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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A GOOD-FOR-NOTHING ***

A GOOD-FOR-NOTHING

By Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen

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Ralph Grimm was born a gentleman, He had the misfortune of coming into the world some ten years later than might reasonably have been expected. Colonel Grim and his lady had celebrated twelve anniversaries of their wedding-day, and had given up all hopes of ever having a son and heir, when this late comer startled them by his unexpected appearance. The only previous addition to the family had been a daughter, and she was then ten summers old.

Ralph was a very feeble child, and could only with great difficulty be persuaded to retain his hold of the slender thread which bound him to existence. He was rubbed with whiskey, and wrapped in cotton, and given mare's milk to drink, and God knows what not, and the Colonel swore a round oath of paternal delight when at last the infant stopped gasping in that distressing way and began to breathe like other human beings. The mother, who, in spite of her anxiety for the child's life, had found time to plot for him a career of future magnificence, now suddenly set him apart for literature, because that was the easiest road to fame, and disposed of him in marriage to one of the most distinguished families of the land. She cautiously suggested this to her husband when he came to take his seat at her bedside; but to her utter astonishment she found that he had been indulging a similar train of thought, and had already destined the infant prodigy for the army. She, however, could not give up her predilection for literature, and the Colonel, who could not bear to be contradicted in his own house, as he used to say, was getting every minute louder and more flushed, when, happily, the doctor's arrival interrupted the dispute.

As Ralph grew up from infancy to childhood, he began to give decided promise of future distinction. He was fond of sitting down in a corner and sucking his thumb, which his mother interpreted as the sign of that brooding disposition peculiar to poets and men of lofty genius. At the age of five, he had become sole master in the house. He slapped his sister Hilda in the face, or pulled her hair, when she hesitated to obey him, tyrannized over his nurse, and sternly refused to go to bed in spite of his mother's entreaties. On such occasions, the Colonel would hide his face behind his newspaper, and chuckle with delight; it was evident that nature had intended his son for a great military commander.

As soon as Ralph himself was old enough to have any thoughts about his future destiny, he made up his mind that he would like to be a pirate. A few months later, having contracted an immoderate taste for candy, he contented himself with the comparatively humble position of a baker; but when he had read "Robinson Crusoe" he manifested a strong desire to go to sea in the hope of being wrecked on some desolate island. The parents spent long evenings gravely discussing these indications of uncommon genius, and each interpreted them in his or her own way.

"He is not like any other child I ever knew," said the mother.

"To be sure," responded the father, earnestly. "He is a most extraordinary child. I was a very remarkable child too, even if I do say it myself; but, as far as I remember, I never aspired to being wrecked on an uninhabited island."

The Colonel probably spoke the truth; but he forgot to take into account that he had never read "Robinson Crusoe."

Of Ralph's school-days there is but little to report, for, to tell the truth, he did not fancy going to school, as the discipline annoyed him. The day after his having entered the gymnasium, which was to prepare him for the Military Academy, the principal saw him waiting at the gate after his class had been dismissed. He approached him, and asked why he did not go home with the rest.

"I am waiting for the servant to carry my books," was the boy's answer.

"Give me your books," said the teacher.

Ralph reluctantly obeyed. That day the Colonel was not a little surprised to see his son marching up the street, and every now and then glancing behind him with a look of discomfort at the principal, who was following quietly in his train, carrying a parcel of school-books. Colonel Grim and his wife, divining the teacher's intention, agreed that it was a great outrage, but they did not mention the matter to Ralph. Henceforth, however, the boy refused to be accompanied by his servant. A week later he was impudent to the teacher of gymnastics, who whipped him in return. The Colonel's rage knew no bounds; he rode in great haste to the gymnasium, reviled the teacher for presuming to chastise *his* son, and committed the boy to the care of a private tutor.

At the age of sixteen, Ralph went to the capital with the intention of entering the Military Academy. He was a tall, handsome youth, slender of stature, and carried himself as erect as a candle. He had a light, clear complexion of almost feminine delicacy; blond, curly hair, which he always kept carefully brushed; a low forehead, and a straight, finely modeled nose. There was an expression of extreme sensitiveness about the nostrils, and a look of indolence in the dark-blue eyes. But the *ensemble* of his features was pleasing, his dress irreproachable, and his manners bore no trace of the awkward self-consciousness peculiar to his age. Immediately on his arrival in the capital he hired a suite of rooms in the aristocratic part of the city, and furnished them rather expensively, but in excellent taste. From a bosom friend, whom he met by accident in the restaurant's pavilion in the park, he learned that a pair of antlers, a stuffed eagle, or falcon, and a couple of swords, were indispensable to a well-appointed apartment. He accordingly bought these articles at a curiosity shop. During the first weeks of his residence in the city he made some feeble efforts to perfect himself in mathematics, in which he suspected he was somewhat deficient. But when the same officious friend laughed at him, and called him "green," he determined to trust to fortune, and henceforth devoted himself the more assiduously to the French ballet, where he had already made some interesting acquaintances.

The time for the examination came; the French ballet did not prove a good preparation; Ralph failed. It quite shook him for the time, and he felt humiliated. He had not the courage to tell his father; so he lingered on from day to day, sat vacantly gazing out of his window, and tried vainly to interest himself in the busy bustle down on the street. It provoked him that everybody else should be so light-hearted, when he was, or at least fancied himself, in trouble. The parlor grew intolerable; he sought refuge in his bedroom. There he sat one evening (it was the third day after the examination), and stared out upon the gray stone walls which on all sides inclosed the narrow courtyard. The round stupid face of the moon stood tranquilly dozing like a great

Limburger cheese suspended under the sky.

Ralph, at least, could think of a no more fitting simile. But the bright-eyed young girl in the window hard by sent a longing look up to the same moon, and thought of her distant home on the fjords, where the glaciers stood like hoary giants, and caught the yellow moonbeams on their glittering shields of snow. She had been reading "Ivanhoe" all the afternoon, until the twilight had overtaken her quite unaware, and now she suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to write her German exercise. She lifted her face and saw a pair of sad, vacant eyes gazing at her from the next window in the angle of the court. She was a little startled at first, but in the next moment she thought of her German exercise and took heart.

"Do you know German?" she said; then immediately repented that she had said it.

"I do," was the answer.

She took up her apron and began to twist it with an air of embarrassment.

"I didn't mean anything," she whispered, at last. "I only wanted to know."

"You are very kind."

That answer roused her; he was evidently making sport of her.

"Well, then, if you do, you may write my exercise for me. I have marked the place in the book."

And she flung her book over to the window, and he caught it on the edge of the sill, just as it was falling.

"You are a very strange girl," he remarked, turning over the leaves of the book, although it was too dark to read. "How old are you?"

"I shall be fourteen six weeks before Christmas," answered she, frankly.

"Then I excuse you."

"No, indeed," cried she, vehemently. "You needn't excuse me at all. If you don't want to write my exercise, you may send the book back again. I am very sorry I spoke to you, and I shall never do it again."

"But you will not get the book back again without the exercise," replied he, quietly. "Good-night."

The girl stood long looking after him, hoping that he would return. Then, with a great burst of repentance, she hid her face in her lap, and began to cry.

"Oh, dear, I didn't mean to be rude," she sobbed. "But it was Ivanhoe and Rebecca who upset me."

The next morning she was up before daylight, and waited for two long hours in great suspense before the curtain of his window was raised. He greeted her politely; threw a hasty glance around the court to see if he was observed, and then tossed her book dexterously over into her hands.

"I have pinned the written exercise to the flyleaf," he said. "You will probably have time to copy it before breakfast."

"I am ever so much obliged to you," she managed to stammer.

He looked so tall and handsome, and grown-up, and her remorse stuck in her throat, and threatened to choke her. She had taken him for a boy as he sat there in his window the evening before.

"By the way, what is your name?" he asked, carelessly, as he turned to go.

"Bertha."

"Well, my dear Bertha, I am happy to have made your acquaintance."

And he again made her a polite bow, and entered his parlor.

"How provokingly familiar he is," thought she; "but no one can deny that he is handsome."

The bright roguish face of the young girl haunted Ralph during the whole next week. He had been in love at least ten times before, of course; but, like most boys, with young ladies far older than himself. He found himself frequently glancing over to her window in the hope of catching another glimpse of her face; but the curtain was always drawn down, and Bertha remained invisible. During the second week, however, she relented, and they had many a pleasant chat together. He now volunteered to write all her exercises, and she made no objections. He learned that she was the daughter of a well-to-do peasant in the sea-districts of Norway (and it gave him quite a shock to hear it), and that she was going to school in the city, and boarded with an old lady who kept a *pension* in the house adjoining the one in which he lived.

One day in the autumn Ralph was surprised by the sudden arrival of his father, and the fact of his failure in the examination could no longer be kept a secret. The old Colonel flared up at once when Ralph made his confession; the large veins upon his forehead swelled; he grew coppery-red in his face, and stormed up and down the floor, until his son became seriously alarmed; but, to his great relief, he was soon made aware that his father's wrath was not turned against him personally, but against the officials of the Military Academy who had rejected him. The Colonel took it as insult to his own good name and irreproachable standing as an officer; he promptly refused any other explanation, and vainly racked his brain to remember if any youthful folly of his could possibly have made him enemies among the teachers of the Academy. He at last felt satisfied that it was envy of his own greatness and rapid advancement which had induced the rascals to take vengeance on his son. Ralph reluctantly followed his father back to the country town where the latter was stationed, and the fair-haired Bertha vanished from his horizon. His mother's wish now prevailed, and he began, in his own easy way, to prepare himself for the University. He had little taste for Cicero, and still less for Virgil, but with the use of a "pony" he soon gained sufficient knowledge of these authors to be able to talk in a sort of patronizing way about them, to the great delight of his fond parents. He took quite a fancy, however, to the ode in Horace ending with the lines:

*Dolce ridentem,
Dulce loquentem,
Lalagen amabo.*

And in his thought he substituted for Lalage the fair-haired Bertha, quite regardless of the requirements of the metre.

To make a long story short, three years later Ralph returned to the capital, and, after having worn out

several tutors, actually succeeded in entering the University.

The first year of college life is a happy time to every young man, and Ralph enjoyed its processions, its parliamentary gatherings, and its leisure, as well as the rest. He was certainly not the man to be sentimental over the loss of a young girl whom, moreover, he had only known for a few weeks. Nevertheless, he thought of her at odd times, but not enough to disturb his pleasure. The standing of his family, his own handsome appearance, and his immaculate linen opened to him the best houses of the city, and he became a great favorite in society. At lectures he was seldom seen, but more frequently in the theatres, where he used to come in during the middle of the first act, take his station in front of the orchestra box, and eye, through his lorgnette, by turns, the actresses and the ladies of the parquet.

II

Two months passed, and then came the great annual ball which the students give at the opening of the second semester. Ralph was a man of importance that evening; first, because he belonged to a great family; secondly, because he was the handsomest man of his year. He wore a large golden star on his breast (for his fellow-students had made him a Knight of the Golden Boar) and a badge of colored ribbons in his buttonhole.

The ball was a brilliant affair, and everybody was in excellent spirits, especially the ladies. Ralph danced incessantly, twirled his soft mustache, and uttered amiable platitudes. It was toward midnight, just as the company was moving out to supper, that he caught the glance of a pair of dark-blue eyes, which suddenly drove the blood to his cheeks and hastened the beating of his heart. But when he looked once more the dark-blue eyes were gone, and his unruly heart went on hammering against his side. He laid his hand on his breast and glanced furtively at his fair neighbor, but she looked happy and unconcerned, for the flavor of the ice cream was delicious. It seemed an endless meal, but, when it was done, Ralph rose, led his partner back to the ballroom, and hastily excused himself. His glance wandered round the wide hall, seeking the well-remembered eyes once more, and, at length, finding them in a remote corner, half hid behind a moving wall of promenaders. In another moment he was at Bertha's side.

"You must have been purposely hiding yourself, Miss Bertha," said he, when the usual greetings were exchanged. "I have not caught a glimpse of you all this evening, until a few moments ago."

"But I have seen you all the while," answered the girl, frankly. "I knew you at once as I entered the hall."

"If I had but known that you were here," resumed Ralph, as it were invisibly expanding with an agreeable sense of dignity, "I assure you you would have been the very first one I should have sought."

She raised her large grave eyes to his, as if questioning his sincerity; but she made no answer.

"Good gracious!" thought Ralph. "She takes things terribly in earnest."

"You look so serious, Miss Bertha," said he, after a moment's pause. "I remember you as a bright-eyed, flaxen-haired little girl, who threw her German exercise-book to me across the yard, and whose merry laughter still rings pleasantly in my memory, I confess I don't find it quite easy to identify this grave young lady with my merry friend of three years ago."

"In other words, you are disappointed at not finding me the same as I used to be."

"No, not exactly that; but—"

Ralph paused and looked puzzled. There was something in the earnestness of her manner which made a facetious compliment seem grossly inappropriate, and in the moment no other escape suggested itself.

"But what?" demanded Bertha, mercilessly.

"Have you ever lost an old friend?" asked he, abruptly.

"Yes; how so?"

"Then," answered he, while his features lighted up with a happy inspiration—"then you will appreciate my situation. I fondly cherished my old picture of you in my memory. Now I have lost it, and I can not help regretting the loss. I do not mean, however, to imply that this new acquaintance—this second edition of yourself, so to speak—will prove less interesting."

She again sent him a grave, questioning look, and began to gaze intently upon the stone in her bracelet.

"I suppose you will laugh at me," began she, while a sudden blush flitted over her countenance. "But this is my first ball, and I feel as if I had rushed into a whirlpool, from which I have, since the first rash plunge was made, been vainly trying to escape. I feel so dreadfully forlorn. I hardly know anybody here except my cousin, who invited me, and I hardly think I know him either."

"Well, since you are irredeemably committed," replied Ralph, as the music, after some prefatory flourishes, broke into the delicious rhythm of a Strauss waltz, "then it is no use struggling against fate. Come, let us make the plunge together. Misery loves company."

He offered her his arm, and she rose, somewhat hesitatingly, and followed.

"I am afraid," she whispered, as they fell into line with the procession that was moving down the long hall, "that you have asked me to dance merely because I said I felt forlorn. If that is the case, I should prefer to be led back to my seat."

"What a base imputation!" cried Ralph.

There was something so charmingly *naive* in this self-depreciation—something so altogether novel in his experience, and, he could not help adding, just a little bit countrified. His spirits rose; he began to relish keenly his position as an experienced man of the world, and, in the agreeable glow of patronage and conscious superiority, chatted with hearty *abandon* with his little rustic beauty.

"If your dancing is as perfect as your German exercises were," said she, laughing, as they swung out upon

the floor, "then I promise myself a good deal of pleasure from our meeting."

"Never fear," answered he, quickly reversing his step, and whirling with many a capricious turn away among the thronging couples.

When Ralph drove home in his carriage toward morning he briefly summed up his impressions of Bertha in the following adjectives: intelligent, delightfully unsophisticated, a little bit verdant, but devilish pretty.

Some weeks later Colonel Grim received an appointment at the fortress of Aggershuus, and immediately took up his residence in the capital. He saw that his son cut a fine figure in the highest circles of society, and expressed his gratification in the most emphatic terms. If he had known, however, that Ralph was in the habit of visiting, with alarming regularity, at the house of a plebeian merchant in a somewhat obscure street, he would, no doubt, have been more chary of his praise. But the Colonel suspected nothing, and it was well for the peace of the family that he did not. It may have been cowardice in Ralph that he never mentioned Bertha's name to his family or to his aristocratic acquaintances; for, to be candid, he himself felt ashamed of the power she exerted over him, and by turns pitied and ridiculed himself for pursuing so inglorious a conquest. Nevertheless it wounded his egotism that she never showed any surprise at seeing him, that she received him with with a certain frank unceremoniousness, which, however, was very becoming to her; that she invariably went on with her work heedless of his presence, and in everything treated him as if she had been his equal. She persisted in talking with him in a half sisterly fashion about his studies and his future career, warned him with great solicitude against some of his reprobate friends, of whose merry adventures he had told her; and if he ventured to compliment her on her beauty or her accomplishments, she would look up gravely from her sewing, or answer him in a way which seemed to banish the idea of love-making into the land of the impossible. He was constantly tormented by the suspicion that she secretly disapproved of him, and that from a mere moral interest in his welfare she was conscientiously laboring to make him a better man. Day after day he parted from her feeling humiliated, faint-hearted, and secretly indignant both at himself and her, and day after day he returned only to renew the same experience. At last it became too intolerable, he could endure it no longer. Let it make or break, certainty, at all risks, was at least preferable to this sickening suspense. That he loved her, he could no longer doubt; let his parents foam and fret as much as they pleased; for once he was going to stand on his own legs. And in the end, he thought, they would have to yield, for they had no son but him.

Bertha was going to return to her home on the sea-coast in a week. Ralph stood in the little low-ceiled parlor, as she imagined, to bid her good-by. They had been speaking of her father, her brothers, and the farm, and she had expressed the wish that if he ever should come to that part of the country he might pay them a visit. Her words had kindled a vague hope in his breast, but in their very frankness and friendly regard there was something which slew the hope they had begotten. He held her hand in his, and her large confiding eyes shone with an emotion which was beautiful, but was yet not love.

"If you were but a peasant born like myself," said she, in a voice which sounded almost tender, "then I should like to talk to you as I would to my own brother; but—"

"No, not brother, Bertha," cried he, with sudden vehemence; "I love you better than I ever loved any earthly being, and if you knew how firmly this love has clutched at the roots of my heart, you would perhaps—you would at least not look so reproachfully at me."

She dropped his hand, and stood for a moment silent.

"I am sorry that it should have come to this, Mr. Grim," said she, visibly struggling for calmness. "And I am perhaps more to blame than you."

"Blame," muttered he, "why are you to blame?"

"Because I do not love you; although I sometimes feared that this might come. But then again I persuaded myself that it could not be so."

He took a step toward the door, laid his hand on the knob, and gazed down before him.

"Bertha," began he, slowly, raising his head, "you have always disapproved of me, you have despised me in your heart, but you thought you would be doing a good work if you succeeded in making a man of me."

"You use strong language," answered she, hesitatingly; "but there is truth in what you say."

Again there was a long pause, in which the ticking of the old parlor clock grew louder and louder.

"Then," he broke out at last, "tell me before we part if I can do nothing to gain—I will not say your love—but only your regard? What would you do if you were in my place?"

"My advice you will hardly heed, and I do not even know that it would be well if you did. But if I were a man in your position, I should break with my whole past, start out into the world where nobody knew me, and where I should be dependent only upon my own strength, and there I would conquer a place for myself, if it were only for the satisfaction of knowing that I was really a man. Here cushions are sewed under your arms, a hundred invisible threads bind you to a life of idleness and vanity, everybody is ready to carry you on his hands, the road is smoothed for you, every stone carefully moved out of your path, and you will probably go to your grave without having ever harbored one earnest thought, without having done one manly deed."

Ralph stood transfixed, gazing at her with open mouth; he felt a kind of stupid fright, as if some one had suddenly seized him by the shoulders and shaken him violently. He tried vainly to remove his eyes from Bertha. She held him as by a powerful spell. He saw that her face was lighted with an altogether new beauty; he noticed the deep glow upon her cheek, the brilliancy of her eye, the slight quiver of her lip. But he saw all this as one sees things in a half-trance, without attempting to account for them; the door between his soul and his senses was closed.

"I know that I have been bold in speaking to you in this way," she said at last, seating herself in a chair at the window. "But it was yourself who asked me. And I have felt all the time that I should have to tell you this before we parted."

"And," answered he, making a strong effort to appear calm, "if I follow your advice, will you allow me to see you once more before you go?"

"I shall remain here another week, and shall, during that time, always be ready to receive you."

"Thank you. Good-by."

"Good-by."

Ralph carefully avoided all the fashionable thoroughfares; he felt degraded before himself, and he had an idea that every man could read his humiliation in his countenance. Now he walked on quickly, striking the sidewalk with his heels; now, again, he fell into an uneasy, reckless saunter, according as the changing moods in' spired defiance of his sentence, or a qualified surrender. And, as he walked on, the bitterness grew within him, and he piteously reviled himself for having allowed himself to be made a fool of by "that little country goose," when he was well aware that there were hundreds of women of the best families of the land who would feel honored at receiving his attentions. But this sort of reasoning he knew to be both weak and contemptible, and his better self soon rose in loud rebellion.

"After all," he muttered, "in the main thing she was right. I am a miserable good-for-nothing, a hothouse plant, a poor stick, and if I were a woman myself, I don't think I should waste my affections on a man of that calibre."

Then he unconsciously fell to analyzing Bertha's character, wondering vaguely that a person who moved so timidly in social life, appearing so diffident, from an ever-present fear of blundering against the established forms of etiquette, could judge so quickly, and with such a merciless certainty, whenever a moral question, a question of right and wrong, was at issue. And, pursuing the same train of thought, he contrasted her with himself, who moved in the highest spheres of society as in his native element, heedless of moral scruples, and conscious of no loftier motive for his actions than the immediate pleasure of the moment.

As Ralph turned the corner of a street, he heard himself hailed from the other sidewalk by a chorus of merry voices.

"Ah, my dear Baroness," cried a young man, springing across the street and grasping Ralph's hand (all his student friends called him the Baroness), "in the name of this illustrious company, allow me to salute you. But why the deuce—what is the matter with you? If you have the *Katzenjammer** soda-water is the thing. Come along—it's my treat!"

** Katzenjammer is the sensation a man has the morning after a carousal.*

The students instantly thronged around Ralph, who stood distractedly swinging his cane and smiling idiotically.

"I am not quite well," said he; "leave me alone."

"No, to be sure, you don't look well," cried a jolly youth, against whom Bertha had frequently warned him; "but a glass of sherry will soon restore you. It would be highly immoral to leave you in this condition without taking care of you."

Ralph again vainly tried to remonstrate; but the end was, that he reluctantly followed.

He had always been a conspicuous figure in the student world; but that night he astonished his friends by his eloquence, his reckless humor, and his capacity for drinking. He made a speech for "Woman," which bristled with wit, cynicism, and sarcastic epigrams. One young man, named Vinter, who was engaged, undertook to protest against his sweeping condemnation, and declared that Ralph, who was a universal favorite among the ladies, ought to be the last to revile them.

"If," he went on, "the Baroness should propose to six well-known ladies here in this city whom I could mention, I would wager six Johannisbergers, and an equal amount of champagne, that every one of them would accept him."

The others loudly applauded this proposal, and Ralph accepted the wager. The letters were written on the spot, and immediately despatched. Toward morning, the merry carousal broke up, and Ralph was conducted in triumph to his home.

III

Two days later, Ralph again knocked on Bertha's door. He looked paler than usual, almost haggard; his immaculate linen was a little crumpled, and he carried no cane; his lips were tightly compressed, and his face wore an air of desperate resolution.

"It is done," he said, as he seated himself opposite her. "I am going."

"Going!" cried she, startled at his unusual appearance. "How, where?"

"To America. I sail to-night. I have followed your advice, you see. I have cut off the last bridge behind me."

"But, Ralph," she exclaimed, in a voice of alarm. "Something dreadful must have happened. Tell me quick; I must know it."

"No; nothing dreadful," muttered he, smiling bitterly. "I have made a little scandal, that is all. My father told me to-day to go to the devil, if I chose, and my mother gave me five hundred dollars to help me along on the way. If you wish to know, here is the explanation."

And he pulled from his pocket six perfumed and carefully folded notes, and threw them into her lap.

"Do you wish me to read them?" she asked, with growing surprise.

"Certainly. Why not?"

She hastily opened one note after the other, and read.

"But, Ralph," she cried, springing up from her seat, while her eyes flamed with indignation, "what does this

mean? What have you done?"

"I didn't think it needed any explanation," replied he, with feigned indifference. "I proposed to them all, and, you see, they all accepted me. I received all these letters to-day. I only wished to know whether the whole world regarded me as such a worthless scamp as you told me I was."

She did not answer, but sat mutely staring at him, fiercely crumpling a rose-colored note in her hand. He began to feel uncomfortable under her gaze, and threw himself about uneasily in his chair.

"Well," said he, at length, rising, "I suppose there is nothing more. Good-by."

"One moment, Mr. Grim," demanded she, sternly. "Since I have already said so much, and you have obligingly revealed to me a new side of your character, I claim the right to correct the opinion I expressed of you at our last meeting."

"I am all attention."

"I did think, Mr. Grim," began she, breathing hard, and steadying herself against the table at which she stood, "that you were a very selfish man—an embodiment of selfishness, absolute and supreme, but I did not believe that you were wicked."

"And what convinced you that I was selfish, if I may ask?"

"What convinced me?" repeated she, in a tone of inexpressible contempt. "When did you ever act from any generous regard for others? What good did you ever do to anybody?"

"You might ask, with equal justice, what good I ever did to myself."

"In a certain sense, yes; because to gratify a mere momentary wish is hardly doing one's self good."

"Then I have, at all events, followed the Biblical precept, and treated my neighbor very much as I treat myself."

"I did think," continued Bertha, without heeding the remark, "that you were at bottom kind-hearted, but too hopelessly well-bred ever to commit an act of any decided complexion, either good or bad. Now I see that I have misjudged you, and that you are capable of outraging the most sacred feelings of a woman's heart in mere wantonness, or for the sake of satisfying a base curiosity, which never could have entered the mind of an upright and generous man."

The hard, benumbed look in Ralph's face thawed in the warmth of her presence, and her words, though stern, touched a secret spring in his heart. He made two or three vain attempts to speak, then suddenly broke down, and cried:

"Bertha, Bertha, even if you scorn me, have patience with me, and listen."

And he told her, in rapid, broken sentences, how his love for her had grown from day to day, until he could no longer master it; and how, in an unguarded moment, when his pride rose in fierce conflict against his love, he had done this reckless deed of which he was now heartily ashamed. The fervor of his words touched her, for she felt that they were sincere. Large mute tears trembled in her eyelashes as she sat gazing tenderly at him, and in the depth of her soul the wish awoke that she might have been able to return this great and strong love of his; for she felt that in this love lay the germ of a new, of a stronger and better man. She noticed, with a half-regretful pleasure, his handsome figure, his delicately shaped hands, and the noble cast of his features; an overwhelming pity for him rose within her, and she began to reproach herself for having spoken so harshly, and, as she now thought, so unjustly. Perhaps he read in her eyes the unspoken wish. He seized her hand, and his words fell with a warm and alluring cadence upon her ear.

"I shall not see you for a long time to come, Bertha," said he, "but if at the end of five or six years your hand is still free, and I return another man—a man to whom you could safely intrust your happiness—would you then listen to what I may have to say to you? For I promise, by all that we both hold sacred—"

"No, no," interrupted she, hastily. "Promise nothing. It would be unjust to yourself, and perhaps also to me; for a sacred promise is a terrible thing, Ralph. Let us both remain free; and, if you return and still love me, then come, and I shall receive you and listen to you. And even if you have outgrown your love, which is, indeed, more probable, come still to visit me wherever I may be, and we shall meet as friends and rejoice in the meeting."

"You know best," he murmured. "Let it be as you have said."

He arose, took her face between his hands, gazed long and tenderly into her eyes, pressed a kiss upon her forehead, and hastened away.

That night Ralph boarded the steamer for Hull, and three weeks later landed in New York.

IV

The first three months of Ralph's sojourn in America were spent in vain attempts to obtain a situation. Day after day he walked down Broadway, calling at various places of business, and night after night he returned to his cheerless room with a faint heart and declining spirits. It was, after all, a more serious thing than he had imagined, to cut the cable which binds one to the land of one's birth. There a hundred subtle influences, the existence of which no one suspects until the moment they are withdrawn, unite to keep one in the straight path of rectitude, or at least of external respectability; and Ralph's life had been all in society; the opinion of his fellow-men had been the one force to which he implicitly deferred, and the conscience by which he had been wont to test his actions had been nothing but the aggregate judgment of his friends. To such a man the isolation and the utter irresponsibility of a life among strangers was tenfold more dangerous; and Ralph found, to his horror, that his character contained innumerable latent possibilities which the easy-going life in his home probably never would have revealed to him. It often cut him to the quick, when, on entering an

office in his daily search for employment, he was met by hostile or suspicious glances, or when, as it occasionally happened, the door was slammed in his face, as if he were a vagabond or an impostor. Then the wolf was often roused within him, and he felt a momentary wild desire to become what the people here evidently believed him to be. Many a night he sauntered irresolutely about the gambling places in obscure streets, and the glare of light, the rude shouts and clamors in the same moment repelled and attracted him. If he went to the devil, who would care? His father had himself pointed out the way to him; and nobody could blame him if he followed the advice. But then again a memory emerged from that chamber of his soul which still he held sacred; and Bertha's deep-blue eyes gazed upon him with their earnest look of tender warning and regret.

When the summer was half gone, Ralph had gained many a hard victory over himself, and learned many a useful lesson; and at length he swallowed his pride, divested himself of his fine clothes, and accepted a position as assistant gardener at a villa on the Hudson. And as he stood perspiring with a spade in his hand, and a cheap broad-brimmed straw hat on his head, he often took a grim pleasure in picturing to himself how his aristocratic friends at home would receive him if he should introduce himself to them in this new costume.

"After all, it was only my position they cared for," he reflected, bitterly; "without my father's name what would I be to them?"

Then, again, there was a certain satisfaction in knowing that, for his present situation, humble as it was, he was indebted to nobody but himself; and the thought that Bertha's eyes, if they could have seen him now, would have dwelt upon him with pleasure and approbation, went far to console him for his aching back, his sunburned face, and his swollen and blistered hands.

One day, as Ralph was raking the gravel-walks in the garden, his employer's daughter, a young lady of seventeen, came out and spoke to him. His culture and refinement of manner struck her with wonder, and she asked him to tell her his history; but then he suddenly grew very grave, and she forbore pressing him. From that time she attached a kind of romantic interest to him, and finally induced her father to obtain him a situation that would be more to his taste. And, before winter came, Ralph saw the dawn of a new future glimmering before him. He had wrestled bravely with fate, and had once more gained a victory. He began the career in which success and distinction awaited him as proofreader on a newspaper in the city. He had fortunately been familiar with the English language before he left home, and by the strength of his will he conquered all difficulties. At the end of two years he became attached to the editorial staff; new ambitious hopes, hitherto foreign to his mind, awoke within him; and with joyous tumult of heart he saw life opening its wide vistas before him, and he labored on manfully to repair the losses of the past, and to prepare himself for greater usefulness in times to come. He felt in himself a stronger and fuller manhood, as if the great arteries of the vast universal world-life pulsed in his own being. The drowsy, indolent existence at home appeared like a dull remote dream from which he had awaked, and he blessed the destiny which, by its very sternness, had mercifully saved him; he blessed her, too, who, from the very want of love for him, had, perhaps, made him worthier of love.

The years flew rapidly. Society had flung its doors open to him, and what was more, he had found some warm friends, in whose houses he could come and go at pleasure. He enjoyed keenly the privilege of daily association with high-minded and refined women; their eager activity of intellect stimulated him, their exquisite ethereal grace and their delicately chiseled beauty satisfied his æsthetic cravings, and the responsive vivacity of their nature prepared him ever new surprises. He felt a strange fascination in the presence of these women, and the conviction grew upon him that their type of womanhood was superior to any he had hitherto known. And by way of refuting his own argument, he would draw from his pocketbook the photograph of Bertha, which had a secret compartment there all to itself, and, gazing tenderly at it, would eagerly defend her against the disparaging reflections which the involuntary comparison had provoked. And still, how could he help seeing that her features, though well molded, lacked animation; that her eye, with its deep, trustful glance, was not brilliant, and that the calm earnestness of her face, when compared with the bright, intellectual beauty of his present friends, appeared pale and simple, like a violet in a bouquet of vividly colored roses? It gave him a quick pang, when, at times, he was forced to admit this; nevertheless, it was the truth.

After six years of residence in America, Ralph had gained a very high reputation as a journalist of rare culture and ability, and in 1867 he was sent to the World's Exhibition in Paris, as correspondent of the paper on which he had during all these years been employed. What wonder, then, that he started for Europe a few weeks before his presence was needed in the imperial city, and that he steered his course directly toward the fjord valley where Bertha had her home? It was she who had bidden him Godspeed when he fled from the land of his birth, and she, too, should receive his first greeting on his return.

V

The sun had fortified itself behind a citadel of flaming clouds, and the upper forest region shone with a strange ethereal glow, while the lower plains were wrapped in shadow; but the shadow itself had a strong suffusion of color. The mountain peaks rose cold and blue in the distance.

Ralph, having inquired his way of the boatman who had landed him at the pier, walked rapidly along the beach, with a small valise in his hand, and a light summer overcoat flung over his shoulder. Many half-thoughts grazed his mind, and ere the first had taken shape, the second and the third came and chased it away. And still they all in some fashion had reference to Bertha; for in a misty, abstract way, she filled his whole mind; but for some indefinable reason, he was afraid to give free rein to the sentiment which lurked in the remoter corners of his soul.

Onward he hastened, while his heart throbbed with the quickening tempo of mingled expectation and fear.

Now and then one of those chill gusts of air, which seem to be careering about aimlessly in the atmosphere during early summer, would strike into his face, and recal! him to a keener self-consciousness.

Ralph concluded, from his increasing agitation, that he must be very near Bertha's home. He stopped and looked around him. He saw a large maple at the roadside, some thirty steps from where he was standing, and the girl who was sitting under it, resting her head in her hand and gazing out over the sea, he recognized in an instant to be Bertha. He sprang up on the road, not crossing, however, her line of vision, and approached her noiselessly from behind.

"Bertha," he whispered.

She gave a little joyous cry, sprang up, and made a gesture as if to throw herself in his arms; then suddenly checked herself, blushed crimson, and moved a step backward.

"You came so suddenly," she murmured.

"But, Bertha," cried he (and the full bass of his voice rang through her very soul), "have I gone into exile and waited these many years for so cold a welcome?"

"You have changed so much, Ralph," she answered, with that old grave smile which he knew so well, and stretched out both her hands toward him. "And I have thought of you so much since you went away, and blamed myself because I had judged you so harshly, and wondered that you could listen to me so patiently, and never bear me any malice for what I said."

"If you had said a word less," declared Ralph, seating himself at her side on the greensward, "or if you had varnished it over with politeness, then you would probably have failed to produce any effect and I should not have been burdened with that heavy debt of gratitude which I now owe you. I was a pretty thick-skinned animal in those days, Bertha. You said the right word at the right moment; you gave me a bold and a good piece of advice, which my own ingenuity would never have suggested to me. I will not thank you, because, in so grave a case as this, spoken thanks sound like a mere mockery. Whatever I am, Bertha, and whatever I may hope to be, I owe it all to that hour."

She listened with rapture to the manly assurance of his voice; her eyes dwelt with unspeakable joy upon his strong, bronzed features, his full thick blond beard, and the vigorous proportions of his frame. Many and many a time during his absence had she wondered how he would look if he ever came back, and with that minute conscientiousness which, as it were, pervaded her whole character, she had held herself responsible before God for his fate, prayed for him, and trembled lest evil powers should gain the ascendancy over his soul.

On their way to the house they talked together of many things, but in a guarded, cautious fashion, and without the cheerful abandonment of former years. They both, as it were, groped their way carefully in each other's minds, and each vaguely felt that there was something in the other's thought which it was not well to touch unbidden. Bertha saw that all her fears for him had been groundless, and his very appearance lifted the whole weight of responsibility from her breast; and still, did she rejoice at her deliverance from her burden? Ah, no; in this moment she knew that that which she had foolishly cherished as the best and noblest part of herself had been but a selfish need of her own heart. She feared that she had only taken that interest in him which one feels in a thing of one's own making, and now, when she saw that he had risen quite above her; that he was free and strong, and could have no more need of her, she had, instead of generous pleasure at his success, but a painful sense of emptiness, as if something very dear had been taken from her.

Ralph, too, was loth to analyze the impression his old love made upon him. His feelings were of so complex a nature, he was anxious to keep his more magnanimous impulses active, and he strove hard to convince himself that she was still the same to him as she had been before they had ever parted. But, alas! though the heart be warm and generous, the eye is a merciless critic. And the man who had moved on the wide arena of the world, whose mind had housed the large thoughts of this century, and expanded with its invigorating breath—was he to blame because he had unconsciously outgrown his old provincial self, and could no more judge by its standards?

Bertha's father was a peasant, but he had, by his lumber trade, acquired what in Norway was called a very handsome fortune. He received his guest with dignified reserve, and Ralph thought he detected in his eyes a lurking look of distrust. "I know your errand," that look seemed to say, "but you had better give it up at once. It will be of no use for you to try."

And after supper, as Ralph and Bertha sat talking confidingly with each other at the window, he sent his daughter a quick, sharp glance, and then, without ceremony, commanded her to go to bed. Ralph's heart gave a great thump within him; not because he feared the old man, but because his words, as well as his glances, revealed to him the sad history of these long, patient years. He doubted no longer that the love which he had once so ardently desired was his at last; and he made a silent vow that, come what might, he would remain faithful.

As he came down to breakfast the next morning, he found Bertha sitting at the window, engaged in hemming what appeared to be a rough kitchen towel. She bent eagerly over her work, and only a vivid flush upon her cheek told him that she had noticed his coming. He took a chair, seated himself opposite her, and bade her "good-morning." She raised her head, and showed him a sweet, troubled countenance, which the early sunlight illumined with a high spiritual beauty. It reminded him forcibly of those pale, sweet-faced saints of Fra Angelico, with whom the frail flesh seems ever on the point of yielding to the ardent aspirations of the spirit. And still even in this moment he could not prevent his eyes from observing that one side of her forefinger was rough from sewing, and that the whiteness of her arm, which the loose sleeves displayed, contrasted strongly with the browned and sunburned complexion of her hands.

After breakfast they again walked together on the beach, and Ralph, having once formed his resolution, now talked freely of the New World—of his sphere of activity there; of his friends and of his plans for the future; and she listened to him with a mild, perplexed look in her eyes, as if trying vainly to follow the flight of his thoughts. And he wondered, with secret dismay, whether she was still the same strong, brave-hearted girl whom he had once accounted almost bold; whether the life in this narrow valley, amid a hundred petty and depressing cares, had not cramped her spiritual growth, and narrowed the sphere of her thought. Or was she

still the same, and was it only he who had changed? At last he gave utterance to his wonder, and she answered him in those grave, earnest tones which seemed in themselves to be half a refutation of his doubts.

"It was easy for me to give you daring advice then, Ralph," she said. "Like most school-girls, I thought that life was a great and glorious thing, and that happiness was a fruit which hung within reach of every hand. Now I have lived for six years trying single-handed to relieve the want and suffering of the needy people with whom I come in contact, and their squalor and wretchedness have sickened me, and, what is still worse, I feel that all I can do is as a drop in the ocean, and, after all, amounts to nothing. I know I am no longer the same reckless girl who, with the very best intention, sent you wandering through the wide world; and I thank God that it proved to be for your good, although the whole now appears quite incredible to me. My thoughts have moved so long within the narrow circle of these mountains that they have lost their youthful elasticity, and can no more rise above them."

Ralph detected, in the midst of her despondency, a spark of her former fire, and grew eloquent in his endeavors to persuade her that she was unjust to herself, and that there was but a wider sphere of life needed to develop all the latent powers of her rich nature.

At the dinner-table, her father again sat eying his guest with that same cold look of distrust and suspicion. And when the meal was at an end, he rose abruptly and called his daughter into another room. Presently Ralph heard his angry voice resounding through the house, interrupted now and then by a woman's sobs, and a subdued, passionate pleading. When Bertha again entered the room, her eyes were very red, and he saw that she had been weeping. She threw a shawl over her shoulders, beckoned to him with her hand, and he arose and followed her. She led the way silently until they reached a thick copse of birch and alder near the strand. She dropped down upon a bench between two trees, and he took his seat at her side.

"Ralph," began she, with a visible effort, "I hardly know what to say to you; but there is something which I must tell you—my father wishes you to leave us at once."

"And you, Bertha?"

"Well—yes—I wish it too."

She saw the painful shock which her words gave him, and she strove hard to speak. Her lips trembled, her eyes became suffused with tears, which grew and grew, but never fell; she could not utter a word.

"Well, Bertha," answered he, with a little quiver in his voice, "if you, too, wish me to go, I shall not tarry. Good-by."

He rose quickly, and, with averted face, held out his hand to her; but as she made no motion to grasp the hand, he began distractedly to button his coat, and moved slowly away.

"Ralph."

He turned sharply, and, before he knew it, she lay sobbing upon his breast.

"Ralph," she murmured, while the tears almost choked her words, "I could not have you leave me thus. It is hard enough—it is hard enough—"

"What is hard, beloved?"

She raised her head abruptly, and turned upon him a gaze full of hope and doubt, and sweet perplexity.

"Ah, no, you do not love me," she whispered, sadly.

"Why should I come to seek you, after these many years, dearest, if I did not wish to make you my wife before God and men? Why should I—I."

"Ah, yes, I know," she interrupted him with a fresh fit of weeping, "you are too good and honest to wish to throw me away, now when you have seen how my soul has hungered for the sight of you these many years, how even now I cling to you with a despairing clutch. But you can not disguise yourself, Ralph, and I saw from the first moment that you loved me no more."

"Do not be such an unreasonable child," he remonstrated, feebly. "I do not love you with the wild, irrational passion of former years; but I have the tenderest regard for you, and my heart warms at the sight of your sweet face, and I shall do all in my power to make you as happy as any man can make you who—"

"Who does not love me," she finished.

A sudden shudder seemed to shake her whole frame, and she drew herself more tightly up to him.

"Ah, no," she continued, after a while, sinking back upon her seat. "It is a hopeless thing to compel a reluctant heart. I will accept no sacrifice from you. You owe me nothing, for you have acted toward me honestly and uprightly, and I shall be a stronger or—at least—a better woman for what you gave me—and—for what you could not give me, even though you would."

"But, Bertha," exclaimed he, looking mournfully at her, "it is not true when you say that I owe you nothing. Six years ago, when first I wooed you, you could not return my love, and you sent me out into the world, and even refused to accept any pledge or promise for the future."

"And you returned," she responded, "a man, such as my hope had pictured you; but, while I had almost been standing still, you had outgrown me and outgrown your old self, and, with your old self, outgrown its love for me, for your love was not of your new self, but of the old. Alas! it is a sad tale, but it is true."

She spoke gravely now, and with a steadier voice, but her eyes hung upon his face with an eager look of expectation, as if yearning to detect there some gleam of hope, some contradiction of the dismal truth. He read that look aright and it pierced him like a sharp sword. He made a brave effort to respond to its appeal, but his features seemed hard as stone, and he could only cry out against his destiny, and bewail his misfortune and hers.

Toward evening, Ralph was sitting in an open boat, listening to the measured oar-strokes of the boatmen who were rowing him out to the nearest stopping-place of the steamer. The mountains lifted their great placid heads up among the sun-bathed clouds, and the fjord opened its cool depths as if to make room for their vast reflections. Ralph felt as if he were floating in the midst of the blue infinite space, and, with the strength which this feeling inspired, he tried to face boldly the thought from which he had but a moment ago

shrunk as from something hopelessly sad and perplexing.

And in that hour he looked fearlessly into the gulf which separates the New World from the Old. He had hoped to bridge it; but, alas! it can not be bridged.

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