mrs. Hawksley's arm.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Ah! is it you, Mrs. Hawksley? You are so pleasantly dark up here."

His eyes wandered from her face to that of the girl who had been shrinking behind her, and he paused, as if smitten by some sudden thought or memory. But Nell rose quickly and hid herself in the group, and Drake went on to Falconer.

"Thank you again," he said. "I have never heard the cavatina—it was it, wasn't it?—better played. I am the bearer of a message from the Duchess of Cleavemere, Mr. Falconer. If you are not engaged, the duchess would be very glad if you could play for her at Cleavemere Court on the [Pg 250] ninth of next month. I ask you at once and so unceremoniously, because her grace is anxious to know. The ninth."

Falconer bowed.

"May I consider, my lord?" he began hesitatingly.

"Why, certainly," said Drake, in the frank, pleasant fashion which Nell knew so well. "Will you send me word? Thanks. That is a fine violin you have."

"It was my father's," said Falconer simply, and unconsciously pressing the instrument closer to him, as if it were a living thing, a well-beloved child.

He had often sold, pawned his belongings for bread, and as often had forgotten his cold and hunger because his precious violin had remained in his possession; that he had never pawned.

Drake nodded, as if he understood; then he looked round.

"Isn't there some supper going, Mrs. Hawksley?" he said pleasantly.

The old lady curtsied in stately fashion.

"Yes, my lord."

"Then it's high time Mr. Falconer—and the rest of us—were at it," he said; and, with a smile and a nod, he left the gallery.

He would have taken Falconer with him to the supper in the banquet room below, but he knew that, though none of the men or women there would have remarked, or cared about, the old velvet jacket, the musician would be conscious of it, and be embarrassed by it.

While Drake had been absent, Lady Luce had stood, apparently listening with profound attention and sympathy, but the movement of her fan almost gave her away, for it grew rapid now and again, and when Lord Turfleigh came up beside her, his hawklike eyes glancing sharply, like those of a bird of prey, from their fat rims, she shot an angry and unfilial glance at him.

"Where's Drake?" he asked, lowering his thick voice.

"Up there in that gallery somewhere; gone to pay compliments to that fiddler fellow who is playing now."

"Gad!" said his lordship, with a stare of contempt at the rapt audience. "What the devil does he want with the 'Dead March in Saul,' or whatever it is, in the middle of a dance. Always thought he was mad! Has he spoken, said anything?"

He lowered his voice still more, and eyed her eagerly.

She shook her head slightly by way of answer, and the coarse face reddened.

"Curse me, if I can understand it—or you," he said, his hand tugging at his dyed mustache. "You [Pg 251] told me, God knows how long ago, that he was 'on' again; then he bolts—disappears."

"Do you want all these people to hear you?" she asked, her eyes hidden by her slowly moving fan.

Her father had been several times to the refreshment buffet, and had "lowered"—as he would have put it—the best part of a bottle of champagne, and was a little off the guard which he usually maintained so carefully.

"They can't hear. I'm not shouting. And you always evade me. You're not behaving well, Luce. Dash it all! I've reason to be anxious! This match means a good deal to me in the present state of our finances!"

"Hush!" she whispered warningly. "I can't explain now. I don't understand it myself; but I've seen enough to know that I should only lose him altogether if I tried to force him. You know him, or ought to do so! Did you ever get anything from Drake by driving him? He had no opportunity of speaking, of explaining."

"By gad! I don't understand it!" he muttered. "Either you're engaged to him or you're not. You led me to believe that the match was on again——"

The fan closed with a snap, and her blue eyes flashed at him with bitter scorn.

"Hadn't you better leave me to play the game?" she asked. "Or perhaps you think you can play it better than I can? If so——The man has stopped; Drake will be down again. I don't want him to see us talking. Go—and get some more champagne."

Lord Turfleigh swore behind the hand that still fumbled at his mustache, and walked away with the jerky, jaunty gait of the old man who still affects youth, and Lady Luce composed her lovely face into a look of emotional ecstacy.

"Oh, how beautiful, Drake!" she said. "Do you know that I have been very nearly crying? And yet it was so sweet, so—so soothing! Who is he? And what are we going to do now?" she asked, without waiting for an answer to her first question, about which she was more than indifferent.

Drake looked round for the duchess.

"I must take the duchess in to supper," he said apologetically. "I will find some one for you—or perhaps you will wait until I will come for you?"

"I will wait, of course," she said, with a tender emphasis on the "of course."

Those who had been listening followed Drake and the duchess to the supper room, talking of the wonderful violin playing as they went; and Lady Luce seated herself in a recess and waited. Several men came to her and offered to take her to supper, but she made some excuse for refusing, and presently Drake returned. [Pg 252]

She rose and took his arm, and glanced up at him, not for the first time that evening, curiously. The easy-going, indolent Drake of old seemed to have disappeared, and left in his place this grave and almost stern-mannered man. She had always been just a little afraid of him, with the fear which is always felt by the false and shifty in the presence of the true and strong; and to-night she was painfully conscious of that vague and wholesome dread.

He found a place for her at a small table, and a footman brought them things to eat and drink; but though she affected a blythe and joyous mood, tapping her satin-clad foot to the music which had begun again, she was too excited, too anxious, to enjoy the costly delicacies before her.

"I have so much to tell you, Drake!" she said, in a low voice, after one or two remarks about the ball and its success. "It seems years, ages, since I saw you! Why—why did you go away for so long, Drake? And why did you not write to me?"

He looked at her with his grave eyes, and her own fell.

"I wrote to no one; I was never much of a hand at letter writing," he said.

"But to me, Drake!" she whispered, with a pout. "I wanted to hear from you so badly! Just a line that would have given me an excuse for writing to you and telling you—explaining——"

He did not smile. He was not the man to remind a woman of her falseness, but something in his eyes made her falter and lower her own.

"I went away because I was tired of England," he said. "I came back because—well, because I was obliged."

"But you won't go away again?" she said, with genuine dismay in her voice and face. "I—I feel as if, as if it were my fault; as if—ah, Drake, have you not really forgiven me?"

Her eyes filled with tears, as genuine as her dismay—for think of the greatness of the prize for which she was playing—and Drake's heart was touched with a pity which was not wholly free from contempt.

"There shall be no such word as forgiveness between us, Luce," he said gravely. She caught at this, though it was but a straw, and her hand, from which she had taken her glove, stole over to his, and her eyes sought his appealingly.

But before he could take her hand—if he had intended doing so—Lady Angleford came up to them.

"Drake, they want you to lead the cotillon," she said.

He rose, but stood beside Luce. [Pg 253]

"Directly Lady Luce has finished her supper, countess. Please don't hurry."

But Lady Luce sprang up at once.

"I have finished long ago; I was not hungry."

"Come, then," he said, and he offered her his arm, "Will you dance it with me?"

Her heart leaped.

"Yes. It will not be for the first time—Drake!" and as she entered the room with him, her heart thrilled with hope, and her blue eyes sparkled with a triumph which none could fail to notice.

CHAPTER XXX.

Certainly not poor Nell, who still remained in her dim corner in the gallery. Mrs. Hawksley had

begged her to come down to the supper which had been laid for her and her brother and Falconer; but Nell, who felt that it would be impossible to make even a pretense of eating or drinking, had begged them to excuse her; and when they had gone and the gallery was empty, she leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes; for she was well-nigh exhausted by the conflicting emotions which racked her. She longed to go, to leave the place, to escape from the risk of Drake's presence; but she could not leave the house alone, and to go from the gallery and absent herself for the rest of the evening might attract notice and comment.

Was it possible that Drake had been near her, so near as to almost have touched her? She trembled—and thrilled—at the thought; then crimsoned with shame for the sinful thrill of joy and happiness which his nearness had caused her.

What was he to her now? Nothing, nothing! She had yielded him up to the beautiful woman he had loved before he saw her, Nell; and it was shameful and unwomanly that she should feel a joy in his proximity.

Falconer came up before the rest of the orchestra, and brought a glass of wine and a biscuit for her.

"I am afraid you have a headache, the lights and the music—they are so near; and it is hot up here. Will you drink some of this, Miss Lorton?"

His voice was low and tender, though he strove to give it a conventional touch and merely friendly tone.

"Thank you, yes," said Nell gratefully. "How good of you to think of me! How magnificently you played! I can't tell you how happy your success has made me! And such a success! I was as proud as if it were I who was playing; and I was prouder still when I saw how quietly you took it. Ah, you felt that it was just your due. I suppose genius always takes the crowd's applause calmly." [Pg 254]

His face flushed, and his dark eyes glowed.

"There is some applause I, at any rate—who am no genius, however—cannot take calmly," he said. "I would rather have those words of approval from you than the shouting and clapping of a multitude. Yes, it made me happy; but I am happier now than words can express."

If Nell had looked up into the eyes bent on hers, she must have read his secret in them; but the band had begun to play, and at that moment Drake was leading Lady Luce to her place for the cotillon, and Nell's eyes were drawn, riveted to the fair face, the blue eyes shining triumphantly; and she forgot not only Falconer's presence, but his existence.

As he saw that she did not heed him, the color died out from his face, and the light from his eyes, and, with a sigh, he left her and went back to his place in the orchestra.

The dance proceeded through all its graceful and intricate evolutions, and even to the spectators in the gallery it was evident that Lady Luce had stepped into the position of the belle of the ball. The excitement of hope and fear, the gratification of vanity which sprang from her consciousness that she was occupying the most prominent place as the earl's partner, had given to her face the touch of warmth it needed to make its beauty well-nigh perfect. Her lips were parted with a smile, the blue eyes—ordinarily a trifle cold—were glowing, and the diamonds sparkled fiercely on her heaving bosom.

Nell could not remove her eyes from her, but sat like a bird held by the fascination of the serpent. She was blind to all else but those two—the man she loved, the woman to whom she had surrendered him.

The time passed unheeded by her, and Falconer's voice sounded miles away as he bent over her.

"Dick has sent up to say that we can go," he said. "There's no fear of the lights now; indeed, the ball is nearly over. This is the last dance."

Nell rose stiffly and wearily.

"I—I am glad," she said.

"You are tired, very tired," he said. "Will you let me give you my arm?"

He felt her hand tremble as she put it on his arm, and he looked down at her anxiously.

"I wish I had taken you out of this before," he said remorsefully. "I have spoken to you—asked you—once or twice; but—but you did not seem to hear me. It is my fault. I ought to have insisted upon your going." [Pg 255]

"No, no!" said Nell. "It is nothing. I am a little tired, and——Is it late?"

"Yes," he said. "Most of the people are leaving. It has been a great success. Is this the way?"

They had gone down the stairs leading to the lower hall, but here Falconer hesitated doubtfully. This second hall led into the larger one, through which the guests were passing.

Nell caught a glimpse of them, and shrank back.

"Not there," she said warningly. "There must be a door——"

"Ah, here it is!" he said; and he led her through an opening between portière curtains. They found themselves in a small conservatory, and Falconer again stopped.

"It is very stupid!" he said apologetically.

"There may be an opening to the terrace," said Nell nervously; "once we are outside——"

"Here we are, out in the open air."

Nell drew a long breath, and pushed the hair from her forehead.

"We must go down these steps, and then to the right. I remember——"

They crossed the terrace, when two or three persons came out through a window behind them. They were talking, and Nell heard a voice which made her wince, and her hand grip Falconer's arm convulsively; for the voice was Drake's.

"They have a fine night to go home in," he was saying. "Not much of a moon, but better than none."

Nell stopped and looked despairingly at the patch of light which the window threw right across their path to the steps.

"Come quickly," said Falconer, in a low voice.

"No, no; we shall be seen!" she implored, in an agitated whisper.

But Falconer deemed it best to go on, and did so.

As they moved, Drake saw them, but indistinctly.

"Good-night, once more!" he called out, in the tone of a host speeding parting guests.

Falconer raised his soft felt hat.

"Good-night, my lord," he responded. At the same moment they stepped into the stream of light. Drake had been on the point of turning away, but as he recognized Falconer's voice and figure, he stopped and took a step toward them. Then, as suddenly, he stopped again, gazing after them as a man who gazes at a vision of the fancy.

"Who—who is that?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

Lady Luce was just behind him.

"That was the man who played the violin," she said. "Didn't you recognize him? How romantic he looks! Quite the idea of a musician." [Pg 256]

Drake put his hand to his brow and stood still, looking after the two figures, now disappearing in the darkness, made more intense by the contrasting streaks of light from the windows.

"My God! How like!" he muttered, taking a step or two forward unconsciously.

But Lady Luce's voice aroused him from the half stupor into which he had fallen, and he turned back to her.

"I must be mad or dreaming!" he muttered. "What folly! And yet how like—how like!"

"Why, what is the matter, Drake?" asked Lady Luce, laying her hand on his arm, and looking up at him anxiously. "You are quite pale. You look"—she laughed—"as if you had seen a ghost!"

He smiled grimly. She had described his feelings exactly. In the resemblance of the girl, whoever she was, on the violinist's arm, he had in very truth seen the ghost of Nell of Shorne Mills.

Nell hurried Falconer along, but presently was forced to stop to regain her breath. Her heart was beating so wildly that she had to fight against the sensation of suffocation which threatened to overcome her.

"Let us wait a minute," said Falconer gently. "You are nervous, overtired. We will wait here."

But Nell had got her breath again by this time.

"No, no!" she said, almost vehemently. "Let us go. I know the way——"

"Dick will be waiting for us at the door of the east wing," he said. "If you can find that——"

"I know," she said quickly. "That is it on our left. But—but I do not want to see any one."

"All the guests are leaving by the front of the house; we are not likely to meet any one."

He was somewhat surprised at her agitation, and her evident desire to leave the place unseen; for Nell was usually so perfectly self-possessed and free from nervousness or gaucherie.

She drew him to the side park under the shadow of the wing, in which few of the windows were lighted, and as they waited she gradually recovered herself.

"There is Dick," said Falconer presently. "He is waiting for us by that window."

Nell looked in the direction he indicated.

"Is that Dick?" she said, peering at the figure. "It is so dark I can scarcely see. I don't think it is Dick. If it is, why is he looking in at the window?" [Pg 257]

"He may be talking to some one inside," said Falconer. "I'll call him. Dick!"

As he called, the figure half turned, then swung round away from them, and with lowered head moved quickly away from the window, and passed into the darkness of the shrubbery.

"How strange!" said Falconer; and he felt puzzled. Why should Dick start at the sound of his name, and make off into the darkness?

Falconer bit his lip. It was just possible that Dick, who was young, and also particularly good-looking, was carrying on a flirtation with some one in the house. If so, the explanation of his sudden flight was natural enough.

"Why did he run away? Where has he gone?" said Nell. "You were wrong. It was not Dick."

"Very likely," assented Falconer. "It was so dark——Yes, I was wrong, for there he stands by the door," he broke off, as, coming round the corner, they saw Dick, who was engaged in lighting his pipe.

"Hallo! here you are, at last," he said, cheerfully. "Couldn't tear yourselves away from the festive scene? By George! if you'd spent the night in an engine room, you'd be glad enough to cut it."

"Poor Dick!" said Nell.

"Oh, I haven't had such a bad time," he said. "They brought me a ripping supper, and a special dish with the chef's compliments. I don't know where the chef's going when he leaves this terrestrial sphere; but, wherever it is, it's good enough for me. Well, Nellikins, enjoyed yourself?"

Nell forced a smile.

"Very much," she replied. "It—it was a great success."

"So I hear," said Dick. "But you seem to have taken the cake to-night, old man. They told me that you created a perfect furore, whatever that is. Anyway, Mrs. Hawksley and the rest came down with the most exciting account of your triumph. Seriously, Falconer, I congratulate you. I won't say that I prophesied your success long ago, because that's a cheap kind of thing to say; but I always did believe you'd hit the bull's-eye the first time you got a chance; and you've done it."

"I think they were pleased," said Falconer.

"His lordship and the rest of the swells ought to be very much obliged," remarked Dick. "You've given éclat to his dance. Observe the French again? There is no extra charge."

"His lordship was extremely kind," said Falconer, "and his thanks more than repaid me for my poor efforts. I don't wonder at his popularity. I've always heard that the higher the rank the [Pg 258] simpler the manners; and Lord Angleford is an instance of it. My acquaintance with the nobility is extremely limited——"

"Ditto here," said Dick. "Though the young lady on your arm has lived in marble halls, and hobnobbed with belted earls and lords of high degree. But I'm glad to hear that this one is affable."

Falconer laughed.

"Affable is the wrong word; it means condescension, doesn't it? And Lord Angleford was anything but condescending. He might have known me for years, if one judged by the tone of his voice and manner; and, as I said, I'm more than repaid."

"Well, I'm glad to hear he made a favorable impression on you," Dick said. "I haven't had the pleasure of making his acquaintance yet; but I shall probably see him before I go. But your success doesn't end here, Falconer. I'm told that you are going to play at Cleavemere Court. By George! if you knock them there as you did here—which, of course, you will do—your fortune's made. The duchess has no end of influence, and you'll be paragraphed in the papers, and get engagements at the houses of other swells, and before we know where we are, we shall see 'Señor Falconer's Recitals at St. James' Hall,' advertised on the front page of the *Times*. And serve you right, old man, for if ever a man deserved good luck, it is you. Eh, Nell?"

"Yes, yes," said Nell.

"And did you see his lordship, our all-puissant earl, my child?"

"Yes," she said, beginning to tremble—but, indeed, she had been trembling all through the conversation. How should she be able to get away from the house—the place which belonged to Drake? "Yes, I saw him. Dick, did a man—a man with a slight figure something like yours—pass you just before we came up?"

"No," he said.

"Are you sure? He must have passed by you."

"A figure like mine, did you say? Yes; I'm quite sure he didn't. I have too keen an eye for grace of form to let such a figure pass unnoticed."

"It may have been a servant or one of the guests," Falconer said.

"Oh, draw it mild!" remonstrated Dick. "Do I look like a flunkey or a groom? What is it you think you have seen?"

"A man was standing looking in at one of the windows of the inner side of the wing," said Nell. "We thought it was you; but, when Mr. Falconer called, the man, whoever he was, turned and walked into the shrubbery." [Pg 259]

"A 'particular friend' of one of the maids, I dare say," remarked Dick easily. "And I've no doubt you have broken up a very enjoyable spooning. Now, would you like——Now what is it?"

For Nell had stopped short, and had seized his arm.

"There!" she exclaimed, in a whisper. "There he is again—that is the man!"

They had come to the lodge by this time, and Nell was gazing rather nervously toward the big gates.

"Where?" asked Dick. "I can see no one. Nell, you have had too much champagne. You'll be seeing snakes presently if you don't mind. Where is he?"

Nell laughed, but a little shakily.

"He has gone, of course. He went quickly through the gate."

"And why shouldn't he?" said Dick, with a yawn. "Oh, Falconer! when I think of the cool tankard into which I shall presently plunge my beak——What's come to you, Nell? It isn't like you to 'get the nerves.'"

CHAPTER XXXI.

The man whom Nell and Falconer had mistaken for Dick passed through the lodge gates, and, turning to the right, walked quickly, but not hurriedly, beside the high park fencing, and presently came up with a dogcart which was being walked slowly along the road.

The cart was a very shabby one, but the horse was a very good one, and looked as if it could stretch itself if it were required to do so. In the cart was a young man in clerical attire. He looked like a curate, and his voice had the regulation drawl as he leaned down and asked:

"Well, Ted?"

The man addressed as Ted shook his head.

"The girl was right," he said, with an air of disappointment. "She's got 'em all on."

"Then it's no use trying it to-night," said the curate. "Perhaps a little later? It must be darkish for some time."

Ted shook his head again.

"No use! Too risky. It will be hours before they all go to bed and the house is quiet; the servants always keep it up after a big affair like this; some of 'em won't go to bed at all, perhaps. Besides, I was spotted just now."

The Parson, as he was called by the burgling fraternity, of which he and Ted were distinguished members, swore under his breath. [Pg 260]

"How was that?" he asked.

"I was looking in at one of the windows of the servants' quarters, getting a word or two with the girl, when a couple of the swells came along. They saw me, and mistook me for some one by the name of Dick, and called to me. I walked off as quickly as I could, and I swear they didn't see my face, neither then nor just now, when, as luck would have it, they caught sight of me going out of the gates. They went into the lodge with the young fellow they'd mistaken me for."

The Parson swore again.

"What's to be done? Did you see the things?"

Ted nodded emphatically.

"Yes! They're the best swag I've ever seen. There's a fortune in them; and, if we had any luck, we might get a few more in addition."

"They'll be in the bank to-morrow," said the Parson gloomily. "These swells know how to take care of their jewelry, especially when they're family diamonds like these. We've lost our chance for the present, Ted. Jump up."

But Ted shook his head.

"Not yet. The girl promised to meet me if she could, and I reckon she'll try to." He smiled and smoothed his mustache. "You drive on slowly and wait for me at the turn of the road. I'll come to you, say, in a quarter of an hour."

The dogcart went on, and Ted followed until he came to a small gate in the park fencing, and, opening this, he stood just inside it. His hand went to his pocket for his pipe, but, with the smoker's sigh, he dropped it back again, for he could not risk striking a match.

After he had been waiting there for a few minutes he heard footsteps and the rustle of a skirt among the undergrowth, and presently a woman stole out from the darkness, and, running up to the man, clutched his arm, panting and trembling with fear and excitement.

Now, when Lord and Lady Wolfer had started for the Continent, on the day of what may be called their reconciliation, Burden, her maid, had refused to go. She was a bad sailor, and hated what she called "foreign parts"; and she begged her mistress to leave her behind. Lady Wolfer, full of sympathy in her newly found happiness, had not only let the girl off, but had made her a handsome present, and given her an excellent written character.

Burden took a holiday, and went home to her people, who kept what is called a "sporting public" in the east of London.

Sport, like charity, is made to cover a lot of sins; and Burden, while assisting in the bar of the pub, made the acquaintance of several persons who were desirable neither in the matter of morals nor manners. [Pg 261]

One of these was a good-looking young fellow who went by the name of Ted. He was supposed to be a watchmaker and jeweler by trade—a working jeweler—but he spent most of his time at the public which Burden now adorned, and though he certainly did not carry on his trade there, always appeared to have as much money as leisure.

Cupid, who seems to be indifferent to his surroundings, hovered about the smoky and beery regions of the Blue Pig, and very soon worked mischief between Burden and Ted.

He was pleasant spoken as well as good-looking, and had a free-and-easy way, was always ready with an order for the play or one of the music halls, and—in short, Burden fell in love with him. But when he asked her to marry him, Burden, who was a respectable girl, and, as Lady Wolfer's maid, had held a good position for one of her class, began to make inquiries.

She did not go on with them, but she learned enough to rouse her suspicions.

The jewelry business evidently served as a blind for less honest pursuits. She took alarm, and, like a sensible girl, fled the paternal pub and sought a fresh situation.

As chance—there is no such thing, of course—would have it, Lady Luce was changing maids at this time.

Burden, armed with her most excellent and fully deserved "character," applied for and obtained the situation.

She ought to have been thankful for her escape, and happy and contented in a service which, though very different from that of Lady Wolfer's, was good enough. But Burden had lost her heart; and when one has lost one's heart, happiness is impossible.

She longed for a sight, just a sight, of her good-looking Ted; and one day, while the Turfleighs were stopping at Brighton, her heart's desire was gratified.

She saw her handsome Ted on the pier. He was, if anything, handsomer than ever, was beautifully dressed—quite the gentleman, in fact, and though Burden had fully intended to just bow and pass on, she stopped and talked to him. Cupid slipped round her the chains from which she had so nearly freed herself, and——The woman who goes back to a man is indeed completely lost.

They met every day; but alas, alas! Ted no longer spoke of marriage; and his influence over the woman who loved him unwisely and too well, grew in proportion to her devotion and helplessness.

She soon learned that the man to whom she had given herself was a criminal, one of a skillful gang of burglars. But it was too late to draw back; too late even to refuse to help him. [Pg 262]

It was Burden who clung to the man in hiding behind the park gate.

"What made you hurry so, old girl?" he said soothingly, and putting his arm round her. "What's your fear?"

"Oh, Ted, Ted!" she gasped. "It's so dark——"

"All the better," he said coolly. "Less chance of any one seeing you."

"But some one saw you as you were standing by the window. It was Miss Lorton—they called out—they may have suspicions."

"Don't you worry," he said. "They only thought it was some one after one of the girls. And it was the truth, wasn't it? What a frightened little thing it is! You'd be scared by your own shadow!"

"I am! I am, Ted!" said the unhappy girl. "I start at the slightest noise; and I'm so—so nervous, that I expect Lady Lucille to send me away every day."

The man frowned.

"She mustn't do that," he said, half angrily. "I can't have that; it would be precious awkward just now! That would spoil all our plans."

"I know! I know!" she moaned. "Oh, if you'd only give it up! Give it up this time, only this one time to please me, Ted, dear."

He shook his head.

"I'd do anything to please you, but I'm not alone in this plant, you know; there's others; and I can't go back on my pals; so you mustn't go back on me."

He spoke in the tone which the man who has the woman in his power can use so effectually; then his voice grew softer, and he stroked her cheek gently.

"And think of what this means if we pull this off, Fan! No more dodging and hiding, no more risks of chokee and a 'life' for me, and no more slaving and lady's-maiding for you! We'll be off together to some foreign clime, as the poet calls it; and, with plenty of the ready, I fancy you'll cut a dash as Mrs. Ted."

It was the one bait which he knew would be irresistible. She caught her breath, and, pressing closer to him, looked up into his eyes eagerly.

"You mean it, Ted? You won't deceive me again? You'll keep your word?"

"Honor bright!" he responded. "Why shouldn't I? You know I'm fond of you. I'd have married you months ago if I'd struck a piece of luck like this; but what was the use of marrying when I had to [Pg 263] —work, and there was the chance of my being collared any day of the week? No! But I promise you that if we pull this off, I am going to settle down; I shall be glad enough to do it. We'll have a little cottage, or a flat on the Continong, eh, Fan? Is the countess going to send the diamonds back to the bank to-morrow?"

He put the question abruptly, but in a low and impressive voice.

Burden shook her head.

"No," she replied reluctantly. "I—I asked her maid; they were talking about them just before I came out. Everybody was talking about them at the ball, and her ladyship's maid gives herself airs on account of them."

"Gases about them? Very natural. And she says?"

"There's a dinner party the night after next, and the countess thought it wasn't worth while sending them to the bank for one day. She's going to keep them in the safe in her room."

Ted's eyes glistened, and he nodded.

"Who keeps the key of the safe, Fan?" he asked; and though they were far from any chance of listeners, his voice dropped to a whisper.

"The countess," replied Burden, still reluctantly.

He nodded.

"I must have that key, Fan. Yes, yes! Remember what we are playing for, you and me! You get that key and put it in the corner of the windowsill where I was standing to-night."

"No, no!" she panted. His arm loosened, and he looked down at her coldly.

"You mean that you won't? Very well, then. But look here, my girl, we mean having these diamonds, with or without your help. You can't prevent us, for I don't suppose you'd be low enough to split and send me to penal servitude——"

"Ted! Ted!" she wailed, and put her arms round him.

He smiled to himself over her bowed head.

"What's the best time? While they're at dinner?"

She made a sign in the negative.

"No," she whispered, setting her teeth, as if every word were dragged from her. "No; the maid will be in the room putting the countess' things away; afterward—while they are in the drawing-room."

He bent and kissed her, his eyes shining eagerly.

"There! You've got more sense than I have, by a long chalk! I should never have thought of the maid being in the room. Clever Fan! Now, you'll put the key on the sill—when? Say ten o'clock.

And you'll see, Fan, that the little window on the back staircase isn't locked, and keep at watch for us?" [Pg 264]

"No, no!" she panted. "I will not! I cannot! I—I should faint! Don't ask me, Ted; don't—don't, dear! I shall say 'I'm ill'—and I shall be—and go to bed!"

"Not you!" he said, cheerfully and confidentially. "You'll just hang about the landing and keep watch for us; and if there's any one there to spoil our game, you'll go to the window and say, just loud enough for us to hear: 'What a fine night!'"

She hid her face on his breast, struggling with her sobs.

"Why, what is there to be afraid of!" he said. "If all's clear we shall have the things in a jiffy, and if it isn't we shall take our hook as quietly as we came, and no one will be the wiser. Should you like Boulogne, Fan, or should you like Brussels? We could be married directly we got on the other side. Boulogne's not half a bad place, and you'd look rather a swell at the Casino."

It was the irresistible argument again. She raised her head.

"You—you will go quietly; there will be no—no violence, Ted?"

"Is it likely?"

She shuddered.

"There—there was in that case at Berkeley Square, Ted!" and she shuddered again.

His face darkened.

"That was an accident. The gentleman was an obstinate old fool. But there's no fear of anything of that kind in this affair. I tell you we shall not be in the house more than five minutes, and if we're seen it won't matter. I'm in decent togs, and my pal is the model of a curate. Any one seeing us would think we were visitors in the house. You shall have a regular wedding dress, Fan. White satin and lace—real lace, mind you! Come, give us a kiss to say that it's done with, Fan!"

He took her face in his hands and kissed her, and with a choking sob she clung to him for a moment as if she could not tear herself away. But, having got what he wanted, the man was anxious to be off.

"Ten o'clock, mind, Fan! And a sharp lookout. There, let me put your shawl round your head. I'll wait here till I hear you're out of the wood."

But he remained only a moment or two after she had left him, and, with quick, light steps, he joined his confederate.

"It's all right," he said, as he got into the dogcart. "I've found out what I wanted. And I've managed with the girl. Had a devil of a job, though! That's the worst of women! You've always got to play the sentimental with them; nothing short of making love or offering to marry 'em is any use. It's a pity this kind of thing can't be worked without a petticoat. There's always trouble and bother when they come in. To-morrow night, Parson, ten o'clock, you and I are men or mice; but it's going to be men," he added, between his teeth. "Did you bring my barker as well as your own?" [Pg 265]

The Parson touched the side pocket of his overcoat, and nodded significantly.

CHAPTER XXXII.

The day following a big dance is always a slack one, and the house party at Anglemere came down late for breakfast, the last stragglers endeavoring to screen their yawns behind their hands, and receiving the usual "plans for the day" with marked coolness.

Drake, though he had slept but little, did his duty manfully, and proposed sundry rides and drives; but the majority of the party seemed to prefer a lounge in the drawing-room, or a quiet saunter in the garden; but eventually a drag started for some picturesque ruins, and some of the more energetic rode or drove to a flower show in the neighborhood.

It is an understood thing nowadays that your host, having provided for your amusement, is not necessarily compelled to join in your pursuits; in short, that his house shall not only be Liberty Hall for his guests, but for himself, and Drake, having dispatched the various parties, started a quiet game in the billiard room, and seen that the drawing-room windows were open and shaded, took his hat and stick and went out for a walk.

Lady Luce had not yet put in an appearance. She remained in bed or in her room on such occasions, and only sallied forth in time for luncheon, thereby presenting a fresh complexion and bright eyes with which to confound her less prudent sisters.

Drake had been thinking of her as well as of Nell. He knew that he would have to marry. The present heir to the title and estates was anything but a desirable young man, and it behooved Drake to keep him out of the succession if possible.

Drake, with all his freedom from pride and side, was fully sensible of the altitude of his position, and he knew the world looked to him for an heir to Angleford.

Yes, he would have to marry, and as he had lost Nell, why, not marry Luce? He had an idea that she cared for him, as much as she cared for any other than herself, and he knew that she would fill the place as well as, if not better than, another. [Pg 266]

Their names had been coupled together. Society expected the match. Why should he not ask her to renew the engagement, and ask her at once? The house would be comparatively empty, for most of the guests would not return until dinner time, and he would have the opportunity of making his proposal.

He stopped dead short, half resolved to obey the impulse; then, after the manner of men, he walked on again, and away from Anglemere, and, instead of returning to the house in time for lunch, found himself at one of the outlying farms.

It is needless to say that he was accorded a hearty welcome. They did not fuss over him; the Anglemere tenants were prosperous and self-respecting; and though they regarded their lord and master as a kind of sovereign, and felt greatly honored by his presence under their roof, there was nothing servile in their attentions.

Drake sat down to the midday meal with a ruddy-cheeked child on each side of him, and chatted with the farmer and his wife, the farmer eating his well-earned dinner with his usual appetite, the latter waiting on them with assiduity and perfect composure. Now and again Drake made a joke for the sake of the children, who laughed up at him with round eyes and open mouths; he discussed the breeding and price of poultry, the rival merits of the new churns and "separators" with the dame, and the prospects of the coming harvest with the good man. For a wonder the farmer did not grumble. The Anglefords were good landlords; there was no rack-renting, no ejections, and a farm falling vacant from natural causes was always eagerly tendered for.

After the meal, which Drake enjoyed exceedingly, he and the farmer sat at the open window with their pipes and a glass of whisky and water, and continued their conversation.

"I'm hearing that your lordship thinks of coming to Anglemere and living among us," said the farmer. "And I hope it's true, with all my heart. The land needs a master's presence—not that I've anything to complain of. Wood, the steward, has acted like a gentleman by me, and I hear no complaints of him among the neighbors. But all the same, it ain't like having the earl himself over us. It makes one's heart ache to see that great place shut up and empty most o' the year. Seems as if there ought to be some one living there pretty nigh always, and as if there ought to be little children running about the terrace an' the lawns. Begging your lordship's pardon, if I'm too free." [Pg 267]

"That's all right, Styles," said Drake. "I know what you mean."

The farmer nodded, and stopped his pipe with his fat little finger.

"I make so bold because I remember your lordship a wee chap so high." He put his hand about eighteen inches from the floor, as usual. "And a rare, hot-spirited youngster you was! Many's the time you've made me lift you into the cart, and you'd allus insist upon driving, though the reins were most too thick for your hands. Well, my lord, what we feels is that we'd like to live long enough to see another little chap—a future lordship—a-running about the place."

Drake nodded gravely and took a drink. Even this simple fellow was aware of Drake's duty to the title and estates.

"Perhaps you may some day, Styles," he said, smiling, and checking the sigh.

The farmer nodded twice, with pleasure and satisfaction.

"Glad to hear it, my lord; and I hope the wedding's to be soon."

"Soon or late, I hope you will come and dance at the wedding ball, Styles," Drake responded, with a laugh, as he got up to go.

But the laugh was not a particularly happy one, and he walked toward home in anything but a cheerful mood; for it is hard to be compelled to have to marry one woman while you are in love with another.

He entered the park by the small gate behind which Ted and Burden had stood on the preceding night, and was treading his way through the wood when he saw two figures—those of a man and a girl—walking in the garden behind the south lodge. He glanced at them absently for a moment, then he stopped, and, leaning heavily on his stick, caught his breath.

The man was Falconer, and the girl was—Nell!

They were pacing up and down the path slowly, she with her eyes downcast, some flowers in her hands, he with his face turned toward her, a rapt look in his eyes, his hands, folded behind his back, twitching nervously. They turned full face to Drake as he stood watching them, and he saw her distinctly. It seemed marvelous to him that he had not fully recognized her last night, that he had not guessed that the young engineer was Dick. The blood rushed to his face, then left it pale, and he stood, unseen by them, gnawing at his mustache.

In all his musings on the past, all his thoughts and dreams of her, the possibility of her being

engaged or married had never occurred to him. He had always pictured her as still "Nell of Shorne Mills," living at The Cottage as she had done when she and he were lovers. [Pg 268]

And it was she—she, Nell!—to whom this musician was engaged! A wave of bitterness swept over him, and in the agony of his jealousy he could have laughed aloud.

He had been sighing for her, longing for her, feeding his soul on his memory of her, all these months, while she had not only forgotten him, but had learned to love another man!

He stood and stared at them, as if he saw them through a mist, too overwhelmed to move; but presently he saw Nell look up with tears in her eyes, and hold out her hand slowly, timidly.

Falconer took it and put his lips to it. The sight broke the spell that held Drake, and, with a muttered oath, he turned and walked away quickly through the wood toward the house.

The first dinner bell was ringing as he entered the hall. Most of the guests had gone up to dress, but one or two still lingered in the hall, and among them Lady Angleford and Lady Luce. The former came to meet him as he entered.

"Why, where have you been, Drake?" she said, with the little maternal manner with which she always addressed him.

Lady Luce was lounging in a chair, playing with a grayhound, and she looked up at him with a smile, then lowered her eyes, as if she were afraid their welcome should be too marked.

"I've been for a walk," he said. His face was flushed, his eyes bright—too bright—with suppressed emotion. "I've been lunching at the Styles' farm——"

"That's a long way! Aren't you tired? Will you have some tea? I'll get some made in a moment or two. Do!"

"No, no; thanks!" he said, as he pitched his cap on the stand. "It's too late."

As he spoke he went up to Lady Luce and looked down at her, his face still flushed, his eyes still unnaturally bright.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Luce?" he asked.

She glanced up at him for a moment, then lowered her eyes and drew the dog's sleek head close to her.

"I don't know," she said, with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "Nothing, I think. It has been an awfully long day."

"Luce has been bored to death, and—for once—has admitted it," said Lady Angleford, laughing. "Her yawns and sighs have been too awful for words."

He stood and looked down at her. She was perfectly dressed, and looked like a girl in the light frock, with its plain blouse and neat sailor knot. At any rate, if he married her he would have a beautiful wife; and that was something. That she loved him, was still more. [Pg 269]

Now that he knew Nell had forgotten him, there was no reason why he should hesitate.

He bent lower, and his hand fell on the dog's head and touched hers.

"Luce!" he said.

She looked up, saw that the words she had been longing for were trembling on his lips, and her face grew pale.

"Luce, I want to speak to you," he said, in a low voice. Lady Angleford had gone to a table to collect her work; there was no one within hearing. "I want to ask you——"

Before he could finish the all-important sentence, Wolfer and one or two other men who had been riding came in at the door.

"Bell gone?" exclaimed Wolfer. "Afraid we are late. Had a capital ride, Angleford! What a lovely country it is! Is my wife in yet?"

Drake bit his lip; for, having made up his mind to the plunge, he disliked being pulled up on the brink.

"After dinner," he whispered, bending still lower, and he went upstairs with the other men. Lord Turfleigh, who was with them, paused at the landing, murmured an excuse, and toddled heavily down again. Lady Luce had picked up her book and risen, and she lifted her head and looked at her father with an unmistakable expression on her face.

He raised his heavy eyebrows and stretched his mouth in a grin of satisfaction.

"No!" he said, in a thick whisper. "Really?"

She nodded, and flashed a smile of exultant triumph round the hall.

"Yes. He had nearly spoken when you came in! My luck, of course! Another minute! But he will speak to-night!"

"My dear gyurl!" he murmured. "You make your poor old father a proud and happy man. My own gyurl!"

She glanced at Lady Angleford warningly, and going up to her, took her arm and murmured sweetly:

"Let us go upstairs together, dear."

Lady Angleford looked at her with a meaning smile.

"How changed you have suddenly become, Luce!" she said. "Where are all your yawns gone? One would think you had heard news!"

Luce turned her face with a radiant smile.

"Perhaps I have," she said, in a low voice. "I—I will tell you—to-morrow!"

They parted at the door of Lady Angleford's room, Lady Luce's being farther down the corridor. Next to Lady Angleford's was the suite which had been prepared for Drake, and he came out of the room which adjoined the one she used as a dressing room as she was going into it. [Pg 270]

"I'm sorry if my absence to-day was inconvenient, countess," he said.

"Not in the least! Everybody was disposed of; indeed, I was so free that Lady Wolfer and I went for a long drive. How changed she is! I don't know a happier woman! And she has given up all that woman's rights business."

Drake nodded, with, it must be admitted, little interest.

"By the way," he said, as casually as he could, "what is the name of the young engineer and his sister who are staying at the lodge?"

"Lorton," replied the countess. "So stupid of me! I thought it was Norton, and I addressed the invitation so; but Mrs. Hawksley tells me that it is Lorton. The brother comes from Bardsley & Bardsley."

Drake nodded. He needed no confirmation of the fact of Nell's presence.

"And she's engaged to this Mr. Falconer?"

"Oh, yes," replied the countess. "There can be no doubt of it. Mrs. Harksley says that his attentions to her last night—at the ball, I mean—were quite touching. They walked home together arm in arm. I really must call on her. They say she is extremely pretty."

"No need to call, I think," he said. "I mean," he went on, as the countess looked surprised, "that—that they will be gone directly."

"Oh, but I thought he might be going to remain as resident engineer."

"No, I think not," said Drake, almost harshly. "From all I hear, he's too young."

Lady Angleford nodded, and went into her room, where her maid was awaiting her.

"Will you wear your diamonds, my lady?" she asked.

The countess nodded absently, and took the key of the safe from her purse; but when the maid placed the square case which held the marvelous jewels on the dressing table, Lady Angleford changed her mind.

"No, no," she said; "not to-night. It is only a house party. Put them back, please."

The maid replaced the case in the safe, but she could not turn the key.

"You must be quick. I am afraid I'm late," said the countess.

"I can't turn the key, my lady," said the woman.

Lady Angleford rose and tried to turn it, but the key remained obstinately immovable. [Pg 271]

"Knock at the earl's door and ask him if he will be kind enough to come to me," she said.

The maid did so, and Drake came in.

"I can't lock the safe, Drake," said the countess. "I am so sorry to trouble you."

"It's no trouble," he responded. "Literally none," he added, with a short laugh. "You hadn't quite closed the door. See?"

"We were stupid. How like a woman!" she said penitently.

"Take care of the key," he said. "The diamonds had better be sent to the bank the day after to-morrow, unless you want to wear them again soon."

"No," she said. "They make such a fuss about them; and—well, they are rather too much of a blaze for such a little woman as I am."

"Nonsense!" he said. "Here's the key."

He laid it on the dressing table, and she was about to take it up to replace it in her purse, and put the purse in one of the small drawers of the dressing table, when there came a knock at the door, and Burden entered.

"I—I beg your ladyship's pardon," she faltered, drawing back.

"What is it?" asked the countess.

"I wanted to borrow some eau de Cologne for my lady," said Burden. "I thought your ladyship had gone down, or I wouldn't——"

"Give her the eau de Cologne," said the countess to her maid. "Please ask Lady Luce to keep it. I shall not want it."

Burden took the bottle and went out. On the other side of the door she paused a moment and caught her breath. Chance, or the devil himself, was working on Ted's behalf, for she had happened to enter the room at the very moment the countess had put the key in the purse, and the purse in the drawer. And all day Burden had been wondering how she should get that key.

She went on after a moment or two, and Lady Luce looked up from her chair in front of the dressing table, as Burden entered.

"Where have you been?" she asked sharply.

"I went to borrow some eau de Cologne, my lady," replied Burden.

"Well, please be quick; you know we are late. I will wear——" she paused a moment. She wanted to look her best that night. The beauty which had caught Drake in the past, the beauty which was to ensnare him again, and win for her the Angleford coronet, must lack no advantage dress could [Pg 272] lend it. "The silver gray and the pearls, please," she said, after a moment or two of consideration. "Why, what is the matter with you?" she asked sharply, as she saw the reflection of Burden's face in the glass. "Are you ill, or what?"

Burden tried to force the color to her face and keep her hands steady.

"I—I am not very well, my lady," she faltered. "I—I have had bad news."

"Bad news! What news?" asked Lady Luce coldly.

"My—mother is very ill, my lady," replied Burden, on the spur of the moment.

Lady Luce moved impatiently.

"It is a singular thing that persons of your class are always in some trouble or other; you are either ill yourselves, or some of your relations are dying. I am very sorry and all that, Burden, but I hope you were not thinking of asking me to let you go home, because I really could not just now."

"No, my lady; perhaps a little later——"

"Well, I'll see," said Lady Luce irritably. "I don't suppose you could do any good if you were to go home; I suppose there's some one to look after your mother; and, after all, she may not be so bad as you think. Servants always look at the worst side of things, and meet troubles halfway."

"Yes, my lady," said Burden.

"And do, for goodness' sake, try and look more cheerful, my good girl! It's like having a ghost behind me. Besides, if you are worrying yourself about your mother you can't dress me properly; and I want you to be very careful to-night—of all nights!"

She leaned back and smiled at her face in the glass, and thought no more of the maid's pale and anxious one. Had she been not so entirely heartless, had she even only affected a little interest and expressed some sympathy, the unhappy girl might have broken down and confessed her share in the meditated crime; but Lady Luce was incapable of pretending sympathy with a servant. In her eyes servants were of quite a different order of creation to that of her own class; hewers of wood and drawers of water, of no account beyond that which they gained from their value to their masters or mistresses. To consider the feelings of the servants who waited upon her would have seemed absurd to Lady Luce, almost, indeed, a kind of bad form.

The dinner bell had rung before she was dressed, and she hurried down to find herself the last to arrive in the drawing-room. She sought Drake's face as she entered. It still wore the expression of suppressed excitement which she had noticed when he came in from his walk, and he smiled [Pg 273] with a kind of reluctant admiration as he noticed the magnificent dress, and the way in which it set off her beauty.

At dinner his altered mood was so marked that several persons who were near him noticed it. He, who had been so quiet and grave, almost stern in his manner and speech, to-night talked much and rapidly, and laughed freely.

The flush on his face deepened, and his eyes flashed so brightly that Wolfer, who was sitting near him, could not help noticing how often Drake permitted the butler to fill his glass, and wondered whether anything had happened, and whether he were drinking too much.

But Drake's gayety was infectious enough, and the dinner was a much livelier one than any that had preceded it.

Lady Luce was, perhaps, the most quiet and least talkative; but she sat and listened to Drake's stories and badinage, with a smile in her eyes and her lips slightly apart.

In a few hours he would speak the word which would make her the future Countess of Angleford!

The ladies lingered at the table rather longer than usual, for Drake's stories had suggested others to the other men, and his high spirits had awakened those of the persons near him. But Lady Angleford rose at last, and the ladies filed off to the drawing-room.

The men closed up their ranks, and Drake sent the wine round briskly. There was no dance to cut short the pleasant "after-the-ladies-have-gone" time; and they sat long over their wine, so that it was nearly ten o'clock when Drake, with his hand on the decanter near him, said:

"No more, anybody? Sure? Turfleigh, you will, surely!"

But the old man knew that he had had enough. He, too, was excited, and under a strain, and he rose rather unsteadily and shook his head.

"No, thanks. Er—er—I fancy we've rather punished that claret of yours to-night, my dear boy."

"It's a sad heart that never rejoices!" Drake retorted, with a laugh which sounded so reckless that Wolfer glanced at him with surprise.

"We'd better have a cigarette in the smoking room before we go into the drawing-room," said Drake, and he led the way.

As they went, talking and laughing, together across the hall, a white-faced woman leaned over the balustrade above, and watched them.

The other servants were in the servants' hall, enjoying themselves; the gentlemen were in the smoking room, and the ladies in the drawing-room. She was alone in the upper part of the house, which was so quiet and still that the sound of a clock, in one of the rooms, striking ten was like [Pg 274] that of a church bell in her ears.

She started and pressed her hand to her heart, then stole to the window on the back staircase, and, keeping behind the curtain, listened. Her heart beat so loudly as to almost deafen her, but she heard a slight noise outside, and something fell with a soft tap against the window sill. It was the top of the ladder falling into its place.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Burden had switched off some of the electric lights in the corridor—was, indeed, prepared to switch the remainder if any one happened to come up—and she could just see a face through the window. The sight of it almost made her scream, for the face was partially covered by a crape mask, through which the eyes gleamed fiercely.

Burden clapped her hand to her mouth to stifle the cry of terror, and, absolutely incapable of remaining on the spot, fled to her own room and locked herself in.

Ted raised the window noiselessly and stepped into the corridor. He had a plan of the house, drawn from Burden's description, and he made straight for the countess' room. The Parson stood at the bottom of the ladder on guard. And each man carried a revolver loaded in all six barrels.

A few minutes before the burglar had so neatly effected his entrance, the men left the smoking room for the drawing-room—all excepting Lord Turfleigh, who had taken a soda and brandy with his cigar, and deemed it prudent to indulge in a little nap before joining the ladies.

Drake was a little less excited than he had been, but he was still resolved to ask Luce to be his wife, and he meant to take her into the conservatory, or one of the rooms where they could be alone for a few minutes. But when he entered the drawing-room she was playing. He went up to the piano, and, bending over it as if to look at the music, whispered:

"Will you go into the conservatory presently?"

She nodded, and without raising her eyes, but with a sudden flush. Drake went across the room to where Lady Angleford and Lady Wolfer were seated, talking, and the first word he heard was Nell's name.

"Of course it is the same," Lady Wolfer was saying eagerly. "Her brother was at the engineers, Bardsley & Bardsley! And Nell has been near us all this time, and in this house, and I didn't know [Pg 275] it! If I had, I would have gone to her at once. She's the dearest and sweetest girl in all the world, and I owe her——" She stopped and sighed, but not sadly. "She left us quite suddenly to go to her stepmother, who was a cousin of my husband's; and I have only seen her once since. They—she and her brother—were living in one of these large mansions—a dreadfully crowded and noisy place; but, though they were poor, she seemed quite happy and contented. I begged her to come and live with me, but she would not leave her brother—though for that matter we should have

been delighted to have him also, especially if he is anything like her. Oh, yes, the dearest girl! And you don't know how much I owe her! Some day I may be tempted to tell you." She sighed again, and was silent for a moment, as she recalled the scene in her bedroom on the night of the dinner party, the night before Nell had left Wolfer House so suddenly. "I must go and see her to-morrow morning. They say she is engaged to the young man, the violinist."

Lady Angleford nodded.

"Yes; and if she was engaged to him when you last saw her, that would account for her happiness, notwithstanding her poverty. She is an extremely pretty girl. I remember her quite well. I saw her at your dinner party, you know. I hope she is going to marry a man worthy of her. I'll go with you to see her to-morrow, if you'll let me."

Drake stood listening, his hands clasped behind his back, his face set sternly. Every word they said caused him a pang of pain; and as he listened, his mind went back to the happy weeks when Nell was engaged to a man who certainly was not worthy of her.

Lady Angleford looked up at him.

"We were talking of Miss Lorton and her brother, Drake," she said. "She's a kind of connection of Lady Wolfer's, and lived with them for a time. I wish you would see the brother and see if he really is too young to be the resident engineer. It would be so nice to have some one whom one knows."

"I will see," he said, so grimly that Lady Wolfer glanced up at him with some surprise; and, as he moved away, Lady Angleford looked after him and sighed.

"How changed he is!" she said, in a low voice.

"In what way?" asked Lady Wolfer.

The countess was silent for a moment or two.

"He seems as if he were unhappy about something," she said; "as if something were worrying him. I only saw him twice before he came into the title, and though he was by no means 'loud' or effusive, he was bright and cheerful; but now——I noticed the change the moment he came into [Pg 276] the Hall on his return. It seems so strange. He had cause for anxiety then, for there was a chance of his losing Angleford; but now one would think he possessed all that a man could desire."

"The vanity of human wishes, my dear!" said Lady Wolfer. "Something may have happened while he was abroad," she suggested in a low voice.

"You mean a love affair? I don't think so."

The countess glanced toward the piano. She felt sure that Drake was about to renew his engagement with Lady Luce, and she deemed him the last man in the world to marry for the sake of "convenience."

Drake moved about the room restlessly, waiting for Luce to rise from the piano; but she was playing a long piece—an interminable one, as it seemed to him. Presently he felt for his pocket handkerchief, and, not finding it, remembered leaving it on the dressing table where Sparling had placed it. He went into the hall to send a servant for it; but there was not one in sight, and he went quickly up the stairs and entered his dressing room. He noticed that most of the electric lights were down, and, disliking the gloom, went toward the row of switches. They were fixed to the wall almost opposite Lady Angleford's dressing room, and as his hand went up to them, he heard a slight sound in the room.

It was a peculiar sound, like the soft bang which is made by the closing of a safe door. For a moment Drake paid no heed to it; then suddenly its significance struck upon him. Lady Angleford was in the drawing-room. Who could be at the safe?

He stepped outside the door, and waited for a second or two, then he opened the door softly, and saw a man rising from his knees in front of the safe. The man turned at the moment and stood with the case of diamonds in his hand—two other cases bulged from his side pockets—his eyes gleaming through his mask.

Now, in fiction the hero who is placed in this position always cries aloud for help, and instantly springs at the burglar; but in real life the element of surprise has to be taken into account; and Drake was too amazed at the moment to fling himself upon the thief. Besides, it is your weak and timid man who immediately cries for help. Drake was neither weak nor timid, and it would not occur to him to shriek for assistance. So the two men stood motionless as statues, and glanced at each other while you could count twenty. Then the burglar whipped a revolver from his pocket and presented it.

"Stand out of my way!" he said gruffly, and disguising his voice, for he knew how easily a voice [Pg 277] can become a means of identification. "Better stand out of my way, or, by God! I'll fire!"

Drake laughed, the short laugh of a strong man ridiculing the proposal that he shall probably stand aside and permit a thief to pass with his booty.

"Put down that thing," he said. "You know you can't fire; too much noise. Put it down—and the cases. No? Very well!"

He sprang aside with one movement, and with the next went for the man.

Ted was really a skillful craftsman, and had taken the precaution to fasten a string across the room, from the bed to the grate.

Drake's foot caught in it, and he went sprawling on his face.

Ted sprang over him, and gained the corridor. With a dexterity beyond all praise, he switched off the remaining lights and then pushed up the window and dropped, rather than climbed, down the ladder.

Drake was on his feet in a moment and out in the corridor in the next. He had heard the window pushed up, and knew the point at which the man had made his escape.

Even then he did not give the alarm, and he did not turn up the lights, for he could see into the night better without them. He leaned out of the window and peered into darkness, and distinguished two forms gliding toward the shrubbery.

It was a long drop, but he intended taking it. He swung one leg over the sill as some one came up the stairs.

It was Sparling.

"Why are all the lights out?" he exclaimed. "Who's there?" for there was light enough from the hall for him to see Drake dimly.

"All right; it's I," said Drake quietly. "Turn up the lights. There are burglars. Don't shout; you'll frighten the ladies. Get the bicycle lamp from my room—quick!"

Sparling tore into the room, and came dashing out with the lamp, and, with trembling hands, lit it.

"Drop it down to me when I call," said Drake. "I'll risk its going out. Then get some of the men and search the grounds. And—mind!—no frightening the ladies!"

Then he lowered himself, dropped, and called up. He caught the lamp, which was still alight, and covering the glass with his hand, ran in the direction the men had taken; and as he ran he buttoned his dress coat over the big patch of white made by his wide shirt front.

He had stalked big game often enough to be aware that his only chance of tracking the thieves lay in his following them quietly and unseen, and he ran on tiptoe, and keeping as much as [Pg 278] possible among the shrubs as he went, his ears and eyes strained attentively, he endeavored to put himself in their place.

"Yes," he muttered, "they'll make for the road, where there'll be a trap waiting for them—or bicycles; but which part of the road?"

The park fence was high, but easily climbable by an experienced burglar, and they might make for it at any point; presumably the nearest.

By this time he was cool enough, but extremely angry; and he blamed himself for falling so easily into the string trap. What he ought to have done——At this point in his futile reflections he stopped and listened, not for the first time, and he fancied he heard a rustling among the trees in front of him. He ran on as softly as possible, and presently saw a figure—one only—going swiftly in the direction of the lodge.

Drake understood in a moment; one man had gone to bring the vehicle near the gates, and this other man was waiting for it.

Up to this instant Drake had given no thought to the fact that he was pursuing two men, desperate, and, no doubt, armed, while he had no kind of weapon upon him. But now he smiled with a grim satisfaction as he saw that he had only one man to deal with.

Their separation was a point in his favor.

Steadily he followed on the man's track, and in a moment or two he saw the glimmer of the light from the lodge window; and as he saw it, he heard the roll of wheels approaching the gates.

The burglar, unacquainted with the topography of the road, was breaking his way through the undergrowth; and Drake, seeing that there was a chance of cutting him off by striking into one of the paths, turned into it.

He had to run for all he was worth now, and as he sped along he was reminded of his old college days, when he sprinted for the mile race—and won it. He reached a corner where the narrow path joined the wider one leading to the gate, and here he stopped, listening intently, and still covering the light of the lamp with his hand. Suddenly he heard footsteps near the lodge, and with a thrill of excitement more keen than any other chase had given him, he ran toward them.

As he did so, he caught sight of a woman's dress, and a faint cry of alarm and surprise arose. Was there a woman in the business?

Before he could answer the mental question he saw a figure—the figure he had been pursuing— [Pg 279] dash from the woods on the right and make for the path he had just left. Drake swung round

sharply and tore after him. The man looked over his shoulder, swore threateningly, and snatched something from his pocket. In drawing the revolver, however, he dropped something, and Drake saw, with immense satisfaction, that it was the diamond case.

"Give in, my man!" he said.

Ted laughed, caught up the case, and rushed on in the direction of the gate. But at that moment the tall figure of Falconer ran from the lodge.

Falconer stood for a moment, then he took in the situation, and dashing to the gate, flung it close. Ted heard the clang of the gate, and ran back toward Drake, with revolver raised.

Death stared Drake in the face; but it is at such moments that men of his temperament are coolest. He sprang aside as he had done in Lady Angleford's room. The revolver "pinged," there was a flash of light, but the bullet sped past him, and Drake flung himself upon his man.

Ted was as slippery as an eel, and striking Drake across the head with the revolver, he ran into the woods, with Drake after him; but the man knew there was no escape for him in that direction, and after a moment or two he turned and faced Drake again.

"Keep off, you fool, or I'll shoot you!" he growled hoarsely.

"Give in," said Drake again. "The game's up!"

Ted laughed shortly, and aimed the revolver again; but as his finger pressed the trigger, a cry rose from behind him, his arm was struck aside, and once more the bullet whizzed past its mark, and Drake was saved.

He saw the figure of a woman struggling with the burglar, saw the man raise his hand to strike her from him, saw her fall to the ground, and knew, by some instinct, that it was Nell.

In that instant the capture of the man was of no moment to him. With a cry, he flung himself on his knees beside her.

"Nell, Nell!" he panted. "Is it you?"

She remained quite motionless under his words, his touch, and he raised her head and tried to see her face.

The lamp he had dropped some moments before.

Suddenly a great shudder ran through her. She sighed, and opened her eyes.

"Drake!" she murmured; "Drake! Is he——"

He thought she referred to the man.

"Never mind him," he said eagerly. "Are you hurt? Tell me?"

She put her hand to her head, and struggled to her feet, swaying to and fro as if only half conscious, then her hands went out to him, and she uttered a cry of terror and anxiety. [Pg 280]

"He—he shot you!" she gasped.

"No, no!" he responded quickly. "There is no harm done, if the brute has not hurt you."

She shook her head and leaned against the tree, trembling and panting.

"I was in the garden. I—heard you and the man running, and—and—I—ran across the path——"

"In time to save my life," he said gravely. "But I'd rather have died than you should come to harm."

As he spoke, he heard the noise of a struggle behind him. He had absolutely ceased to care what became of the man whom he had been pursuing so relentlessly for a few minutes before; but the noise, the hoarse cries, which now broke upon them had recalled him to a sense of the situation.

"They are struggling at the gate—I must leave you," he said hurriedly. And he ran down the path.

As he approached the gate, he saw Falconer and the burglar struggling together. Falconer was losing ground every moment, and as Drake was nearly upon them, Ted got his opponent under him; but Falconer still clung to him, and Ted could not get free from him. As he shot a glance at Drake he ground his teeth.

"Let me go, you fool!" he hissed. "Let me——"

He got one arm free, the glimmer of steel flashed in the dim light as he struck downward, and Falconer with a sharp groan loosed his hold.

Ted was clear of him in an instant and sprang for the gate; but as he opened it Drake was upon him. Ted was spent with his struggle with Falconer; he had dropped his revolver; Drake had seized the arm which held the knife—seized it in a grip like that of a vise.

"Parson! Quick!" cried Ted. The dogcart drove up to the gate, and the Parson was about to spring to the aid of his mate, when another figure came running up. It was Dick.

"Why, what on earth's the matter?" he cried.

At the sound of his voice, the Parson, counting his foes with a quick eye, leaped into the cart and drove away at a gallop. Ted cursed at the sound of the retreating cart and struck out wildly, but Drake had pinned him against the gate.

"Knock that knife out of his hand!" he said sharply, and Dick did so. In another moment the burglar was on his back in the road with Drake's knee on his chest.

"That will do!" he panted. "I give in! It's a fair cap! But if that white-livered hound had stood by me, I'd have beaten the lot of you! As it is, I've given as good as I've got, I fancy!" and he nodded [Pg 281] tauntingly as he glanced to where Dick knelt beside Falconer.

Drake tore off the mask, and Ted shrugged his shoulders.

"You can take your knee off my chest, my lord," he said; "you're a tidy weight. Oh, I'm not going to try to escape. I know when I'm done. But it was a near thing."

Sparling and a couple of grooms with lanterns came running toward them, and Drake rose.

"Look to him," he said quietly. "He is not armed."

Ted took the cases from his pockets and flung them down as the men surrounded him; then he drew out a cigarette case, and, with a cockney drawl, said:

"Can one of you oblige me with a light?"

Sparling knocked the cigarette out of his hand, and one of the grooms growled:

"Shall I give him one over the head, for his cheek, Mr. Sparling?"

"Yes; that's about all you flunkeys can do; hit a man when he's down," said Ted. "But you needn't trouble. Here comes the peelers."

His quick ears had caught the heavy footsteps of the policeman, who came running up, and, before he was asked to do so, he held out his hands for the handcuffs.

"Is the cove dead?" he asked curtly; but no one answered him; indeed, no answer was possible, for Falconer lay like one dead, and Drake, who supported his head, could perceive no movement of the heart.

"One of you take a cart and go for the doctor," he said gravely.

As he spoke, Nell came toward them. The climax had been reached so quickly that Falconer had been wounded and the burglar caught before she could find strength to follow Drake; for the reaction which had followed upon her discovery of the fact that he was unhurt had made her weaker than the man's blow had done.

But now, as she saw the circle of men bending and kneeling round a prostrate figure, her terror rose again and she hurried forward. Pushing one of the men aside, she looked down, and with a cry fell on her knees beside the unconscious man and gazed with horror-stricken eyes.

"He is dead! He is dead! He has killed him!" she moaned.

There was a moment's silence, while Drake looked at her with set face and gloomy eyes; for at the anguish in her voice a pang of jealousy shot through him, of envy; for how willingly he would have changed places with the injured man!

He rose, lantern in hand, and went round to her. [Pg 282]

"He is not dead," he said, almost inaudibly.

"Oh, thank God!" she breathed.

"But he is badly hurt, I am afraid," said Drake gravely. Then he turned to the men. "We will carry him to the lodge. Gently!"

They lifted the wounded man and bore him along slowly. As they did so, Nell walked by his side, and half unconsciously took his hand and held it fast clasped in her trembling one. Even at that moment he saw her actions, and his heart ached. Yes, to have Nell hold his hand thus, to have her sweet eyes resting on him so tenderly, so anxiously, he would have willingly been in Falconer's place.

They carried Falconer up to his room, and Drake, with the skill he had acquired in many a knife-and-gun-shot accident, staunched the wound. Falconer had been stabbed in the chest, and the blood was flowing, but slowly.

Drake was so absorbed in the task that he had forgotten Dick's presence until, looking up, he caught Dick's eye fixed on him with sheer wonder.

"Drake!" he said, in a whisper. "You here?"

Drake nodded.

"Yes; it's a strange meeting, Dick, isn't it? But we have been near each other—though we didn't

know it—for some days past. You are 'the young engineer,' and I——"

He shrugged his shoulders, and Dick leaped at the truth.

"You are Lord Angleford?" he said.

Drake nodded.

"Yes. I'll explain presently. Just now all we can think of is this poor fellow."

"Poor chap!" said Dick sadly. "If I'd only come up a minute or two sooner—I'd gone down to the village for some 'bacca. Who'd have thought he was such a plucky one. For he's not strong, Drake, you see."

Drake nodded.

"No," he said; "but it is not always the strongest who are the bravest. Who is that?" for there came a knock at the door.

Dick went and opened it. Nell stood there, white to the lips, but calm and composed. He answered the question in her eyes.

"All right, Nell! Don't be frightened. He'll pull through; won't he, Drake?"

She turned her eyes upon him, and he met their appeal steadily.

"I hope so," he said.

She stole into the room, and, with her hands clasped, looked down at Falconer in silence.

"I hope so," repeated Drake emphatically. "There are not so many brave men that the world can afford to lose one." [Pg 283]

She raised her eyes to his face quickly.

"Yes," he said, "he was unarmed and knew that it was a struggle for life, that the man was desperate and would stick at nothing. It was the pluckiest thing I have ever seen." Then he remembered how she had sprung forward to strike up the burglar's arm, and he added, under his breath, "almost the pluckiest."

The crimson dyed her face for a moment, and her eyes dropped under his regard; but she said nothing, and presently she stole out again.

It seemed an age to the two men before the doctor arrived, though the time was really short; it seemed another age while he made his examination. He met Drake's questioning gaze with the grave evasion which comes so naturally to the smallest of country practitioners.

"A nasty wound, my lord!" he said. "But I've known men recover from a worse one. Unfortunately, he is not a strong man. This poor fellow has known the meaning of privation." He touched the thin arm, and pointed to the wasted face. "They tell their own story! Now, if it were you, my lord ——" he smiled significantly.

"Would to God it had been!" said Drake. The village nurse, whom the doctor had instructed to follow him, entered and moved with professional calm to the bedside, and the doctor gave her some instructions.

"I'll send you some help, nurse," he said.

As he spoke, Nell came to the door.

"No," she said, very quietly; "there is no need; I will help."

Almost as if he had heard her, Falconer's lips quivered, and he murmured something. Nell glided to the bed, and kneeling beside him, took his hand. His eyes opened, with the vacant stare of unconsciousness for a moment, then they recognized her, and he spoke her name.

"Nell!"

"Yes," she whispered, in response. "It is I. You are here at the lodge. Here is Dick, and"—her voice fell before Drake's steady regard—"you are with friends, and safe."

He smiled, but his eyes did not leave her face.

"I know," he said. "I—I am more than content."

Drake could bear it no longer. Dick followed him out of the room, and they went downstairs.

"I will wire for Sir William, the surgeon," said Drake, very quietly. "He will come down by the first train. Everything shall be done. Tell—tell your sister——"

Dick nodded gravely. [Pg 284]

"He's one of the best fellows in the world; he's worth saving, Drake——" he said. "I beg your pardon," he broke off. "I—I suppose I ought to call you 'my lord' now. I can scarcely realize yet ——"

Drake flushed almost angrily.

"For Heaven's sake, no!" he exclaimed. "There need be no difference between you and me, Dick, whatever there may be between——I'll come across in the morning to inquire, and I'll tell you all that has happened. Dick, you'll have to forgive me for hiding my right name down there at Shorne Mills. It was a folly; but one gets punished for one's follies," he added, as he held out his hand.

Still confused by the discovery that his old friend "Drake Vernon" was Lord Angleford, Dick could only let him go in silence, and Drake passed out.

As he did so, he looked up at the window of the sick room. A shadow passed the blind, and as he recognized it he sighed heavily. Yes; notwithstanding his wound and his peril, the penniless musician was the lucky man, and he, my Lord of Angleford, the most unfortunate and unhappy.

Slowly he made his way toward the house, and as he went the face and the voice of the woman he loved haunted him. For a moment she had rested in his arms, and he could still feel her head on his breast, still hear the "Drake, Drake!"

She had not forgotten him, then; she still remembered him with some kindness, though she loved Falconer? Well, he should be grateful for that. It would be good to think of all through the weary years that lay before him.

How beautiful she was! With what an exquisite tenderness her eyes had dwelt upon the wounded man! He started, and almost groaned, as he remembered that not so long ago those eyes had beamed love and tenderness upon himself.

"Oh, Nell, Nell!" broke from him unconsciously. "Oh, my dear, lost love! how shall I live without you, now that I have seen you, held you in my arms again?"

The great house loomed before him; the hall door was open; figures were standing and flitting in the light that streamed on the terrace; and with a pang he awoke to the responsibilities of his position, to the remembrance of his interview with Luce. There she stood on the top of the steps, a shawl thrown round her head, her face eager and anxious.

"Drake! Is it you?" she exclaimed; and she came down the steps to meet him, her hand outstretched.

The others crowded round, all talking at once. He shook her hand, held it a moment, then let it drop.

"He is all right, I hope," he said.

"He!" she murmured. "It is you—you, Drake!"

He frowned slightly. [Pg 285]

"Oh! I?" he said, with self-contempt. "I have got off scot-free. Where is the countess?"

Lady Luce looked at him keenly, and with a half-reproachful air.

"I—I—have been very frightened, Drake," she said.

For the life of him he could not even affect a tenderness.

"On my account? There was not the least need."

Lady Angleford came forward hurriedly.

"Drake! You are not hurt! Thank God!" And her hands clasped his arm.

"You have got your jewels?" he said, in the curt tone with which a man tries to fend off a fuss. "Are they all there?"

She made an impatient movement.

"Yes, yes—oh, yes! As if they mattered! Tell me how that poor man is. How brave of him!"

He smiled grimly.

"Yes. He will pull round, I hope. We shall know more in the morning. Hadn't you ladies better go to bed? Wolfer, I have wanted a drink once or twice in my life, but never, I think, quite so keenly as now."

The men gathered round him as he stopped at the foot of the stairs to wish the women good night. Luce came last, and as she held out her hand, looked at him appealingly. Was he going to let her go without the word she had been expecting—the word he had promised? He understood the appeal in her eyes, but he could not respond. Not to-night, with Nell's face and voice haunting him, could he ask Lady Luce to be his wife. To-morrow—yes, to-morrow!

She smiled at him as he held her hand, but as she went up the stairs the smile vanished, and, if it is ever possible for so beautiful a woman to become suddenly plain, then Lady Luce's face achieved that transformation.

Gnawing at her underlip, she entered her room, flung herself into a chair, and beat a tattoo with her foot. The door opened softly, and Burden stole in. She was very pale, there were dark marks

under her eyes, and she trembled so violently that the brushes rattled together as she took them from the table.

Lady Luce looked up at her angrily.

"What is the matter with you?" she demanded. "You look more like a ghost than a human being, or as if you'd been drinking."

Burden winced under the insult, and stole behind her mistress' chair; but Lady Luce faced round after her.

"You're not fit to do my hair, or anything else!" she said. "What is the matter now? Your mother or one of your other relations, I suppose. You always have some excuse or other for your whims and fancies." [Pg 286]

"I—I am rather upset, my lady!" Burden responded, almost inaudibly. "The—the robbery——"

"What does it concern you?" said Lady Luce sharply. "It is no affair of yours; your business is to wait upon me, and if you can't or won't do it properly——"

The brush fell from Burden's uncertain hand, and Lady Luce sprang to her feet in a passion.

"Oh, go away! Get out of my sight!" she said contemptuously. "Go down to the kitchen and tremble and shake with the other maids. I can't put up with you to-night."

"I'm—I'm very sorry, my lady. I'm upset—everybody's upset."

"Oh, go—go!" broke in Lady Luce impatiently. "If you are not better to-morrow, you'd better go for good!"

Burden stood for a moment uncertainly; then, with a stifled sob, left the room, and went down the corridor toward the servants' apartments; but halfway she stopped, hesitated, then descended the back stairs and stole softly along one of the passages. A door from the smoking room opened on to this passage, and against this she leaned and listened.

Sparling and the grooms who had joined in the pursuit of the burglars had come back full of the chase and its results, and there was an excited and dramatic recital going on in the servants' hall at that moment; but she dared not go there, though she was in an agony of anxiety to know the whole truth and the fate of her lover. Her face, her overwrought condition, would have betrayed her; so, at the least, would have caused surprise and aroused suspicion. She could not face the servants' hall, but she knew that the gentlemen would be discussing the affair in the smoking room, and that if she could listen unseen she should hear what had happened to Ted. It was Ted, and nothing, no one else she cared about.

All the men were in the smoking room, and all were plying Drake with questions. Drake, knowing that he would have to go through it, was giving as concise an account of it as was possible. He was wearied to death, not only of the burglary, but of the emotions he had experienced, and his voice was low and his manner that of a man talking against his will; but Burden heard every word, for, at its lowest, Drake's voice was singularly clear.

She listened, motionless as a statue, till he came to the point where the burglar had turned and faced him. Then she moved and had hard work to stifle a moan.

"That was a near thing, Angleford!" said Lord Turfleigh, over the edge of his glass; "a deuced near thing! If I'd been you, I should have cried a go, and let the fellow off. Dash it all! a man in your position has no right to risk his life, even for such diamonds as the Angleford." [Pg 287]

Drake laughed shortly.

"I didn't think of the diamonds," he said quietly. "It was a match between me and the man. He missed me and bolted to cover. I followed, and he slipped behind a tree and aimed; but he missed —fortunately for me."

"Missed you?" said Lord Wolfer, who had been listening attentively and in silence. "How was that? You must have been very near?"

Drake was silent for a moment; then, as if reluctantly, he replied:

"There were several persons engaged in the game. One of them was a young lady who is staying at the lodge—the south lodge. She happened to be out, strolling in the garden, and heard the rumpus. And she"—he lit a fresh cigarette—"she sprang on him and struck his arm up!"

"No!" exclaimed one of the men. "Dash it all! Angleford, if this isn't the most dramatic, sensational affair I've ever heard of."

"Yes?" came in Drake's grave, restrained tones. "Yes, that saved my life."

There was a moment's silence, an impressive silence, then he went on:

"And did for the man. If he had disposed of me, he could have shot poor Mr. Falconer at the gate and got off. As it was——" He stopped and seemed to consider. "Well, it left me free to collar him at the gate, but not, unfortunately, until he had wounded Falconer."

"Poor devil!" muttered Lord Turfleigh. "Hard lines on him, eh, Angleford?"

"Yes," said Drake gravely.

"Then, as I understand it," said Lord Wolfer, "your life, the salvation of the countess' jewels, and the capture of the burglar are due to this lady?"

"That is so," assented Drake quietly.

"Who is she? What is her name?" asked several men, in a breath.

There was a pause, during which Burden listened breathlessly.

"Her name is Lorton," said Drake, very quietly. "She is staying at the south lodge."

Burden started and bit her lip. Lorton? Where had she heard——

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Lord Wolfer. "You don't mean that Miss Lorton who was with us?"

Drake nodded.

"The same," he said gravely. [Pg 288]

Burden's lips twitched, and her hands gripped the edge of the door frame.

There was silence for a moment, then one of the men asked:

"And what do you think the fellow will get, Angleford?"

"It all depends," replied Drake, after a pause. "If this fellow Falconer should die——Well, it will be murder. If not—and God grant he may not!—it will be burglary simply, and it will mean penal servitude for so many years."

"And serve him right, whichever way it goes!" cried one of the men. "Anyway, this young lady, this Miss Lorton, is a brick! Here's her health!"

Burden waited for no more. She was white still, but she was trembling no longer. Her eyes were glowing savagely, and her lips were strained tightly. Her sweetheart was captured; he would either be hanged or sentenced to penal servitude; and Miss Lorton was the person with whom she had to reckon!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Before morning Falconer became delirious. He did not rave nor shout, but he talked incessantly, with his eyes wide open and fixed vacantly, and his long hand plucking at the bedclothes. Nell stole in from her room, though she had promised to rest and leave the night duty to the village nurse, and, sitting beside him, held his hand.

At the touch of her cool fingers he became quiet for a moment or two, and something like a smile crossed his pain-lined face; but presently he began again. Sometimes he was back at the Buildings, and he hummed a bar or two of music while his fingers played on the counterpane as if it were a piano. Once or twice he murmured her name in a tone which brought the color to Nell's face and made her heart ache. But it did not need the whisper of her name to tell her Falconer's secret. She knew that he loved her, for he had told her so at the moment when Drake had seen them walking together in the garden.

And as she sat and held his hand, she tried to force her mind from dwelling on Drake, and to remember the devotion of the stricken man beside her.

Though he had confessed his love, he had asked for nothing in return. He had said that he knew that his passion was hopeless, but that he could not help loving her, that he must continue to do so while life lasted.

"I will never speak of it again," he had said. "You need not be afraid. I don't know why I told you now; it slipped out before I knew——No, don't be afraid. All I ask is that you should still look upon me as a friend, that you will still let me be near you as often as is possible. It is too much to ask? If so, I will go away—somewhere, and cease to trouble you with the sight of me!" [Pg 289]

And Nell, with tears in her eyes—as Drake had seen—had given him her hand in silence, for a moment or two, and then, almost inaudibly, had answered:

"I am sorry—sorry! Oh, why did you tell me? No, no; forgive me! But you must not go. I—I could not afford to lose your—friendship!"

"That you shall not do!" he had said, very quietly, and with a brave smile. "Please remember that I said I knew there was no hope for me. How could there be? How could it be possible for you—you!—to care for me? But a weed may dare to love the sun, Miss Lorton, though it is only a weed and not a stately flower. I ought not to have told you; but that little success of mine, and the prospect it has opened out, must have turned my head. But you have forgiven me, have you not? and you will try and forget that I was mad enough to show you my heart?"

He had not waited for her to respond, but had left her at once, and, so that she should not think

him quite heartbroken, had hummed an air as he went.

And now that he lay here 'twixt life and death, Nell's heart ached for him, and she longed, with a longing beyond all words, that she could have returned the love he bore her.

But alas, alas! she had no love to give. Drake had stolen it long ago, there at Shorne Mills; and though he had flung it from him, it could not come back to her.

Even as she sat, with Falconer's hand in hers, she could not keep her mind from dwelling on Drake, though the failure of her attempt to do so covered her with shame. She had been in his arms again, had heard his voice, and the glamour of his presence and his touch were upon her.

His face hovered before her in the dim light of the sick room, and filled her with the aching longing of unsatisfied love.

Oh, why could she not forget him? Why could she not bring herself to accept, to return, the love of the man who loved her with all his heart and soul? He was all that was good, he was a genius, and a brave man to boot! Surely any woman might be proud to possess him for a husband, might learn to love him!

She turned and looked at him as he lay, his head tossing restlessly on the pillow, his lips moving deliriously; but though her whole being was stirred with pity for him, pity is not love, though it may be nearly akin, and one cannot force love as one forces a hothouse plant. [Pg 290]

After a while he became weaker, and the rambling, incoherent talk ceased; but she was still holding his hand when Dick and the doctor came in again. She sought the latter's face eagerly, but he merely smiled encouragingly.

"He has had a better night than I expected," he said, "and the temperature is not exceedingly high. You had better get some rest, Miss Lorton; you have been sitting up, I see."

Dick drew Nell out of the room.

"Drake—confound it! Lord Angleford, I mean!—has sent for Sir William. Is—is he going to die, do you think. Nell?"

Nell shook her head, her eyes filling.

"I don't know; I hope not. You—you have seen Dra—Lord Angleford, Dick?"

"Just now. He came to inquire. Nell, I can't understand it, though he has tried to explain why he hid his real name; and—and—Nell—he didn't tell me why you and he broke it off."

She flushed for a moment.

"There was no need," she said. "It does not matter."

Dick sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"No, I suppose it doesn't; but it's a mysterious affair. I hear he is going to marry that fair woman, Lady Luce."

Nell inclined her head, her lips set tightly.

"It's a pity we can't get away from here," he said gloomily. "It's jolly awkward. Though Drake was more than friendly with me last night and just now. He's awfully changed."

They were standing by the window of the sitting room, and Nell was looking out with eyes that saw nothing.

"Changed?"

"Yes; he looks years older, and he's stern and grave as if——Well, he doesn't look the same man, and it strikes me that he's anything but happy, though he is the Earl of Angleford, and going to marry one of the most beautiful woman in England."

Nell stood with compressed lips and eyes fixed on vacancy.

"He got a nasty blow last night," said Dick, after a pause.

Her manner changed in a moment, and her eyes flew round to him.

"He was hurt?" she said, with a catch in her breath.

Dick nodded.

"Yes; that ruffian struck him with the revolver or something. And I say, Nell, I haven't heard your share in this affair yet. Drake told me that the fellow struck you." [Pg 291]

"Did he?" she said indifferently. "I—I don't remember. Was Lord Angleford badly hurt? Tell me."

"Oh, no; I think not; not badly," replied Dick. "There's a bruise on his temple; but what's that to the damage poor Falconer suffered? Drake says that it was the pluckiest thing he's seen. Oh, Lord! what a sickening business it is! Thank goodness, they've got the fellow. It will be a lifer for him, that's one consolation."

Nell shuddered.

"And they've got the jewels back, that's another," said Dick, more cheerily. "Though I'd rather the fellow had got off with them than poor Falconer should have been hurt. What beastly bad luck, just after he'd struck oil and got a start! Drake says that Falconer will be a celebrity, if he lives; and you may depend Drake will do his best to make his words good. There'll be a 'Falconer boom,' mark my words. I never saw any one so concerned about a man as Drake is about him. He was here outside talking with the doctor before it was light. The whole of the remainder of the big house is to be placed at our disposal. In short, if it had been Drake himself who was stabbed, there couldn't be more concern shown. Here's the breakfast, and for the first time in my life, I don't want it. Why the deuce can't the swells look after their blessed diamonds?"

Nell gave him his coffee, and then stole up to her own room and flung herself on the bed.

Drake was hurt. It might have been Drake instead of Falconer lying between life and death. Her heart throbbed with thankfulness; but the next moment she hid her face in her hands for very shame. She tried to sleep, but she could not, and it was almost a relief when the servant knocked and said that two ladies from the Hall were downstairs.

"But I was not to disturb you if you was asleep, miss," she added, with naïveté.

Nell bathed her face and smoothed her hair quickly, and went down; and, as she entered the sitting room, was taken into Lady Wolfer's embrace.

"My dear, dear Nell!" she cried, in the subdued tones due to the sick room above. "Why, it's like a fairy story! Why didn't I or some of us know you were here, till last night? You remember Lady Angleford, dear?"

The countess came forward and held out her hand with her friendly and gentle smile.

"Come to the light and let me look at you," Lady Wolfer went on, drawing Nell to the window; "though it's scarcely fair, after all you have gone through. Nell, who would have thought that we were entertaining a heroine unawares? We knew you were an angel, of course; but a heroine—a heroine of romance! You dear, brave girl!" [Pg 292]

Nell colored painfully.

"The whole place, the whole county, by this time, to say nothing of London and every other place where a telegraph wire runs, is full of it."

"Oh, I am sorry!" said poor Nell, aghast.

Lady Angleford smiled.

"It is the penalty one pays for heroism, Miss Lorton," she said; "and you must forgive me for being grateful to you for saving Lord Angleford's life."

"Oh, but I didn't—indeed I didn't!" exclaimed Nell, in distress.

"Oh, but indeed you did!" retorted Lady Wolfer. "Lord Angleford says so, and he ought to know. He says that but for you the wretch would have shot him—he was quite close."

Nell's face was white again now, and the countess came to her aid.

"We are forgetting one of the objects of our visit," she said. "You know how anxious we are about Mr. Falconer, Miss Lorton. I hope he is in no danger, my dear?"

She took Nell's hand as she spoke, and pressed it, and Nell colored again under the sympathy in the countess' eyes.

"When I heard that he had been injured, I wished with all my heart that the man had got clear off with the miserable diamonds—I was going to say 'my' miserable diamonds, but they are only mine for a time. But I am sure Lord Angleford joins me in that wish. All the diamonds in the world are not worth rescuing at such a price as Mr. Falconer—and you—have paid. I hope you can tell us he is better. We are all terribly anxious about him."

Now, even in the stress and strain of the moment, Nell noticed a certain significance in the countess' tone, a personal sympathy with herself, conveyed plainly by the "and you," and it puzzled her. But she put the faint wonder aside.

"I don't know," she said simply. "He is very ill—he was badly stabbed. He has been delirious most of the night——"

"My poor Nell!" murmured Lady Wolfer, pressing her hand.

"I hope the nurse you have in to help you is a good one," said the countess, as if she took it for granted that Nell was also nursing him. "If not, we will send to London for one; indeed, Sir William may bring one with him. I don't know what Lord Angleford telegraphed."

"I wish we could do something for you, Nell," whispered Lady Wolfer. "Only last night, before the burglary, we were arranging that we would come down here and carry you—by main force, if necessary—up to the Hall. And now——But, dear, you must not lose heart! He may not be badly hurt; and the surgeons do such wonderful things now. Perhaps, when Sir William comes, he may [Pg 293]

tell you that there is no danger whatever, and that you will have him well again before very long."

Her eyes dwelt on Nell's with tender pity and womanly sympathy; and Nell, still puzzled, could only remain silent. As if she could not say enough, Lady Wolfer drew her to the window, and continued, in a lower voice:

"I meant to congratulate you, Nell, and I do. I—we all admired him so much the other night, little guessing the truth; and now that he has proved himself as brave as he is clever, one can understand your losing your heart to him. All the same, dear, I think he is a very—very lucky man."

The red stained Nell's face, and then left it pale again. She opened her lips to deny that she and Falconer were engaged, but at that moment a dogcart drove through the gate and stopped at the lodge.

"Here is Drake!" said the countess. "He has been to Angleford to see the police."

Nell drew away from the window quickly, and the countess went out as Drake got down from the cart.

"How is he?" Nell heard him ask. Though she had moved from the window, she could see him. He looked haggard and tired, and she saw the bruise on his temple. Her heart beat fast, and she turned away and leaned her arm on the mantelshelf. "And—and Miss Lorton?" he inquired, after the countess had replied to his first question.

She lowered her voice.

"She looks very ill, but she is bearing up wonderfully. It is a terrible strain for her, poor girl."

Drake nodded gloomily.

"Tell her that Sir William will be down by the midday train. And tell her not to give up hope. I saw the wound, and——"

"Hush! She may hear," whispered the countess.

He glanced toward the window, and the color rose to his face.

"Is she there?" he asked.

"Yes. Would you like to see her?"

He hesitated for a moment, his eyes fixed on the ground; then he said, rather stiffly:

"No; she might think it an intrusion"—the countess stared at him. "No; I won't trouble her. But please tell her that everything shall be done for—him." [Pg 294]

The countess accompanied him to the gate.

"You have been to the police?"

He nodded almost indifferently.

"Yes; the man is well known. We were flattered by the attentions of a celebrated cracksman. I've seen the detective in charge of the case, and given him all the particulars. He says that the men were assisted by some one inside the house—one of the servants, he suggests."

The countess looked startled.

"Surely not, Drake! Who could it be?"

He shrugged his shoulders with the same indifference.

"Can't tell. It doesn't matter. I've sent the things to the bank, and the other people will look after their jewels pretty closely after this. I wouldn't worry myself, countess."

"But you are worrying, Drake!" she said shrewdly, as she looked at his haggard face. "About this poor Mr. Falconer, of course!"

He started slightly, but he was too honest to assent.

"Partly; but there is no need for you to follow my example. I'll go on now."

He got up and drove off, but slowly, and he put the horse to a walk as he neared the house.

He had not seen Luce that morning, for he had been out, inquiring at the lodge at six, and had gone straight on to Anglebridge, where he had breakfasted.

In his heart he had been glad of the excuse for his absence, for the few hours of reprieve. But he would have to see her now, would have to ask her to be his wife—while his heart ached with love for Nell!

As he drove up to the door, one of the Angleford carriages came round from the stables. He glanced at it absently, and entered the hall slowly, draggingly, and was amazed to find Lord Turfleigh, in overcoat and hat, standing beside a pile of luggage.

"By George! just in time, Drake!" he exclaimed, his thick voice quavering with suppressed excitement, his hands shaking as he tugged at his gloves. "Just had bad news—deuced bad news!"

But though he described the intelligence as bad, there was a note of satisfaction in his voice.

"I'm sorry. What is it?" asked Drake.

"Buckleigh—Buckleigh and his boy gone down in that infernal yacht of his!" said Lord Turfleigh hoarsely.

He turned aside as he spoke to take a brandy and soda which the footman had brought.

The Marquis of Buckleigh was Lord Turfleigh's elder brother, and, if the news were true, Lord Turfleigh was now the marquis, and a rich man. [Pg 295]

Drake understand the note of satisfaction in the whisky-shaken voice.

"Just time to catch the train!" said the new marquis. "Where the devil is Luce? I always said Buckleigh would drown himself——Where is Luce? She thinks I'll go without her; but I won't!" He swore.

At that moment Lady Luce came down the stairs. She was coming down slowly, reluctantly, her fair face set sullenly; but at sight of Drake her expression changed, and she ran down to him. There might yet be time for the one word.

"Drake!" she cried, in a low voice, "I am going——You have heard?"

"Yes, yes," her father broke in testily. "I've told him. Get in. It will be a near thing as it is. Come on, I tell you!" and he shambled down the steps to the carriage.

She held Drake's hand and looked into his eyes appealingly.

"You see! I must go!" she murmured.

He nodded gravely.

"But you will come back?" he said, as gravely. "Come back as soon as you can."

Her face lit up, and she breathed softly. She was now the daughter of a rich man, but she wanted Drake, none the less.

"The Fates are against me, Drake," she whispered; "but I will come back."

"Where the devil is that confounded maid of yours, Luce?" Turfleigh called to her.

Burden came down the stairs. Her veil was drawn over the upper part of her face, but the lower part was white to the lips.

"I'm half inclined to leave her behind," said Lady Luce irritably. "Pray be quick, Burden!"

Burden got up on the box seat without a word.

Drake put Lady Luce in, held her hand for a moment, then the carriage started, and he was standing alone, staring after it half stupidly.

He was still free!

CHAPTER XXXV.

Two days later, Nell sat beside Falconer. He was asleep, but every now and then he moved suddenly, and his brows knit as if he were suffering.

The great surgeon—who, by the way, was small and short of stature—had come down, made his examination, said a few cheerful words to the patient, gone up to the Hall to dinner—at which he had talked fluently of everything but the case—and returned to London with a big check from Drake. But though he did not appear to have accomplished anything beyond a general expression of approval of everything the local man had done, all persons concerned felt encouraged and more hopeful by his visit; and when Falconer showed signs of improvement it was duly placed to Sir William's credit. There is much magic in a great name. [Pg 296]

But the improvement was very slight, and Nell, as she watched the wounded man, often felt a pang of dread shoot through her. Sometimes she was assailed by the idea that Falconer was not particularly anxious to live. When he was awake he would lie quite still, save when a spasm of pain visited him, with his dark eyes fixed dreamily upon the window; though when she spoke to him he invariably turned them to her with a world of gratitude, a wealth of devotion in them.

And for the last two days the pity in Nell's tender heart had grown so intense that it had become own brother to love itself. When a woman knows that she can make a good man happy by just whispering "I love you," she is sorely tempted to utter the three little pregnant words, especially when she herself knows what it is to long for love.

She could make this man who worshiped her happy, and—and was it not possible in doing so she might find, if not happiness, contentment for herself?

A hundred times during the last two days she had asked herself this question, until she had grown to desire that the answer might be in the affirmative. Perhaps if she were betrothed to Falconer she would learn to forget Drake, for whose voice and footstep she was always waiting.

On this afternoon, as she sat at her post, she was dwelling on the problem, which had become almost unendurable at last, and she sighed wearily.

Falconer awoke, as if he had heard her, and turned his eyes upon her with the slow yet intense regard of the very weak.

"Are you there still?" he asked, in a low voice. "I thought you promised me that, if I went to sleep, you would go out, into the garden, at least."

"It wasn't exactly a promise. Besides, I don't think you have been really asleep; and if you have it is not for long enough," she said, smiling, and "hedging" in truly feminine fashion. "Are you feeling better—not in so much pain?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I'm in no pain." He told the falsehood as admirably as he managed his face when he was awake, but it gave him away when he was asleep. "I shall be quite well presently. I [Pg 297] wish to Heaven they would let me be removed to the hospital!"

"That sounds rather ungrateful," said Nell, with mock indignation. "Don't you think we are taking enough care of you?"

He sighed.

"When I lie here and think of all the trouble I've given, I sometimes wish that that fellow's knife had found the right place. Though I suppose they'd have hanged him if it had."

Nell shuddered.

"Is that the only reason you regret he did not kill you?" she said.

"Am I to speak the truth?"

"Nothing else is ever worth speaking," she remarked, in a low voice.

"Well, then, yes. I am not so enamored of life as to cling to it very keenly," he said, stifling a sigh. "I don't mean because I have had a rough time of it—the majority of the sons of men find the way paved with flints—but because——What an ungrateful brute I must seem to you. Forgive me; I'm still rather weak."

"Rather!"

"Very weak, then; and I talk like a hysterical girl. But, seriously, if any man were given his choice, I think he'd prefer to cross the river at once to facing the gray and dreary days that lie before him."

"But the days that lie before you are brilliant; crimson with fame and fortune, instead of gray and dreary," she said. "Have you forgotten your success at—at the ball? that you were to play at the duchess'? Everybody says that you will become famous, that a great future lies before you, Mr. Falconer."

"Do they?" he said, gazing at the window dreamily. "No, I have not forgotten. I wonder whether they are right?"

"I know, I feel, they are right," she said quietly. "Very soon we shall all be bragging of your acquaintance—I, for one, at any rate. I shall never lose an opportunity of talking of 'my friend, Mr. Falconer, the great musician, you know.'"

"Yes," he said, looking at her with a faint smile. "I think you will be pleased. And I——"

He paused.

"Well?" she asked.

"If the prophecy comes true, I shall spend my time looking back at the old days, and sighing for the Buildings, for that sunny room of yours, with the tea kettle singing on the hob, and——Has Dick come back from Angleford?" [Pg 298]

Nell nodded.

"And the man? Has he been committed for trial?"

"Yes," she replied. "But I don't want to speak of that—it isn't good for you."

He was silent a moment; then he said:

"Do you know, I've got a kind of sneaking pity for the man. He wanted the diamonds badly—he needed them more than the countess did. What would it have mattered to her if he had got off with them? And he risked his liberty and his life for them. A man can't do more than that for the thing he wants."

Nell tried to laugh.

"I have never listened to a more immoral sentiment," she said. "I think you had better go to sleep again. But I understand," she added, as if she were compelled to do so.

"And I fancy the reflection that he made a good fight for it—and it was a good one; he was a plucky fellow!—must console him for his failure. After all, one can only try."

"Try to steal other people's jewels," said Nell.

"Try for what seems the best—what one wants," he said dreamily. "I wonder whether he would have been satisfied if he had got off with, say, a small box of trinkets?"

"I should imagine he would consider himself very lucky," said Nell, her eyes downcast.

"Do you think so?" asked Falconer quietly. "Somehow, I fancy you're wrong. He would have hankered after those diamonds for the rest of his life, and no amount of small trinkets would have consoled him for having missed them. Though I dare say, being a plucky fellow, he would have made the best of it."

Nell began to tremble. The parable was plain to her. The man beside her had failed to win the woman he loved, and would try to make the best of the poor trinkets of fame and success. Her lips quivered, and her eyes drooped lower.

"Perhaps—perhaps he would have tried for the diamonds again," she said, almost inaudibly.

He looked at her with a sudden light in his eyes, a sudden flush on his white face.

"Do—do you think so? Do you think it would have been any use?"

Nell rose, and brought some milk and water for him.

"I—I don't know," she said. "I—I think, if he felt that he wanted them so badly, he would have tried again; and that—that—he might——"

He raised himself on his elbow and looked at her fixedly, his breath coming fast, his eyes searching hers.

"Ah!" he said. "You think that if he came to the countess and whined for the things, she would have given them to him out of sheer pity! Is that it?" [Pg 299]

Nell shook her head.

"One can't imagine his being such a cur, such a fool, as to do it!" he said, sinking back. "And yet that is what I am! See how weak and cowardly I am, Nell! I promised that I would never again trouble you with my love; that I would be content to be your friend—your friend only; and yet a few days' sickness, and I am crawling at your feet and begging you to take compassion on me! And you'd do it!—yes, I know what you meant when you said that the man would try for the diamonds again!—out of womanly pity you would! Oh, shame on me for a cur to take advantage of my weakness!"

"Hush, hush!" she said brokenly. "I meant what I said; I—I——" She tried to smile. "I am a woman, and—and may change my mind!"

"But not your heart!" he said. He raised himself on his elbow again. "For God's sake, don't tempt me! I—I am not strong enough to resist. I want my diamonds so badly, you see, that I would stoop to stealing them. Nell, don't tempt me!"

He sank back, and put his hand over his eyes as if to shut out the beautiful face of the girl he loved.

Nell sank into a chair, and sat silent for a moment; then she said, in a low voice:

"I want to tell you the truth."

He took his hand away from his eyes, and fixed them on her downcast face.

"Go on," he said. "Tell me everything; why—why you have aroused a hope—the dearest hope of my life——But no; it never was a hope, only a hopeless longing. Ah! if you knew what such love meant, you would forgive me for my weakness, for my cowardice. To long day and night! If you knew!"

"Perhaps I do!" she whispered, in so low a voice that it was wonderful he should have heard her. But he did hear, and he turned to her quickly.

"You! And I—I never guessed it! Oh, forgive me! forgive me! Then indeed there never was any hope for me. I understand! How blind I have been! Who——No; I've no right to ask. Now I understand the look in your eyes which has often haunted and puzzled me. Oh, what a blind, blundering fool I have been all this time!"

"Hush!" she said, still so low that he could only just hear the broken murmur. "I—I am glad you did not know. I—I would not have told you now, if—if it were not all past and done with!" [Pg 300]

"Nell!" he said.

"Yes, it is all past and done with," she repeated. "And—and I want to forget it. I want you—to help me! Oh! must I speak more plainly? Won't you understand? If you will be content to take me—knowing what I have told you—if you will be content to wait until I—I have quite forgotten! and I shall soon, very soon——"

He stretched out his hand to her, an eager cry on his lips.

"Content!" he said. "You ask me if I shall be content!"

Then, as she put out her hand to meet his, he saw her face. It was white to the lips, and there was a look in her eyes more full of agony than his own had worn at his worst times. He let his hand fall on the bed.

"Is it all past?" he asked doubtfully.

She was about to speak the word "Yes," when a voice came from below through the open window. It was Drake talking to Dick. The blood flew to her face, her brows came together, and she shrank as if some one had struck her.

Falconer, with his eyes fixed upon her, heard the voice, saw the change on her face. The light died out of his eyes, and slowly, very slowly, he drew his hand back.

Nell stood looking before her, her lips set tightly, her eyes downcast. It was a terrible moment, in which she appeared under a spell so deep as to cause her to forget the presence of the man beside her. And, as he watched her, the life seemed to die out of his face as well as his eyes.

The door opened, and Dick came in.

"Drake's come to inquire after the patient," he said. "How are we, Falconer?"

"Better," said Falconer, with a smile; "much better. Couldn't you persuade Miss Lorton to take down the report, Dick?"

Dick nodded commandingly at Nell.

"Yes; you go, Nell."

She hesitated a moment; then she raised her head and glanced at Falconer reproachfully.

"Yes, I will go," she said, almost defiantly.

Drake leaned against the rails in the sunlight, softly striking his riding whip against his leg. His horse's bridle was hitched over the gate, and as he waited for Dick he thought of the time when the bridle had been hitched over another gate.

He heard a step lighter than Dick's on the stairs behind him, and slowly turned his head. The sun was streaming through the doorway, so that the slim, graceful figure and lovely face were set as in an aureole. A thrill ran through him, the color rose to his bronzed face, and he stood motionless and speechless for a moment; then he raised his hat. [Pg 301]

"How is Mr. Falconer?" he asked.

He had not seen her since the night of the burglary, the night he had held her in his arms, and the blunt question sounded like a mockery set against the aching longing of his heart.

"He is better," she said.

Her eyes rested on him calmly, and she spoke quite steadily, so that he did not guess that her heart was beating wildly, and that she had to clench the hand beside her in her effort to maintain her composure.

"I am glad," he said simply. "It has been an anxious time—must be so still—for you, I am afraid."

"Yes," she said.

He stood looking at her, and then away from her, and then at her again, as if his eyes must return to her against his will.

"I—I am glad to see you. I wanted to tell you—to thank you for what you did for me the other night. You know that I owe you my life?"

She shook her head and forced a smile.

"Isn't that rather an—exaggeration, Lord Angleford?"

He bit his lip at the "Lord Angleford." And yet how else could she address him?

"No," he said; "it is the simple truth. The man would have shot me."

"Then I am glad," she said quietly, as if there were no more to be said.

He bit his lip again.

"You are looking pale and thin."

"Oh, no," she said. "I am quite well."

Why did he not go? Every moment it became more difficult for her to maintain her forced calm. If he would only go! But he stood, his eyes now downcast, now seeking hers, his brows knit, as if he found it awful to remain, and yet impossible to go.

"Will you tell Mr. Falconer that directly he is able to go out I will send a carriage for him—a pony phaëton, or something of that sort?" he said, at last.

Nell inclined her head.

"We will leave here as soon as he can be moved," she said.

His frown deepened.

"Why?" he asked sharply. "Why should you?"

The blood began to mount to her face, and, gnawing at his mustache, he turned away. But as he did so Dick came down the stairs, two at a time. [Pg 302]

"Hi, Drake!" he called out. "Don't go. Falconer would like to see you!"

Drake hesitated just for a second—then——

"I shall be very glad," he said.

Nell moved aside to let him pass, and went into the sitting room, and he followed Dick upstairs. She went to the window, and stood looking out for a moment or two, then she caught up her hat and left the house, for she knew that she could not see him again—ah! not just yet.

Drake went up the stairs slowly, trying to brace himself to go through the ordeal like a man—and a gentleman. He was going to congratulate Mr. Falconer on his good fortune in winning the woman he himself loved. It was a hard, a bitterly hard thing to have to do, but it had to be done.

"Here's Lord Angleford, old man," said Dick, introducing him. "I don't know whether visitors are permitted yet, but you can lay the blame on me; and you needn't palaver long, Drake."

"I will take care not to tire Mr. Falconer," said Drake, as he went to the bedside and held out his hand.

Falconer took it in his thin one, and looked up at the handsome face with an expression which somewhat puzzled Drake.

"I'm glad to hear you're better," he said. "I suppose I ought not to refer to the subject, but I can't help saying, Falconer, how much we—I mean Lady Angleford—and all of us—are indebted to you. But for you the fellow would have got off, and her diamonds would have been lost."

Falconer noticed the friendly "Falconer," and though his heart was aching, he could not help admiring the man who stood beside him with all the grace of health and high birth in his bearing; and he sighed involuntarily as he drew a contrast between himself and "my lord the earl."

"All the same," Drake went on, "the countess would rather have lost her diamonds than you should be hurt."

"Her ladyship is very kind," said Falconer. His eyes, unnaturally bright, were fixed on Drake's face, his voice was low but steady. "I am glad I was of some little use in saving them. The man has been committed for trial, I hear?"

Drake nodded indifferently.

"Yes," he said. "I wish he had dropped the jewel cases and got off. It would have saved a lot of bother. But don't be afraid that you will be wanted as a witness," he added quickly. "I and one or two of the men who were present when he was captured will be sufficient. There will be no need to worry you—or Miss Lorton."

Falconer nodded.

"I hope you will be able to get out soon," said Drake. "I told Miss Lorton that I would send a carriage for you—something bulky and comfortable. Perhaps you'll let me drive you?" [Pg 303]

Falconer nodded again, and Drake began to feel vaguely uncomfortable under his fixed gaze and taciturnity; and being uncomfortable, he blundered on to the subject that tortured him.

"But Miss Lorton can drive you well enough; she is a perfect whip. And—and now I am mentioning her, I will take the opportunity of congratulating you upon your engagement, Falconer."

Falconer's lips twitched, but his eyes did not leave Drake's face, which had suddenly become stern and grim.

"You knew Miss Lorton before she came here, Lord Angleford?" said Falconer.

Drake colored, and set his lips tightly.

"Yes," he said, trying to speak casually. "We met——"

He stopped, overwhelmed by a thousand memories. His eyes fell, but Falconer's did not waver.

"Then it is as an old friend of hers that you congratulate me, Lord Angleford?" he said.

"Yes, an old friend," said Drake, his throat dry and hot. "I wish you every happiness, my dear fellow; and I think you——"

Falconer raised himself on his elbow.

"You are laboring under a mistake, Lord Angleford," he said, very quietly. "You think that Miss Lorton—is betrothed to me?"

Drake nodded. His face had grown pale; there was an eager light in his eyes. Falconer dropped back with a sigh.

"You are wrong," he said. "Who told you?"

Drake was silent a moment. The blood was rushing through his veins.

"Who told me? I heard—everybody said——"

He dropped into the chair and leaned forward, his face stern and set.

Falconer smiled as grimly as Drake could have done.

"What everybody says is rarely true, my lord. We are not betrothed."

"You don't——" exclaimed Drake.

A worm will turn if trodden on too heavily. Falconer turned. His face grew hot, his dark eyes flashed.

"Yes, my lord, I love her!" he said, and the lowness of his voice only intensified its emphasis. "I love her so well—so madly, if you like—that I choose to set conventionality at defiance, and speak the truth. I love her, but I can never win her, because there is one who comes between her and me. Wait!"—for Drake had risen, and was gazing down at the wan face with flashing eyes. "I do not know who he is. She has never uttered a word to guide me; but I can guess. Wait a moment longer, my lord! Whoever he may be, he is not worthy of her; but she cares for him, and that is enough for me, and should be enough for him. If I were that man——" [Pg 304]

He stopped, for his breath had failed him. Drake leaned over him as if he would drag the conclusion of the sentence from him.

"If I were that man, I'd strive to win her as I'd strive for heaven! Ah, it would be heaven!" His lips twitched, and he turned his face away for a moment. "I would count everything else as of no account. I would thrust all obstacles aside, would go through fire and water to reach her——"

Drake caught him by the arm.

"Take care!" he said hoarsely. "You bid me hope! Dare I do so?"

Falconer looked at him fixedly.

"Go to her and see. Wait, my lord. I love her as dearly—more dearly, perhaps, God knows!—than you do. She would be mine at a word."

Drake stood motionless, his face white and set.

"But that word will never be spoken by me. So I prove my love. Prove yours, my lord, and go to her!"

Drake tried to speak, but could not. His hand closed over Falconer's for a moment, then he hurried from the room and went down the stairs.

Dick was lounging in the porch with a cigarette, and he stared at Drake's hurried appearance, at his white, set face.

"Where is Nell? Where is your sister?" Drake demanded.

"Heaven only knows! She went out when you came in. She's in the wood, I should think."

Drake strode down the path and into the wood. His brain was on fire. She was free—they were both free! There was heaven in the thought!

Nell was seated at the foot of one of the big elms, and heard his quick, firm steps. She looked up, and would have risen and flown, but he was upon her before she could move—was upon her, and in some strange, never-to-be-explained way had got her hand in his.

"Nell—Nell!" was all he could say, as he knelt beside her and looked into her eyes. [Pg 305]

CHAPTER XXXVI.

At the passionate "Nell! Nell!" at the grasp of his hand, the blood rushed to Nell's face, and her breath came painfully. She was startled and not a little alarmed. Why was he kneeling at her feet,

why did he call upon her name with the appeal of love, the note of entreaty, in his voice? He was no longer Drake Vernon, but the Earl of Angleford, the promised husband of Lady Lucille.

The color left her face, and she drew her hand from his and shrank away from him, so that she almost leaned against the tree.

He half rose and looked at her penitently, and with something like shame for his vehemence. Indeed, he had rushed from the lodge in search of her, remembering nothing, thinking of nothing, but the fact that they were both free. But now he realized how suddenly he had come upon her, how great a shock his passionate words, his excited manner, must have been to her.

"Forgive me!" he said, still on one knee; "forgive me! I have frightened you. I forgot."

Nell tried to still the throbbing of her heart, to regain composure; but she could not speak. He rose and stood before her, his eyes fixed on her, eloquent with love and admiration. She had never seemed more beautiful to him than at this moment. Her face was thinner and paler than it had been in the happy days at Shorne Mills, but it had grown in beauty, in that spiritual loveliness which replaces in the woman that which the girl loses. The gray eyes were pure violet now, and fuller and deeper, as they mirrored the soul which had expanded in the bracing atmosphere of sorrow and trial.

He had fallen in love with an innocent, unsophisticated girl; he was still more passionately in love with her now that, a girl still in years, she had developed into glorious, divine womanhood. His eyes scanned her face hungrily, yet reverently, as he thought: Was it possible that he had once kissed those beautiful lips, had once heard them murmur "I love you?" And was it possible that he might again hear those magic words? His soul thirsted for them. It seemed to him that if he were to lose her now, if she were to send him away, life would not be worth having, that nothing remained for him in the future but misery and despair. To few men is it given to love as he loved the girl before him, and in that moment he suffered an agony of suspense which might well have caused the recording angel to blot out the follies of his past life. [Pg 306]

But he must not frighten her, he must not drive her away from him by revealing the intensity of his passion.

So his voice was calm, and so low that it was little more than a whisper, as he said:

"I have come in search of you; I have something to say that I hope, I pray, you will hear. Won't you sit down again?" and he motioned to the place where she had been seated.

But Nell shook her head and remained standing, her hands clasped loosely before her, her eyes downcast.

"What is it, Lord Angleford?" she said, in a voice as low as his. "I—I want to go back to the lodge."

"Wait a few minutes," he said imploringly. "I will not keep you long. I have just left the lodge. He—Mr. Falconer—is all right; he will not mind—will not miss you for a few minutes. And I must speak to you. All my happiness, my future, depends on it—upon you!"

"Ah, let me go!" she said, almost inaudibly; for at every word he spoke her heart went out to him, and she was tempted to forget that he was no longer her lover, but the betrothed of Lady Lucille. Whatever he said, she must not forget that!

"No; it is I who will go, when I have spoken, and if you tell me," he said gravely. "When you sent me away last time I went—I obeyed you. I promise to do so now if you send me away again. Nell—ah! I must call you so. It is the name I think of you by, the name that is engraven on my heart! Nell, I want to ask you if there is no hope of my recovering my lost happiness. Do you remember when I told you that I loved you, there at Shorne Mills? I told you I was not worthy of you. Even then I was deceiving you."

She drew nearer to the tree, and put her hand against it for support.

"I was masquerading as Drake Vernon. I concealed my real name and rank; but I had no base motive in doing so. I was sick of the world, and weary of it and myself, and I longed to escape the maddening notoriety which harassed me. And then, when I thought—ah, no! I won't say thought, for; I know that then, then, Nell, you loved me!"

Her lips quivered, but she kept the tears back bravely.

"Then it seemed so precious a thing to know that you should have loved me for myself alone, that you were not going to marry me for my rank and position, as many another girl would have done, that I was tempted to play the farce to the end. It was folly, but the gods punish folly more surely and quickly than they punish crime. The night that you discovered I had deceived you, I had resolved to tell you the truth and beg your forgiveness. But it was too late. Most of our good resolutions come too late, Nell. You had learned that I had deceived you; you had learned that I was not worthy to win and hold the love of a pure and innocent girl, and you sent me away." [Pg 307]

She raised her eyes and glanced at him, half bewildered. Was it possible that he thought that was her only reason for breaking the engagement?

"You were right, Nell. I think you would be right if you sent me away now; but I am daring to hope that you won't do so. It is but the shadow—the glimmer of a hope, and yet I cling to it, for it means so much to me—so much!"

There was silence for a moment, then he went on:

"I left Shorne Mills that day, and I sailed in the *Seagull*, determined that I would accept your sentence, that I would never harass or worry you, that, if it were possible, you should never be troubled by the sight of me. But, Nell, though I left you, I carried your image with me in my heart. I tried to forget you, but I could not. I have never ceased to love you; not for a single day have you been absent from my mind, not for a single day have I ceased to long for you!"

She looked at him again, wonder and indignation dividing her emotion. There was truth in his accents, in his eyes. Had he forgotten Lady Lucille?

"There was no more wretched and unhappy man on God's earth than I was at that time," he went on. "Nell, if you had been called upon to find a punishment heavy enough for the deceit which I practiced, I do not think you could have hit upon a heavier one. For I could not be rid of my love for you. I could not forget your sweet face; your dear voice haunted me wherever I went, and I moved like a man under a curse, the curse of weariness and despair."

His voice almost broke, and he put his hand to his forehead as if he still felt the weight of the weary months.

"Then came the news of my uncle's sudden death; but when I had got over my grief for him—he had been good to me, and I was fond of him!—even then I could find no pleasure in the inheritance which had fallen to me. Of what use was the title and the rest of it, if all my happiness was set upon the girl I had lost forever? I came home to do my duty, in a dull, dogged fashion, came home with the conviction that I should not be able to rest in England, that I should have to take to wandering again. I loved you still, Nell, but I hoped—see, now, I tell you the truth!—that I might at least get some peace, might learn to deaden my heart. And then, as the Fates would have it, I find you here, and——" [Pg 308]

He paused for a moment and caught his breath.

"Hear that you were going to marry another man."

Nell started slightly, and the color rose to her face. She had forgotten Falconer!

"That was the last drop in my cup of misery. Somehow, I had always thought of you as the little girl of Shorne Mills, as—as—free. I had not reflected that it was inevitable that some other man should admire and love you. You see, you—you still, in some strange way, seemed to belong to me, though I knew I had lost you!"

No words he could have uttered could have touched her more sharply and deeply than this simple avowal. She turned her head aside so that he might not see the quivering of her lips, the tenderness which sprang into her eyes.

"That was the hardest blow of all that Fate had dealt me, Nell. It almost drove me mad to know that you once loved me, and yet that you were to be the wife of another man! It made me mad and desperate for a time, then I had to face it, as I had faced my loss of you. But, Nell——"

He paused again, and ventured to draw a little nearer to her; but as she still shrank from him, and leaned against the tree, he stopped short and did not venture to take her hand.

"Now I have just left Mr. Falconer, I have heard from his own lips that there is no engagement, that——Oh, Nell! It was the knowledge that you were still free that sent me to you just now, that made me cry out to you as I did! I love you, Nell, more dearly, more truly, if that be possible, than I did! Won't you forgive me the folly which made you send me away from you? Won't you let me try and win back your love?"

There was silence, broken only by the rustle of the leaves in the summer breeze, by the note of a linnet singing in the branches above their heads.

"See, dear, I plead as a man pleads for his life! And on your answer hangs all that makes life worth living. Forgive me, Nell, and give me back your love! I have been punished enough, rest assured of that. Forgive me that past folly and deceit, Nell! I'll teach you to forget in time. Dearest, you loved me, did you not? You loved me until that night of the ball—at the Maltbys'—when you discovered who I was!"

Back it all came to her, and she turned her face to him with grief and reproach in her violet eyes.

"I was on the terrace," she said, almost inaudibly. "It is you who forget. It was not because you kept your right name and rank from me. I was on the terrace. I saw you and—and Lady Luce!" [Pg 309]

He started, and his hand fell to his side. He could not speak for a moment, the shock was so great, and in silence he recalled, saw as in a flash of lightning, all the incidents of that night.

"You—you were there? You saw—heard?" he said, half mechanically.

"Yes," she said.

She was calm, unnaturally calm now, and her voice was grave and sad rather than reproachful.

"I saw and heard everything. I saw her and Lady Chesney before you came out. I heard Lady Luce telling her friend that you and she were engaged, that you had parted, but that she still cared for you, and that you would come back to her; and when you came out of the house on the terrace, I

saw her—and you——Oh, why do you make me tell you? It is hateful, shameful!"

She turned her face away, as if she could not bear his gaze fixed on her with amazement, and yet with some other emotion qualifying it.

"You saw Lady Luce come to meet me, heard her speak to me, saw her kiss me?" he said, almost to himself; and even at that moment she was conscious of the fact that there was no shame in his voice, none in his eyes.

She made a motion with her hand as if imploring him to say no more, to leave her; but he caught at her hand and held it, though she strove to release it from his grasp.

"My God! and that was the reason? Why, oh, Nell! Nell! why did you not tell me what you had seen? Why did you say no word of it in your letter? If you had done so—if you had only done so!"

She looked at him sadly.

"Was it not true? Were you not engaged to her?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"Yes," he replied quickly. "I kept that from you; but it was true. You read of the engagement in that paragraph in the stupid paper, you remember? I ought to have told you, and I thought that it was because I had not, as well as because I had concealed my rank, that you broke with me. But, Nell, my engagement with her was broken off by herself; when there was a chance of my losing the title and the estates, she jilted me. I was free when I asked you to be my wife. You believe that? Great heavens! you do not think me so bad, so base——"

"No," she said, with a sigh. "No; but you went back to her. Oh, I do not blame you! She is very beautiful; she was a fitting wife——" [Pg 310]

He uttered an exclamation—it was very like an oath—and caught her hand again.

"No, no," he said, almost fiercely. "You are wrong—wrong!"

She sighed again.

"I saw you—and her," she said, as if that were conclusive.

"I know it," he said. "You saw her come toward me and greet me as if—Heaven! I can scarcely bear to speak of it, to recall it!—as if she were betrothed to me. You saw her kiss me. But, Nell—ah! my dearest, listen to me, believe me!"—for she turned away from him in the bitterness of her agony, the remembrance of the agony she had suffered that night on the terrace. "You must believe me! The kiss was hers, not mine. I would rather have died than my lips should have touched her that night."

Nell's heart began to throb, and something—a vague hope—the touch of a joy too great and deep for words—began to steal over her.

"I am a fool, and weak, but, as Heaven is my witness, I had no thought for her that night. All my heart, my love, were yours! The very sight of her, her presence, was painful to me! Even as she came toward me, I was thinking of you, was in search of you. And her kiss! If the lips had been those of one of the statues on the terrace, it could not have moved me less. Nell, be merciful to me! What could I do? I am a man, she is a woman. Could I thrust her from me? I longed to do so; I would have told her I loved her no longer, that my love was given to another, to you, Nell; but there was no time. She left me before I could scarcely utter a word. And then I went in search of you—and the rest you know. Think, Nell! When you sent me away, did I go to her? No; I left England with my disappointment and my misery. Ah, Nell, if you had only told me that you had beheld the scene on the balcony! Go back to her—and leave you!"

He laughed with mingled bitterness and desperation. The strain was growing too tense for mere words.

At such moments as this, the man, if there is aught of manliness in him, has need of more than words.

"Think, dearest!" he said hoarsely. "Compare yourself with poor Luce! You say she is 'beautiful.' Do you never look in the glass? Dearest, you are, in all men's sight, ten times more lovely! The pure and flawless gem against the falsely glittering paste! Oh, Nell, if my heart was not so heavy, I could laugh, laugh! And you thought I had left you for her, gone back to her! And so you sent me away to exile and misery!" [Pg 311]

His voice grew almost stern.

"Nell! It is you who ought to plead for forgiveness! Yes! You have sinned against me!"

She started and looked at him, open-eyed in her amazement.

"Yes, you also have sinned, Nell! You ought to have spoken to me, brought your accusation. I could have explained it all; we should have been married—and happy! And I should have been spared all these months of unhappiness, this awful hell upon earth!"

He had struck the right note at last. Convince a woman that she has been cruel to you, and, if she loves you, the divine attribute of pity will awaken in her, and bring her, who a moment before was as inflexible as adamant, to your feet.

Nell, panting for breath, looked at him; questioningly at first, then, by short degrees, pleadingly, almost penitently.

"Drake!" she breathed piteously.

He sprang forward and caught her in his arms, and pressed a torrent of kisses upon her lips, her hair.

"Nell! My love, my dearest! Oh, have I got you back again? Have I? Tell me you believe me, Nell! Tell me that I may hope; that you will love me again!"

She fought hard to resist him; but when a man holds the woman he loves, and who loves him, in his arms, the woman fights in vain. Every sense in her plays traitor, and fights on the man's side.

Nell put her hands on his broad chest, and tried to hold him off; but he would not be denied.

"Nell, I love you!" he cried hoarsely. "I want you. Let the past go. Don't hold me at arm's length, dearest! I love you! Nell, you will take me back?"

She still struggled and protested against the flood of happiness which overwhelmed her.

"But—but she?" she said, meaning Luce. "Since you have been here——They say——Ah, Drake!"

He laughed as he pressed her to him.

"Let them say!" he retorted. "Nell, I'll tell you the whole truth. If you had been engaged to poor Falconer, I should have married Luce——"

"Ah!" she breathed, with a shudder she could not repress.

"But you are not. And I am still free! And you are free! Nell, lift your head! Give me one kiss—only one—and I will be satisfied."

Her head still drooped for a moment, then she raised it and kissed him on the lips.

The summer breeze made music in the leaves, the linnet sang his heart out above their heads, the soft air breathed an atmosphere of love, and these two mortals were, after months of misery, happy beyond the power of words to express. [Pg 312]

And as they sat, hand in hand, talking of the past, and picturing the future, neither of them naturally enough gave a thought to Lady Luce.

And yet he had asked her to come back to Anglemere; and without doubt she would come.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

It was an enchanted world to these two. For some time they sat side by side, or, rather, Drake sat at Nell's feet, her hand sometimes resting, lightly as a dove's wing, with a caress in its touch, upon his head. There were long spells of silence, for such joy as theirs is shy of words; but now and again they talked.

They had so much to tell each other, and each was greedy of even the smallest detail. Drake wanted to hear of all that had happened to her since the terrible parting on the night of the Maltbys' ball—how long ago it seemed to them as they sat there in the sunshine that flickered through the leaves and touched Nell's hair with flashes of light.

And Nell told him everything—everything excepting the episode of Lady Wolfer and Sir Archie—that was not hers to tell, but Lady Wolfer's secret, and Nell meant to carry it to the grave with her; not even to this dearly loved lover of hers could she breathe a word of that crisis in Ada Wolfer's life. And yet, if she had been free to tell him about it then and there, how much better it would have been for them both, how much difference it would have made in their lives!

"And was there no one, no other man whom you saw, who could teach you to forget me, Nell?" he asked, half fearfully.

Nell blushed and shook her head.

"Surely there was some one among all you knew who was not quite blind, who was sensible enough to fall in love with the loveliest and the sweetest girl in all London?"

Nell's blush grew warmer as she remembered some of the men who had paid court to her, who would have been her suitors if she had not kept them at arm's length.

"There was no one," she said simply.

"Falconer?" he said, in a low voice. [Pg 313]

The color slowly ebbed from her face, and her eyes grew rather sad as she reflected that her happiness had been purchased at the cost of his pain and self-sacrifice.

"Yes," she said, in a whisper, for she could not hide the truth from him; her heart was bare to his

gaze. "If—if you had not come, if he had chosen to accept me, I should have married him. But you came at the very moment, Drake; and at the sound of your voice——He saw my face, and read the truth."

"Poor Falconer," he said, very gravely. "He is a better man than I am, than I shall ever be, even under the influence of your love, and the happiness it will bring me. I owe him a big debt, Nell; and though I can't hope to pay it, I must do what I can to make his life more smooth."

"He is very proud," she said, a little proudly herself.

"I know, I know; but he must let me help him in his career. I can do something in that direction, and I will. But for him! Ah, Nell, I don't like to think of it; I don't like to contemplate what might have happened if I had lost you altogether. Yes; I owe him a debt no man could hope to repay. I wish it had been I who had lived at Beaumont Buildings and played the violin to you, instead of him. All that time I was sailing in the *Seagull*, or wandering about Asia, wondering whether there was anything on earth, or in the waters under the earth, that could bring me a moment's pleasure, a moment of forgetfulness."

"And—and—you thought of me all that time? There was no one else?"

"There was no one else," he said, as simply as she had answered his question. "Though sometimes——Do you want me to tell you the whole truth, dearest?"

"The whole truth," she responded, looking down at him with trustful eyes, and yet with a little anxious line on her brow. For what woman would not have been apprehensive? She had cast him off, and he had been wandering about the world, free to love again, to choose a wife.

"Well, sometimes I tried to efface your image from my mind, to forget Nell of Shorne Mills, in the surest and quickest way. I went to some dinners and receptions; I joined in a picnic or two, and an occasional riding party. Once I sailed in a man's yacht which had three of the local belles on board, and I tried to fall in love with one of them—any of them—but it was of no use. Now and again I endeavored to persuade myself that I was falling in love. There was one, a girl who was something like you; she had dark hair, and eyes that had a look of yours in them; and when she was silent I used to look at her and try——But when she spoke, her voice was unlike yours, and her very unlikeness recalled yours; and I saw you, even as I looked at her, as you stood on the [Pg 314] steps at the quay, or sat in the stern of the *Annie Laurie*, and my heart grew sick with longing for you, and I'd get up and leave the girl so suddenly that she used to stare after me with mingled surprise and indignation. What charm do you exert, what black magic, Nell, that a big, strong, hulking fellow like me cannot get free from the spell you throw over him? Tell me, dearest."

Her eyes rested on him lovingly, and there was that in the half-parted lips which compelled him to rise on his elbow and kiss them.

"And yet you could have married Lady Luce," she said, not reproachfully, but very gravely. "Did you not think of her, Drake?"

"No," he replied gravely. "I gave no thought to her until I came home and saw her. And it was not for love of her that I should have married her, Nell, but in sheer desperation. You see, it did not matter to me whom I married if I could not have you."

"And yet—ah, how hard love is!—she cares for you, Drake! I have seen her—I saw her on the terrace, I saw her at the ball here."

He laughed half bitterly.

"My dear Nell, don't let that idea worry you. There is nothing in it; it is quite a mistaken one. Luce is a charming woman, the most finished product of this fin de siècle life——"

"She is very beautiful," Nell said, just even to her rival.

"I'll grant it, though compared to a certain violet-eyed girl I know——"

Nell put her hand over his lips; and he kissed it, and went on gravely.

"No, it is not given to Luce to love any one but herself. She and her kind worship the Golden Image which we set up at every street corner. Rank, wealth, the notoriety that is paragraphed in the society papers, those are what Luce worships, and marries for. By the accident of birth I represent most of these things, and so——"

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"And now chance has helped me again, for her father has inherited the Marquisate of Buckleigh, and he will be rich. It is likely enough that she would have jilted me again."

"But you were not engaged to her?" said Nell, drawing her hand from his head, where it had rested lightly.

"No," he said. "But I should have been, and she knows it. The whole truth, dearest! No, I am free, thank God! Free to win back my old love." [Pg 315]

Nell drew a sigh of relief, and her hand stole back to him.

"She will let me go calmly and easily enough. There are at least two marriageable dukes in the

market, and Luce——"

"Ah, Drake, I do not like to hear you speak so harshly—even of her."

"Forgive me, Nell. You are right," he said penitently. "But I can't forget that by her play acting on the terrace that night she nearly robbed me of you forever, and caused both of us months of misery. I can't forget that."

"But you must!" said Nell gently. "After all, it may not have been acting."

He laughed again, and drew her down to him.

"Ah, Nell, not even after the experience you had at Wolfe House, do you understand the fashionable woman, the professional beauty. It was all 'theater' on Luce's part, believe me! She would have made a magnificent actress. But do not let us talk about her any more. Tell me again how you used to live in Beaumont Buildings. Nell, we'll go there after we are married—we'll go and see the rooms in which you lived. I want to feel that I know every bit of your life since we parted."

At the "after we are married," spoken with all the confidence of the man, Nell's face grew crimson.

"And now, dearest, you will come up to the Hall?" he said, after a pause, and as if he were stating an indisputable proposition. "By George! how delighted the countess will be to hear of our reconciliation and engagement! She knows nothing of our love and our parting. I told no one; my heart was too sore; but I think I shall tell her now, and she will be simply delighted. You'll like her, Nell; she's such a dear, tender-hearted little woman. I don't wonder at my uncle falling in love with her. Poor old fellow! She has been wonderfully good to me. You'll come up to the Hall, and be treated like a princess."

"No, Drake," she said. "I must not. I must stay with—him; he needs me still."

He was silent a moment, then he kissed her hand assentingly.

"It shall be as you will, my queen!" he said quietly. "Ah, Nell, I shall make a bad husband; for I foresee that I shall spoil you by letting you have your own way too much. I wanted you at the Hall, wanted you near me. But I see—I see you are right, as always. But, Nell, there must be no delay about our marriage. Directly Falconer is well enough to——" [Pg 316]

She drew her hand away, but he recovered it and held it against his face.

"There must be no other chance of a slip between the cup and the lip," he said, almost solemnly. "I want you too badly to be able to wait. Besides, do you forget that we have been engaged two years? Two years! A lifetime!"

At this moment a "Coo-ee!" sounded through the wood—an impatient and half indignant "Coo-ee!"

It was Dick, and he approached them, yelling:

"Nell! Nell! Where on earth are you, Nell?"

They had barely time to move before he was upon them.

"I say, Nell, where on earth have you been? I'm starving——Hallo!" he broke off, staring first at Nell's red and downcast face, and then at Drake's smiling and quite obviously joyous one. "What ——"

Drake took Nell's hand.

"We quite forgot you, Dick, and everybody and everything else. But you'll forgive us when you hear that Nell and I have—have——"

"Made it up again!" finished Dick, with a grin that ran from ear to ear. "By George, you don't say so! Well, I said it was only a tiff; now, didn't I, Nell? But it was a pretty long one. Eighteen months or thereabouts, isn't it?"

For a moment the two lovers looked sad, then Drake smiled.

"Just eighteen months too long, Dick," he said. "But you might wish us joy."

"I do, I do—or I would, if I wasn't starving!" retorted Dick. "While you have been spooning under the spreading chestnut tree, I've been wrestling with the electric dynamos; and the sight of even bread and cheese would melt me to tears. But I am glad, old man," he said, in a grave tone—"glad for both your sakes; for any one could see with three-quarters of an eye, to be exact, that you were both miserable without each other. Oh, save me from the madness of love!"

"There was a very pretty girl by the name of Angel at the Maltbys' dance," put in Drake musingly; "a very pretty girl, indeed, who sat out most of the dances, if I remember rightly, with a young friend of mine."

Dick's face grew a healthy, brick-dust red, and he glanced shyly from one to the other.

"Well hit, Drake, old man!" he said. "Yes; there was one, and I've seen her in London once or

twice——"

"Oh, Dick, and you never told me!" said Nell reproachfully.

"I don't tell you everything, little girl," he remarked severely; "and I won't tell you any more now unless you come on and give me something to eat. See here, now; I'll walk in front, and promise not to look round——" [Pg 317]

Nell, blushing painfully, looked at Drake appealingly, and he seized Dick by the arm and marched him off in the direction of the lodge, Nell following more slowly.

As they entered, the nurse came down from Falconer's room, and Nell inquired after him anxiously.

"He is much better, miss," said the nurse; "and he asked me to say that he should be glad if you and his lordship would go up to him."

Drake nodded, and he followed Nell up the stairs.

Falconer was sitting up, leaning back against a pile of pillows; and he greeted them with a smile —the half-sad, half-patiently cynical smile of the old days in Beaumont Buildings—the smile which served as a mask to hide the tenderness of a noble nature.

Nell came into the room shyly, with the sadness of the self-reproach which was born of the knowledge that her happiness had been gained at the cost of this man who loved her with a love as great as Drake's; but Drake came up to the bed boldly, and held out his hand.

"We have come—to thank you, Falconer," he said, in the tone with which one man acknowledges his debt to another. "No, not to thank you, for that's impossible. Some things are beyond thanks, and this that you have done is one of them. You have brought happiness where there was nothing but misery and despair. Some day I will tell you the story of our separation; but that must wait. Now I can only try and express my gratitude——"

He stammered and broke down; for with Falconer's eloquent eyes upon him, he realized the extent of the man's self-sacrifice, and it seemed to him that any attempt to express his own gratitude was worse than absolute silence. Can you thank a man for the gift of your life?

Falconer looked from one to the other, the half-sad smile lighting up his wan face.

"I know," he said simply. And indeed he knew how he should feel if he were in the place of this lucky man, this favored of the gods. "I know. There is no need to say anything. You are happy?"

His eyes rested on Nell. She slipped to her knees beside the bed and took his hand; but she could not speak; the tears filled her eyes, and she gazed up at him through a mist.

"Ah! what can I say?" she murmured.

He smiled down at her with infinite tenderness.

"You have said enough," he said simply, "and I am answered. Do you think it is nothing to me, your happiness? It is everything—life itself!" His dark eyes glowed. "There is no moment since I knew you that I would not have laid down this wretched life of mine, if by so doing I could have made you happy at a much less cost." [Pg 318]

He turned his eyes to Drake with sudden energy.

"Don't pity me, Lord Angleford. There is no need."

Drake took his other hand and pressed it.

"You must get well soon, or her—our—happiness will be marred, Falconer," he said warmly.

Falconer nodded.

"I shall get well," he said. "I am better already. We artists are never beyond consolation. Art is a jealous mistress, and will brook no rival."

"And you worship a mistress who will make you famous," said Drake.

Falconer smiled.

"We are content, though she should deny us so much as that," he said. "Art is its own reward."

Nell rose from her knees and stole from the room. When she had gone, Falconer raised his head and looked long and seriously at Drake.

"Be good to her, my lord," he said, very gravely. "You have won a great prize, a ruby without a blemish; value it, cherish it."

Drake nodded.

"I know," he said simply.

Nell stole into the room again. She was carrying Falconer's violin carefully, tenderly. She put it in his hands, held out eagerly to receive it, and he placed it in position, turned it swiftly, and began to play, his eyes fixed on hers gratefully.

Nell and Drake withdrew to the window, their heads reverently bent.

He played slowly, softly at first, a sad and yet exquisitely sweet melody; then the strain grew louder, though not the less sweet, and the tiny room was throbbing with music which expressed a joy which only music could voice.

Drake's hand stole toward Nell's, and grasped it firmly. Her head drooped and the tears rose to her eyes, and soon began to trickle down her cheeks. The exquisite music seemed to reach her soul and raise it to the seventh heaven, in even which there are tears.

"Drake!" she murmured. "Drake!"

"Nell, my dearest!" he responded, in a whisper.

Then suddenly the music ceased. Falconer slowly dropped the violin on the bed and fell back, his eyes closed, his face as calm as that of a child falling to sleep.

"Go now," whispered Nell; and Drake stole from the room, leaving Nell kneeling beside the musician, who had apparently fallen asleep. [Pg 319]

Drake went down the stairs like a man in a dream, the strange, weird music still ringing in his ears, and walked up to the Hall.

The countess met him as he entered, and he took her hand and led her into the library without a word.

"Oh, what is it, Drake?" she asked anxiously, for she knew that something had happened.

He placed her in one of the big easy-chairs, and stood before her, the light of happiness on his face.

"I've something to tell you, countess," he said. "I am going to be married."

She smiled up at him.

"I am very glad, Drake. I have expected it for some time past. What a pity it is that she should have had to go!"

"She! Who?" he exclaimed.

For the moment he had forgotten Lady Luce.

The countess stared at him.

"Who?" she said, with surprise. "Why, who else should it be but Luce?"

His brows came together, and he made an impatient movement.

"No, no!" he said. "It is Nell—I mean Miss Lorton."

She rose with amazement depicted on her countenance.

"Miss Lorton! At the lodge?"

"Yes," he said impatiently. "We were engaged nearly two years ago. There was a—a—misunderstanding—but it is all cleared up. I want your congratulations, countess."

She was an American, and therefore quick to seize a point.

"And you have them, Drake. That sweet, beautiful girl! I am glad! But—but——"

"What?" he asked impatiently.

"But Luce!" she stammered. "We all thought that——"

"You are wrong," he said, almost hoarsely. "It is Miss Lorton. Go to her at the lodge, and——"

He said no more, but went to the writing table.

Lady Angleford, all in amaze, left the room.

He took up a pen and scribbled over a sheet of note-paper, then tore it up. He filled several other sheets, which he destroyed, but at last he wrote a few words which satisfied him.

Then he remembered that he did not know Luce's address; and, for want of a better, he addressed the letter, announcing his engagement to Miss Lorton, to Lord Turfleigh's club in London; and, like a man, was satisfied. [Pg 320]

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Was it any wonder that Nell should lie awake that night asking herself if this sudden joy and happiness that had come to her was real—that Drake loved her still—had never ceased to love her—and was hers again?

Perfect happiness in this vale of tears is so rare that we may be pardoned for viewing it with a certain amount of incredulity, and with a doubt of its stability and lasting qualities. But Drake's kisses were still warm on her lips, and his passionate avowal of love still rang in her ears.

And next morning, almost before she had finished breakfast, down came the countess to set the seal, so to speak, upon the marvelous fact that Nell of Shorne Mills was to be the wife of the Earl of Angleford.

Nell, blushing, rose from the table to receive her, and the countess took and held her hand, looking into the downcast face with the tender sympathy of the woman, who knows all that love means, for the girl who has only yet learned the first letters of its marvelous alphabet.

"My dear, you must forgive me for coming so early. Mr. Lorton, if you do not go on with your breakfast, I will run away again. I am so glad to meet you. Now, pray, pray, sit down again."

But Dick, who knew that the countess wished to have Nell alone, declared that he had finished, and took himself off. Then the countess drew Nell to her and kissed her.

"My dear, I am come to try and tell you how glad I am! Last night Drake and I sat up late talking of you. He has told me all your story. It is a romance—a perfect romance! And none the less charming because, unlike most romances in life, it has turned out happily. And we are all so pleased, so delighted—I mean up at the Hall; and I am sure the people on the estate will be as pleased, for I know that you have become a general favorite, even though you have been here so short a time. Lady Wolfer begged me to let her come with me this morning, but I would not yield. I wanted you all to myself. Not that I shall have you for long, I suppose, for Drake will be sure to be here presently."

Nell's blush grew still deeper. She was touched by the great lady's kindness, and the tears were very near her eyes.

"Why are you all so glad?" she faltered, gratefully and wonderingly. "I know that there is a great difference between us. I am—well, I am a nobody, and Drake is stooping very low to marry me. [Pg 321] You must all feel that."

"My dear," said the countess, with a smile, "no man stoops who marries a good and innocent girl. It's the other way about—at least, that's my feeling; but then I'm an American, you know; and we look at things differently on the other side. But, Nell, we are glad because you have made Drake happy. None of us could fail to see that he has been wretched and miserable, but that now he has completely changed. If you had seen the difference in him last night! But I suppose you did," she put in naïvely. "He seemed to have become years younger; his very voice was changed, and rang with the old ring. And you have worked this miracle! That is why we are all so delighted and grateful to you."

The tears were standing in Nell's eyes, though she laughed softly.

"And yet—and yet he ought to have married some one of his own rank." The color rushed to her face. "I did not know who he was when—when I was first engaged to him at home, at Shorne Mills."

"I know—I know. He has told me the whole story. It was very foolish of him—foolish and romantic. But, dear, don't you see that it proves the reality, the disinterestedness of your love for him? And as for the difference of rank—well, it does not matter in the least. Drake's rank is so high that he may marry whom he pleases; and he is so rich that money does not come into the question."

"It is King Cophetua and the beggar maid," murmured Nell.

"If you like; but there is not much of the beggar maid about you, dear," retorted the countess, holding Nell at arm's length and scanning the refined and lovely face, the slim and graceful form in its plain morning frock. "No, my dear; there is nothing wrong about the affair, excepting the extraordinary misunderstanding which parted you for a time, and brought you so much unhappiness. But all that is past now, and you and he must learn to forget it. And now, my dear, I want you to come up with me to the Hall."

But Nell shook her head.

"I can't do that, countess," she said. "I can't leave Mr. Falconer. He is much better and stronger this morning; the nurse says that he slept all night, for the first time; but he still needs me—and—I owe him so much!" she added in a low voice.

The countess looked at her keenly for a moment; then she nodded.

"I see. Drake told me that I should find you harder to move than you look. And I am not sure that [Pg 322] you are not right," she said. "When you come to stay at the Hall it will be as mistress." Nell's face crimsoned again. "But, my dear girl, we can't pass over the great event as if it were of no consequence. Drake's engagement, under any circumstances, would be of the deepest interest to all of us, to the whole country; but his engagement to you will create a profound sensation, and we must demonstrate our satisfaction in some way. I'm afraid you will have to face a big dinner party."

Nell looked rather frightened.

"Oh!" she breathed. "Is—is it necessary? Can't we just go on as if—as if nothing had happened?"

The countess laughed.

"That's exactly what Drake said when I spoke to him about it last night. It is nice to find you so completely of one mind. But I'm afraid it wouldn't do. You see, my dear, the people will want to see you, to be introduced to you; and if we pursue the usual course there will be much less talk and curiosity than if we let things slide. Yes, you will have to run the gauntlet; but I don't think you need be apprehensive of the result," and she looked at her with affectionate approval.

"Very well," said Nell resignedly. "You know what is best, and I will do anything you and Drake wish."

"What a dutiful child!" exclaimed the countess, banteringly. "And though you won't come and stay at the Hall, you will come up and see us very often, to lunch and tea and——"

"When Mr. Falconer can spare me," said Nell quietly.

"Yes. And about him, dear. We talked of him last night, and his future. That will be Drake's special care. He, too, owes him a big debt, and he feels it. Mr. Falconer is a genius, and the world must be made to know it before very long. And your brother, dear; you will let him come up to the Hall?"

Nell laughed softly.

"You are thinking of everything," she said. "Even of Dick. Oh, yes, he'll come. Dick isn't a bit shy; but he thinks more of his electric machines than anything else on earth just at present."

"I know," said the countess, laughing. "But we must try and lure him from them now and again. I am sure we shall all like him, for he is wonderfully like you. Now, about the dinner, dear. Shall we say this day week?"

"So soon!" said Nell.

"Yes; it mustn't be later, for this wretched trial is coming on; the assizes are quite close, you know; and Drake will have to be there as witness. My dear, I'm glad they did not get off with the diamonds! You little thought that night, when you saved Drake's life, and prevented the man getting away, that you were fighting for your own jewels." [Pg 323]

"Mine!" said Nell.

The countess laughed.

"Why, yes, you dear goose! Are they not the Angleford diamonds, and will they not soon be yours?"

Nell blushed and looked a little aghast.

"I—I haven't realized it all yet," she said. "Ah! I wish Drake were—just Drake Vernon! I am afraid when I think——"

The countess smiled and shook her head.

"There is no need to be afraid, my dear," she said shrewdly. "You will wear the Angleford coronet very well and very gracefully, if I am not mistaken, because you set so little store by it. And now here comes Drake! It is good of him to give me so long with you. Give me a kiss before he comes —he won't begrudge me that surely! Ah, you happy girl!"

Drake drove up in a dogcart.

"I can't get down; the mare won't stand"—he hadn't brought a groom, for excellent reasons. "Please tell Nell to get her things on as quickly as she can!" he said to the countess as she came out.

Nell looked doubtful.

"I will go upstairs first," she said. But Falconer was asleep, and when she came down she had her outdoor things on.

Drake bent down and held out his hand to help her up.

"You won't be long?" she asked, and she looked up at him shyly, for, after their long separation, he seemed almost strange to her.

"Just as long as you like," he said, understanding the reason for her question, and glancing at the window of Falconer's room. "Dick tells me that he is better this morning. I couldn't say how glad I am, dearest Nell," he whispered, as the mare sprang at the collar and they whirled through the gates and down the road. "Is it you really who are sitting beside me, or am I dreaming?"

Nell's hand stole nearer to his arm until it touched it softly.

"I have asked myself that all night, Drake," she said, almost inaudibly. "It is so much more like a dream than a reality. Are we going through the village?" she asked, suddenly and shyly.

"Yes," he said. "We are. Nell, I want to show my treasure to the good folk who have known me

since I was a boy. Perhaps the news has reached the village by this time—for the servants at the Hall know it, and I want them to see how happy you have made me!" [Pg 324]

There could be no doubt of the news having got to the village, for as the dogcart sped through it the people came to the doors of the shops and cottages, all alive with curiosity and excitement.

Drake nodded to the curtseys and greetings, and looked so radiantly happy that one woman, feeling that touch of nature which makes all men kin, called out to them:

"God bless you, my lord, and send you both happiness!"

"That's worth having, Nell," he said, very quietly; but Nell didn't speak, and the tears were in her eyes. "A few days ago I should have laughed or sneered at that benediction," he said gravely. "What a change has come over my life in a few short hours! There is no magic like that of love, Nell."

They were silent for some time after they had left the village behind them, but presently Drake began to call her attention to the various points of interest in the view; the prosperous farms, and thickly wooded preserves; and Nell began, half unconsciously, to realize the extent of the vast estate—the one of many—of which the man she was going to marry was lord and master.

"I'm going to take you to a farm which has been held by the same family for several generations," he said. "I think you will like Styles and his wife; and you won't mind if they are outspoken, dearest? I was here to lunch only the other day, and Styles read me a lecture on my duties as lord of Angleford. One of the heads was that I ought to choose a wife without loss of time. I want to show him that I have taken his sermon to heart."

"Perhaps he may not approve of your choice," said Nell.

Drake laughed.

"Well, if he doesn't, he won't hesitate to say so," he said.

They pulled up at the farm, and Styles came down to the gate to welcome them, calling to a lad to hold the mare.

"Yes, we will come in for a minute or two, Styles, if Mrs. Styles will have us," said Drake.

Mrs. Styles, in the doorway, wiping her hands freshly washed from the flour of a pudding, smiled a welcome.

"Come right in, my lord," she said. "You know you be welcome well enough." She looked at Nell, who was blushing a little. "And all the more welcome for the company you bring."

"Sit down, my lord; sit ye down, miss—or is it 'my lady'?" said Styles, perfectly at ease in his unaffected pleasure at seeing them. [Pg 325]

"This is Miss Lorton, the young lady who is rash enough to promise to be my wife, Mrs. Styles," said Drake. "I drove over to introduce her to you, and to show that I took your good advice to heart."

The farmer and his wife surveyed Nell for a moment, then slowly averted their eyes out of regard for her blushes.

"I make so bold to tell your lordship that you never did a wiser thing in your life," said Styles quietly, and with a certain dignity; "and if the young lady be as good as she is pretty—and if I'm anything of a judge, I bet she be!—there's some sense in wishing your lordship and her a long life and every happiness."

Drake held out his hand, and laughed like a boy.

"Thanks, Styles," he said. "It was worth driving out for. And I'm happy enough, in all conscience, for the present."

"I've heard of Miss Lorton, and I've heard naught but good of her," said Mrs. Styles, eying Nell, who had got one of the children on her knee; "and to us as lives on the estate, miss, it's a matter of importance who his lordship marries. It may just mean the difference between good times or bad. Us don't want his lordship to marry a fine London lady as 'u'd never be contented to live among us. And there be many such."

Nell fought against her shyness; indeed, she remembered the simple folk of Shorne Mills, who talked as freely and frankly as this honest couple, and plucked up courage.

"I'm not a fine London lady, at any rate, Mrs. Styles," she said, with a smile. "I have lived for nearly all my life in a country village, much farther away from London than you are; and I know very little of London life."

"You don't say, miss!" exclaimed Mrs. Styles, much gratified.

"Oh, yes," said Nell, laughing softly. "And I could finish making this apple pudding, if you'd let me, and boil it after I'd make it."

Mrs. Styles gazed at her in speechless admiration, and Drake laughed with keen enjoyment of her surprise.

"Oh, yes; Miss Lorton is an excellent cook and housekeeper, Mrs. Styles; so I hope you are satisfied?"

"That I be, and more, my lord," responded Mrs. Styles. "But, Lor'! your lordship do surprise me, for she looks no more than a schoolgirl—begging her pardon."

"Oh, she's wise for her years!" said Drake. "Yes, I'll have a glass of your home-brewed, Styles."

Mrs. Styles brought some milk and scones for Nell, and the two women withdrew to the settle and talked like old friends, while Drake, his eyes and attention straying to his beloved, discussed the burglary at the Hall with Styles. As Mrs. Styles' topic of conversation was Drake—Drake as a [Pg 326] lad and a young man—Nell was in no hurry to go; but suddenly she remembered Falconer—he might be wanting her—and she got up and went to Drake, who, his beloved brier in his mouth, leaned back in an easy-chair and talked to the farmer as if time were of no consequence. He sprang up as she approached him.

"Well, good-by, Styles. I said you should dance at my wedding, and so you shall," he said.

"Thank you, my lord," he responded. "I'll do my best, but I thought your lordship was only joking. Here's a very good health to you, my lord, and your future lady."

"And God bless ye both," said Mrs. Styles, in the background.

They drove away in grand style, the mare insisting on putting on frills and standing on her hind legs; and Drake, when the mare had settled down to her swinging trot, stole his hand round Nell's waist, and pressed her to him.

"Do you know why I took you there this morning, Nell?" he said, in a low voice.

Nell shook her head shyly.

"I'll tell you. The sudden good fortune has seemed so unreal to me that I haven't been able to realize it, to grasp it. It wasn't enough for the countess to know and congratulate us—it wasn't enough, somehow. I wanted some of the people on the estate to see you, and, so to speak, set their seal on our engagement and approaching marriage. Do you understand, dearest? I'm not making it very plain, I'm afraid."

But Nell understood, and her heart was brimming over with love for him.

"You have been accepted this morning into the—family, as it were," he said. "And now I feel as if it were impossible that I should lose you again. Styles will go down to the inn to-night and talk about our visit, and give a detailed account of the 'new ladyship,' and everybody on the estate will know of my good fortune. It is almost as if"—he paused, and the color rose to his face—"as if we were married, Nell. I feel that nothing can separate us now."

She said not a word, but she pressed a little closer to him, and he bent and kissed her.

"You don't mind my taking you to the Styles', dearest?" he asked.

"No, oh, no!" she replied. "I would rather have gone there than to any of the big houses—I mean the county people, Drake. I like to think I am not the sort of person they dreaded. What was it? 'A fine London lady.' Perhaps it would be better for you if I were; but for them—well, perhaps for [Pg 327] them it will be better that I am only one of themselves, able to understand and sympathize with them. Drake, you will not forget that I am only a nobody, that I am only Nell of Shorne Mills."

He smiled to himself, for he knew that this girl whom he had won was, by virtue of her beauty and refinement, qualified to fill the highest place in that vague sphere which went by the name of "society."

"Don't you worry, dearest," he said. "You have won the heart of the Styles family; and that is no mean conquest. That farm on the right is the Woodlands, and that just in front is the Broadlands. You will learn all the names in time, and I want you to know them; I want you to feel that you have a part and lot in them. Nell, do you think you will ever be as fond of this place as you are of Shorne Mills?"

"Yes," she said; "because—it is yours, Drake."

He looked down at her gratefully.

"But you shan't lose Shorne Mills," he said resolutely. "I mean to buy some land there, and build a house, just on the brow of the hill—you know, Nell; that meadow above The Cottage?—and we'll go there every summer, and we'll sail the *Annie Laurie*."

So they talked, with intervals of silence filled with his caresses, until they reached the lodge. And as they came up to it, they heard the strains of a violin.

Nell awoke with a start.

"Oh, I had almost forgotten!" she said remorsefully.

"Listen!" Drake whispered.

Nell, in the act of pushing the dust cloak from her, listened.

Falconer was playing the "Gloria in Excelsis."

"Oh, how happy I have been!" she murmured, half guiltily.

"And how happy you will be, Heaven grant it, dearest!" Drake murmured, as he released her hand and she got down.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"Nell, I believe you are nervous! You're not? Very well; then stand up and look me in the face, and say 'Mesopotamia' seven times!"

It was the night of the dinner party at the Hall, at which, as Dick put it, she was to be "on view" as the fiancée of my lord of Angleford, and Nell had come down to the little sitting room dressed and ready to start. [Pg 328]

Dick and Falconer were also ready, for Falconer had recovered sufficiently to be present, and had voluntarily offered to take his violin with him.

"Don't tease her, Dick," said Falconer, with the gentle, protective air of an elder brother. "She does not look a bit nervous."

"But I am!" said Nell, laughing a little tremulously; "I am—just a little bit!"

"And no wonder!" said Falconer promptly. "It is rather an ordeal she has to go through; to know that everybody is regarding you critically. But she has nothing to be afraid of."

"Now, there I differ with you," said Dick argumentatively. "If I were in Nell's place I should feel that everybody was thinking: 'What on earth did Lord Angleford see in that slip of a girl to fall in love with?' Ah, would you?" as Nell, laughing and blushing, caught up the sofa cushion. "You throw it and rumple my best hair, if you dare."

Nell put the cushion down reluctantly.

"It's a mean shame; you know I can't fight now."

"Though you have your war paint on," said Falconer, looking at her with a half-sad, half-proud admiration and affection.

"It's not much of a war paint," said Nell, but contentedly enough. "It's the dress I made for a party at Wolfer House—Dick, you know that the Wolfers have had to go? Lord Wolfer's brother was ill. I am so sorry! She would have made me feel less nervous, and rather braver. Yes, I'm sorry! It's an old dress, and I'm afraid Drake's jewels must feel quite ashamed of it," and she glanced at the pearls which he had given her a day or two ago, and which gleamed softly on her white, girlish neck and arms.

"You hear her complaining, Falconer!" said Dick, with mock sternness and reproval. "You'd find it hard to believe that I offered to remain at home and pop my dress suit, that she might buy herself fitting raiment for this show. Oh, worse than a serpent's tooth, it is to have an ungrateful sister!"

"I thought it was a new dress," remarked Falconer, still eying it and the wearer intently.

Nell shook her head, coloring a little, as she said:

"No; I wanted to wear this one. I didn't want to appear in a grand frock as if I were a fashionable lady."

"Fine feathers do not always make a fine lady," observed Dick, addressing the ceiling. "No one would mistake you for anything but—what you are, a simple ch-e-ild of Nachure." [Pg 329]

"Don't tease her, Dick," remonstrated Falconer; but Nell laughed with enjoyment.

"I don't mind in the least, Mr. Falconer. It's quite true, too; my plain frock is more suitable than anything Worth could turn out."

"My dear Falconer, I'm sorry to see you so easily imposed on. Don't you see that she's as vain as a peacock, and that she's only playing at the humble and meek? Besides, I expect that idiot Drake—who slipped out just as we came down—he'll be late for dinner if he doesn't mind!—has been telling her that she looks rather pretty——"

Nell blushed, for Drake had indeed told her that she looked more than pretty.

"And, of course, she believes him. She'd believe him if he told her that the moon was made of green cheese. Put that cushion down, my child, or it will be worse for you. And I hope you will behave yourself properly to-night. Remember that the brother who has brought you up with such anxious care will be present, to say nothing of the friend to whose culture and refined example you owe so much. Don't forget that it is bad manners to put your knife in your mouth, or to laugh too loudly. Remember we shall be watching you closely and anxiously."

"It is time we started," said Falconer. "Let me put that shawl more closely round you, Miss

Lorton. It's a fine night, but one cannot be too careful."

It was so fine that they had decided to walk the short distance to the Hall; and they set out, Falconer with his precious violin in its case under his arm, and Dick smoking a cigarette. They were all rather silent as they approached the great house, and Dick, looking up at it, said with a gravity unusual with him:

"It's hard to realize that you are going to be the mistress of this huge place, Nell."

Nell made no response; but she, too, looked up at the house with the same thought.

Indeed, it was hard to realize. But the next moment Drake came out to meet them, and took her upon his arm, with a whispered word of loving greeting for her, and a warm welcome to the two men.

"I needn't say how glad I am to see you, Falconer," he said, "or how delighted the countess and the rest of them will be. You must be prepared for a little hero worship, I'm afraid, for the countess has been diligent in spreading the story of your pluck."

As he lovingly took off Nell's shawl, he whispered: [Pg 330]

"Dearest, how sweet and beautiful you look! If you knew how proud I am—how proud and happy!"

Then he led them into the drawing-room. A number of guests had already arrived, and as the countess came forward and kissed Nell, they looked at her with a keen curiosity, though it was politely veiled.

Nell was a little pale as the countess introduced her to one after another of the county people; but Drake stood near her; and everybody, prepossessed by her youth, and the girlish dignity and modesty which characterized her, was very kind and pleasant; and soon the threatened fit of shyness passed off, and she felt at her ease.

The room, large as it was, got rather crowded. Guests were still arriving. Some of the women were magnificently dressed in honor of the occasion, but Nell's simple frock distinguished her, as the plain evening dress of the American ambassador is said to distinguish him among the rich uniforms and glittering orders of the queen's levee; and the women recognized and approved her good taste in appearing so simply dressed.

"She is sweetly pretty," murmured the local duchess to Lady Northgate. "I don't wonder at Lord Angleford's losing his heart. Half the men in the room would fall in love with her if she were free. And I like that quiet, reticent manner of hers; not a bit shy, but dignified and yet girlish. Yes, Lord Angleford is to be congratulated."

"So he would be if she were not half so pretty," said Lady Northgate; "for he is evidently too happy for words. See how he looks at her!"

"Who is that bright-looking young fellow?" asked the duchess, putting up her pince-nez at Dick.

"That is her brother. Isn't he like her? They are devoted to each other; and that is Mr. Falconer, the great violinist. Of course, you've heard the story——"

"Oh, dear, yes," said the duchess. "And I want to congratulate him. I wish you'd bring the boy to me, dear."

Lady Northgate went after him, but at that moment a young lady with laughing eyes came into the room, and Dick started and actually blushed.

Drake, who was standing near him, laughed at his confusion.

"An old friend of yours, I think, Dick, eh? Miss Angel. She's stopping in the house; came to-day. If you're good, you shall take her in to dinner."

"I'll be what she is by name, if I may!" said Dick, eagerly. "I'll go and tell her so," and he made his way through the crowd to her. [Pg 331]

"Afraid you've forgotten me, Miss Angel," he said. "Hop at the Maltbys', you know!"

Her eyes danced more merrily, but she surveyed him demurely for a moment, as if trying to recall him, then she said:

"Oh, yes; the gentleman who was so very—very cool; I was going to say impudent; pretty Miss Lorton's brother."

"You might have said Miss Lorton's pretty brother!" retorted Dick reproachfully. "But you'll have time to say it later on, for I'm going to take you in to dinner."

"'Going to have the honor' of taking me in to dinner, you mean!" she said, with mock hauteur.

"No; 'pleasure' is the word," said the unabashed Dick. "I say, how delighted I am to see you here ——"

"Thank you."

"Because I know so very few of this mob."

"Oh, I see. I'll recall my thanks, please."

Dick grinned.

"I thought you were rather too previous with your gratitude. But isn't it jolly being here together!"

"Is that a question or an assertion? Because, if it's the former, I beg leave to announce that I see no reason for any great delight on my part."

"Oh, come now! You think! You can resume the lesson on manners you commenced at the Maltbys'. I want it badly; for I have been among a rough set lately. I'm a British workingman, you know—engineer. Come into this corner, and I'll tell you all about it."

"I don't know that I want to hear," she retorted. "But, oh, well, I'll come after I've spoken to your sister. How lovely she looks to-night! If I were a man, I should envy Lord Angleford."

"Would you? So should I if he were going to marry another young lady I know."

"Oh, who is that?" she asked, with admirably feigned innocence and interest.

"Oh, you can't see her just now. No looking-glass near," he had the audacity to add, but under his breath.

The dinner hour struck, the carriages were setting down the last arrivals, and Lady Angleford was looking round and smilingly awaiting the butler's "Dinner is served, my lady!" when a footman came up to her and said something in a low voice.

The countess went out of the room, and found her maid in the hall.

The woman whispered a few words that caused Lady Angleford to turn pale and stand gazing before her as if she had suddenly seen a ghost. [Pg 332]

"Very well," she said.

The maid hurried upstairs, but the countess stood for quite half a minute, still pale, and gazing into vacancy.

Then she went back to the drawing-room, and, with a mechanical smile, passed among the guests until she reached Drake, who was talking to the duke and Lord Northgate.

"You want me, countess?" he said, feeling her eyes fixed on him, and he followed her to a clear space.

"Drake," she said, lifting her eyes to his face pitifully, "Drake, something dreadful has happened—something dreadful. I don't like to tell you, but I must. She is here!"

She whispered the announcement as if it were indeed something dreadful.

Drake looked at her in a mystified fashion.

"She! Who?" he asked.

"Luce!"

He did not start, but his brows came together, and his face grew stern, for the first time since his reconciliation to Nell.

"Luce!" he echoed. "Impossible!"

"Oh, but she is!" she murmured, in despair. "She arrived a quarter of an hour ago."

"But I wrote, telling her," he muttered helplessly.

The countess made a despairing gesture.

"Then she did not get your letter. She sent a telegram this morning, saying that she was able, unexpectedly, to come, but I have not had it. And if I had received it, there would not have been time to prevent her coming." She glanced at the slim, girlish figure of Nell, where it stood, the center of a group, and almost groaned. "What shall we do?"

At such times a man is indeed helpless, and Drake stood overwhelmed and idealess.

"She says that we are not to wait—that she will come down when she is dressed. She—she——Oh, Drake! she does not know, and she will think that—that you still—that she——"

He nodded.

"I know. But I am thinking of Nell," he said grimly. "Luce must be told. She—yes, she must go away again. She will, when she knows the truth."

"But—but who is to tell her?" said the poor countess, aghast at the prospect before her.

Drake shook his head.

"Not you, countess. I will tell her."

"You, Drake!"

"Yes—I," he said, biting his lips. "She found little difficulty in telling me, there at Shorne Mills——No, no; I ought not to have said that. But I am anxious to spare Nell, and my anxiety makes me [Pg 333] hard. Wait a moment."

He went to the window, and, putting aside the curtains, looked out at the night, seeing nothing; then he came back.

"Put the dinner back for a quarter of an hour, and send word to her and ask her to go into your boudoir. I will wait her there."

"Is there no other way, Drake?" she asked, pitying him from the bottom of her heart.

"There is none," he said frankly. "It is my fault. I ought to have found out her address; but it is no use reproaching oneself. Send to her, countess!"

She left the room, and Drake went back to the duke, talked for a moment or two, then went up to the countess' room and waited. He had to face an ordeal more severe than any other that had hitherto fallen to his not uneventful life; but faced it had to be; and he would have gone through fire and water to save Nell a moment's pain. Besides, Luce was to be considered, though, it must be confessed, he felt little pity for her.

Presently the door opened; but it was Burden who entered. She was looking pale and emaciated, as if she were either very ill, or recovering from illness, and Drake, even at that moment of strain and stress, noticed her pitiable appearance.

"How do you do, Burden?" he said. "I am afraid you have not been well."

Burden curtsied, and looked up at him with hollow eyes.

"Thank you, my lord," she faltered. "My lady sent me to tell your lordship that she will be here in a minute or two."

She left the room, and Drake leaned against the mantelshelf with his hands in his pockets, his head sunk on his breast; and in a minute or two the door opened again, and Luce glided toward him with outstretched hands.

"Drake! How sweet of you to send for me—to wait!" she murmured.

He took one of her hands and held it, and the coldness of his touch, the expression of his face, startled her.

"Drake! What is the matter?" she asked. "Are—are you not glad to see me? Why do you look at me so strangely? I came the moment I could get away. There has been so much to do; and father"—she paused a moment and shrugged her shoulders—"has been very bad. The excitement and fuss ——You know the condition he would be in, under the circumstances. I told Burden to wire this morning to say I was coming, but she forgot to do so. She seems half demented, and I am going [Pg 334] to get rid of her. What is the matter, Drake?"

She had moved nearer to him, expecting him to take her in his arms and kiss her; but his coldness, his silence, was telling upon her, and the question broke from her impatiently.

"Haven't you had my letter?" he asked.

"Your letter? No. Did you write? I am sorry! What did you write?"

"I wrote"—he hesitated a moment, but what was the good of trying to "break" the news? "I wrote to tell you of my engagement——"

She started and stared at him.

"Your engagement! Your——Drake! What do you mean? Your engagement! To—to whom?"

"Sit down, Luce," he said gravely, tenderly, and he went to lead her to a chair; but she shook her hand free and stood, still staring at him blankly, her face growing paler.

"I wrote and told you all about it. I am engaged to Miss Lorton. You do not know her; but she is the young lady I met at Shorne Mills, the place in Devonshire——I was engaged to her then, but it was broken off, and we were separated for a time; but we met again——I am sorry, very sorry, that you did not get my letter."

Her face was perfectly white by this time, her lips set tightly. He feared she was going to faint; but, with a great effort she fought against the deadly weakness which assailed her.

"So that was what you wrote!" she breathed, every word leaving her lips as if it caused her pain to utter. "You—you—have deceived me."

"No, Luce," he said quickly.

"Yes, yes! When I left here you——Is it not true that you intended asking me to be your wife, to renew our engagement? Answer!"

She glanced up at him, her teeth showing between her parted lips.

He inclined his head.

"Yes, it is true; but I had not met—I had not heard——Oh, what is the use of all this recrimination, Luce? I am engaged to the girl I love."

She raised her hand as if to strike him. He caught it gently, and as gently released it.

"I will go," she panted. "I will go at once. Be good enough to order my carriage——"

She put her hand to her head as if she did not know what she was saying; and Drake's heart ached with pity for her—at that moment, at any rate. [Pg 335]

"Don't think too hardly of me, Luce," he said, in a low voice. "And you have not lost much, remember."

She clasped her hands and swayed to and fro for a moment.

"I see! It is your revenge. I once jilted you, and now——"

"For God's sake, don't say—don't think——No man could be so base, so vile!" he said sternly.

She laughed.

"It is your revenge; I see it. Yes, you have scored. I will go—at once. Open the door, please!"

There was nothing else to be done. He opened the door for her, and she swept past him. Outside, she paused for a moment, as if she did not know where she was, or in which direction her room lay; then she went slowly—almost staggered—down the corridor, and, bursting into her room, fell into a chair.

So sudden was her entrance, so tragic her collapse, that the nervous Burden uttered a faint shriek.

"Oh, my lady! what is the matter?" she cried, her hand against her heart.

Lady Luce sat with her chin in her hands, her eyes gleaming from her white face, in silence for a moment; then she laughed, the laugh which borders on hysteria.

"Congratulate me, Burden!" she said bitterly; "congratulate me! Lord Angleford is engaged!"

Burden stared at her.

"To—to your ladyship?" she said, but doubtfully. "I do congratulate you."

"You fool!" cried Luce savagely. "He is engaged to another woman. He has jilted me! Oh, I think I shall go mad! Jilted me! Yes, it is that, and no less. Oh, my head! my head!"

Burden hurried to her with the eau de Cologne, but Lady Luce pushed it away.

"Keep out of my sight! I can't bear the sight of any human being! Engaged! 'I am engaged to Miss Lorton!'"—she mimicked Drake's voice in bitter mockery.

Burden started, and let the eau de Cologne bottle fall with a soft thud to the floor.

"What—what name did your ladyship say?" she gasped, her face as white as her mistress's, her eyes starting.

Lady Luce glared at her.

"You fool! Are you deaf? Lorton! Lorton!" she almost snarled at the woman.

Burden stooped to pick up the bottle, but staggered and clutched a chair, and Lady Luce watched her with half-distraught gaze. [Pg 336]

"What is the matter with you? Why do you behave like a lunatic?" she demanded. "Do you know this girl? Answer!"

Burden moistened her lips.

"Is it the young lady—who helped catch Ted—I mean the burglar, my lady?" she asked hoarsely.

"I suppose so. Yes. Well? Speak out—don't keep me waiting. I'm in no humor to be trifled with. You know her—something about her?"

Burden tried to control her shaking voice.

"If—if it is the same young lady who was at Lady Wolfer's——I was her maid, you remember——"

"I remember, you fool! Quick!"

"Then—then I know something. She's very pretty—and young, with dark hair——"

Lady Luce sprang to her feet.

"You idiot! You drive me mad. I've not seen her. But if it be the same——Well—well?"

"Then—then Lord Angleford is to be pitied. He has been deceived—deceived cruelly," said Burden, in gasps.

Lady Luce caught her by the shoulders and glared into her quailing eyes.

"Listen to me, Burden: pull yourself together. Tell me what you know—tell me this instant! Well? Sit there in that chair. Now!" She pressed the shoulders she still held with the gesture of an Arab slave driver. "Now, quick! Who is she? What do you know against her?"

In faltering accents, and yet with a kind of savage pleasure, Burden spoke for some minutes; and as Lady Luce listened, the pallor of her face gave place to a flush of fierce, malicious joy.

"Are you sure? You say you saw, you listened? Are you sure?" she said—hissed, rather—at the end of Burden's story.

"I—I am quite sure," she responded. "I—I could swear to it. I was just outside the library."

Lady Luce paced up and down with the gait of a tigress.

"If I could only be sure," she panted; "if I could only be sure! But you may be mistaken. Wait!" Her hand fell upon Burden's shoulder again. "Go downstairs, look at the people, and tell me if you see her there. Quick!"

Burden, wincing under the savage pressure of her hand, rose, and stole from the room.

In less than five minutes she was back.

"Well?" demanded Lady Luce, as Burden closed the door and leaned against it.

"It—it is the same. I saw her," she said suddenly.

Lady Luce sank into a chair, and was silent and motionless for a moment; then she sprang up and laughed—a hideous laugh for such perfect lips. [Pg 337]

"Get out my pale mauve silk. Dress me, quick! I am not going to leave the house. I am going downstairs to make Miss Lorton's acquaintance! Quick!"

Burden got out the exquisite dress. The flush which had risen to her mistress' face was reflected in her own. This Miss Lorton had helped to capture her beloved, her "martyred" Ted, and he was going to be avenged!

CHAPTER XL.

After Luce had swept from the room, Drake remained for a minute or two thinking the thoughts that a man must think under such circumstances; then he went slowly down to the drawing-room.

The countess was watching and waiting for him, and she looked up at his grave countenance anxiously as he came toward her.

"It is all right," he said, in his quiet way; "she is going at once."

His composure, the Angleford impassiveness which always came to their aid in moments of danger and difficulty, impressed her; she drew a breath of relief, and signed to the butler, who was hovering about awaiting her signal. "Dinner is served, my lady," he announced solemnly; and Drake gave the duchess his arm, and the company went into the dining room in pairs "like the animals into Noah's Ark," as Dick whispered to Miss Angel, who, to his great delight, he was taking in.

It was a large party, and a brilliant one. The great room in the glory of its new adornment was worthy of the house and its guests. If the truth must be told, Nell was at first a little nervous, though it was not her first experience, as we know, of an aristocratic dinner party. She was seated on the left of Drake, and on pretense of moving one of her glasses, he succeeded in touching her hand, and, as he did so, he looked at her as a man looks who sees joy before him and an abiding happiness; then he turned and talked to the duchess, for he knew that Nell would like to be left alone for a few minutes.

It was impossible for any party, however large and aristocratic, over which the countess presided, to be dull, and very soon they were all talking, and some of them laughing, for there were two young persons present, at any rate, who were by no means overawed by the splendor of [Pg 338] the appointments or the rank of the guests. Dick would have found it possible to be merry at a Quakers' meeting, and Miss Angel, though she tried to preserve a demure, not to say repressive, mood, very soon yielded to Dick's light-hearted influence; and not only she, but those near them, were kept by him in ripples of laughter.

It was just what Drake wanted, and he looked down the table toward Dick with approval and gratitude.

"Dick hasn't changed a bit—thank Heaven!" he said to Nell.

"Your brother's the most charming boy I've met for a very long time," remarked the duchess. "Of course, he will come with you and the rest to me on the ninth. I am so glad to see Mr. Falconer here, and I hope he will be well enough to join us!"

Nell glanced at Falconer with a sisterly regard, and Drake said:

"We'll bring him, if we have to pack him in cotton wool!"

The dinner was, inevitably, a lengthy one; but it was never for a moment dull, and the countess almost forgot Lady Luce as she realized the success of her party. She felt as a captain of a vessel feels when he has left behind him the perilous rocks on which he had nearly struck. Drake, too, almost forgot the ordeal through which he had just passed. How could he do otherwise when his darling was within reach of his hand, under his roof, at his table? The ladies remained some time after the appearance of the dessert, but the countess rose at last, and led the way to the drawing-room. There, of course, Nell was made much of. Some of the younger women drew their chairs near her, and showed as plainly as they could—and how plainly women can show things when they like!—that they were eager to welcome her into the county's social circle; and it required no effort on their part, for Nell's charm, which Drake had found so potent, was irresistible. There was some playing and singing, and the countess wanted Nell to do one or the other; but she shook her head.

"Mr. Falconer will want me to play his accompaniments presently," she said. Not even in this full tide of her happiness did she forget him.

Meanwhile, the men were having a very pleasant time in the dining room. Drake, like all the Anglefords, was a capital host. Anglemere was famous for its claret and its port, as we know, and Dick and the other young men waxed merry; and the duke voiced the general sentiment when, leaning back in his chair and sipping his claret, he said:

"The gods might be envious of you, Angleford. If I were asked to spot a happy man, I should pitch upon you. I congratulate you upon your engagement. She's one of the prettiest and most charming girls I've ever met. That sounds rather banal, but I mean it. I hope you'll let us see a great deal of her, for Mary"—Mary was the duchess—"has, I can see, taken a great fancy to her. And I'm very glad to hear that you intend to make this your home; at least, so I hear from Styles, who appears to be in your confidence." [Pg 339]

And he laughed.

And Drake laughed.

"Oh, yes, Styles and I are old friends," he said. "We mean to live here a great deal. I shall keep up the Home farm; they've offered me the mastership of the hounds, and I think I shall take it. Nell's a capital horsewoman. In fact, we shall lead a country life most of the time, and see as much as we can of our people."

"You're right," said the duke emphatically. "It's the best of all lives. If we all lived on our estates and looked after our people, we should hear very little of socialism, and such like troubles. It's the absenteeism which is answerable for most of the mischief."

They discussed county affairs, "horses, hounds, and the land," for some minutes; then Drake, who was anxious to go to Nell, asked the men if they would have any more wine, and, receiving a negative, rose, and made for the drawing-room.

Miss Angel was singing; Dick of course, was turning over her music. There was a little hushed buzz of conversation which is not too loud to permit the song to penetrate, and which indicates that things are going well. Drake went to Nell and leaned over the tall back of her chair without a word. When the song was finished, the countess went up to Falconer and asked him to play. A footman brought the precious violin, and Nell went to the piano and struck up the piece which they had chosen. Conversation ceased, and every one prepared to listen with eager anticipation.

Falconer may have played as well in his life, but he certainly never played better. One could have heard a pin drop during the softer notes of the exquisite music, so intense and almost breathless was the silence of the rapt audience. When the last note had died away, the countess went up to him.

"It is useless trying to thank you, Mr. Falconer," she said, "but if you will play again——"

"Certainly," said Falconer. He turned to Nell. "What shall I play next?" he asked, as if the choice must naturally rest with her.

She turned over the music and set up a Chopin, and he had placed the violin in position, when the door opened, and Lady Luce swept slowly in. She was superbly dressed, her neck and arms and hair were all a-glitter with diamonds. Though she was rather pale, her face was perfectly serene, and she smiled sweetly as she crossed the room. [Pg 340]

Her entrance caused a surprise; the countess happened to be standing with her back to the door, and did not see her come in; but she felt the sudden silence and turned to ascertain the cause. For a moment she was rooted to the spot, and the color left her face. It says much for her aplomb that she did not cry out. Her confusion lasted only for a moment, then she went toward Lady Luce with outstretched hand.

"I am so sorry to be so late," said Luce, in her sweetest tones, "but my maid, who is a perfect tyrant, refused to dress me until I had rested——"

"Your dinner?" almost gasped the countess.

"I had some sent up to my room," said Lady Luce sweetly.

She looked round. Drake stood by the piano, his face sternly set. Why had she remained? What was she going to do? He glanced at Nell, and saw that she had gone white, and that her eyes were fixed on Lady Luce. What should he do?

Instinctively, he went to meet Luce, who was advancing with a placid smile, and the ease of a woman who is at peace with all the world, and sure of her welcome.

"How do you do, Lord Angleford?" she said, as if this were their first meeting for some time. "I am so glad that I was able to get here to-night, though I wish that I could have arrived earlier. But I am interrupting the music! Please don't let me!"

She moved away from him with perfect grace, and, greeting one and another, went and seated herself in a chair beside the duchess—and opposite Nell at the piano. There was a little buzz of conversation round her, then she herself raised her fan as a sign for silence, and Falconer began to play again.

It was well for Nell that she knew every note of the nocturne by heart, for the page of music swam before her eyes, and she could not see a note. She felt Lady Luce's gaze, rather than saw it, and her heart throbbed painfully for a while; but presently the influence of the music stole over her and helped her—if only Falconer could have known it!—and she said to herself: "What can it matter to me if she is here? I know that Drake loves me, and me alone; that she is nothing to him and I am everything. It is she who should feel confused and embarrassed, not I. And yet how calm, how serene she is! Can she have forgotten that night on the terrace? Can she have forgotten all that has happened? Yes, it is she whose heart should be beating as mine is now." [Pg 341]

When the nocturne came to an end, and the applause which greeted it broke out, Lady Luce, still clapping her hands, rose and went toward Drake.

"Will you please introduce me to Miss Lorton?" she said. "I am all anxiety to know her."

She smiled at him so placidly that even Drake, who knew her better than did any other man, was completely deceived.

"She means to forget the past," he said to himself. "She is behaving better than I had any reason to expect."

He drew a breath of relief, and his stern face relaxed somewhat as he nodded slightly and went toward Nell, who had risen from the piano and stood near Falconer. She looked at Drake and Lady Luce as calmly as she could, and Drake made the introduction in as ordinary a tone as he could manage. Lady Luce held out her hand with a sweet smile.

"I am so glad to meet you, Miss Lorton," she said. "I have heard so much about you; and I dare say you have heard something about me, for Lord Angleford and I are very old friends. How charmingly you played that difficult accompaniment! Shall we go and sit down somewhere together and have a chat?"

What could Nell say or do? Both she and Drake were helpless. Nell stood with downcast eyes, the color coming and going in her face, and Drake looked from one to the other, half relieved, half in doubt.

"Let us go and sit on that ottoman," said Lady Luce, indicating one in the center of a group of ladies.

Nell, as she followed, glanced at Drake as if she were asking, "Must I go?" He made a slight gesture in the affirmative, returning her glance with one of tender love and trust.

The countess stood at a little distance, watching them, though apparently absorbed in conversation, and no one would have guessed the condition of her mind as she saw the two women seated side by side. Presently she went up to Drake.

"What does it mean?" she asked. "Why has she not gone? Why is she so—so friendly with Nell?"

Drake shrugged his shoulders with a kind of smiling despair.

"I can't tell you," he replied. "I think she is going to behave sensibly. At any rate, there is no need for anxiety. I have told Nell everything. She will trust me."

"Yes; but I wish she had gone," said the countess, in a low voice. [Pg 342]

Drake smiled grimly.

"So do I. But she hasn't."

"She is too serene and contented," murmured the countess.

Drake shrugged his shoulders again.

"I know," he said significantly. "But what does it matter? She can do no harm. Nell knows everything."

"I like the way you say that," said the countess. "But don't leave her."

He nodded as if he understood, and gradually made his way toward the group among which Luce and Nell were sitting. As he approached, Lady Luce looked up with a smile.

"I have been telling Miss Lorton that if there is one thing I adore upon earth, it is a romantic engagement, and that I quite envy her, and you, too, Lord Angleford! A glamour of romance will surround you for the rest of your lives. As I have often said to Archie, life without sentiment would not be worth having. By the way, Miss Lorton, you know Sir Archie Walbrooke?"

Nell had scarcely been listening, for she had been wondering whether she could now rise and leave Lady Luce; but at the name of Sir Archie Walbrooke, she turned with a sudden start, and the color rose to her face. Lady Luce looked at her sweetly; then, as if she had suddenly remembered something, exclaimed, in a low voice:

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I quite forgot. How stupid of me!" Then she laughed softly and looked from Nell to Drake. "But of course you've told Lord Angleford? It is always the best way."

The color slowly left Nell's face; a look of pain, of doubt, even of dread, came into her eyes. Drake glanced from one woman to the other.

"What is it Nell must have told me, Lady Luce?" he asked easily.

Lady Luce hesitated, seemed as if in doubt for a moment, and smiled in an embarrassed fashion.

"Have you told him?" she asked Nell, in a low, but perfectly audible voice.

Nell rose, then sank down again. She saw in an instant the trap which Lady Luce had set for her; and it seemed to her a trap from which she could not escape. It was evident that Lady Luce had become informed of the scene that had taken place between Sir Archie, Lord Wolfer, and Nell in the library at Wolfer House, and that Lady Luce intended to denounce her in the drawing-room before Drake and the large party gathered together in her honor.

For one single instant there rose in her heart a keen regret that she had not told Drake; but it [Pg 343] was only for an instant; for Nell's nature was a noble one, and she knew that at no time and under no circumstances whatever could she have sacrificed her friend, even to save her life's happiness—and Drake's.

That chilly morning in the dim library she had taken her friend's folly and sin upon her own shoulders, scarcely counting, scarcely seeing the cost, certainly not foreseeing this terrible price which she would have to pay for it. And now—now that the terrible moment had come when Drake—she cared little for any other—would hear her accused of that which a pure woman counts the worst of crimes, she would not be able to rise, and, with uplifted head, exclaim: "I am innocent!"

She felt crushed, overwhelmed, but she could not remain silent; she had to speak; the eyes of those who were near were fixed upon her waitingly.

"I have not told him," she said at last, in a low but clear voice.

Lady Luce bit her lip softly, as if very much confused.

"I am so sorry I spoke!" she said, in an apologetic whisper. "It was very foolish of me—I am always blurting out awkward things—it is the impulsive Celtic temperament! Pray forgive me, Miss Lorton, and try and forget my stupid blunder."

There was an intense silence. Nell looked straight before her, as one looks who hears the knell of the bell which signals the hour of her execution. Drake stood with his hands clasped behind him, his face perfectly calm, his eyes resting on Nell with infinite love and trust. The others glanced from one to the other with doubtful and half-suspicious looks. It seemed as if no one could start a conversation; the air was heavy with suspense and suspicion. The countess was quick and clever. She saw that for Nell's sake the matter must not be allowed to rest where it was; she knew that Lady Luce would have effected her purpose and cast a shadow of scandal over Nell's future life if not another word was spoken. Convinced that Nell was innocent of even the slightest indiscretion, she felt that it would be wiser to force Lady Luce's hand.

So she came forward with a smile of tolerant contempt on her pretty, shrewd face, and said slowly, and with her musical drawl:

"Oh, but, Lady Luce, we cannot let you off so easily. What is this interesting story in which Miss Lorton and Sir Archie Walbrooke are concerned?"

Lady Luce rose with well-feigned embarrassment.

"Pardon me, Lady Angleford," she said. "I have blundered and have asked forgiveness; I have not [Pg 344] another word to say."

She was crossing the room in front of Drake, and he saw her lip curl with a faint sneer. He laid his hand upon her arm gently but firmly.

"We will hear the story, if you please, Lady Luce," he said.

She bit her lip, as if she were driven into a corner, and did not know what to do.

"Not here, at any rate!" she said, in a low voice, and looking round at the silent group.

Some of them rose and moved away; but Drake held up his hand.

"Oh, do not lose an amusing story!" he said, with a smile eloquent of contempt. "Now, Lady Luce, if you please."

She looked from him to Nell.

"What am I to do?" she asked, as if in great distress. "Miss Lorton, you see my predicament; please come to my aid, and help me to escape. Tell Lord Angleford that you do not wish me to say any more."

Still looking straight before her, Nell responded, almost inaudibly:

"Speak! Yes—tell them!"

Lady Luce still seemed reluctant; at last she said, with an embarrassed laugh:

"After all, it may amount to nothing, and you'll be very much disappointed. Indeed, it is very likely not true."

Her reluctance was not altogether feigned, for it needed even her audacity and assurance to make such an accusation as she was about to bring against the future Countess of Angleford, and under her future roof; but she braced herself to a supreme effort, and, though she was really as white as Nell, she looked round boldly, as if confident of the truth of the thing she was going to say.

"Everybody knows what Sir Archie is," she began. "He's the worst flirt and the most dangerous man in England. Everybody has heard stories of his delinquencies; some of them are true, but many of them, I dare say, are false, and I've not the least doubt that Miss Lorton will tell us that the story that she was about to elope with him from Wolfer House one morning, but that she was stopped by Lord Wolfer, is an absurd fable. The story goes that she did not know, until Lord Wolfer told her at the very moment that she and Sir Archie were leaving the house, that Sir Archie was a married man. Now that's the whole affair, and I really think Miss Lorton will be grateful to me for giving her an opportunity of rising in true dramatic fashion and exclaiming: 'It is not true!'" [Pg 345]

She nodded at Nell and laughed softly.

There were many who echoed her laugh, for, indeed, the story did sound like an absurd fable. All eyes were turned on Nell, and all waited for her to bring about with a denial the satisfactory dénouement. Drake did not laugh, for his heart was burning with fury against the audacity, the shameless insolence, of Lady Luce; but he smiled in a grim fashion as his eyes still rested on Nell's face.

A moment passed. Why did she not rise? Why did she not, at any rate, speak? Four words would be enough: "It is not true!"

But she remained motionless and silent. A kind of consternation began to creep over those who were watching, Drake went up to her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Pray relieve Lady Luce's anxiety, Nell, and tell her that she has amused us with a canard too ridiculous to be anything but false," he said tenderly.

She looked up at him, her brows drawn, her eyes pitiful in their agony of appeal, her lips quivering.

"It is true!" she said, in a voice which, though low, was perfectly audible.

There was an intense silence. No one moved; every eye was fixed on her in breathless excitement. They asked themselves if it were possible they had heard aright. Drake's hand pressed more heavily on Nell's shoulder; she could hear his breath coming heavily, could feel him shake. A faint cry escaped Lady Angleford's parted lips.

"Nell!" she cried.

Nell rose and looked at her with the same agony of appeal in her eyes, but with her face firmly set, as if she were buoyed up by an inflexible resolution.

"What Lady Luce has said is true," she said. "I will go——"

Drake was by her side in an instant. He took her cold hand and drew it within his arm.

"No!" he said. "You will not go——"

He looked at Lady Luce, and there was no need to finish the sentence.

She smiled, and fanned herself slowly.

"Of course, Miss Lorton can explain it all," she said. "I am very sorry to have been the cause, the innocent cause, of such an unpleasant scene. But really you forced me to speak; and we all know that though Miss Lorton has admitted her—what shall I call it?—little escapade, there must be some satisfactory explanation. No one will believe for a moment that she really intended to elope with Sir Archie."

While she had been speaking, some of the guests had edged toward the door. At such moments the kindest thing one can do is to remove oneself as quickly as possible. When a sudden death [Pg 346] happens in a ballroom, the dancing ceases, the music stops, the revelers vanish. Something worse than death had happened in this drawing-room. The happiness of more than one life had been blasted as by a stroke of lightning.

There was a general movement toward the door. A group of old friends—county neighbors, real friends of Drake and the countess—gathered round the little group. Falconer and Dick pushed their way through them none too ceremoniously.

"I'll take my sister home, Lord Angleford," said Dick hotly; while Falconer took her hand, his face white, his eyes flashing.

Nell would have drawn away from Drake and turned to them; but he put his arm round her waist and held her by sheer force.

"I beg that no one will go," he said; and his voice, though not loud, rang like a bell. Everybody stopped. "I think every one has heard Lady Lucille's accusation against my future wife," he said. "For reasons which concern herself and me only, my future wife"—he laid an emphasis on the words—"has seen fit not to deny this accusation. I am quite content that it should be so. If we have any friends here let——"

Before he could finish his appeal, the door opened, and Lord and Lady Wolfer entered the room. They were in traveling dress, and Lady Wolfer looked pale and in trouble, while Wolfer's face was grave and stern.

"If any friend, whether it be man or woman, deems an explanation due to them, I will ask Miss Lorton if she can give it to them," continued Drake. "If she should not think fit to do so——"

Lady Wolfer, until now unnoticed except by a very few, came through the circle which at once had formed round the principal actors in this social tragedy. She went straight up to Nell, and took her hand and drew her into her embrace, as if to shelter and succor her. With a faint cry, Nell's head fell on Lady Wolfer's bosom. Lady Wolfer looked round, not defiantly, but with the air of one facing death bravely.

"I will explain," she said. "It was not she who was going to elope with Sir Archie Walbrooke. It was I!"

"No, no; you must not!" panted Nell.

The living circle drew closer, and listened and stared in breathless silence.

"It was I!" said Lady Wolfer. [Pg 347]

"You!" exclaimed Lady Luce. "Then Burden——"

"Burden lied," said Lady Wolfer. "I want to tell every one; it is due to this saint, this dear girl, who sacrificed herself to me. I only heard this morning from my husband that he had found a note which Sir Archie had sent me, asking me to leave England with him. He placed this note on a pedestal in my drawing-room. Both my husband and Nell saw it, not knowing that the other had seen it. It never reached me; but this dear girl kept the appointment which Sir Archie had made for the library the next morning. She wanted to save me. I know, almost as if I had been there, how she pleaded with him, how she strove for my honor. While they were there my husband came upon them. The letter was not addressed to me, and he leaned to the conclusion that it was intended for Nell. She permitted him to make the hideous mistake, and, to save me, she left the house with her reputation ruined—in his eyes, at least. Until this morning he has never breathed a word of this to a soul. I am confident that Sir Archie Walbrooke, who went away full of remorse and penitence, has also kept silent. It was reserved for a woman to strike the blow aimed at the honor and happiness of an innocent and helpless girl—a girl so noble that she is ready to lay down her life's happiness and honor rather than betray the friend she loves. Judge between these two, between us three, if you will."

It was not a moment for cheering, but sudden exclamations burst from the men, most of the women were in tears, and Nell was sobbing as she lay on her friend's bosom.

Lady Luce alone remained smiling. Her face was white, her breath came in quick, labored gasps.

"What a charming romance!" she exclaimed, with a forced sneer. "So completely satisfactory!"

At the sound of her voice, the countess' spirit rose in true Anglo-Saxon fashion. She checked her sobs, wiped her eyes with a morsel of lace she called a handkerchief, and, sweeping in a stately manner to the door, said, with the extreme of patrician hauteur:

"A carriage for Lady Lucille Turfleigh, please!"

Lady Luce shrugged her shoulders, turned, and slowly moved toward the door; and, as she went, the crowd made way for her, and left her a clear passage, as if she had suddenly become infectious.

Nell did not see her go, did not hear the mingled expressions of indignation and congratulation which buzzed round her.

All she heard was Drake's "Nell! Nell! My dearest! my own!" as he put his arms round her and drew her head to his breast. [Pg 348]

Those persons who are fortunate enough to receive invitations to the summer and shooting parties, which Lord and Lady Angleford give at Anglemere, have very good reason to congratulate themselves; but those who are still more fortunate to receive a letter from Nell, asking them to spend a fortnight at the picturesque and "cottagy" house which Drake has built at a certain out-of-the-way spot in Devonshire called Shorne Mills, go about pluming themselves as if they had drawn one of the prizes in life's lottery. For only very intimate and dear friends are asked to Shorne Mills.

The house is not large. With the exception of the grooms, there are no menservants; there is no state, and very little formality; life there is mostly spent in the open air, in that delicious mixture of sea and moorland air in which everyday worries and anxieties do not seem able to exist.

At The Cottage no one finds time hanging heavily on his or her hands; no one is bored. It is a small Liberty Hall. There are horses to ride; there are tramps to be taken across the heather-scented hills; there are yachting and fishing in the bay, and there is always light-hearted laughter round and about the house—especially when her ladyship's brother, Mr. Dick Lorton, is present; and he and the famous musician, Mr. Falconer, always come down together, and remain while the family occupy The Cottage. There, too, the dowager countess is always a regular visitor; indeed, Nell and she are very seldom apart, for, if the countess could tear herself away from Nell, she certainly could not leave the baby son and heir, who is as often in her arms as in his mother's.

Here, too, come, every year, the Wolfers. In fact, to sum it up, the party is composed of Nell's and Drake's dearest and tried friends, and they one and all have grown to love Shorne Mills almost as keenly as Nell and Drake themselves do. Nell is proud of Anglemere, and the other places which her husband has inherited, but there is a certain corner in her heart which is reserved for the little fishing place in which she first saw, and learned to love, "Drake Vernon."

Watch them as they go down the steep and narrow way to the pier. It is a July evening; the sun is still bright, but the shadows are casting a purple tint on the hills beyond the moor; a faint breeze ripples the opaline bay; the fishing boats are gliding in like "painted ships on a painted ocean"; the tinkle of the cow bells mingles with the shrill cry of the curlew and the guillemot. The *Seagull* lies at anchor in the bay ready to sail at a moment's notice. But Drake does not signal for the dinghy as Nell and he reach the pier, for, though they are going for a sail, it is not in the stately yacht.

By the slip lies an old herring boat, with *Annie Laurie* painted on its stern, and Brownie has got the sail up and stands waiting with a smile to help his beloved "Miss Nell" into the old boat. Nell [Pg 349] lays her hand upon his shoulder as of old, and steps in and takes the tiller; Drake makes taut the sheet, and the old boat glides away from the slip and sails out into the open.

Drake looks up at the wind with a sailor's eye, and glances at Nell. He does not speak, but she understands, and she steers the *Annie Laurie* for the little piece of smooth beach which leads to the cave under the cliff. It is to this point they nearly always make; for was it not here that Drake Vernon told Nell Lorton of his love, and drew the confession of hers from her lips? To this place they always come alone, for it is sacred.

As, on this afternoon, they approach the spot, Drake utters an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, Nell, there's another boat there!" he says.

"Not really, Drake?" she says, with a little disappointment in her voice.

For the moments they spend in this spot are sweet and precious to her.

"Yes, there is," he says; "and, by George; there are two persons sitting on the bowlder—our bowlder!"

Nell looks with keen eyes; then she blushes, and laughs softly.

"Drake, it's Dick and Lettie Angel!" she says, in a whisper, as if they could hear her.

But she need not be afraid; the two young people who are seated on the spot sacred to Nell and Drake's love, have no ears nor eyes for any but themselves. The girl's face is downcast and blushing, and Dick's is upturned to hers. He has got hold of her hand; he is pleading as—well, as a certain Drake Vernon once pleaded to a certain Nell Lorton.

Nell and Drake exchange glances full of tenderness, full of sympathy.

"Ourselves over again, dearest!" he says, in a low and loving voice. "Put her round; we won't disturb them. God bless them, and send them happiness like unto ours!"

And "Amen!" whispers Nell, her eyes full of tears.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NELL, OF SHORNE MILLS; OR, ONE HEART'S BURDEN ***

Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain

permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™’s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.