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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PORTIA; OR, BY PASSIONS ROCKED ***

PORTIA; OR BY PASSIONS ROCKED BY THE DUCHESS

Author of "PHYLLIS," "AIRY, FAIRY LILLIAN," ETC

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PORTIA; Or, "By Passions Rocked."

[1]

CHAPTER I.

"A child of our grandmother Eve, a female; or, for thy more sweet understanding, a woman."—LOVE'S LABORS LOST.

THE gates are thrown wide open, and the carriage rolls smoothly down the long dark avenue, beneath the waving branches of the tall elms and the copper beeches, through which the dying sun is flinging its parting rays.

The horses, sniffing the air of home, fling up their heads and make still greater haste, until presently, rounding the curve, they draw up before the hall door.

It stands open, and on the high, stone steps that lead to it, a very pretty girl looks down upon the carriage from under her palm, with a face eager and expectant. When she has barely glanced at it, she says, "Ah!" in a tone of deep satisfaction, and running down the steps and over the gravel, turns the handle of the carriage door and looks anxiously at its occupant.

"You have come," she says, cheerily. "I was *so* afraid something might have prevented you."

The person she addresses—a girl about two years older than herself, says:

"Yes, I have come," in a tone slow and sweet, almost to languor.

"*So* glad," says the pretty girl, with a smile that must be one of her sweetest charms, it is so full of life and gaiety; "come out of this dreadful old sarcophagus and upstairs with me; I have your tea in your own room for you." [2]

Miss Vibart, stepping out of the brougham, follows her hostess into the house, through the grand old hall, and up the wide, oak staircase, into a room huge and old-fashioned—but delicious and cozy, and comfortable to the last degree.

Having cast one hasty glance round the apartment, Miss Vibart turns to her young hostess—

"You are Dulcinea? isn't it?" she says, questioningly.

"Yes, I am Dulcinea as a rule—(may I be your maid, just for once—you will be so much happier without your hat)—but I have so many other names, that it takes me all my time to remember which one I really belong to. Uncle Christopher calls me Baby! and Mark Gore, when he is here, calls me Duchess, and Dicky Browne calls me Tom, and Roger calls me—I really quite forget what it is Roger calls me," with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"Is Dicky Browne your *fiancé*?" asks Miss Vibart, uncertainly; "I know you are engaged to somebody; Auntie Maud told me that."

"Dicky Browne! Oh, no!" Then, with the gayest little laugh in the world, "If you could only *see* Dicky Browne! He couldn't, by any possibility, be *anybody's fiancé*! You mean Roger, I suppose." But, with a quick frown and a touch of petulance, "Don't let us talk about *him*. He is such a worry, and has been making himself so exceedingly unpleasant all the morning!"

Miss Vibart stares, forgetting her usually very charming manners for the moment, and then drops her heavily-fringed lids over her eyes.

"By-the-by," says Dulce, breaking in upon what threatens to be an awkward pause, "how d'ye do? I don't believe I have said that yet." Her whole tone and expression have changed as if by magic; the suggestion of ill-temper is gone; the former vivacity re-asserts itself. She lays her hands upon her visitor's shoulders with a light, caressing gesture, and leans towards her. "I shall give you a little kiss for your welcome, my dear cousin, if I may," she says, very prettily.

Portia Vibart, acknowledging her grace, tells herself this new cousin will suit very well, and returns her soft embrace with some warmth. She is feeling tired, used up, *ennuye* to the last degree; even the two or three weeks she has had in town have been too much for her, and she has come down to her uncle's house nearly ready to confess to herself that she is seriously ill. Here, in the stillness, in this great room, with the elms swaying to and fro outside her windows, and the distant cawing of the rooks in the branches high up out of sight, she feels rest, and comfort, and a curious longing, that has a strange pleasure in it, to stretch out her arms and sigh deeply and contentedly. [3]

"Sit in this chair, and rest a little before thinking of taking off anything else," says Dulce; "I shall pour out your tea."

She goes, with the quick undulating step that belongs to her, to a small, round table, and makes a little fuss over the delicate fat little cups that stand on the tray.

"You take sugar?" she asks, in a moment or two.

"No, thank you," says Portia, slowly; she is looking at her cousin still, whose hair is as nearly red as it can be, without being exactly so; it comes very, very close to it, but it is only the rude who have ever called it so.

"But of course not," says Dulcinea. "One might know that by looking at you. It isn't a good thing to take sugar in one's tea nowadays, is it?—it almost touches on immorality;" she is standing with the sugar-tongs poised in her right hand, and is glancing at Portia over her shoulder. "*I* take it, you know—any amount of it, and I have yet the grace to be ashamed of myself afresh, at every new lump. Dicky Browne likes it, too."

"Who *is* Dicky Browne?" demands Portia, suddenly: if she is going to live in this rather mixed household, she had better learn some particulars about the inhabitants at once.

"Not know Dicky? it argues yourself unknown. He is our celebrity. He is really immensely clever, about always doing the wrong thing, and indeed is inestimable in most ways. He is your cousin, too, as much as he is mine, which really," declares she airily, "isn't much. But he is such a pet all through that we magnify the third-cousinship into a first. He rides very straight and smokes the very prettiest cigarettes, and he is *such* a fool!" [4]

Miss Vibart is amused. "What a very charming description," she says, with the low laugh she allows herself; "he sounds like something I have seen somewhere, and he certainly would be a treasure to Byron."

"Lord Byron?" asks Dulce, with lifted brows; "I don't myself think he would show off much as a Conrad, or a Giaour, or a Lara."

"I rather fancy I was thinking of the man who writes plays," says Miss Vibart, mildly. "Is he here now?"

"Yes. He spends most of his time here. Both he and Roger are consumed with a desire to see you. You must know," says Dulcinea, laughing over her cups at her cousin, "that a breath from the outer world came to us, whispering of your success in town, and how every one raves of your *beaux yeux*, and your beauty generally."

"Who wafted so insane a breath as that?" asks Portia, with a suppressed smile.

"Mark Gore. He puts in a good deal of his time here, too."

"Mark Gore never talks anything but the very utterest nonsense," says Portia with a faint blush. "No one minds him. I shall be quite afraid to go down-stairs to present myself to Dicky Browne after all you have said. Consider his disappointment."

"I shan't," says Dulce, calmly, "and you needn't fear him. He is only Dicky. Well, it is five now, and we dine at seven. I shall send your maid to you, and I shall call back for you in an hour, if you wish, to bring you down stairs with me. But, perhaps—"

"Oh! please do," says Portia, graciously. "I shall be just a little strange at first, shan't I?"

"Strange here? *Indeed* no," says Dulcinea, earnestly. "Nobody knows the meaning of that word in this old Court. We all get friends with each other at once, and I don't think we ever fall asunder again. Now at six do try to be ready, and I will take you to see Uncle Christopher, who is sure to be in just then."

"I shall be ready," says Portia, with determination.

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CHAPTER II.

"The first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind is curiosity."—BURKE.

"Yes, I am quite ready," says Portia.

The hour has flown, and Dulcinea, standing in the doorway of her cousin's room, gazes on her with undisguised admiration. To Dulcinea, anything lovely, be it man, or beast, or flower, is an intense and everlasting delight, and now Portia enchants her. In very truth so well she might, as a fairer picture than she presents at this moment can hardly be imagined.

She is standing before a large glass, let into the wall on one side of the room from ceiling to floor, and, with a back glass in her hand, is leaning slightly to one side, as though lost in admiration of the soft mass of fair, brown hair that lies coiled low down on her neck in high-art fashion. She is like a soft harmony in black and gold, with her filmy robes clinging closely round her, and the old gold, that is so like tarnished yellow, touching her here and there.

"Ah! Mark was right," says Dulce, with a little sigh of intensest pleasure. "Come down now (you *cannot* make yourself more beautiful), and be made known to Uncle Christopher."

It is in the library that Miss Vibart makes herself known. Dulce entering first, with her gay little air, says:

"This is Portia, Uncle Christopher." Thereupon a tall old man, rising from a chair, comes quickly up to them and takes Portia's hand, and, stooping very low, presses his lips to her forehead.

He is a remarkably handsome old man, with light hair, and a rather warm complexion, and choleric, but kindly eyes. Even at the first glance Portia tells herself he would be as harsh a foe as he would be a champion true, and in so far she reads him right. He is hot-tempered, obstinate, at moments perhaps unjust, but at all times kind-hearted, and deserving of tenderest regard.

Now he is holding his new niece's hand, and is gazing down at her with animated eyes, that no age will ever quite dim.

"So glad. *So* glad you have come to us," he says, in a tone that reminds her of Dulce's, though it is so deep and strong and masculine, and hers so very much the reverse in every way, "Bless me, how days go by! Just last week, as it seems to me, I saw you a little girl in short petticoats and frills, and furbelows, and now—"

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"I wear petticoats still," says Portia, demurely, with a soft laugh, "and frills sometimes, and often furbelows, I *think*, though I don't in the least know what they mean, but they sound nice."

So, after all, I should be now very much as I was."

"Very much. But forgive me," says Sir Christopher, "if I say you were not anything like as good-looking then as you are to-day."

"A speech easy to forgive," said Portia, lightly. Then, after a pause, "I, too, remember what *you* were like in those old days."

"What then?" asked Sir Christopher, giving a sudden pull to his collar, and betraying an increased degree of interest.

"Nothing like so good-looking as you are to-day," retorts she, with a quick smile and a little flicker of her eyelids.

"Ah! we shall be friends," cries Sir Christopher, gaily. "Baby and you and I will ride roughshod over all the others; and we have wanted somebody to help us, haven't we, Baby?" Then he turns more entirely to Dulce; "Eh, a sharp wit, isn't it?" he says.

"Auntie Maud sent her love to you," said Portia.

"Eh? Much obliged, I'm sure," says Sir Christopher. "Very good of her; mine to her in return. A most estimable woman she always was, if short of nose. How she *could* have thrown herself away upon that little insignificant—eh?—though he *was* my brother—eh?"

"She ought to have had you," says Miss Vibart, with soft audacity.

"Eh? eh?" says Sir Christopher, plainly delighted. "Now, what a rogue!" He turns to Dulce, as he always does on every occasion, be it sweet or bitter. "You hear her, Dulce. She flatters me, eh?"

"Uncle Christopher, you are a sad, sad flirt," says Dulce, patting his cheek. "I am glad poor Auntie Maud escaped your fascinations. You would have forgotten her in a week. Do you know what o'clock it is?—*after* six. Now do go up and get ready for dinner, and try to be in time for once, if only to do honor to Portia. He is so irregular," says Dulcinea, turning to Portia. [7]

Miss Vibart, like Alice, begins to think it all "curiouser and curiouser;" yet, withal, the house seems full of love.

"Well, indeed as a rule, I believe I *am* late," says Sir Christopher, in a resigned tone. "But I always put it down upon Mylder; he *can't* tie a cravat!" Then, to Portia, "You are pale and thin, child. You must get rosy and fat, and above all things healthy, before we are done with you."

"She must, indeed," says Dulce, "though I doubt if she will thank us for it by-and-by; when she finds herself (as she shall) with rose-colored cheeks like a dairy-maid, she will be very angry with us all."

"I shall never have red cheeks," says Portia; "and I shall never be angry with you; but I shall surely get strong in this charming air."

"Here you will live forever," says Dulce. "People at ninety-five consider themselves in the prime of life."

"Lucky they!" says Portia; "they must 'wear the rose of youth' upon them forever."

"Oh! we *can* die young," says Dulce, hastily, as though anxious to take a stigma off her country-side. "We have been known to do it, but not much; and the happiest have gone the soonest."

"Yes," says Uncle Christopher, most cheerfully—he is plainly unimpressed, and shows an inclination to whistle

"Golden lads and girls, all must,
As chimney-sweepers come to dust!"

"I say, Dulce, isn't Portia like that picture of your grand-aunt in the north gallery?"

"Like who?" asks Portia, anxiously.

"Like the handsomest woman in Europe, of her time," says Sir Christopher, earnestly, with a low, profound bow that might perhaps have been acceptable to "the handsomest woman in Europe," but only serves now to raise wild mirth in the breasts of her degenerate grand-nieces.

When they have reached again the hall outside (leaving Sir Christopher to seek the tender mercies of Mylder) Portia turns to her cousin—

"I am fortunate," she says, in her usual composed fashion that is yet neither cold nor repellant, "I find Uncle Christopher, also, altogether charming!" [8]

The "also" is very happy. It is not to be misunderstood, and is full of subtle flattery. Dulcinea yields to it, and turns, eyes and lips bright with a warm smile, upon Miss Vibart.

"Yes; he is quite everything that is nice," she says, gracefully ignoring the compliment to herself. "Now, shall we come and sit on the balcony until dinner is ready; as a rule, we assemble there in Summer instead of in the drawing-room, which, of course, is more convenient, and decidedly more gloomy."

"I have an all-conquering curiosity to know everything about everybody down here," says Portia, as they reach the balcony. Dulce pushes a low, sleepy-looking chair toward her, and, sinking gracefully into it, she turns her eyes up to her cousin. "Tell me all about your Roger," she says, languidly. "As I must begin with somebody, I think I shall prefer beginning with—with—what shall I call him? Your young man?"

"It sounds like Martha's baker's boy," says Dulce, laughing; "but you may call Roger what you like. I wish with all my heart you could call him husband, as that would take him out of my way."

They are standing on the balcony, and are looking toward the South. Beyond them stretch the lawns, green and sloping; from below, the breath of the sleeping flowers comes up to greet them; through the trees in the far, far distance comes to them a glimpse of the great ocean as it lies calm and silent, almost to melancholy, but for the soft lap, lapping of the waves upon the pebbly shore.

"Some one told me he was very handsome," says Portia, at a venture. Perhaps she has heard this, perhaps she hasn't. It even seems to her there is more truth in the "has" than in the "hasn't."

"I have seen uglier people," admits Dulcinea, regretfully; "when he has his face washed, and his hair brushed, he isn't half a bad boy."

"Boy?" asks Portia, doubtfully; to her the foregoing speech is full of difficulty.

"I daresay *you* would call him a man," says Dulce, with a shrug of her soft shoulders; "but really he isn't. If you had grown up with him, as I have, you would never think of him as being anything but an overgrown baby, and a very cross one. That is the worst of being brought up with a person, and being told one is to marry him by-and-by. It rather takes the gilt off him, I think," says Dulce with a small smile.

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"But why must you marry him?" asks Portia, opening her large black fan in an indolent fashion, and waving it to and fro.

The sun retiring

"On waves of glory, like an ocean god,"

flings over her a pale, pink halo, that renders even more delicately fine the beauty of her complexion. A passing breeze flings into her lap a few rose-leaves from a trailing tree that has climbed the balcony, and is now nodding drowsily as the day slowly dies. She is feeling a little sorry for Dulce, who is reciting her family history with such a doleful air.

"Well, I needn't, you know," says that young lady, lightly; "not if I don't choose, you know. I have got until I am twenty-one to think about it, and I am only eighteen now. I daresay I shall cry-off at the last moment; indeed, I am sure I shall," with a wilful shake of the head, "because Roger, at times, is quite too much, and utterly insupportable, yet, in that case, I shall vex Uncle Christopher, and I do so love Uncle Christopher!"

"But he had nothing to do with the arrangement, had he?"

"Nothing. It was his brother, Uncle Humphrey, who made the mistake. He left the property between us on condition we married each other. Whichever of us, at twenty-one, declines to carry out the agreement, gets £500 a year off the property, and the rest goes to the happy rejected. It is a charming place, about six miles from this, all lakes and trees, and the most enchanting gardens. I daresay Roger would be delighted if I would give him up, but" (vindictively) "I shan't. He shall never get those delicious gardens all to himself."

"What an eccentric will," says Portia.

"Well, hardly that. The place is very large, and requires money to keep it up. If he had divided the income between us, and we had been at liberty to go each our own way, the possessor of the house and lands would not have had enough money to keep it in proper order. I think it rather a just will. I wish it had been differently arranged, of course, but it can't be helped now."

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"Is he your first cousin? You know I have heard very little about this branch of my family, having lived so long in India."

"No, my second cousin. Fabian is Uncle Christopher's heir, but if—if he died, Roger would inherit title and all. That is another reason why I hate him. Why should he have even a distant claim to anything that belongs to Fabian?"

"But, my dear girl, you are not going to marry a man you hate?" says Portia, sitting up very straight, and forgetting to wave her fan.

"Not exactly," says Dulce, meditatively; "I really don't think I hate him, but he can be disagreeable, I promise you."

"But if you marry him, hardly tolerating him, and afterwards you meet somebody you can love, how will it be with you then?"

"Oh, I shan't do that," she says; "I have felt so married to Roger for years, that it would be positively indecent of me, even *now*, to fall in love with any one. In fact I couldn't."

"I daresay, after all, you like him well enough," says Miss Vibart, with her low, soft laugh.

"Mark Gore says you are exactly suited to each other."

"Mark Gore is a confirmed old bachelor, and knows nothing," says Dulce, contemptuously.

"Yet once, they say, he was hopelessly in love with Phyllis Carrington."

"So he was. It was quite a romance, and he was the hero."

"Phyllis is quite everything she ought to be, and utterly sweet," says Portia, thoughtfully. "But *is* she the sort of person to create a *grande passion* in a man like Mark?"

"I daresay. Her eyes are lovely; so babyish, yet so full of latent coquetry. A man of the world, like Mark, would like that sort of thing. But it is all over now, quite a worn-out tale. He visits there at stated times, and she has thoughts only for her baby and her 'Duke,' as she calls her husband."

"I wonder," says Miss Vibart, with a faint yawn, "if at times she doesn't find that a trifle slow?"

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Then she grows a little ashamed of herself, as she catches Dulce's quick, puzzled glance.

"It is a very pretty baby," says Dulce, as though anxious to explain matters.

"And what can be more adorable than a pretty baby?" responds her cousin, with a charming smile. "Now do tell me"—quickly, and as though to change the current of her companion's thoughts—"how many people are in this house, and who they are, and everything that is bad and good about them."

Dulce laughs.

"We come and go," she says. "It would be hard to arrange us. *I* am always here, and Uncle Christopher, and—Fabian. Roger calls this his home, too, but sometimes he goes away for awhile, and Dicky's room is always kept for him. We are all cousins pretty nearly, and there is one peculiarity—I mean, Uncle Christopher makes no one welcome who does not believe—in—Fabian."

Her voice falls slightly as she makes the last remark, and she turns her head aside, and, leaning over the balcony, plays absently with a rosebud that is growing within her reach. In this position she cannot see that Portia has colored warmly, and is watching her with some curiosity.

"You must try to like Fabian," says Dulce, presently. Her voice is sad, but quite composed. She appears mournful, but not disconcerted. "You have no doubt heard his unfortunate story from Auntie Maud, and—*you* believe in him, don't you?" She raises her eyes to her cousin's face.

"I hardly think I have quite heard the story," says Miss Vibart evasively.

"No? It is a very sad one, and quite unaccountable. If you have heard anything about it, you have heard all I can tell you. Nothing has ever been explained; I am afraid now nothing ever will be. It rests as it did at the beginning—that is the pity of it—but you shall hear."

"Not if it distresses you," says Portia gently. A feeling of utter pity for Fabian's sister, with all her faith and trust so full upon her at this moment, touches her keenly. As for the story itself, she has heard it a score of times, with variations, from Auntie Maud. But then, when brought to bay, what *can* one say!

"It will not distress me," says Dulce, earnestly; "and I would so much rather you knew everything before you meet him. It will make things smoother. It all happened four long years ago—years that to him must seem a lifetime. He is twenty-nine now, he was only twenty-five then, just the time, I suppose, when life should be sweetest."

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"It is mere accident makes life sweet at times," says Portia. "It has nothing to do with years, or place, or beauty. But tell me about your brother."

"He had just come home for his leave. He was so handsome, and so happy—without a care on earth—and was such a pet with the men in his regiment. I was only a child then, but he never seemed too old to talk to me, or to make me his companion. And then one morning it all happened; we were at breakfast—as we might be to-morrow"—says poor Dulce, with a comprehensive gesture, "when one of the men came in and said somebody wanted to speak to Uncle Christopher. When I think of it"—with a long-drawn sigh—"my blood seems to run cold. And even now, whenever Harley comes in at breakfast and bends over Uncle Christopher in a confidential way to tell him—it may be—about the puppies or the last filly, a sensation of faintness creeps over me."

"I don't wonder," says Portia, feelingly. "How could one ever forget it? You are making yourself unhappy; go no farther now, but tell me about it another time."

"As I have begun I shall finish," says Dulce, heroically, "even at the risk of boring you. But"—wistfully—"you will forgive me that."

"Go on; I *want* to hear," says Portia, strangely moved. Yet it seems cruel to make her repeat what she knows so well already, and what is so bitter to the narrator.

"Well, Uncle Christopher went out to see the man who wanted him, and after a little bit came back again, with a white face, and told us one of the clerks at the County Bank had dared to say

Fabian had forged his—Uncle Christopher's—name for £500. I think I hardly understood; but Fabian got up, and first, he grew very red, and then very white, but he said nothing. He only motioned to me not to stir, so I sat quite still, and then he went up to Uncle Christopher, who was very angry, and laid his hand upon his arm and led him out of the room."

She pauses.

"Dulcinea," as yet the more familiar appellation "Dulce" is strange to Miss Vibart. "Dulcinea," she says, very sweetly, holding out a soft, pale, jewelled hand, with tender meaning, "come and sit here beside me."

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Dulce is grateful for the unspoken sympathy, but instead of accepting half the lounging chair, which is of a goodly size, she sits down upon a cushion at Portia's feet, and leans her auburn head against her knee.

"It was quite true that somebody had forged Uncle Christopher's name for £500, but who it was has never transpired. Uncle Christopher wanted to hush it up, but Fabian would not let him. The writing was certainly Fabian's, I mean the imitation was exactly like it. I saw it myself; it was so like Fabian's that no one could possibly know one from the other. You see"—wistfully—"I am terribly honest, am I not? I do not pretend to see a necessary flaw."

"I like you the better for that," says Portia; involuntarily she lays her hand on Dulcinea's throat, just under her chin, and presses her gently towards her. "If it will make you happier tell me the rest," she says.

"Unfortunately at that time Fabian *did* want money. Not much you know, but the fact that he wanted it at all was fatal. He had lost something over the Grand National—or one of those horrid races—and people heard of it; and then, even after long waiting and strictest inquiry, we could not discover who had been the real offender, and that was worst of all. It seemed to lay the crime forever upon Fabian's shoulders. He nearly went mad at that time, and we, who loved him, could do nothing to comfort him."

"Ah! that was hard," says Portia, leaning over her. "Not to be able to lift the burden from those whose life is dear to us as our own is almost more than one can bear!"

"How you understand," says Dulce, gratefully. "And then, you see, somehow every one got to know about it; Fabian could not prove his innocence, and—I suppose—the story sounded badly in alien ears. And then there came a day when somebody—Lord Ardley I think—cut Fabian publicly, and that made an end of all things. Uncle Christopher wanted to take notice of that, too—wanted I think" (with a wan smile that has no mirth in it) "to challenge Lord Ardley and carry him over to France and fight it out with him *à la mort*, but Fabian would not allow it, and I think he was right."

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"Quite right." There was quite a ring in Miss Vibart's tone as she says this, but Dulce is too occupied with sad retrospect to notice anything at this moment. "How could the writing have so exactly resembled Fabian's?" she says, presently; "it was Uncle Christopher's name was forged, was it not?"

"Yes, but Fabian writes exactly like him. He makes his capitals quite the same. Anyone trying to copy Uncle Christopher's writing would probably succeed in imitating Fabian's perfectly."

"Ah! he writes like Uncle Christopher," says Portia, slowly, as though adding another link in her own mind to a conclusion already carefully formed.

"You will like him, I think," says Dulce, getting up from her low position as though restless and desirous of change. She leans her back against the balcony and faces her cousin. "Though he is terribly altered; so different to what he used to be. He is so grave now, and silent and moody. He seems to be ever brooding over the mystery of his own life, and trying—trying to get away from everybody. Oh! how he suffered, how we all suffered just then, knowing him to be innocent."

"You knew he was innocent?" says Miss Vibart. Unfortunately her tone is one of inquiry. She has her hands clasped in her lap and is looking steadily at Dulce, who is watching her intently from the railings of the balcony, where she stands framed in by roses. Miss Vibart's fan has slipped to the ground; she is really interested in this story. May not the hero of it prove an absorbing study? Her tone, however, grates upon the ears of the "absorbing study's" sister. Dulce flushes perceptibly; opens her lips hastily as though to speak, and then suppresses herself.

"I forgot," she says, quietly, after a moment's reflection, "you have never seen him."

The faith in this small remark touches Portia keenly—the more in that she has already formed her own opinion on the subject in hand.

"I wonder he stayed here after it happened," she says, with some faint acceleration of manner. Haste to Portia, is a word unknown.

"He is a hero, a martyr," says Dulce, earnestly, two large tears gathering in her eyes. "He was in the K.D.Gs., as you know, but of course he flung up his commission then, and was going abroad, when Uncle Christopher fell ill. So ill, that we despaired of him. And when even the doctor from London refused him hope, he called Fabian to his bedside and made him swear he would not leave him while he lived—and then he recovered. But he has always held Fabian to his word; and, indeed, it was a very necessary promise, because I don't think Uncle Christopher

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could live without him now. It is all terribly sad; but it would be worse if Fabian were really in fault, would it not?"

"It is all very sad," says Portia. Her eyes are bent, and she is slowly turning a ring round and round upon her finger.

"It has ruined Fabian's life, and broken his heart," says Dulce, in a low tone. "It is more than sad."

"But if innocent, why should it weigh so heavily upon him?" asks Portia, gently.

"*If*," says Dulce, quickly, the hot blood mounting to her cheeks. Then—very coldly—"There is no 'if' about it; he *is* innocent. However mysterious his unhappy story may sound in a strang— in your ears, nevertheless, our Fabian has nothing to do with disgrace. It could not touch him."

"I put it badly," says Portia, correcting her mistake with much grace. "I should have said *as* he is innocent. Forgive me."

"It was all a mistake," says Dulce, who is now very pale, "But we are so unaccustomed to even the faintest doubt of Fabian. Even Mark Gore, the sceptic, believes in him. How tired you look; would you like another cushion to your back?"

"No, thank you. I am quite comfortable and quite happy. Do you know," with a slow, lovely smile, "I rather mean that last conventional phrase: I *am* happy; I feel at rest. I know I shall feel no want here in this delicious old place—with you!" This is prettily toned, and Dulce smiles again. "I am so tired of town and its ways."

"You will miss your season, however," says Dulce, regretfully—for *her*.

"Yes, *isn't* that a comfort?" says her cousin, with a devout sigh of deepest thankfulness.

"A comfort!"

"Yes. I am not strong enough to go about much, and Auntie Maud has that sort of thing on the brain. She is like the brook—she goes on for ever, nothing stops her. Ah! See now, for example, who are those coming across the lawn? Is one your brother?"

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"No! It is only Dicky Browne and—"

"Your Roger?"

"Oh! yes; my Roger," repeats Dulce, with a distasteful shrug.

Then she leans over the balcony, and says:

"Roger, come up here directly; for once in your life you are wanted by somebody. And you are to come, too, Dicky, and please put on your Sunday manners, both you boys, because I am going to introduce you to Portia!"

CHAPTER III.

"Whether youth can be imputed to any man as a reproach, I will not, sir, assume the province of determining."—W. PITT.

THE boys, as Miss Blount—that is Dulce—irreverently terms them, are coming slowly across the grass, trampling the patient daisies. The sun has "dropped down" and the "day is dead," and twilight, coming up, is covering all the land. A sort of subtle sadness lies on everything, *except* "the boys," they are evidently full of the enjoyment of some joke, and are gay with smiles.

Mr. Browne is especially glad, which convinces his pretty cousin on the balcony that he has been the perpetrator of the "good thing" just recorded. At her voice, both he and his companion start, and Roger, raising his eyes, meets hers.

He is a tall, slight young man, handsome, indolent, with dark eyes, and a dark moustache, and a very expressive mouth.

Dicky is distinctly different, and perhaps more difficult of description. If I say he is a little short, and a little stout, and a little—a *very* little—good looking, will you understand him? At least he is beaming with *bonhomie*, and that goes a long way with most people.

He seems now rather taken by Dulce's speech, and says:

"No! Has she really come?" in a loud voice, that is cheery and comfortable to the last degree. He can't see Portia, as she is sitting down, and is quite hidden from view by the trailing roses. "Is she 'all your fancy painted her?' is she 'lovely and divine?'" goes on Mr. Browne, gaily, as though seeking information.

[17]

"Beauties are always overrated," says Roger, sententiously, in an even louder voice—indeed, at the very top of his strong young lungs—"just tell somebody that somebody else thinks so-and-so fit to pose as a Venus, and the thing is done, and so-and-so becomes a beauty on the spot! I say,

Dulce, I bet you anything she is as ordinary as you please, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot!"

"I can't follow up that bet," says Dulce, who has changed her position so as effectually to conceal Portia from view, and who is evidently deriving intense joy from the situation, "because I have only seen her face and her hands; and they, to say the least, are passable!"

"Passable! I told you so!" says Roger, turning to Dicky Browne, with fine disgust. "Is she æsthetic?"

"No."

"Fast?" asks Dicky, anxiously.

"No."

"Stupid—dull—impossible?"

"No, no, no."

"I thank my stars," says Dicky Browne, devoutly.

"Can't you describe her?" asks Roger, impatiently staring up from the sward beneath at Dulce's charming, wicked little face.

"She has two eyes, and a very remarkable nose," says Miss Blount, with a nod.

"Celestial or Roman?" demands Roger, lazily. By this time he and Dicky are mounting the stone steps of the balcony, and discovery is imminent.

"I think it is a little unfair," murmurs Portia, in a low whisper, who is, however, consumed with laughter.

At this moment they reach the balcony, and Dulce says, blandly, *à propos* of Roger's last remark, "Perhaps if you ask her that question, *as she is here*, she will answer you herself!"

She waves her hand towards Portia. Portia rises and comes a step forward, all her soft draperies making a soft *frou-frou* upon the stone flooring; and then there is a good deal of consternation! and a *tableau* generally.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," says Roger, when breath returns to him, casting an annihilating glance at Dulce, who catches it deftly, plays with it for a moment, and then flings it carelessly over the balcony into the rising mist and night.

[18]

"Whatever you beg you shall have," says Portia, coming nearer to him and holding out a slim white hand. "How d'ye do, Roger?"

"It is quite too good of you to forgive me so soon," says that young man, pressing with deep gratitude the slim, friendly hand. "It was beastly mean of Dulce, she *might* have told us"—this with another glance, meant to wither, at that mischievous maiden, who rather revels in her guilt. "My only apology is that I didn't know you—had never seen you, or I could not so have expressed myself."

"What a clever apology," murmurs Portia. "And what flattering emphasis!" She smiles at him pleasantly through the fast gathering gloom. "You will now introduce me to your friend, will you not?"

"Dicky, come forward and make your best bow," says Dulce. Whereupon, Mr. Browne, with a shamefaced laugh, comes to the front, and, standing before Miss Vibart like a criminal at the bar of justice, bends very low.

"Miss Vibart—Mr. Browne," says Roger, seriously. But at this Dicky forgets himself, and throws dignity to the winds.

"She called *you* Roger! I'm as much her cousin as ever you were!" he says, indignantly. "*Mr. Browne*, indeed!"

At this, both girls laugh merrily, and so, after a bit, does Dicky himself, to whose soul the mildest mirth is an everlasting joy.

"I am then to call you Dicky?" asks Portia, smiling, and lifting her eyes as though half-reluctantly to his; she has quite entered into the spirit of the thing.

"If you will be so very good," says Dicky Browne.

"You really had better," says Dulce, "because you are likely to see a good deal of him, and perpetually addressing people by their proper names *is* so tiring."

"It is true," says Portia; then turning to Dicky Browne, with half-closed lids and a subdued smile, she says, slowly:

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

It has its charm, this lowered tone. Dicky gives in to it; and—metaphorically speaking—instantly prostrates himself at Miss Vibart's feet.

Perhaps he might have done so actually without metaphor, Dicky's conduct being at times uncertain, but for a timely interruption.

[19]

"Any chance of dinner to-night?" says a cheery old voice behind them, and turning, they see Sir Christopher standing inside the open window of the drawing room, smiling upon them with the utmost benignity. "Portia, my dear," he says, genially, as though he and she have been intimate for years, "we are all so young here, we hardly require sustenance. Nevertheless, let me take you into the dining-room, if only to see what cook has provided for us."

Portia lays her hand upon his arm, and, followed by the others (who are plainly quarreling in a warm, if subdued fashion), goes into the grand old dining-room. Roger takes the foot of the table; Dicky seats himself next Portia; Dulce, as she always does when no foreign guests are present, or, as she terms it, on "off-days," seats herself near Uncle Christopher.

One place, however, is empty; by right it is Roger's, who, except when Fabian is absent, never sits at the foot of the table.

Sir Christopher fusses a little, grows discontented, and finally says uneasily—

"Where is Fabian?"

"He has a headache, dear," says Dulce, gently. "He hopes we will all excuse him—especially Portia."

She turns with a sweet glance to Portia, who murmurs something civil in return.

"He would be better here than moping in his own room," says Sir Christopher, in a low voice. His spirits are evidently damped, though he makes an effort to suppress the fact; his smile grows faded, and less frequent, and presently dies away altogether. Every one makes a noble effort at conversation, and every one, after a bit, breaks down ignominiously and looks at his or her fish, as though in it lies some hidden charm.

Dicky Browne alone remains unimpressed by the gloom of the surroundings. He is thinking the filleted sole very good indeed, and is lost to all other ideas.

"Tell you who I saw to-day," he says, airily, "Boer. That clergyman fellow, you know, who married that annoying girl who used to be always at Chetwoode. I spent half an hour with him in the High Street, just opposite the club."

"How you *must* have enjoyed yourself!" says Roger, feelingly. "How I wish I could have put myself in your place at that moment."

[20]

"Don't you! Not being selfish, I would willingly have resigned to you the intellectual treat I endured! All things have their end, however, even my patience, which is known to be elastic like my conscience; so, as a last resource, I offered him a brandy and soda, and, as it turned out, it was quite the best thing I could have done under the circumstances. He looked awfully angry, and went away directly."

"Clever boy!" says Roger. "For the future I shall know exactly what to do when the reverend Boer inflicts his small talk on *me*. Dead sell, though, if he accepted your offer. One would have to sit it out with him, and, probably, he takes his brandy slowly."

"I don't believe he ever took any in his life," says Dulce, idly. "That is why the chill has never been removed from him. How I wish he could be thawed."

"I always feel so sorry for Florence," says Portia, languidly; she is feeling very tired, and is hardly eating anything. From time to time she looks at Sir Christopher, and wonders vaguely if it is her presence has kept Fabian from dinner to-night. "But Mr. Boer reads very well."

"When he doesn't turn over two pages at once," says Dicky Browne. "That is a favorite amusement of his, and it rather makes a mess of the meaning contained in holy writ. He is rather touchy about that last little *fiasco* of his when reading before the bishop the other day, so I thought I would tell him a story to-day that chimed in deliciously with his own little mistake, and, I doubt not, brought it fresh to his mind."

"What a wicked humor you must have been in," says Portia. "Tell the story to us now."

"You have heard it, I daresay. I only repeated it to Boer in the fond hope he would go away if I did, but it failed me. It was about the fellow who was reading the morning lesson—and he came to the words, 'and he took unto him a wife'—then he turned over two pages by mistake, and went on, 'and he pitched her with pitch within and without!' I don't think Boer liked my little story, but still he wouldn't go away."

"He is a dreadfully prosy person, and very material," says Portia, when they have all laughed a little.

"He is a jolly nuisance," says Mr. Browne.

[21]

"He hasn't got much soul, if you mean that," says Roger—

"A primrose by a river's brim,
A yellow primrose is to him
And it is nothing more."

"That *is* such utter nonsense," says Dulce, tilting her pretty nose and casting a slighting glance at her *fiancé* from eyes that are

"The greenest of things blue,
The bluest of things gray."

"What more *would* it be?—a hollyhock, perhaps? or a rhododendron, eh?"

"Anything you like," says Roger, calmly, which rather finishes the discussion.

The night belongs to warm, lovable June; all the windows are wide open; the perfume of flowers comes to them from the gardens beneath, that are flooded with yellow moonshine. So still it is, so calm, that one can almost hear the love-song the languid breeze is whispering to the swaying boughs.

Across the table come the dreamy sighs of night, and sink into Portia's heart, as she sits silent, pleased, listening to all around, yet a little grieved in that her host is strangely silent, too, and looks as one might who is striving to hear the sound of a distant footstep, that comes not ever.

"He is always that way when Fabian absents himself," says Dicky Browne, with so little preface that Portia starts. "He adores the ground he walks on, and all that sort of thing. Speak to him and get him out of it."

"What shall I say?" asks Miss Vibart, somewhat taken aback. "Moods are so difficult."

"Anything likely to please him."

"My difficulty just lies there," says Portia.

"Then *do* something, if you can't say it. Exertion, I know, is unpleasant, especially in June, but one must sacrifice one's self sometimes," says Dicky Browne. "He'll be awfully bad presently if he isn't brought up pretty short by somebody during the next minute or so."

"But what can I do?" says Portia, who is rather impressed by Mr. Browne's earnestness.

"You hate port, don't you?" asks he, mysteriously.

"Yes. But what has that got to do with it?"

"Take some presently. It is poison, and will make you dreadfully ill; but that don't count when duty calls. We all hate it, but he likes it, and will feel positively benevolent if you will only say you like it too. 'Pride in his *port*, defiance in his eye!'—that line, I am convinced, was written for him alone, but modern readers have put a false construction upon it." [22]

"It will make me *so* unhappy," says Portia, looking at Uncle Christopher with a pitying eye. The pity is for him, not for herself, as Dicky foolishly imagines.

"Don't think about that," he says, valiantly. "Petty inconveniences sink into nothingness when love points the way. Take your port, and try to look as if you liked it, and always remember, 'Virtue is its own reward!'"

"A very poor one, as a rule," says Portia.

"Have some strawberries, Portia?" asks Roger at this moment, who has been sparring with Dulce, mildly, but firmly, all this time.

"Thank you," says Portia.

"They don't go well with port, and Portia adores port," says Mr. Browne, hospitably, smiling blandly at her as he speaks.

She returns his smile with one of deep reproach.

"Eh? No, do you really?" asks Sir Christopher, waking as if by magic from his distasteful reverie. "Then, my dear, I can recommend this. Very old. Very fruity. Just what your poor father used to like."

"Yes—your *poor* father," says Dicky Browne *sotto voce*, feelingly and in a tone rich with delicate encouragement.

"Thank you. Half a glass please. I—I never take more," say Portia, hastily but sweetly, to Sir Christopher, who is bent on giving her a goodly share of what he believes to be her heart's desire. Then she drinks it to please him, and smiles faintly behind her fan and tells herself Dicky Browne is the very oddest boy she has ever met in her life, and amusing, if a little troublesome.

Sir Christopher once roused, chatters on ceaselessly about the old days when he and Charles Vibart, her father, were boys together, and before pretty Clara Blount fell in love with Vibart and married him. And Portia listens dreamily, and gazing through the open window lets part of the music of the scene outside sink into his ancient tales, and feels a great longing rise within her to get up and go out into the mystic moonbeams, and bathe her tired hands and forehead in their cool rays. [23]

Dulce and Roger are, as usual, quarreling in a deadly, if carefully-subdued fashion. Dicky Browne, as usual, too, is eating anything and everything that comes within his reach, and is

apparently supremely happy. At this moment Portia's longing having mastered her, she turns to Dulce and asks softly:

"What is that faint streak of white I see out there, through, and beyond, the branches?"

"Our lake," says Dulce, half turning her head in its direction.

"Our pond," says Roger, calmly.

"Our *lake*," repeats Dulcinea, firmly; at which Portia, feeling war to be once more imminent, says hastily—

"It looks quite lovely from this—so faint, so silvery."

"It shows charmingly when the moon is up, through that tangled mass of roses, far down there," says Dulce, with a gesture toward the tangle.

"I should like to go to it," says Portia, with unusual animation.

"So you shall, to-morrow."

"The moon will not be there to-morrow. I want to go now."

"Then so you shall," says Dulce, rising; "have you had enough strawberries? Yes? Will you not finish your wine? No? Come with me, then, and the boys may follow us when they can tear themselves away from their claret!" This, with a scornful glance at Roger, who returns it generously.

"I shall find it very easy to tear myself away to-night," he says, bent on revenge, and smiling tenderly at Portia.

"So!" says Dulce, with a shrug and a light laugh that reduces his attempt at scorn to a puerile effort unworthy of notice; "a compliment to *you* Portia; and—the other thing to me. We thank you, Roger. Come." She lays her hand on Portia's, and draws her toward the window. Passing by Uncle Christopher's chair, she lets her fingers fall upon his shoulder, and wander across it, so as just to touch his neck, with a caressing movement. Then she steps out on the verandah, followed by Portia, and both girls running down the stone steps are soon lost to sight among the flowers.

[24]

CHAPTER IV.

"'Tis not mine to forget. Yet can I not
Remember what I would or what were well.
Memory plays tyrant with me, by a wand
I cannot master!"

—G. MELLEN.

PAST the roses, past the fragrant mignonette they go, the moon's soft radiance rendering still more fair the whiteness of their rounded arms.

The dew lies heavy on leaf and flower. Motionless stand the roses, and the drooping lilies, and the pansies, purple and yellow. "God Almighty," says Bacon, "first planted a garden; and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures; it is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man!"

Here, now, in this particular garden, where all is so deeply tranquil, it seems as if life itself is at a standstill, and sin and suffering, joy and ambition, are alike unknown. A "pure pleasure" it is indeed to gaze upon it, and a great refreshment to any soul tired, or overwrought, or sorrowful.

The stars are coming out slowly one by one, studding brilliantly the pale, blue vault of heaven, while from a

"Thin fleecy cloud,
Like a fair virgin veil'd, the moon looks out
With such serene and sweet benignity
That night unknits his gloomy brows and smiles."

Dulce, plucking some pale blossom, lifts it to her lips, and kisses it lightly. Portia, drawing a deep breath of intensest satisfaction, stands quite still, and letting her clasped hands fall loosely before her, contemplates the perfect scene in mute delight.

Presently, however, she shivers, a passing breeze has cast a chill upon her.

"Ah! you are cold," says Dulce, anxiously; "how thoughtless I am; yes, you are quite pale."

"Am I?" says Portia. "It was the standing here, I fancy. India gave me bad habits, that, after three years, I find myself unable to conquer. Every silly little wind strikes a chill to my heart."

"I shall get you a shawl in no time," says Dulcinea; "but keep walking up and down while I am away, so as to keep your blood warm."

"Your command shall be obeyed," says Portia, smiling, and then Dulce, turning, disappears quickly amongst the shadows, moving as swiftly as her light young feet can carry her.

[25]

Portia, left alone, prepares to keep her promise, and walks slowly along the graveled path once more. Turning a corner, again a glimpse of the distant lake comes to her. It is entrancing; calm as sleep, and pure as the moon above, whose image lies upon its breast.

Even as she looks the image fades—the "fleecy cloud" (jealous, perhaps, of the beauty of the divine Artemis, and of Portia's open admiration of her) has floated over her again, and driven her, for a little moment, into positive obscurity.

The path grows dark, the lake loses its color. Portia, with a sigh, moves on, confessing to herself the mutability of all things, and pushing aside some low-lying branches of a heavily-scented shrub, finds herself face to face with a tall young man, who, apparently, is as lost in wonder at her appearance as she is at his!

She starts, perceptibly, and, only half-suppressing a faint exclamation of fear, shrinks backwards.

"I beg your pardon," says the stranger, hastily. "I am afraid I have frightened you. But, really, it was all the fault of the moon."

His voice is reassuring, and Portia, drawing her breath more freely, feels just a little ashamed of her momentary terror.

"I am not frightened now," she says, with an upward glance, trying to read, through the darkness, the face of him she addresses. The clouds are scurrying swiftly across the sky, and now the moon shines forth again triumphant, and all things grow clearer. She can see that he is tall, dark, handsome, with a strange expression round his mouth that is surely more acquired than natural, as it does not suit his other features at all, and may be termed hard and reckless, and almost defiant. His jaw is exquisitely turned. In his eyes is a settled melancholy—altogether his face betrays strong emotions, severely repressed, and is half-morbid and wholly sad, and, when all is said, more attractive than forbidding.

Portia, gazing at him with interest, tells herself that years of mental suffering could alone have produced the hard lines round the lips and the weariness in the eyes. She has no time for further speculation, however, and goes on quickly: "It was more than foolish of me; but I quite forgot, I"—with some uncertainty—"should have remembered."

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"What do you forget? and what should you have remembered?"

"I forgot that burglars do not, as a rule, I suppose, go about in evening clothes; and I should have remembered"—with a smile—"that there was yet another cousin to whom I had not been introduced."

"Yes; I am Fabian Blount," he says indifferently. He does not return her smile. Almost he gives her the impression that at this moment he would gladly have substituted another name for his own.

"Ah! you are Fabian," she says, half-puzzled by his manner.

"If you will take my word for it." His tone is even more strange as he says this, and now he *does* smile, but disagreeably.

Portia colors faintly.

"You have not asked me my name?" she says quietly. "I am Portia."

"What a very pretty name!" He has had a half-smoked cigar behind his back all this time; now remembering it, he looks at it, and flings it far from him. "It reminds one of many things; Shakespeare, I suppose principally. I hope," looking at her, "*you* will choose the right casket."

"Thank you. That is a very kindly wish."

"How does it happen that you are here all alone?"

"I was cold; I always am. Dulcinea saw me shiver, I think, and ran to get a shawl or some covering for me. That is all."

"She is a long time getting it, is she not?"

"Is she?" says Portia. This speech of his piques her a little. "Does it seem long?"

"Very long, if one is to shiver all the time," replies he, calmly, reading her resentment in her face, but taking no notice of it. "Much too long to be out in this chilly night-air without sufficient clothing, and with a wholesome dread of possible burglars full upon you. May I stay with you till Dulce returns, and will you walk on a little? It is foolish to stand still."

"I am sorry you threw away your cigar on my account. I am sure you want it now."

[27]

"I don't believe I ever want anything," says Fabian, slowly; and then they walk on again, returning by the way she had come. The night-wallflower is flinging its perfume abroad, the seringas are making sweet the air, a light eager wind rushes softly past them.

"It was a long drive," says Fabian, presently, with all the air of a man who is determined to rouse himself—however against his will—and carry on conversation of some sort. "Are you tired?"

"It *was* long. But everything here is so new, so fresh, so sweet, that I have forgotten to be tired."

"You are one of those, perhaps, who always find variety charming." As he speaks he carefully removes a drooping branch of roses out of her way.

"Not quite always." She smiles as she defends herself. "I like old friends, and old songs best. I am not absolutely fickle. But I have always had a great desire to live in the country."

"People who have never tried it, always do have that desire."

"You think I shall be *desillusionne* in a week? But I shall not. When George had to return to India, I was so unhappy in the thought that perhaps I should have to live in town until his return. Of course I could have gone somewhere to live by myself, and could have found some charming old lady to take care of me, but I am not fond of my own society, and I can't bear charming old ladies."

"One feels quite sorry for the old ladies," says Fabian, absently.

"I was afraid I should have to put in my two years of waiting for George, with Auntie Maud, and that would have been terrible. It would mean seasons, and months at fashionable watering-places, which would be only town out of town—the same thing all over again. I was so glad when Uncle Christopher wrote to say he would like me to come here. I have often wondered since," she says, suddenly—smiling somewhat wistfully, and flushing a warm crimson,—“whether all of *you* didn't look upon my coming with disfavor."

"What put such a thought as that into your head?"

"A very natural one I think. A stranger coming to a household always makes such a difference; and you had never met me, and you might not like me, and— Did any of you resent my coming?"

[28]

"No," says Fabian. There is no energy in his reply, yet it is impossible to doubt that he means exactly what he says. "You must not begin by thinking unkindly of us," he goes on, gently. "You may believe me when I say none of us felt anything but pleasure at the idea of your coming."

"Yes? That was very good of you all." She is longing to say, "Yet you see I kept you from dinner to-night," but after a moment's reflection leaves it unsaid.

"I hope the country will not disappoint you," he says, after a slight pause. "It is unwise to begin by expecting too much."

"How can it disappoint?" says Portia, with some intensity. She says nothing more, but she lifts her lovely face to the starry sky, and puts out her hands with a faint gesture, fraught with admiration, towards the heavy flowers, the distant lake, the statues half hidden by the drooping shrubs, and the moonlight sleeping upon all!

"There is always in the country, the sun, the flowers, and at night, the moon," she says.

"Yet, the day will come, even for you, when there will be no sun, and when the moon will refuse to give its light." He speaks peculiarly and as though his thoughts are wandering far from her to other scenes in which she holds no part.

"Still, there will always be the flowers," she says, quickly, impressed by his tone, and with a strange anxiety to prove to herself that surely all things are not in vain.

"Oh, no! They are the frailest of the three," returns he; "they are like our dearest hopes. At the very time they should prove true, when the cold Winter of our discontent is full upon us, they forsake us—never to return."

"Never? Does not the Summer bring them again?" She has stopped in the middle of the path, and is asking her question with an anxiety that astonishes even herself. "This rose bush," she says, pointing to one close beside her, "now rich in glory, and warm with golden wealth, will it not bloom again next year, in spite of the death that must pass over it?"

"It may. But you will never see again those roses over there, that you love and rejoice in now! Others may be like them, but they cannot be quite the same."

Portia makes no reply. The moonlight is full upon him, and she can see that his lips have lost their hardness, and are as full of melancholy as his eyes. She is looking curiously at him, regarding him perhaps in the light of a study—he is looking, not at her at all, but at something that surely has no place in this quiet garden, lying so calm and peaceful beneath the light of heaven.

[29]

A terrible expression, that is despair and grief commingled, covers his face. Some past horror, that has yet power to sting, is holding him captive. He has forgotten Portia, the beauty of the night, everything! He is wrapt in some miserable memory that will not be laid. Surely, "the heart may break, yet brokenly live on."

Be he guilty (as she believes him) of this crime that has darkened his life, or only the victim of unhappy circumstances, at this moment Portia pities him with all her heart.

Voices in the distance! Roger and Dulce still high in argument; a faint perfume of cigarettes; Dicky Browne's irrepressible laugh; and then they all come round the corner, and somebody says, "Ah, here she is," and Dicky Browne places a shawl round Portia's shoulders.

"You here, Fabian?" says Dulce, gladly. "And making friends with Portia? That's right."

"Taking a mean advantage of us all I call it," says Dicky Browne. "We got introduced in the cruel glare of day, with all our imperfections on our heads. *You* waited for moonshine, balmy air, scent of roses, poetical effect, and so on! That's why you stayed away from dinner. And to think none of us saw through you! Well, I always said I was very innocent; quite unfit to go about alone!"

"Not a doubt of it," said Roger, cheerfully. "But you won't have to complain of that long. We are all on the look-out for a keeper for you, and a straight waistcoat." Then, turning to Fabian, "Your headache better, old man?"

"Thank you—yes. Your cousin is tired, I think, Dulce. Take her in and make her rest herself."

"Ah! You are worn out," says Dulce to Portia, with contrition. "I have been so long getting you the shawl; but I could not help it. You must not stay up, you know, to do manners to us, you must go straight to bed this moment, and come down like a rose in the morning. Now confess you are tired."

"Well, yes, I am afraid I am," says Portia, who is feeling faintly disappointed for the first time since her arrival. Why, she scarcely knows.

"She said 'I am a-weary, a-weary; I would I were a-bed,'" quotes Mr. Browne, feelingly. [30] Whereupon everyone feels it his duty to take Portia at once back to the house, less Mr. Browne, by any ill-luck, should commit himself still further.

It is only when Portia is at last alone in her own room that she recollects that Fabian forgot to shake hands with her. Or was it she with Fabian?

CHAPTER V.

"Oh, how full of briars is this working-day world!"
—"AS YOU LIKE IT."

"I WISH you would *try* to remember," says Dulce, a little hastily. She is sitting in a rather Gothic chair, and the day is ultra-hot, and the strain upon her mental powers is greater than she can bear. Hence the haste.

She is leaning back in the uneasy chair now, pencil in hand, and is looking up at Roger, who is leaning over the table, in a somewhat supercilious manner, and is plainly giving him to understand that she thinks him a very stupid person, indeed.

This is irritating, and Roger naturally resents it. A few puckers show themselves upon his forehead, and he turns over a page or two of the gardener's book before him with a movement suggestive of impatience.

"I *am* trying," he says, shortly.

"Well, you needn't tear the book in pieces," says Dulce, severely.

"I'm not tearing anything," retorts Mr. Dare, indignantly.

"You look as if you wanted to," says Dulce.

"I don't want anything except to be let alone," says Mr. Dare.

The windows are all wide open. They were flung wide an hour ago, in the fond hope that some passing breeze might enter through them. But no breeze cometh—is not, indeed, born—and the windows yawn for it in vain. Outside, all Nature seems asleep; inside, the very curtains are motionless.

In a low rocking-chair, clad in the very lightest of garments permitted by civilization, sits Sir Mark Gore. He arrived at the Court only yesterday, in a perfect torrent of passionate rain, and was accused on all sides of having brought ill weather in his train. But to-day having asserted itself, and dawned fairly, and later on having burst into matchless beauty, and heat of the most intense, he is enabled to turn the tables upon his accusers, who look small and rather crushed. [31]

"Have they had such a day this season?"

"Never! Oh, never!"

"Have they ever seen so lovely a one?"

"Never—at least, *hardly* ever!"

They are vanquished. Whereupon he tells them they were distinctly ungrateful yesterday, and that he will never put in a good word for them with the clerk of the weather again. *Never!*

Just now he is nodding drowsily over his *Times*, and is vainly trying to remember whether the last passage read was about Midhat Pasha, or that horrid railway murder, or the Irish Land League.

In the next window sits Portia, clad in a snowy gown that suits her to perfection. She has been here now for a fortnight, and feels as if she had been here forever, and almost wonders if in reality she ever knew another home. She is lounging in the very easiest of cushioned chairs, and is making a base attempt at reading, which attempt is held up to public scorn every other minute by Dicky Browne, who is sitting at her feet.

He is half in and half out of the room. His feet being on the verandah, his head and shoulders in the room. He is talking a little, and fidgeting a little, and laughing a little, and, in fact, doing everything in the world except thinking a little. Thought and Dicky Browne are two.

The room in which they are all sitting is long and very handsome, with three windows and two fire-places. It is always called the blue room at the Court, for no earthly reason that any one can see, except that it is painted green—the very most impossible green, calculated to create rapture in the breasts of Oscar and his fellows; a charming color, too, soothing, and calm, and fashionable, which, of course, is everything. There are tiny cabinets everywhere, gay with majolica ware and many a Palissy dish; while Wedgewood, and Derby, and priceless Worcester shine out from every corner. There are Eastern rugs, and Japanese screens, and, indeed, everything that isn't Japanese is old English, and everything that isn't old English is Japanese—except, perhaps, a few lounging-chairs of modern growth brought in to suit the requirements of such unæsthetic beings as prefer the comfortable satin-and-down lounge to the more correct, if more trying oak.

[32]

"Perhaps it was the Duke of Edinburgh," says Roger, breaking the silence that has lasted now for a full minute. "I see he is very handsome, of robust habit and constitution, and of enormous size and length. Is that what you want?"

"No; I am sure it was not the Duke of Edinburgh. It doesn't sound like him. I wonder why you can't think of it. I am sure if I once eat anything I should remember all about it."

"Good gracious!" says Dicky Browne, from his lowly seat, glancing solemnly at Portia, "have they eaten the Duke of Edinburgh? It sounds like it, doesn't it? They must have done it on the sly. And *what* a meal! Considering they acknowledge him to be of enormous size and length!"

"Perhaps it was Sir Garnet Wolseley," says Roger, moodily, in the discontented tone of one who is following out a task utterly repugnant to his feelings. "He has an excellent flavor, but is entirely destitute of shank or shoulder."

Sir Mark Gore, at this dreadful speech, lowers his paper and lifts his head. Portia looks faintly startled. What can Roger be talking about?

"Ain't it awful," says Mr. Browne, "who'd have thought it of them. They look quite mild—and—er—like other people. Positively they are cannibals! And (did you remark?) it is *roast shoulder* they prefer, because they are grumbling at the want of it in the unfortunate General who has evidently been enticed from his home and coldly murdered by them. I wonder it wasn't in the papers—but doubtless the family hushed it up. And how heartlessly they speak! But, by the way, what on earth is a *shank*?—"

"The neck is splendid, and, indeed, there is no waste whatever," goes on Roger, in a wooden tone.

"No waist whatever! Did you hear that? I always thought poor Sir Garnet was a lean man," says Dicky, *sotto voce*. "Poor, poor fellow, can nothing satisfy them but rank and talent?"

"Not a bit like it," breaks in Dulce, petulantly tapping her foot upon the floor. She is never petulant with any one but Roger, being indeed, by nature, the very incarnation of sweetness and light.

[33]

"Give it up," says Roger, rising hope in his tone—hope that, alas, is never verified.

"And meet McIlray with such a lame story as that! Certainly not," says Dulce, warmly. "It must be found out. Do try again."

"Well, this must be it," says Roger, in despair, "The Marquis of Lorne, exquisite short neck, smooth skin, very straight, nice white spine."

At this Sir Mark rises to his feet.

"Really, my *dear* Roger!" he says, impulsively—but for the excessive laziness of his disposition it would have been severely.

"Ah," says Roger, glad of anything in the shape of a reprieve, even though it be unpleasant argument.

"How *can* Dulcinea find any interest in the color of the Marquis's spine?" says Sir Mark, reprovingly. "Forgive me if I say I think you are going a little too far."

"I shall have to go farther," says Roger, desperately, "There is no knowing where I shall end. She can't find it out, and neither can I, and I see no hope of our arriving at anything except a lunatic asylum."

"I can look it up by myself," says Miss Blount, grandly, "I don't want your help—much. I daresay I can manage by myself, after all. And even if I can't, I daresay Mark will come to my assistance if you forsake me."

"I won't," says Gore, decidedly; "I won't indeed. I would do anything in the world for you, Dulcinea, as you know, but for this work unfortunately I am too modest. I *couldn't* go about making inquiries about the color of people's spines. I couldn't, indeed. As a matter of science I daresay it would be interesting to know the exact number of shades, but—I feel I am unequal to the task."

"The Duke of Connaught," goes on Roger, wearily, hope being stifled in his breast, "bright green skin, well covered with bloom; small neck and—"

"Oh! hang it all, you know," says Dicky Browne, forgetting himself in the excitement of the moment, "I don't believe his Royal Highness *has* a green skin, do you, Portia?—saw him only a fortnight ago, and he looked all right then, just as white as the rest of us."

[34]

"It's cucumbers," says Miss Blount, with dignity.

"Yes, cucumbers," responds Mr. Dare, with a sigh; he is evidently in the last stage of exhaustion. "McIlray has forgotten the name of some particular seed he planted in the Spring that we all liked immensely (how I wish we *hadn't*), and he has compelled Dulce to try and discover it. So we are looking for it in these infer—I mean these very prettily-illustrated books that the seedsman has kindly sent us (how I wish he hadn't), and hope to find it before the millenium. I daresay any time next month you will still find us here poring over these identical books, but we shall be *dead* then—there is at least comfort in that thought."

"One wouldn't think so, to look at you," said Gore, pleasantly.

"You can go away, Roger, you really can," says Dulce, irritably. "You are not the least use to me, and I hate grumblers."

"Perhaps it is the Empress of India," says Dicky Browne, who has come over to the table, driven by sheer curiosity, and is now leaning on Roger's shoulder. "She 'is of enormous length, and the handsomest this year. She is beautifully shaped throughout, with scarcely any handle.' Oh, I say, hasn't the Queen a handle to her name? What an aspersion upon her royal dignity."

"Ah! here is Fabian! Now, you may go away, all of you," said Dulce, with fine contempt. "He will really be of some use to me. Fabian, what is the name of the cucumber that tiresome McIlray wants? I am worn out, almost in hysterics, trying to remember it."

"What a pity you didn't ask me sooner," says Fabian. "It is all right. I made it out this morning, and told McIlray. He says now he remembers all about it perfectly."

"Fabian, may I shake hands with you. You are a man and a brother," says Roger, effusively, with a sudden return of animation. "I should, indeed, like to kiss you, but it might betray undue exhilaration. You have saved me from worse than death. Bless me, isn't it warm?"

"Just a little sultry," says Mr. Browne. "Show me that book you were looking at? Carter's, eh? How I love a work of that sort! I think I love Carter himself. I daresay it is he designs those improbable vegetables and fruits that would make their fortunes as giants at a penny show. You see there *are* giants in these days."

[35]

"Are there?" says Dulce. "I think there aren't."

"Well, it's just as simple," says Dicky, amiably. "Not a bit more trouble. It is quite as easy to suppose there aren't, as to suppose there are. *I* don't mind. But to return to our muttons. I really do esteem our Carter—in anticipation. It occurs to me he yet may grow peaches as big as my head, and then what a time we'll 'ave, eh?—Eating fruit is my forte," says Mr. Browne, with unction.

"So it is," says Dulce. "Nobody will dispute that point with you. You never leave us any worth speaking about. McIlray says you have eaten all the cherries, and that he can't even give us a decent dish for dinner."

"What vile alliteration," says Mr. Browne, unabashed. "Decent, dish, dinner. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Well, I'm not," says Dulce.

"Just shows your moral depravity. If you aren't you ought to be. Three great big D's in a breath! Shocking, shocking," says Dicky, gravely.

"What a heavenly day, and how depressing. We are never satisfied," says Mark Gore, flinging his arms above his head with a lazy gesture, and looking with almost comic despair at the pale-blue-and-gold glory in the heavens above.

Fabian, who has been standing near him, lost in a daydream, starts perceptibly at his tone, and

moves as though he would go towards the door. Then, though still a little absent, and still wrapt in the dream from which he has sought to free himself, he looks round the room as though in search of something. Perhaps he finds it as his eyes light upon the window where Portia sits, because they linger there, and the restless expression, that has characterized his face up to this, vanishes.

He hesitates; pushes a book upon a table near him backwards and forwards gently two or three times, as though in doubt, and then walks straight to the window where Portia is, leans against the sash, just where he can see the lovely, downcast face before him.

After Dicky's defection (or was it on Fabian's entrance?) Miss Vibart returned to her neglected book, and has been buried in it ever since. Even when Fabian comes and stands close to her, she is so engrossed with the beauty of the story that she forgets to lift her eyes to look at him. So determinedly do they seek the page beneath them, that Fabian tells himself she must indeed have got to a thrilling part of her tale. [36]

Her long, dark lashes lie like shadows on her cheeks. Her lips are closed. The hand that lies beneath the book trembles slightly.

They are all laughing at the upper end of the room at one of Dicky's absurdities. Down here by the far window, there is a silence marked enough to make itself felt. I think at last even Mark Gore feels it, because he rises from his comfortable rocking-chair with a faint yawn, and, walking down the room, comes to anchor behind Portia's chair.

Leaning over it, he says, pleasantly:

"Is that book of James' so very charming as to make you deaf and blind to us poor mortals?"

"I am never deaf or blind to you," says Portia, sweetly, glancing up at him over her shoulder. Her rounded chin is slightly tilted, a soft smile curves her lips.

At the Court Mark is a special favorite, yet so pretty a speech coming from Portia, who is usually so cold and indolent, strikes one as strange. Fabian regards her earnestly. How beautiful she is, yet how unsympathetic; has she no soul, no feeling? Surely her eyes, so large, so deep, so intense, belie this thought.

As though compelling himself, he says, with a visible effort:

"Have you been indoors all this lovely day? Has the sun had no power to tempt you to come out?"

"No;" she shakes her head as she answers him, and smiles, too, but the smile is cold as death, and though perfect, is altogether different from the one bestowed only a minute since upon Sir Mark.

"Then come out now," says Gore, as though pleasantly impressed by the suggestion conveyed in Fabian's speech. "Let us all shake off dull sloth and make a tour right round the gardens."

"A charming idea," says Portia, sitting more upright, and brightening visibly. She grows even animated, and animation, even of the faintest, is to be commended on such a day as this.

"Take your cousin to see the new carp-pond," says Gore, addressing Fabian, but watching Portia attentively. "You will like to see it, Portia?" [37]

"So *very* much," says Portia. "But if I do go it must be with Dicky."

Her manner as she says this gives both the men fully to understand that early in the day she had pledged herself to go for a walk some time in the afternoon. So far, so good—it *might* have so explained itself—but, unfortunately, at this moment Dicky Browne (who, as Dulce says, is always in the wrong place at the wrong time) comes up behind them, and addresses them generally:

"What are you all conspiring about?" he says, genially. "Roger and Dulce, for the fourteenth time to-day, have again agreed to differ, so I seek refuge here. Take me in, will you? And, by-the-by, what shall we do with ourselves this grilling day!"

"I have just been suggesting a quiet stroll," says Sir Mark.

"The very thing," exclaims Mr. Browne, who is amiability itself. "Why on earth didn't we think of that before? Portia, if you will come with me, if you have not promised," with a glance at Sir Mark, "to go with anyone else, I will show you a new tennis court that will draw tears of admiration from your eyes."

This is the unfortunate part of it. It now becomes apparent to every one that Dicky did *not* ask her early in the morning to go for a walk anywhere. Silence follows Dicky's speech. A faint-pink color, delicate but distinct, creeps into Portia's cheeks; she does not lower her head, however, or her eyes either, but gazes steadily through the open window at the hills in the far, far distance, misty with heat and coming rain.

She feels that Fabian's eyes are on her, and inwardly resents his scrutiny. As for Fabian himself, his brow contracts, and a somewhat unpleasant expression mars the beauty of his face; yet, turning to Dicky with the utmost composure, he says, calmly:

"Take Portia to see the carp-pond; that may interest her."

"So I will," says Dicky. "But you come, too, old man; won't you? You understand all about fish, you know, and that, and I don't a little screw. Make him come, Portia; he talks like a book when he has got to explain things."

"Don't trouble Portia," says Fabian, quietly. "*Even she* could not persuade me to leave the house to-day, as I have business on hand that must be done."

[38]

There is the very faintest touch of sarcasm in his tone. The "even she," though very slightly done, is full of it. Portia, at least, is conscious of it. She unfurls her huge, black fan with a lazy gesture, and then turns her large eyes full upon him.

"So sorry my persuasions have failed," she says, slowly, not having persuaded him at all; and, satisfied with this speech, waves the fan indolently to and fro, and with half-closed eyes watches the merry little sunbeams outside as they run hither and thither over the grass.

"Oh! let us do something," says Dulce, from the distance. "I shall go mad if I am left here to talk to Roger all day."

"I am sure I don't want you to talk to me if it disagrees with you," says Roger, with ill-suppressed ire.

Then they tell her they are going for a gentle stroll before tea is ready, and she consents to go with them if Sir Mark will walk with her instead of Roger; and Roger, having indignantly disclaimed all anxiety to be her companion on this occasion, peace is restored, and they all sally forth armed with big, white umbrellas, to inspect the stupid carp.

Fabian alone remains indoors to transact the mysterious business, that I think would have been gladly laid aside had Portia so willed it. That she had absolutely refused to have him as her companion in her walk, was so evident at the time of her expressed desire to go to see the carp with Dicky Browne, that Fabian could not be blind to it. Standing in the window of the library now, with the dying sunset reddening the scene without, and shedding upon the flowers its tenderest tints of fair array, Fabian reminds himself of each word she had said, of each smallest smile and glance that had belonged to her, and at this moment hates her with a hatred that is exceptionally bitter.

Then a little wave flows over his soul, and he tells himself how that he is unjust, and a stranger cannot be reasonably expected to think him innocent of a crime he himself has been unable to refute.

The day wanes. Twilight falls; a flush of soft violet color deepens the sky. The sound of footsteps echoes again in the long hall without; they have returned from the carp and the new tennis ground, and are asking eagerly for their tea. The sun has gone down behind the Western hills, and the stained-glass windows are throwing a sombre light over the antlers and Gothic chairs, and mediæval furniture, in which the halls delight. Fabian, hearing the footsteps, pulls himself together somewhat roughly, and, opening a door that leads to a passage in little use, makes his way to a distant office, where he tells himself, bitterly, he is "far from the madding crowd," and free from intrusion.

[39]

Dulce and Portia, crossing the hall, go down the north corridor that leads to the library Fabian has just vacated. A heavy crimson curtain conceals a door on one side, and, as they pass, a figure, emerging from behind it, brushes somewhat brusquely against Portia, filling her with sudden alarm.

This figure, as it appears in the vague gloaming, is bowed and bent, and altogether uncanny.

Portia, shrinking closer to Dulce, lays her hand upon her arm.

"Ah! what was that?" she says, fearfully.

"Only Gregory Slyme," returns Dulce, quickly, "you are not frightened at *him*, poor old thing, are you? Have you not seen him before?"

"No," says Portia, with a shudder and a backward glance at the shrunken figure creeping away down the corridor as if ashamed of itself.

"No?—that is strange; but he has affected his own room a good deal of late."

"But who is he?" anxiously.

"He was Uncle Christopher's secretary for years, and calls himself that still, but Fabian does all the writing now."

"What a start he gave me," says Portia, putting her hand hurriedly to her heart as though in pain. "A chill seemed to rush all through my blood. It was as though I had met something that had worked, and would work, me harm!"

"Fanciful baby," says Dulce, with very superior scorn; "old Slyme could not work ill to anyone. He has lived with us for years; but lately, within the last eight months, he has become—well, a little uncomfortable; indeed, perhaps, unbearable is the word."

"How so?—what has he done?" asks Portia, unaccountably interested in this shadow that has crossed her path.

CHAPTER VI.

"Present mirth hath present laughter,
What's to come is still unsure."

—SHAKESPEARE.

"JULIA is coming to-day," says Dulce, looking at them all, with the tea-pot poised in her hand. It is evident that this sudden announcement has hitherto been forgotten. "I heard from her this morning," she says, half apologetically, "but never thought of telling you until now. She will be here in time for dinner, and she is bringing the children with her."

"Only the children?" says Roger, the others are all singularly dumb.

"Yes. The *ayah* has gone home. Of course she will bring a nurse of some sort, but not Singa."

"For even small mercies we should be thankful," says Roger.

"Who is Julia?" asks Portia, idly.

"Who is Julia? What is she
That all our swains commend her?
Holy, fair, and wise is she,
The heavens such grace——"

"Oh, that will do," says Dicky Browne, turning impatiently to Roger, who has just delivered himself of the above stanza.

"Don't be severe," says Dulce, reprovingly; "extravagant praise is always false, and as to the swains, that is what she *wants* them to do, only they won't."

"Now, who is severe?" says Roger triumphantly.

"As yet, you have hardly described her," says Portia.

"Let me do it," entreats Mr. Browne, airily, "I feel in the very vein for that sort of thing. She is quite a thing to dream of; and she is much too precious to utter, and quite too awfully too-too!"

"That's obsolete now," says Dulce, "quite out of the market altogether. Too-too has been superseded, you should tell Portia she is very-very!"

"Odious," says Roger, in a careful aside as though determined to think Miss Blount's speech unfinished.

"She is like Barbauld's *Spring*," put in Sir Mark, lazily, coming up to have his cup refilled. "She is the 'sweet daughter of a rough and stormy sire.' Do any of you remember old Charley Blount?"

[41]

Plainly, nobody does. Everybody looks at everybody else, as though *they* should have known him, but nothing comes of it.

"Well, he was just the funniest old thing," says Sir Mark, laughing, at some absurd recollection. "Well, he is gone now, and

'I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
At him here;
But the old three-cornered hat
And the breeches, and all that,
Were so queer.'

"And bless me, what a temper he had," says Sir Mark, laughing again at his quotation. "His clothes and his temper were old Blount's principal features. Hideous old monster he was too."

"Is she hideous?" ask Portia.

"N-o. She is well enough; she isn't a bit like him, if we forget the clothes and temper. She says her mother was very beautiful."

"I never knew a woman whose mother wasn't beautiful, once the mother was dead," says Roger. "Sort of thing they tell you the moment they get the chance."

Five o'clock has struck some time ago. Evening is coming on apace. On the dry, smooth-shaven lawn, outside, the shadows are lengthening, stretching themselves indolently as though weary from all the hide-and-peek they have been playing, since early dawn, in the nooks and corners of the quaint old garden.

June has not yet quite departed; its soft, fresh glory still gilds the edge of the lake, and lends a

deeper splendor to the golden firs that down below are nodding to the evening breeze; it is the happiest time of all the year, for

"What is so rare as a day in June?
Then, if ever, come perfect days;
Then heaven tries the earth, if it be in tune,
And over it softly her warm ear lays."

"Well, the mother is dead and gone now, this many a year," says Sir Mark, "and the old fellow went nearly out of his mind when Julia married Beaufort."

"Oh! she is married?" says Portia.

"Dear Portia, didn't I *tell* you she had children?" says Dulce, reproachfully. "She married an Indian Nabob with an aristocratic name and a *lac* of rupees, as she believed, but there was a flaw somewhere, and—er—how was it Dicky?"

[42]

"Simplest thing out," says Dicky. "He had a lack of rupees, indeed, as she found out when he died. It is only the difference of one letter after all, and that can't count for much."

"Her father, old Charley, left her everything, so she isn't badly off now," says Sir Mark, "but the Nabob was a sell."

"I wonder if Portia will like her," says Dulce, meditatively, laying her elbows on the table and letting her chin sink into her palms.

"Tell me something about her personally," entreats Portia, turning to her with some show of interest.

"What can I tell you? She is pretty in her own way, and she agrees with everyone, and she never means a word she says; and, when she appears most earnest, that is the time not to believe in her; and she is very agreeable as a rule, and she is Fabian's pet aversion."

("Not now," says Portia to herself).

"I don't think there is anything else I can tell you," continues Dulce, with a little nod.

"I wonder you have her," says Miss Vibart, disagreeably impressed by this description.

"Why, she is our cousin! And, of course, she can come whenever she wishes—she knows that," says Dulce. "It is not with her, as with you, you know. You are a joy, she is a duty. But the children *are* so sweet."

"How many of them?" asks Portia, who knows a few things she prefers to children.

"Three. Pussy, Jacky, and the Boodie. The Boodie is nothing short of perfection."

"That is the one solitary point on which Dulce and I agree," says Roger. "We both adore the Boodie. Wait till you see her; she is all gold hair, and blue eyes, and creamy skin, and her nose is a fortune in itself. I can't think where Julia found her."

"Fabian is so fond of her," says Dulce, whose thoughts never wander very far from the brother for whose ruined life she grieves incessantly, day after day.

"How old is she?" asks Portia—"this little beauty you speak of—this harmony in blue and gold?"

"Five, I think. She is not in the least like her mother, who goes in for æsthetics, with a face like a French doll, and who will love you forever, if you will only tell a lie, and say you think she resembles Ellen Terry."

[43]

"With a soul given entirely to French bonnets and Louis Quinze shoes, she would be thought ultra-mundane," says Sir Mark, who is trying to make Dulce's little toy terrier, Gilly, stand on his hind legs, in search of cake.

"My goodness! what a long word," says Dicky Browne, who is now eating bread and butter, because he has finished the cake. "Does it mean anything edible? Because if so, I don't quite follow you; *no* one could masticate Julia!"

"I hope she will be in a good temper when she comes," says Roger. "Last time she terrified us all into fits."

"If the children have behaved nicely in the train, and if anyone has taken any notice of her, she will be charming," says Dulce, moodily. "If not, she will be—the other thing."

"And the other thing isn't nice," puts in Dicky, in his pleasantest tone.

"Then what shall we do with her just at first?" says Miss Blount, who is evidently in fear of breakers ahead.

"Look here," says Mr. Browne, who couldn't hold his tongue to save his life, "I'll tell you the first thing to say to any fellow who arrives at your house. Don't go worrying him about the health of his sister, and his cousins, and his aunts, but just ask him if he will have a B. and S. He *will*, you know—and—and there you are. He won't forget it to you afterwards."

Sir Mark laughs. Portia unfurls her fan, and smiles faintly behind it.

"Julia isn't a fellow, and I'm sure she wouldn't like brandy," says Dulce, who is feeling a little hopeless as she contemplates the coming of this new guest.

"The more fool she," says Dicky. "Try Madeira, then. She has a tenderness for Madeira; and tell her her hat is lovely. That'll fetch her."

"Come and sit here, Dicky," says Portia, motioning to the footstool near her. "Your advice is not to be surpassed."

"It's not so bad," says Mr. Browne, comfortably settling himself on the cushion at her feet, just as Fabian enters the room; "but I'm sorry she won't entertain the brandy idea. That never fails. It's friendly, homely, you know, and that."

"Dicky says if you drink rum and new milk every morning before breakfast, you will live forever," says Dulce, thoughtfully.

"What a miserable idea," says Fabian, in his usual soft voice, that has yet something stern about it. "It suggests the Wandering Jew, and other horrors. Who would live forever?"

"I would," says Dicky, with a sentimental glance at Portia, "if I might only remain here."

"Get up, Dicky, and don't make an ass of yourself," says Sir Mark, a little sharply for him, considering his natural laziness, and his tendency to let all things slide. As a rule he makes indolence his god, and sacrifices everything to it. Now, some superior influence compels him to make this speech, and to regard Dicky with a glance that bespeaks disfavor. Fabian is standing somewhat apart, his eyes as usual fixed upon the flickering shadows and the touch of green in the ocean beyond, but with his mind many leagues away. Yet now he turns, and looks with wonder at Sir Mark, as though astonished at his tone, and Sir Mark looks at him. There is a certain amount of longing, and hope, and affection, in Sir Mark's glance.

"At all events she will be in time for our ball," says Roger, "and, besides that, there will be another element of amusement. Stephen Gower is coming back to the Fens at last. She can get up a little flirtation with him, and as he is a right-down good sort. I daresay, if I gave him the right cue, he would take her off our hands for a little while."

"Is your friend coming?" says Dulce, with some surprise. "You never told us. And that pretty place is to have a master at last? I am rather glad, do you know; especially as he is a friend, too, of Fabian's."

"I have no friends," says Fabian, suddenly, with a small frown.

"Oh yes, you have, whether you like it or not," says Gore, quickly. "I can swear to one at least. My dear fellow, this is one of your bad days; come with me; a walk through the evening dews will restore you to reason once more."

He passes his arm through Fabian's, and leads him down the balcony steps into the dew-steeped gardens. A moan from the sea comes up to greet them as they go. No other sound disturbs the calm of the evening air.

"I think Fabian has the most perfect face I ever saw," says Roger, suddenly. But Portia makes no reply. She is watching Fabian's figure as it disappears in the dusk. Dulce, however, turns quickly, and looks at Roger, a strange gleam in her great, blue eyes.

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CHAPTER VII.

"He is a fool who is not for love and beauty. I speak unto the young, for I am of them, and always shall be."—BAILEY.

SLOWLY, decorously, they march into church, one by one—Dulce first, and then Sir Christopher, and then Julia Beaufort and Portia, and so on, down to the children, who are evidently consumed with a desire to know more than seems, and who are evincing a dangerous longing to waltz up the smooth stone aisle.

The Boodie (who has not been overdrawn by Dulce and Roger, and who really *is* like an angel, with her sapphire eyes and corn-colored hair, and the big white bonnet, with its blue bow, that surrounds her face like a cloud) rather loses her presence of mind. It is either this, or a sudden accession of ambition, that overcomes her, because, without a moment's notice, she turns gently on her left heel, and executes a tiny pirouette on her small Hessian boots. A frown from her mother suppresses further evolutions, and, with a sigh, she returns to decorum and the family pew.

In a corner of it the children are comfortably stowed away, while all the others following suit, fall into their proper places. They are only barely in time. The organ plays them up the aisle, and they have only just a second to scramble through the preliminary prayers (so distinct a token of respectability), when the rector's voice breaks forth.

Portia, who has not been to church before, looks up at Mr. Grainger, while he is confessing

everybody in a tone severe but bilious, and tells herself he is as like a superannuated old crow as ever he can be. He is flanked by the curate, a mediæval young man, with a pallid countenance and an irreproachable gown, cut in the latest fashion, who stands in an attitude of the most approved, with his eyes fixed immovably upon a side pillar. The fixity of his gaze is so intense as to suggest the idea that he never again means to remove it until death claims him for his own.

Then a hymn is sung by the village choir, led by the organist's high soprano. It is a hymn very unique in its way, and sung with much fervor, if little tune, and pierces even to the brains of its hearers. The organ beats a solemn accompaniment to this delicacy, and whether the strains from the ancient instrument—that squeaks like a dilapidated bagpipes—is too much for the curate, I know not; but, at the last verse, he removes his eyes from the pillar of the church and concentrates them upon Portia.

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Portia, at this particular moment, I regret to say, is smiling broadly. A brilliant smile that illuminates her whole face, rendering her as lovely as a dream. She is plainly deriving great consolation from the village choir?

The curate, smitten by the sight of her levity, or by the consciousness of his own lapse from the path of duty, in so far letting his mind wander to mundane matters, turns pale, and, lowering his eyes until they reach the tessellated pavement at his feet, grows sad and thoughtful, and perhaps decides on eating no meat again to-day as punishment for his fault.

The church is old, quaint, curious. It is like a thing forgotten. It looks as if it had been dug up by somebody and planted just here, no one knows why. The windows are narrow and elongated, and admit but little light. The pillars in the more distant corners are wrapt in gloom. A cobweb falling from the roof, spun by some enterprising spider, hangs over the gaunt pulpit, as though desirous of coming in contact with whosoever may enter it.

The cobweb, as it waves lazily backward and forward with every breeze that assails it, is a thing of joy to Roger and Dicky Browne, who are sitting side by side. It is an unspeakable boon, a sweet attraction, an everlasting resource to them throughout the service. As it goes to and fro their eyes follow it; they would willingly bet upon it were such a thing practicable; and they wait in a charmed suspense until such time as some one will enter the pulpit, to see whether the some one will attack the cobweb, or the cobweb attack the some one.

Besides the cobweb there is a clerk and a sexton. Sometimes they say Amen when the idea strikes them; sometimes they don't; it is awkward when they *don't*. Then a lull in the performance makes itself felt, though it is always somewhat broken by the voice of the curate, which is monotonous in the extreme.

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A few stray sunbeams are straggling in through the narrow windows, and are holding high festival in Dulce's bonnet; a perfect crown of glory envelops her head. The day being exceptionally warm, everything and every one is drowsy and sleepy, and a trifle inattentive.

Meanwhile, the service progresses surely, if slowly. Uncle Christopher's head is courting his chest; Fabian, who always sits next to him, is unmistakably wide-awake, but has his head lowered, and his eyes fixed moodily upon the carpet at his feet. He looks attentive, but is really miles away from the Commandments and from everything.

Portia, in her white gown, is looking more than ordinarily lovely, and just now is gazing oddly at Fabian. She is vaguely wondering how he would look if he permitted himself to smile. He is always so preternaturally grave that she is curious to know if a smile—once indulged in—would embitter or sweeten his face. Yes; Roger was quite right when he said the other day that Fabian's face was perfect. Perhaps even the smile she desires to see upon it could not improve it. Nay, it might even mar it, so severe are its lines; but were they *always* so? She is lost in impossible speculation!

Dulce, clad all in severe black, with her hands crossed upon her knees, like a small devotee, is looking straight before her at nothing particular, and is utterly unconscious that the strange young man in the "Fens" pew is regarding her with an amount of attention he has certainly not expended on his prayers.

The children have behaved wonderfully well, all things considered. The Boodie has only once laughed out loud, and only twice have Jacky and Pussy indulged in a deadly scuffle; altogether, there is deep cause for thankfulness.

The cobweb is still waving to and fro, and now (as Mr. Grainger ascends the stairs and enters the pulpit), driven, perhaps, by some stronger current of air, moves rapidly to the right, so that the rector reaches his place and arranges himself therein, without coming into collision with it, to Roger's and Dicky's everlasting chagrin.

"A narrow escape," says Dicky, in a careful undertone, to Roger, who, too, has been breathlessly watching the *denouement*.

"Yes, just like our dismal luck," responds that young man, in an aggrieved tone. "I'd have bet anything on its catching him by the wig."

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Mr. Grainger standing up, after a short and private prayer, looks as if he was making his bow to the audience, and having surveyed them leisurely for an embarrassing moment (during which the farmers' wives fidget, and look as if they would gladly inhabit their boots), he gives forth his

text.

Silence ensues; the curate arranges himself in a purely ascetic attitude; the rector stamps his foot, in a preparatory sort of way, on the floor of the massive pulpit, which is as hideous as it is clumsy to the last degree. There are a few meagre little carvings all round it, suggestive of tares, and wheat, and good Samaritans, and there is an impossible donkey in the foreground. It is a very depressing pulpit, but certainly solid.

"No chance of a breakdown," says Roger, gloomily, fixing, his eye-glass in his left eye, and surveying with ill concealed disgust the unwieldy structure before him.

"You're a brave boy," returns Mr. Browne, with exaggerated admiration. "Fancy your looking for excitement *here*."

"It may be nearer than you think," says Roger, *so* meaningly, that his companion applies himself to the translating of his glance. It is fixed, and fixed on the cobweb, too, which is slowly, slowly floating towards the rector's head. It comes nearer to it, catches in a rising lock (that has elevated itself, no doubt, because of the preacher's eloquence), and lingers there, as though bent on lifting pulpit, Grainger and all to the ceiling with the next puff of wind.

Roger forgets his grievance, his *ennui*, everything! The situation has its charm. To his delight he finds Dicky as wrapt in the possible result as himself. The cobweb sticks fast. Mr. Grainger, lifting his hand, smooths his ear, under the mistaken impression that the ticking feeling is there, and then goes on solemnly with his discourse, which is dryer than the weather, which is saying a good deal. He moves his head impatiently from side to side, but gains nothing by this, as the cobweb is apparently of an affectionate disposition, and goes with him wherever he listeth.

Dicky Browne is entranced. *Such* an interlude was more than he had hoped for. Involuntarily he lays his hand on Dulce's arm, and, giving her a mild pinch, shows her the cause of his apparent joy.

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"If the flooring gives way he'll die the death of Absalom," he says, gravely, whereupon Miss Blount also, I grieve to say, gives way to silent but wild mirth.

The rector waxes warm. The cobweb, giving up the hair as a bad job, has relinquished its hold, and is now mildly touching his cheek, in a somewhat coquettish fashion. Mr. Grainger, with a short but decisive gesture, drags it, and its many yards of spider-workmanship to the ground. The cobweb and the spider suffer—but they have their revenge. Mr. Grainger is embarrassed with the cobweb, which has twined itself loving round his finger, and not until he has lost his place in his sermon and grown very red in the face, is serenity restored.

The rural congregation shows every symptom of being able to fall at a moment's notice into the arms of Morpheus. The curate grows leaner, more toil-worn, more ascetic. The rector drones away. The Boodie, having walked up and down the pew several times, has finally come to anchor in Uncle Christopher's arms, and having flung her little white bonnet from her, has now snuggled her head inside his coat, and is intently listening to what appears to be a very lengthened whisper from him. It seems to be a whisper without an end, and one undesirous of response. Indeed, there is a legend extant that Uncle Christopher employs his time during the sermon, whenever the Boodie is with him, in telling her tales of fairyland, not to be surpassed by Grimm or Andersen!

The rector bleats on incessantly; faintly and more faintly his voice seems to reach his flock. The sun beats with undying fervor upon the gables outside and the bald heads of the parishioners within. There is a great sense of quiet everywhere, with only the rector's voice to disturb it, when suddenly upon the startled ear falls a sound, ambiguous, but distinct.

It is a snore! An undeniable snore! and it emanates from Jacky! He has succumbed to heat and Mr. Grainger, and is now travelling in lands where we poor waking mortals cannot enter. Apparently he is happy, but he certainly is not as pretty as he need be, with his short and somewhat aggressive nose uplifted, and his mouth at its widest stretch.

Everyone in the pew gives a decided jump—be the same small or great—but Pussy alone finds herself equal to the occasion. She is a child of extreme promise, and, seeing her opportunity, at once embraces it. She seizes Jacky mildly, but firmly, by the hair, and administers to him three severe shocks.

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The result is everything she can possibly have desired. Jacky, awakening, comes to his senses with the aid of a partially suppressed yell, and falling upon Pussy with an evident desire to exterminate her there and then, rolls with her off the seat, and disappears with her heavily under it.

An awful moment, fraught with agony for the survivors ensue: and then the belligerents are once more brought to light by Fabian; who, after much search and expostulation, restores them to their proper places. Being nearest to them, he plants them again upon their cushions with only this precaution—that he himself now sits between them. This is hardly to their liking, and from their several positions, and right across poor Fabian's chest, they breathe fire and war, and death and destruction upon each other.

How it will all end everyone refuses to dwell upon; but, just at the most critical moment, Fabian, stooping his dark, grave face, whispers something to the irate little damsel that, as if by

magic, reduces her to order.

She looks at him a little while, then sighs, and finally, slipping her hand through his arm, lays her blonde head against him, and is the personification of all things peaceful, until the service ends.

She looks up at him, too, as though desirous of his forgiveness, and Fabian, taking her slim little baby hand in his, assures her with a glance that she *is* forgiven; and then she smiles at him, and nestles a degree closer, and then Fabian, though always unsmilingly, passes his arm round the child, and draws her into a more comfortable position.

Portia, who has watched it all, feels a strange pang at her heart; it is as though he is glad to be friends with these children, to be at peace with them, because they, at least (sweet, trusting souls), believe in him. And what a tenderness he betrays towards them! this dark, moody, concentrated man, whose whole life is burdened with an unsavory mystery. What a power, too, he possesses over them; even that untractable Pussy was calmed, charmed into submission by a word, a glance. Yet children and dogs, they say, have keenest instincts!

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While she still wonders, Fabian lifts his eyes and meets hers, and as though drawn by some magnetic influence each towards the other, though sorely against their wills, they gaze into each other's faces for more time than they care to calculate afterwards, until at last Fabian (who is the first to recover himself) lets his glance fall, and so the spell is broken.

After this, Portia sits quiet and thoughtful until the last Amen is uttered, and they all go eagerly, but with a meritorious attempt at regret, into the open air once more.

CHAPTER VIII.

"None here are happy, but the very fool,
Or very wise: I am not fool enough
To smile in vanities, and hug a shadow;
Nor have I wisdom to elaborate
An artificial happiness from pains."—YOUNG.

THEY are all standing in the porch, saying "How d'ye do" to half a dozen of their neighbors, and being introduced to the dark young man in the Fens pew. He is a very handsome young man, and very light-hearted apparently, and looks very frequently at Miss Blount, who smiles at him very graciously, and tells him he must "really come up to luncheon at the Court, or Uncle Christopher will be *so* disappointed. *Any* friend of Roger's"—and so on.

"Portia," says Sir Christopher, suddenly—when Stephen Gower has expressed his extreme pleasure at the thought of lunching at the Court, always with his dark eyes fixed curiously upon Dulce—"Come with me; I want to show you your poor mother's last resting-place."

"Ah! yes; I shall like to see that," says Portia, tenderly, though the dead mother is only a bare memory to her. "Yes, take me to see it."

They separate from the others, and go around an angle of the old church, and past an ivied corner, and so come to the quiet spot where stands the vault of the Blounts.

"It was too far to send her to the Vibarts' burying-place," says Sir Christopher; "at least we tried to think so, because we tried to keep her with *us*. And your father was dead. And at the very last, she murmured something about being laid beside her mother; poor, dear girl!" To Sir Christopher, Portia's mother has always been a girl, and a poor soul. I think, perhaps, Portia's father had been "*breezy*" in the way of temper.

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Then Portia asks many questions, trivial in themselves, yet of mighty interest to these two, to whom the dead had been dear. And the questions and answers occupy some time, insomuch that when at length they return to the church porch, they find the others have all disappeared, and the sexton preparing to lock the church door.

"Where have all my people gone to?" asks Sir Christopher of this functionary, in an elevated tone, the functionary being, as he himself would describe it, "hard of hearing." Whereupon they are informed that the "Court folk" went "away home through yon small iron gate," and into the woods beyond, and are now presumably sauntering lazily homeward beneath the shade of the spreading oaks and elms.

"Then we cannot do better than follow their example," says Sir Christopher, but almost before they come to the iron gate they see Fabian, who, unmindful of their presence, nay, rather, utterly unaware of it, is walking steadily, but slowly, onward, as though lost in thought.

Presently, hearing footsteps behind him, he turns, and seeing Portia, starts perceptibly, and comes to a standstill.

"I thought you would all be at home long before this," he says, involuntarily. Involuntarily also his tone conveys the idea that his wish was "father to his thought." There is a note in it that is distinct disappointment. Portia lets her lids fall over her eyes, and lets her lips form themselves

into an almost imperceptible smile. Plainly he had loitered in the churchyard in the fond hope of avoiding them all (her especially it may be), and here is the result.

"We thought the same of you," says Sir Christopher, cheerily, coming to the front bravely, "we believed you at the Court before this. Very lucky you aren't though, as I want you to see Portia home. I must go and interview Bowles about that boy of his—a duty I hardly admire."

"It is late now. If you delay any longer you will miss your luncheon," says Portia, hurriedly. Her face betrays unmistakable anxiety.

It is now Fabian's turn to smile, but his lips are rigid, and the commonest observer may read, that mirth of even the grimmest description is far from him.

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"Luncheon, eh? I don't care a fig about luncheon," says Uncle Christopher, gaily, "unless I'm shooting, or that. No. Better see Bowles now if I am to see him at all. Sunday is his only visible day, I've been told. His '*At home*,' in fact—as all the rest of the week he lies in bed, and refuses to wash himself."

"Horrid man!" says Miss Vibart, merely for the sake of saying something. In reality had Bowles felt it his duty to lie a-bed all the year round, and never indulge in the simplest ablutions, it would not have given her a passing thought.

"On the Sabbath he rouses himself, and in a spotless shirt (washed by that idiot of a wife of his, who still will believe in him), and with a pipe in his mouth, he struts up and down the pavement before the door of his palatial residence," says Uncle Christopher. "I am sure to find him to-day."

"Let me go with you," says Portia, as a last resource. "I should like to be made acquainted with this incomparable Bowles." She smiles as she speaks, but the smile is somewhat artificial, and is plainly conjured up with difficulty for the occasion.

"Well, come," says Sir Christopher, who always says "yes," to every one, and who would encourage you warmly if you expressed a desire to seek death and the North Pole.

"It is quite impossible," says Fabian, quietly, not raising his voice, and not moving as he speaks. "Portia cannot go with you to Bowles' house. The man is insupportable."

Portia has her hand upon Sir Christopher's arm; her eyes are alight; something within her—some contradictory power—awakens a determination to see this Bowles. Yet it is hardly so keen a desire to see a man in a clean shirt and a "churchwarden" that possesses her, as a desire to circumvent the man who has opposed her expressed wish. Fabian, on his part, though pained, is equally determined that she shall not be brought face to face with the unpleasant Bowles. She has her eyes on him, but he has his on Sir Christopher.

"I should like to go with you," she says, in clear tones, taking no heed of Fabian's last remark; "I like country people, and strange village characters, and—and that." This is somewhat vague.

"You remember the last time Dulce went to see *Mrs.* Bowles?" says Fabian, who has caught Sir Christopher's eye by this. Whatever Dulce may have endured during that memorable visit is unknown to Portia, but the recollection of it, as forced upon Sir Christopher's memory, is all-powerful to prevent her accompanying him on his mission to-day.

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"Yes, yes. I remember," he says, hurriedly, "Bowles, as a rule, is not courteous. My dear child,"—to Portia—"No, you cannot, I regret to say, come with me. This man can be uncomfortable in many ways. You understand, eh? You wouldn't like him. People in shirt-sleeves, however clean, are always out of it, eh? There, good-by to both of you. Take her home, Fabian, and explain my absence to the others, especially to Roger's friend, that new young fellow, Gower, of the Fens."

So saying, he marched away to do battle with the objectionable Bowles, with his fine old shoulders well squared, and a world of defiance in his gait. There is no help for it! The two left behind feel this acutely, and Fabian pushing open the little iron gate, Portia goes down the stone steps and enters presently upon a wood all green, and soft and verdure-clad.

The trees are interlaced above their heads. Through them the calm, blue sky looks down in wonder, and sheds a scintillating radiance on their path.

"In heat the landscape quivering lies,
The cattle pant beneath the tree:"

No little kindly breath of air comes to break the monotony of the dead sultriness that lies on everything.

Portia sighs, and with a small, but expressive, gesture pushes her hat somewhat off her forehead. He is quick to notice the faintest sign of wrong in those with whom he associates, and now turning to her, says, gravely:

"Here, beneath the trees, where the sun cannot penetrate too severely, Dulce often takes off her hat. Take off yours."

"If you think it will do any good," says Portia, doubtfully; and as though fearful of seeming ungracious, she does take off her hat, and walks along beside him, bare-headed.

She is feeling sad and depressed. For the first time since her arrival she is wishing herself back again with Auntie Maud, who is anything but after her own taste. Yet to live on here in the shadow of a living lie is bitter to her; more bitter than she had ever supposed possible.

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She had come down to the Court fully aware that Fabian (according to the lights of those with whom she had lived) was guilty of the crime imputed to him. He had always been discussed in her immediate circle with bated breath, as one who had eternally disgraced the good old name of Blount, and dragged it cruelly in the dust.

To be innocent and not to be able to prove one's innocence, had seemed (and even now does seem to Auntie Maud and her set) a thing not to be entertained for a moment. It would be *too* preposterous! He had rendered their name hideous, but he should not impose upon them with his absurd stories of utter ignorance. They believed he had wilfully committed the forgery, trusting he would never be discovered, because of the unfortunate similarity between his writing and that of Sir Christopher. But he had failed, in spite of his ingenuity, and had been found out; and, though none of the forged notes had been discovered in his possession (which only proved the more to his distant relatives that he possessed the cleverness of the practised schemer), still they one and all sat upon him in solemn conclave, and pronounced him outside the pale of respectability.

That Christopher should elect to leave the beautiful old Court to such a one seems little less than a crime to the "cousins and aunts." To leave it to a man shunned by the entire county (and very properly too!), a man ashamed to lift his head amongst his fellow men, and who had never tried to live down his disgrace or brave it out. In this fact—the certainty of his being pusillanimous about his accusation—lies the proof of his guilt, to them.

Portia is going over the whole sad story now again, while the sinner walks beside her. Once she lifts her eyes, and looks at him, and tells herself Roger was indeed right when he made much of his beauty. Yet Satan dwells in comely bodies! How sad that a face so inclined to nobility should be stamped with the lines of care, born of dishonor. Tears fill her eyes as she looks at him, and she turns her head quickly away, but not before he has seen and marked the signs of distress within her beautiful eyes. A spasm crosses his face; he recoils a little from her, as though fear possesses him. He frowns; and a curious light—half grief, half anger—grows upon him, and expresses itself upon his quiet lips. Something that is almost agony is in his eyes; truly though the body can know grief, the "sorrows of the soul are graver still."

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"What is it that has risen between us?" he asks, suddenly; there is something intense in his tone. "Have you?"—he pauses, and then goes on with an effort—"have you in your heart so utterly condemned me?"

They have come to a stand-still; and Fabian, as he asks this question, is standing with his back against a huge oak tree, his eyes fixed upon his companion. His face is as white as death.

She makes him no answer. A very fine shade of color, so faint as to be almost imperceptible, dyes her cheek for a moment and then vanishes as suddenly as it came, leaving her quite as pallid as he is himself.

"It is the most natural thing in the world to condemn," he goes on, somewhat excitedly. "It is only human. One feels how easy it is. If one hears a damning story about an acquaintance, a story almost unsupported, how readily one inclines to the cruel side. It is not worse in one than in another. We all have a touch of savagery about us—a thirst for blood. For the most part, if placed in a certain set number of circumstances, we all think and act alike. That we should be cast in one mould with the very commonest of our brethren is a humiliating thought, but strictly within the lines of truth. You *do* condemn me?"

He wishes to force her into saying so. She shrinks from him, and raises one hand to her throat, as though nervous and unhappy.

"I don't know," she says at last, in a low, hesitating tone. "I know nothing. Sometimes I don't even know myself."

"That is always a knowledge difficult of attainment," he says, slowly. "But about me, in your heart, you are *sure*. You believe you do know. You think me guilty." As he says the word he clenches one hand so firmly that the nails crush into the flesh.

"I would rather not talk about it," says Portia, faintly.

By a terrible effort he recovers himself; a quick breath, that is almost a sigh, escapes him.

"That, of course, shall be as you wish," he says, quietly; and, rousing himself, they walk on together beneath the branching elms, in silence, painful as it is prolonged.

Coming to a tiny stream (where he is compelled to offer and she to accept, his hand to help her over), she glances at him, but her glance is not returned, and then she sees that he has forgotten her very existence, and is, in thought, miles away from her. He has entered into some ideal realm of his own—captured during his long years of isolation from the world.

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As she is silently watching him and wondering, a dark figure, moving from between the shrubs that hide off one angle of the house, comes into their path, and, seeing them, makes a skulking movement to the right as though it would gladly escape observation.

"Good evening, Slyme," says Fabian, in half kindly, half contemptuous tone. The old man murmurs something in return. His eyes refuse to meet Fabian's, his hands join each other, and rub palm to palm in an uneasy, shuffling fashion. His voice is husky and slightly uncertain. His dull old eyes roam from Fabian to Portia in an odd, questioning way, as if debating some strange matter. Yet, though looking at them, it is at their arms or chests he looks, rather than at their faces.

Portia (who had stopped when Fabian had) now turns a little to one side and plucks a flower lazily from a neighboring shrub, and sighs a little as if weary, and as if she would gladly be at home.

At this, Fabian, who is quick to notice anything concerning her, rouses himself from his prolonged stare at Gregory, and, noting the instability of the old man's gait, says, suddenly, with his dark gaze full upon him:

"Again!"

His tone this time is all contempt; no kindness mingles with it. The old man seems to wither beneath it, and puts out his hands with a gesture suggestive of deprecation. Fabian, taking no notice of it, walks away from him, Portia gladly following.

Then the secretary's face changes. Standing in the centre of the pathway, he looks after their retreating figures with a half-drunken scrutiny, full of malice.

"Ay," he says, bitterly, beneath his breath, "as a dog I am in his sight! So he has destroyed his only hope this many a time!"

His head sinks into its old position on his chest, and with a muttered curse he continues his way.

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Just as Portia ascends the stone steps that lead to the house, Fabian, by a gentle touch, detains her.

"Remember always this," he said slowly and with an attempt at calmness that is infinitely sad, "that I do not blame you."

Tears spring to her eyes. She is at least generous, and now a great longing to be able to believe in him, to be able to assure him of her unbounded faith in his honor possesses her. But, alas! faith is neither to be invoked nor purchased, and to lie to him, and tell him a soothing falsehood against her conscience would be worse than useless. The tears having gathered, two of them roll slowly down her cheeks. She turns hastily aside. Catching her hand he holds it for a short moment in his own.

"They at least are mine," he says, meaning the tears, his voice deeply agitated, and then she draws her hand from his, and an instant later, is lost to sight.

CHAPTER IX.

"Young hearts, bright eyes, and rosy lips are there,
And fairy steps, and light and laughing voices,
Ringing like welcome music through the air—
A sound at which the untroubled heart rejoices."

—HON. MRS. NORTON.

PORTIA, dressed in *merveilleux* of a cream shade, with a soft, yellow rose in her hair, is looking her loveliest. She is a little languid after her walk, and a little *distracte*, but desirable beyond words. She is coquetting with her dinner, rather than eating it, and is somewhat uncomfortably conscious that Fabian's eyes are perpetually wandering in her direction.

Dicky Browne is talking gaily, and is devoting himself with an ardor worthy of a better cause to Julia Beaufort, who is chattering inanely about many things, and who is in her element, and a blood-colored gown.

They have all the conversation to themselves, these two, as the others are depressed, or rather impressed, by Sir Christopher's silence, who has one of his brooding fits upon him. Either the redoubtable Bowles disagreed with him, or he disagreed with Bowles, because clouds have crowned his brow since his return home.

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Mrs. Beaufort by this time has got to Sardou's last comedy, and Dicky, who never heard of it or its author, comes to a conversational stand-still. This means uninterrupted quiet all round, as nobody else is saying anything. The footsteps of the solemn butler, and his equally solemn assistant, is all the sound one hears, and presently they all wake to the fact that something *must* be said, and *soon*.

"What wretched artichokes!" says Dulce, coming nobly to the front, with a laudable desire to fill up the yawning gap.

"Yes—melancholy," says Roger, backing her up, as in duty bound; "out of all heart, apparently."

At this weak attempt at a joke Dicky grins approvingly.

"I know few people so altogether sufficing as our Roger," he says patronizingly, addressing nobody in particular; and as nobody in particular appears to think it necessary to answer him, conversation once more languishes.

Sir Mark—who can always find resources in his dinner, whatever else may fail him—is placidly happy, so is Mrs. Beaufort, though, perhaps, she is a little sorry that her sleeves have not been made as tight as Portia's, and with the second puffing, which is certainly beyond all praise!

"What's this?" asks Sir Christopher, addressing the butler in a resigned tone, and looking at a round, soft mass that has just been laid before him.

"Suet dumpling, Sir Christopher," replies the butler, apologetically.

"Again!" says Sir Christopher, in an indescribable manner.

"Surely not *again*," repeats Dulce, with unpleasant animation. "It *can't* be that frightful thing *again*, after all I said to cook yesterday!"

"I'm afraid it is, 'em," says the butler, very sadly.

"And this is the cook Miss Gaunt so highly recommended!" says Dulce, wrathfully. "Save me from my friends, say I; can't she make anything else, Martin?"

"This is a gooseberry tart, 'em," whispers the butler, respectfully, a faint shade of encouragement in his voice, laying that delicacy before her.

"That means sugar—lots of sugar," says Dicky Browne, who is sitting close to her. "I'm glad of that, I like lots of sugar."

Portia laughs.

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"You are like my lord mayor's fool," she says; "you like everything that is sweet."

"I do," says Dicky, fondly; "that's why I like you."

"I think it was very wrong of Miss Gaunt to impose such a woman upon us," says Dulce, deeply aggrieved.

"Never trust an old maid," says Roger; "I spend my life giving you good advice, which you won't take; and such an old maid, too, as Miss Gaunt! She is as good (or as bad) as two rolled into one."

"She said she was a perfect treasure," exclaims Miss Blount, casting an indignant glance at him.

"Send her back her treasure, then, and tell her, as you are not selfish, you could not think of depriving *her* of her services."

"Is that a sample of your good advice?" asks she, with considerable scorn. "Besides, I can't; I have agreed with this woman to stay here for a month."

"Fancy suet dumplings every day for a month," says Dicky Browne, unfeelingly; "that means four weeks—thirty-one days! We shall be dead, I shouldn't wonder, long before that."

"No such luck," says Sir Mark.

"Give her anything she wants, Dulce, and send her away," says Sir Christopher.

"But she will think me so unkind and capricious," protests Dulce, who is an arrant little coward, and is afraid to tell cook she no longer requires her. The cook is a big Scotchwoman, with very large bones, and a great many of them.

"Well, do whatever you like," says Uncle Christopher, wearily.

The night is fine, calm, and cool, and sweet with many perfumes. Some of them at table cast lingering glances at the lawn without, and long, silently, to be standing on it. The moon has risen, and cast across it great streaks of silver light that brighten and darken as clouds race each other o'er Astarte's sacred brow.

There is great silence on the air, broken only by a "murmuring winde, much like the sowne of swarming bees." A little rivulet in the far distance runs musically.

"Let us all go out," says Julia Beaufort, suddenly, feeling she has already spent quite too long a time over her biscuit and claret.

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"Ah! thank you," says Portia, quickly, turning to her almost before she had finished speaking—her great, soft eyes even larger than usual. "I have been so longing to say that for the last five minutes."

"The 'lost chord' has been struck again," says Dicky Browne. "Mrs. Beaufort, I won't be deserted in this barefaced fashion. If you are determined to court death through night dews, I

shall court it with you."

Julia simpers, and looks delighted. Then they all rise from the table, and move towards the balcony; all—that is—except Sir Mark, who (though he would have dearly liked to accompany them into the mystic moonlight) still lingers behind to bear company with Sir Christopher, and strive to lay the ghost that so plainly is haunting him to-night.

Joyously they all descend the steps, and then break into a little run as their feet touch the velvet grass. The sky is bright with pale blue light, the air is soft and warm as sultry noon. A little baby wind—that ought to be in bed, so sweet and tender it is—is roaming here and there amongst the flowers, playing with the scented grasses, and losing itself amongst the bracken, lower down.

One can hear the roar of the distant ocean breaking itself against the giant rocks; one can hear, too, in strange contrast, the chirp, chirp of the green grasshopper.

As they come within view of the fountain, all their mouths form themselves into many round Os, and they say, "Ah!" as with one breath.

The scene is indeed charming beyond description. The water of the fountain is bright as silver, great patches of purest moonlight lying on it as calm as though in death. The water-lilies tremble faintly, as it might be in terror of the little gods who are leaning over them. A shadow from the trees in the background falls athwart a crouching Venus. Some pretty, low chairs are standing scattered about, and Portia sinking into one, the others all follow her example, and seating themselves on chairs on the soft sward begin to enjoy themselves.

The men produce cigars, and are presently happy in their own way. Roger or Dicky asks every one, indiscriminately, if she would like a cigarette; a question responded to in the negative by all, though in truth Dulce would have dearly liked one.

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Fabian, who has come with them, is lying full length upon the grass, with his hands behind his head, gazing dreamily at the glimpse of the far-off sea, that shows through the dark-green firs. Dulce's silvery laugh is waking an echo lower down. There is a great sense of rest and happiness in the hour.

A big, lazy bumblebee, tumbling sleepily into Portia's lap, wakes her into life. It lies upon her, looking larger and blacker than its wont, as it shows against the pallor of her gown. She starts, and draws herself up with a half-suppressed cry.

Fabian, lifting the bee from her knees, flings it high into the air, and sends it off on the errand it was probably bound on before it fell in love with Portia.

"How foolish of me to be frightened of it—pretty thing," she says, with a faint blush. "How black it looked."

"*Everything* frightens me," says Julia Beaufort pensively, "*everything!*"

"Do I?" asks Dicky Browne, in a tone full of abject misery. "Oh! *say* I don't."

"I meant insects you know, and frogs, and horrid things like that," lisps Julia. "And they always will come flying round one just on a perfect night like this, when"—sentimentally—"Nature is wrapt in its profoundest beauty!"

"I don't think I ever saw a frog fly," says Dicky Browne, innocently. "Is it nice to look at? Is it funny?"

"No! it's only silly—like you!" says Dulce throwing a rosebud at him, which he catches dexterously.

"Thank you," he says, meekly, whether for the speech or the flower, he leaves vague.

"Stephen Gower is coming over here to-night," says Roger suddenly.

"To-night? Why didn't you ask him to dinner?" asks Dulce, a note of surprise in her tone.

"I did ask him, but, for some reason I now forget, he could not come. He confessed he was lonely, however, in that big barn of a house, and said he would feel deeply grateful if you would permit him to drop in later on. I said you would; and advised him to drop in by all means, though how people do that has always been a puzzle to me."

"Who is Stephen Gower?" asks Portia, curiously, of no one in particular. She is leaning back in her chair, and is fanning herself languidly.

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"He is Roger's *Fidus Achatas*—his second self—his very soul!" says Dicky Browne, enthusiastically. "He is a thing apart. We must, in fact, be careful of him, lest he break. At least so I have been told."

"I thought you knew him, too," says Dulce. "I always believed you and Roger, and this wonderful Stephen Gower, were all at college together."

"You wronged Dicky, albeit unwittingly," says Mr. Dare, taking his cigar from between his lips to give more emphasis to his words. "We at Cambridge were too frivolous for such superior beings as Dicky. It was at Oxford he commenced his honorable career; it was there he indulged in those high hopes of future fame that have been so splendidly realized in his maturer years."

"Don't kick me when I'm down," says Dicky, pathetically. "I couldn't help it—and at least I have *had* my hopes. That must be always something. It's any amount soothing, do you know, to look back upon your past, and remember what a jolly ass you once were."

"I can't imagine your ever having had hopes of future fame," says Dulce, laughing.

"Well I had, do you know, any amount of 'em. In the early dawn, when I was awake—which, perhaps, wasn't so often as it sounds, except when I was returning from—er—a friend's house. I used to sit up with them, you know, whenever they had scarla"—

"Oh yes, *we* know," interrupts Roger, most unfeelingly.

"Well, in the early dawn," continues Dicky, quite unmoved, "when the little birds were singing, I used to think I could be happy as General Sir Richard Browne, at the head of a gallant corps, with a few darkies in the foreground fleeing before my trusty blade. By breakfast time, however, all that would be changed, and I would glory in the belief that one day would see me seated on the wool-sack. By dinnertime I was clothed in sanctimonious lawn; and long before the small hours, I felt myself a second Drake, starting to conquer another Armada, only one even *more* Invincible."

They all laugh at him. And then he laughs at himself, and seems, indeed, to enjoy the joke even more than they do.

"I don't care," he says, at length, valiantly; "no, not a single screw. I haven't *done* anything, you know."

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"Oh yes, you have, a lot in your time," murmurs Roger, supportingly.

"But I must come in for the title and the estate when the old boy, my cousin, 'shuffles off this mortal coil,' and in the meantime the governor stands to me decently enough, and I'm pretty jolly all round."

"Tell us about Stephen Gower," says Dulce, after a pause, "He interests me, I don't know why. What is he like?"

"He is

'A greenery yallery
Grosvenor gallery
Foot-in-the-grave young man.'"

quotes Dicky, gaily.

"An æsthetic! Oh! I *do* hope not," exclaims Dulce, in a horrified tone.

"Have they pursued me even down here?" asks Portia, faintly. "I thought, I *hoped*, they were plants indigenous to London soil alone."

"He is nothing of the sort," says Roger, indignantly. "He is about the best fellow I know. He would be ashamed to go round (like those idiots you speak of) with flowers and flowing locks. He leaves all that sort of thing"—contemptuously—"to girls."

"Who is talking of Stephen Gower?" asks Sir Mark, coming towards them over the path of moonlight that lies upon the smooth lawn. "Happy man to be discussed by so fair a trio, 'beneath the sweet-smelling starlight,' as James has it."

"Bless me," says Dicky, "I had no idea dry monopole would have had such an effect on Gore. He is talking poetry, I think; I never could understand it myself. Now for example, about those stars—*do* they smell? I never noticed it. What's it like, Gore?"

Everyone disdains to take notice of this sally—all, that is, except Dulce, who is always only too delighted to laugh whenever the barest chance of being able to do so presents itself.

Roger, crossing over to where she sits, leans his arms on the back of her chair, and bends his face to hers.

"Look here," he says, in the conciliatory tone of one who is going to make a request and is not quite sure it will be granted. "If Gower comes down by-and-by, I wish you would promise me to be good to him. He is a very old chum of mine, and a very good fellow, and—be civil to him, will you?"

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"What do you suppose I am going to do to him?" asks Miss Blount, opening her eyes. "Was I bad to him at luncheon? Are you afraid I shall bite him? I shan't. You may be happy about that."

"Of course—I know; but I want you to be *particularly* nice to him," goes on Roger, though faintly discouraged by her tone. (Now what did he mean by saying she *wouldn't* bite him. It sounds as if she would bite me!) "He is the oldest friend I have; and—er—as we are to be married some time or other, I want him to like you very much."

"Who are to be married? You and Mr. Gower? It sounded like it," says Dulce, wilfully.

"I was thinking of you and myself," he says, a little gravely.

"Well, what is it you want me to do?" asks she, moving restlessly in her seat. She is, in spite of

herself, disturbed by his gravity. "Am I to make love to him, or am I to let him make love to me? Your devotion to this old friend is quite touching."

"He would be very unlikely indeed to make love to you," replies Roger, rather stiffly. "He understands perfectly how matters are between you and me."

"Oh, no doubt," says Miss Blount, disgustedly. "Everyone seems to know all about this *absurd* engagement. I can't think how I was ever brought to consent to it."

"*Absurd!*" says Mr. Dare, in an impossible tone.

"Yes, *painfully* absurd! Quite too ridiculous," with unpleasant force.

"Oh!" says Mr. Dare.

"Yes," says Dulce, still defiant, though a little ashamed of herself, "it is quite enough to make people *hate* people, all this perpetual gossip."

"You are at least honest," he says, bitterly.

Silence.

Dulce, whose tempers are always short-lived, after a little reflection grows very repentant.

Turning to him, she lays her little hand on his, as it still rests on the arm of her chair, and says, softly:

"I have been cross to you. Forgive me. I did not quite mean it. Tell me again what you want me to do about your friend." [66]

"It was only a little matter," says Roger, in a low tone, "and it was, I think, the first favor I ever asked of you; and I thought, perhaps—"

He pauses. And raising himself from his lounging position, on her chair, moves as though he would go away from her, having abandoned all hope of having his request acceded to.

But as he turns from her, her fingers tighten upon his, and so she detains him.

"What is it now?" he asks, coldly, trying to keep up his dignity, but as his glance meets hers, he melts. And, in truth, just now she could have thawed a much harder heart, for on her *mignon* face sits one of her very loveliest smiles, conjured up for Roger's special benefit.

"Don't go away," she entreats, prettily, "and listen to me. I shall be charming to your friend. I shall devote myself exclusively to him if it will please you; and if only to prove to you that I *can* grant you a favor."

"Thank you," says Roger gratefully. Then he regards her meditatively for a moment, and then says, slowly:

"Don't be too kind to him."

"Could I?" says Dulce, naively.

He laughs a little, and, bending his head, presses his lips to the little slender hand that still rests within his own.

The caress is so unusual that Dulce glances at him curiously from under her long lashes. A faint, pink glow creeps into her cheeks. She is surprised; perhaps, too, a little pleased, because once again this evening she bestows upon him a smile, soft and radiant.

Mr. Browne is rambling on in some incoherent fashion to Julia Beaufort. Sir Mark is telling Portia some quaint little stories. Fabian is silently listening to them stretched at Portia's feet.

The last glimpse of day has gone. "Death's twin sister, Sleep," has fallen upon the earth. One by one the sweet stars come out in the dusky vault above, "spirit-like, infinite."

In amongst the firs that stand close together in a huge clump at the end of the lawn, great shadows are lying, that stretching ever and ever further, form at last a link between the land and the sea.

"Ah! here you are, Stephen," says Sir Mark, addressing the languid young man they had met in the morning, who is coming to them across the grass. "Why didn't you come sooner?" [67]

"They wouldn't give me any dinner until about an hour ago," says the languid young man in a subdued voice. He glances from Portia to Julia Beaufort, and then to Dulce. There his glance rests. It is evident he has found what he seeks.

"Dulce, I think I told you Stephen Gower was coming to-night," says Roger, simply. And then Dulce rises and rustles up to him, and filled with the determination to keep sacred her promise to be particularly nice to Roger's friend, holds out to him a very friendly hand, and makes him warmly welcome.

Then Portia makes him a little bow, and Julia simpers at him, and presently he finds himself accepted by and admitted to the bosom of the family, which, indeed, is a rather nondescript one. After a few moments of unavoidable hesitation, he throws himself at Dulce's feet, and, leaning on

his elbow, tells himself country life, after all, isn't half a bad thing.

"What a heavenly night it is," says Dulce, smiling down on him, still bent on fulfilling her word to Roger. Perhaps she is hardly aware how encouraging her smile can be. "See the ocean down there," pointing with a rounded, soft, bare arm, that gleams like snow in the moonlight, to where the sea is shining between the trees. "How near it seems, though we know it is quite far away."

"It is nearer to you than I am," says Mr. Gower, in a tone that might imply the idea that he thinks the ocean in better care than himself.

"Well, not just now," says Dulce, laughing.

"Not just now," returns he, echoing her laugh. "I suppose we should be thankful for small mercies; but I wish the Fens was a little nearer to this place than it is."

"Portia, can you see Inca's Cliff from this?" asks Dulce, looking at her cousin. "You remember the spot where we saw the little blue flowers yesterday, that you so coveted. How clearly it stands out now beneath the moonbeams."

"Like burnished silver," says Portia, dreamily, always with a lazy motion wafting her black fan to and fro. "And those flowers—how I longed for them, principally, I suppose, because they were beyond my reach."

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"Where are they," asks Roger. "I never remember seeing blue flowers there."

"Oh! *you* wouldn't notice them," says his *fiancée*, a fine touch of petulance in her tone, that makes Gower lift his head to look at her; "but they were there nevertheless. They were the very color of the Alpine *gentian*, and so pretty. We quite fell in love with them, Portia and I, Portia especially; but we could not get at them, they were so low down."

"There was a tiny ledge we might have stood on," says Portia, "but our courage failed us, and we would not try it."

"And quite right, too," says Sir Mark. "I detest people who climb precipices and descend cliffs. It makes my blood run cold."

"Then what made you climb all those Swiss mountains, two years ago?" asks Julia Beaufort, who has a talent for saying the wrong thing, and who has quite forgotten the love affair that drove Sir Mark abroad at that time.

"I don't know," replies he, calmly; "I never shall, I suppose. I perfectly hated it all the while, especially the guides, who were more like assassins than anything else. I think they hated me, too, and would have given anything to pitch me over some of the passes."

Portia laughs.

"I can sympathize with you," she says. "Danger of any sort has no charm for me. Yet I wanted those flowers. I think"—idly—"I shall always want them, simply because I can't get them."

"You shall have them in three seconds if you will only say the word," says Dicky Browne, who is all but fast asleep, and who looks quite as like descending a rugged cliff as Portia herself.

"I am so glad I don't know the 'word,'" says Portia, with a little grimace. "It would be a pity to endanger a valuable life like yours."

Dulce turns to Mr. Gower.

"You may smoke if you like," she says, sweetly. "I know you are longing for a cigarette or something, and *we* don't mind."

"Really though?" says Gower.

"Yes, really. Even our pretty town-lady here," indicating Portia, "likes the perfume in the open air."

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"Very much indeed," says Portia, graciously, leaning a little toward Gower, and smiling sweetly.

"A moment ago I told myself I could not be happier," says Stephen, glancing at Dulce. "And indeed I wanted nothing further—but if I may smoke—if I have your permission to light this," producing a cigar, "I shall feel that my end is near; I shall know that the gods love me, and that therefore I *must* die young."

As he places the cigar between his lips he leans back again at Dulce's feet with a sigh suggestive of unutterable bliss.

"We were talking about you just before you came," says Dulce, with a little friendly nod, bending over his recumbent form, and making him a present of a very adorable smile. "We had all, you know, formed such different opinions about you."

"What was your opinion," asks he, rising to a sitting posture with an alacrity not to be expected from a youth of his indolence. In this last attitude, however, it is easier to see Dulce's charming face. "I *should* like to know that."

His manner implies that he would not like to hear the opinion of the others.

"It was nothing very flattering, I am afraid," said Dulce, with a little laugh. "I was—to confess the truth—just in the very faintest degree nervous about you."

"About *me!*"

"Yes," she laughed softly again; "I thought you might be a 'blue-and-white young man,' and that idea filled me with dismay. I don't think I like a 'soul-ful eyed young man,' *too* much."

"I'm so glad I'm of the 'threepenny 'bus' lot," says Gower, with a smile. "Ye gods! what a shocking thought is the other. Look at my hair, I entreat you, Miss Blount, and tell me does it resemble the lanky locks of Oscar?"

"No, it is anything but wylde," says Dulce, glancing at his shaven crown, that any hermit might be proud of: "and do you know I am glad of your sanity; I should quite hate you if you were a disciple of that school."

"Poor school," says Gower, pityingly, "for the first time I feel deep sympathy for it. But with regard to myself, I am flattered you troubled yourself to think of me at all. Did it really matter to you what my convictions might be?"

"Yes, of course," says Dulce, opening her eyes, and showing herself half in fun, half in earnest, and wholly desirable. "Such a near neighbor as you must be. I suppose we shall see a good deal of you—at least"—sweetly—"I hope we shall; and how would it be with us if you called here every morning with lanky tresses, and a cadaverous face, and words culled from a language obsolete?"

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This little speech quite dazzles Gower. Not the sauciness of it, but the undercurrent of kindness. "*Every* morning!" Does she really mean that he may come up to this enchanting spot every morning?

It had, of course, occurred to him, during prayers, in the early part of the day, when he had sat out the dreary service with exemplary patience, and his eyes fixed on the Blount pew, that, perhaps, he might be allowed to call once a week at the Hall, without being considered by the inmates an absolute nuisance—but every day! this sounds too good to be true, and is, therefore, received by him with caution.

"You needn't be afraid of me," he says, apropos of Dulce's last remark. "I can speak no language but my own, and that badly."

"What a comfort," says Miss Blount. She is now wondering if she has done her duty by her new guest, and if she has been everything to him that she ought to have been, considering her promise to Roger.

"Where is Fabian?" she asks, suddenly, peering through the dusky gloom. "Are you there, darling?"

But no one answers her. It seems to them, that, tiring of their company, he has betaken himself to solitude and the house, once more. No one has seen him go, but, during the last few minutes, a gray black cloud has been slowly wandering over the pale-faced moon, and forms and features have been more indistinct. Perhaps Portia, who is sitting on the outer edge of the group, might have noticed his departure, but, if so, she says nothing of it.

Time runs on. Some one yawns, and then tries vainly to turn it into a sigh. The bell from some distant steeple in the little slumbering village far below in the plain, tolls slowly, solemnly, as though to warn them that eleven more hours have slipped into the great and fathomless sea of Eternity.

"Ah! so late!" says Dulce, with a little start. "How swiftly time has gone to-night. I never knew it fly with such hot haste. That proves I have been happy, does it not?"

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She smiles down upon Mr. Gower, who is still at her feet, and he smiles up only too willingly at her.

At this moment a dark figure emerges from amongst the moaning firs, and comes toward them. In the uncertain and somewhat ghostly light it appears of an unusually large size. Dulce draws her breath a little quickly, and Julia, feeling her duty lies in this direction, gives way to a dainty scream. Portia, whose eyes have been upon this new comer for a full minute before the others noticed him, only turns her head away, and lets it sink a degree more lazily into the cushion of her chair.

The firs mounting high into the sky, stand out boldly against their azure background. Fabian, in answer to Julia's touch of affectation, advances with more haste, and says:

"It is only me," in his usual clear, slow voice.

Passing by Portia's chair, he drops into her lap a little bunch of dark blue flowers.

"Ah!" she says quickly, then checks herself. Taking up the deeply-dyed blossoms, she lays them in her pink palm, and, bending her face over them, examines them silently. Sir Mark, regarding her curiously from the background, wonders whether she is thinking of them or of their donor.

"Why, those are the flowers we were talking about," says Dulce, with a faint contraction of her

brows. "Fabian! Did you risk your life to get them?"

"Your life!" says Portia, in an indescribable tone, and as if the words are drawn from her against her will. I think she had made up her mind to keep utter silence, but some horror connected with Dulce's hasty remark has unbound her lips. She turns her eyes upon him, and he can see by the moonlight that her face is very white.

"My dear fellow," says Sir Mark, "you grow more eccentric daily. Now this last act was rashness itself. That cliff is very nearly impassable, and in this uncertain light—"

"It was the simplest thing in the world," says Fabian, coldly. "There was the ledge Dulce told you of, and plenty of tough heather to hold on by. I assure you, if there was the smallest danger, I should not have attempted it. And, besides, I was fully rewarded for any trouble I undertook. The view up there to-night is magnificent."

To Portia it is an easy matter to translate this last remark. He is giving her plainly to understand that he neither seeks nor desires thanks from *her*. The view has sufficed him. It was to let his eyes feast upon the glorious riches nature had spread before him that led him up the mountain-side, not a foolish longing to gratify her whim at any cost to himself.

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She looks at the flowers again, and with one tapered finger turns them over and over in her hand.

"Well, good people," says Sir Mark, rising to his feet, "as it is eleven o'clock, and as the dew is falling, and as you are all plainly bent on committing suicide by means of rheumatism, neuralgia and catarrhs generally, I shall leave you and seek my virtuous couch."

"What's a catarrh?" asks Dicky Browne, confidentially, of no one in particular.

"A cold in your nose," replies Roger, uncompromisingly.

"I thought it was something to play on," says Mr. Browne unabashed.

"Dear me! Is it really eleven?" asks Julia. "I should never have thought it,"—in reality she thought it was twelve—"why did you not tell me?"—this to the attentive Dicky, who is placing a shawl round her shoulders—"you must have known."

"With thee conversing I forget all time," quotes that ardent personage, with a beautiful smile. "I thought it was only nine."

Even with this flagrant lie Julia is well pleased.

"Dulce, tuck up your gown, the grass is really wet," says Roger, carelessly, "and put this round you." He goes up to her, as he speaks, with a soft white scarf in his hands.

"Thank you; Mr. Gower will put it on for me," says Dulce, rather more wilfully than coquettishly handing the wrap to Stephen, who takes it as if it were some sacred symbol, and, with nervous care, smothers her slender figure in it. Roger, with a faint shrug, turns away, and devotes his attentions to Sir Mark.

Portia, still with the flowers in her hand, has wandered away from the others, and entering the drawing-room before they have mounted the balcony steps, goes up to a mirror and regards herself attentively for a moment.

A little gold brooch, of Indian workmanship, is fastening the lace at her bosom. She loosens it, and then raises the flowers (now growing rather crushed and drooping) as if with the evident intention of placing them, by means of the brooch, against her neck.

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Yet, even with her hand half lifted she hesitates, glances at her own image again; and finally, turning away, leaves the brooch empty.

Fabian, entering the drawing-room at this moment with the others, has had time to notice the action, the hesitation, everything.

Then comes bed hour. The men prepare to go to the smoking-room—the women think fondly of their own rooms and their maids.

Fabian, lighting a candle, takes it up to Portia. They are all standing in the hall now, beneath the light of the hanging lamps. She smiles her thanks without letting her eyes meet his, and lets him place the candle in her left hand.

"Have you hurt this?" he asks, lightly touching her right hand as he speaks.

"No." She pauses a moment, and then, slowly opening her closed fingers, shows him the blue flowers lying therein.

"They are lovely," she says, in a low tone, "and I *did* wish for them. But never—*never*—do that again."

"Do what again?"

"Endanger your life for me."

"There was no danger—and you had expressed a wish for them."

CHAPTER X.

"Every one is as God made him, and oftentimes a great deal worse!"

—MIGUEL DE CERVANTES.

WITH a continuous sob and a roar from the distant ocean the storm beats on. All night it has hurled itself upon path and lawn with impotent fury; towards morning it still rages, and even now, when noonday is at its height, its anger is not yet expended.

The rain falls in heavy torrents, the trees bow and creak most mournfully, the rose leaves—sweet-scented and pink as glowing morn—are scattered along the walks, or else, lifted high in air by vehement gusts of wind, are dashed hither and thither in a mazy dance full of passion and despair.

"Just three o'clock," says Dulce, drearily, "and what weather!"

"It is always bad on your day," says Julia, with a carefully suppressed yawn. Julia, when yawning, is not pretty. "I remember when I was here last year, that Thursday, as a rule, was the most melancholy day in the week."

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Indeed, as she speaks, she looks more than melancholy, almost aggrieved. She has donned her most sensational garments (there is any amount of red about them) and her most *recherché* cap to greet the country, and naught cometh but the rain.

"I don't know anything more melancholy at any time than one's at-home day," says Dicky Browne, meditatively, and very sorrowfully; "It is like Sunday, it puts every one out of sorts, and creates evil tempers all round. I never yet knew any family that didn't go down to zero when brought face to face with the fact that to-day they must receive their friends."

"It's a pity you can't talk sense," says Dulce, with a small curl of her upper lip.

"It's a pity I *can*, you mean. I am too above-board, too genuine for the times in which we live. My candor will be my ruin!" says Mr. Browne, hopelessly unabashed.

"It will!" declares Roger, in a tone that perhaps it will be wise not to go into.

"I suppose nobody will come here to-day," says Portia, somewhat disappointedly; they have been indoors all day, and have become so low in spirit, that even the idea of possible visitors is to be welcomed with delight.

"Nobody," returns Sir Mark, "except the Boers and Miss Gaunt, and *they* are utter certainties; they always come; they never fail us; they are thoroughly safe people in every respect."

"If Miss Gaunt inflicts herself upon us to-day (which the gods forbid), be sure you pitch into her about the cook she sent you," says Roger, gloomily, turning to Dulce. "That will be a topic of conversation at all events; you owe me a debt of gratitude for suggesting it."

"Well I shan't pay it," says Miss Blount, with decision.

"Well you *ought*. As a rule, the attempts at conversation down here are calculated to draw tears to the eyes of any intellectual person."

"But why?" asks Portia, indolently.

"It is utterly simple," says Roger, mildly. "There is nothing to talk about; you cannot well ask people what they had for dinner yesterday, without being rude, and there are no theatres, or concerts, or clubs to discuss, and nobody ever dies (the country is fatally healthy), and nobody ever gets married (because there is nobody to marry), and nothing is ever born, because they were all born years ago, or else have made up their minds never to be born at all. It is, in fact, about as unsatisfactory a neighborhood as any one could wish to inhabit."

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"I dare say there are worse," says Dulce.

"You have strong faith," retorts Roger.

"Well, it would be a nice question to decide," says Sir Mark, amiably, with a view to restoring order.

"I don't think it is half a bad place," says Dicky Browne, genially, addressing nobody in particular, and talking for the mere sake of hearing his own voice.

"Dicky, I love you," says Dulce, triumphantly.

"Lucky Dicky," says Roger, with an only half-suppressed sneer, which brings down upon him a withering glance from his betrothed.

"How I hate rain," she says, pettishly, tapping the window with two impatient little fingers.

"I love it," says Roger, unpleasantly.

"Love rain!" with an air of utter disbelief. "How can you make such a ridiculous remark! I never heard of *any* one who liked rain."

"Well, you hear of me now. *I* like it."

"Oh! nonsense," says Miss Blount, contemptuously.

"It *isn't* nonsense!" exclaims he, angrily, "I suppose I am entitled to my own likes and dislikes. You can hate rain as much as you do *me* if you wish it; but at least allow me to—"

"Love it, as you do me," with an artificial laugh, and a soft shrug of her rounded shoulders. "It is perfectly absurd, in spite of your obstinate determination to say you do, I don't believe you *can* have a desire for wet weather."

"Thank you!" indignantly. "That is simply giving me the lie direct. I must say you *can* be uncivil when you choose."

"Uncivil!"

"Decidedly uncivil, and even more than that."

"What do you mean! I insist on knowing what you mean by more."

"They're at it again," says Mr. Browne, at this auspicious moment, waving his hand in an airy fashion in the direction of our two belligerents.

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Mr. Browne is a person who can always say and do what he likes for several reasons, the principal being that nobody pays the smallest attention to either his sayings or doings. Everybody likes Dicky, and Dicky, as a rule, likes everybody. He has a father and a home somewhere, but where (especially with regard to the former), is vague.

The home, certainly, is kept up for nobody except the servants, as neither Dicky nor his father ever put in an appearance there. The latter (who has never yet mastered the fact that he is growing old), spends all his time in the favorite window of his Club in Pall Mall, with his nose pressed against the pane and his attention irrevocably fixed upon the passers-by on the other side of the way. This is his sole occupation from morning till night; unless one can take notice of a dismal and most diabolical tattoo that at unfortunate moments he is in the habit of inflicting upon the window, and the nerves of the other occupants of the room in which he may be.

Dicky puts in most of his time at Blount Hall. Indeed, it has grown to be a matter of speculation with the Blount's whether in the event of his marriage he will not elect to bring his bride also to stay with them for good and all! They have even gone so far as to hope he will marry a *nice* girl, and one whom they can receive in the spirit of love.

"I don't think they really ever quite enjoy themselves, until they are on the verge of bloodshed," says Sir Mark, in answer to Dicky's remark. "They are the very oddest pair I ever met."

All this is said quite out loud, but so promising is the quarrel by this time, that neither Dulce nor Roger hear one word of it.

"You do it on purpose," Dulce is saying in a tone in which tears and extreme wrath fight for mastery, "You torment me from morning till night. You are both rude and unkind to me. And now—*now*—what is it you have just said?"

"What have I said?" asks Roger, who is plainly frightened.

"What indeed! I should be ashamed to repeat it. But I know you said I was uncivil, and that I told lies, and any amount of things that were even worse."

"What on earth is the matter now with you two children?" asks Sir Mark, coming for the second time to the rescue.

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"I'm sure *I* don't know," says Roger, desperately. "It was all about the rain, I think. She is angry because I like it. How can I help that? I can't be born again with other preferences just to oblige *her*."

"There is some comfort in *that* thought," says Miss Blount, vindictively. "One of you in a century is *quite* sufficient."

"Oh! come now, Dulce," protests Sir Mark, kindly. "You don't mean that, you know. And besides only pretty speeches should come from pretty lips."

"Well, he does nothing but tease me," says Dulce, tearfully. "He makes my life perfectly wretched to me."

"How *can* you say that!" exclaims Dare, indignantly. "I spend my whole time trying to please you—in vain! It is your own temper is at fault."

"You hear that?" exclaims Dulce, triumphantly, turning to Sir Mark, who is trying vainly to edge in one word.

"I maintain what I say," goes on Roger, hurriedly, fearful lest Sir Mark if he gets time, will say something to support Dulce's side of the question. "It *can't* be my fault. You know I am very fond of you. There have even been moments," says Mr. Dare, superbly, "when if you had asked me to

lie down and let you trample on me, I should have done it!"

"Then do it!" says Dulce, with decision. "Now this moment. I am in an awful temper, and my heels are an inch and a half high. I should perfectly *love* to trample on you. So make haste"—imperiously, "hurry, I'm waiting."

"I shan't," says Dare; "I shan't make myself ridiculous for a girl who detests me."

"Now, isn't that just like him?" says Dulce, appealing to the company at large, who are enjoying themselves intensely—notably Mr. Brown. "Simply because I told him it would give me some slight pleasure if he fulfilled his promise, he has decided on breaking it. He has refused to keep his solemn word, just to vex me."

"That is not my reason."

"Then you are afraid of the high-heeled shoes," with a scornful laugh.

"I am afraid of nothing," hotly.

"Not even of ridicule?"

"Well, yes, I *am* afraid of that. Most fellows are. But I don't wish to carry on the argument, I have nothing more to say to you."

"Nor I to you. I hope you will never address me again as long as you live. Ah!" glancing out of the window, with an assumption of the most extreme relief and joy—"Here is Mr. Gower coming across the lawn. I *am* glad. Now, at least, I shall have some one to talk to me, who will not scold and quarrel incessantly, and who can sometimes behave like a gentleman."

"Tell him so. It will raise him to the seventh heaven of delight, no doubt," says Roger, in an indescribable tone.

"I thought it was arranged that we were not to speak to each other again," says Dulce, with considerable severity.

Now Portia, being strange to the household, is a little frightened, and a good deal grieved by this passage at arms.

"Is it really so bad as they would have us think?" she says, in a low tone, to Sir Mark, whom she has beckoned to her side. "Is it really all over between them?"

"Oh, dear, no!" says Sir Mark, with the fine smile that characterizes his lean, dark face. "Don't make yourself unhappy; *we* are quite accustomed to their idiosyncrasies by this time; you, of course, have yet much to learn. But, when I tell you that, to my certain knowledge, they have bid each other an eternal adieu every week during the past three years, you will have your first lesson in the art of understanding them."

"Ah! you give me hope," says Portia, smiling.

At this moment Mr. Gower enters the room.

"Ah! how d'ye do!" says Dulce, nestling up to him, her soft skirts making a gentle *frou-frou* as she moves; "so glad you have come. You are late, are you not?" She gives him her hand, and smiles up into his eyes. To all the others her excessive cordiality means only a desire to chagrin Dare, to Stephen Gower it means—well, perhaps, at this point of their acquaintance he hardly knows what it means—but it certainly heightens her charms in his sight.

"Am I?" he says, in answer to her remark. "That is just what has been puzzling me. My watch has gone to the bad, and all the way here I have felt as if the distance between my place and the Hall was longer than I had ever known it before. If I am to judge by my own impatience to be here, I am late, indeed."

She smiles again at this, and says, softly:

"You are not wet, I hope? Such a day to come out. It was a little rash, was it not?"

With the gentlest air of solicitude she lays one little white jeweled hand upon his coat sleeve, as though to assure herself no rain had alighted there. Gower laughs gaily.

"Wet? No," he says, gazing at her with unmistakable admiration. His eyes betray the fact that he would gladly have lifted the small jeweled hand from his arm to his lips; but, as it is, he does not dare so much as to touch it though never so lightly. "Rain does me more good than harm," he says.

"How did you come?" asks she, still charmingly anxious about his well-being.

"I rode. A very good mare, too; though it seemed to me she never traveled so slowly as to-day."

"You rode? Ah! then you got all that last heavy shower," says Dulce, who has plainly made up her mind to go in for compassion of the very purest and simplest.

"My *dear* fellow!" puts in Roger at this juncture, "you don't half consider yourself. Why on earth didn't you order out the covered carriage and a few fur rugs?"

Gower colors; but Roger is smiling so naturally that he cannot, without great loss of courtesy,

take offence. Treating Dare's remark, however, as beneath notice, he turns and addresses himself solely to Dulce.

"To tell you the truth," he says, calmly, "I adore rain. A sunny hour is all very well in its way, and possesses its charms, no doubt, but for choice give me a rattling good shower."

To Roger, of course, this assertion, spoken so innocently, is quite too utterly delicious. Indeed, everybody smiles more or less, as he or she remembers the cause of the quarrel a moment since. Had Gower been thinking for ever, he could hardly have made a speech so calculated to annoy Dulce as that just made. To add to her discomfiture, Roger laughs aloud, a somewhat bitter, irritating laugh, that galls her to the quick.

"I must say I cannot sympathize with your taste," she says, very petulantly, to Gower; and then, before that young man has time to recover from the shock received through the abrupt change of her manner from "sweetness and light" to transcendental gloom, she finishes his defeat by turning her back upon him, and sinking into a chair beside Portia. [80]

"A gleam of sunshine at last," exclaims Sir Mark, at this moment, coming for the third time to the surface, in the fond hope of once more restoring peace to those around.

"Ah, yes, it is true," says Portia, holding up her hand to let the solitary beam light upon it. It lies there willingly enough, and upon her white gown, and upon her knitting needles, that sparkle like diamonds beneath its touch.

"And the rain has ceased," says Julia. "How nice of it. By-the-by, where is Fabian?"

"You know he never sees anyone," says Dulce, a little reproachfully, and in a very low tone.

"But why?" asks Portia, turning her face to Dulce. Even as she speaks she regrets her question, and she colors a hot, beautiful crimson as the quick vehemence of her tone strikes on her own ears.

Sir Mark, leaning over her chair, says:

"Two lessons in one day? Ambitious pupil! Well, if you must learn, know this: Fabian never goes anywhere, except to church, and never receives anybody even in his own home, for a reason that, I suppose, even you are acquainted with." He looks keenly at her as he speaks.

"Yes—I know—that is, I have heard, of course," says Portia, in a very still fashion, bending her eyes upon her knitting once more.

"How suddenly the rain has ceased," says some one; "it will be a very charming evening after all."

"The flowers are already beginning to hold up their poor heads," says Dulce, gazing down anxiously at the "garden quaint and fair" that stretches itself beneath the window. The skies are clearing, the clouds are melting away, far up above in the dark blue dome that overshadows the earth.

"The great Minister of Nature, that upon the world imprints the virtue of the heaven, and doles out Time for us with his beam," is coming slowly into view from between two dusky clouds, and is flinging abroad his yellow gleams of light.

"I hear wheels," says Dicky Browne, suddenly. [81]

Everybody wakes up at once; and all the women try surreptitiously to get a glimpse of their hair in the mirrors.

"Who can it be?" says Dulce, anxiously.

"If we went to the upper window we could see," says Dicky Browne, kindly, whereupon they all rise in a body, and, regardless of tempers and dignity, run to the window that overlooks the avenue, and gaze down upon the gravel to see who fate may be bringing them.

It brings them a vehicle that fills them with consternation—a vehicle that it would be charitable to suppose was built in the dark ages, and had never seen the light until now. It is more like a sarcophagus than anything else, and is drawn by the fossilized remains of two animals that perhaps in happier times were named horses. For to-day, to enable their mistress to reach Blount Hall, they have plainly been galvanized, and have, in fact, traversed the road that lies between the Hall and Blount Hollow on strictly scientific principles.

"The Gaunt equipage!" says Dicky Browne, in an awestruck tone. Nobody answers him. Everybody is overfilled with a sense of oppression, because of the fact; that the ancient carriage beneath contains a still more ancient female, fatally familiar to them all. Smiles fade from their faces. All is gloom.

Meantime, the coachman (who has evidently come straight from the Ark), having turned some handle that compels the galvanized beasts to come to a standstill, descends, with slow and fearful steps, to the ground.

He has thrown the reins to another old man who is sitting on the box beside him, and who, though only ten years his junior, is always referred to by him as "the boy." Letting down a miraculous amount of steps, he gives his arm to a dilapidated old woman, who, with much

dignity, and more difficulty, essays to reach the gravel.

"Some day or other, when out driving," says Dicky Browne, meditatively, "those three old people will go to sleep, and those animated skeletons will carry them to the land where they would *not* be."

Then a step is heard outside, and they all run back to their seats and sink into them, and succeed in looking exactly as if they had never quitted them for the past three hours, as the door opens and the man announces Miss Gaunt.

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"Remember the puddings," says Dicky Browne, in a careful aside, as Dulce rises to receive her first guest.

She is tall—and gaunt as her name. She is old, but strong-minded. She affects women's rights, and all that sort of thing, and makes herself excessively troublesome at times. Women, in her opinion, are long-suffering, down-trodden angels; all men are brutes! Meetings got up for the purpose of making men and women detest each other are generously encouraged by her. It is useless to explain her further, as she has little to do with the story, and, of course, you have all met her once (I hope not twice) in your lifetimes.

Dulce goes up to greet her with her usual gracious smile. Then she is gently reminded that she once met Julia Beaufort before, and then she is introduced to Portia. To the men she says little, regarding them probably as beings beneath notice, all, that is, excepting Dicky Browne, who insists on conversing with her, and treating her with the most liberal cordiality, whether she likes it or not.

Dexterously he leads up the conversation, until culinary matters are brought into question, when Miss Gaunt says in her slow, crushing fashion:

"How do you like that last woman I sent you? Satisfactory, eh?"

"Cook, do you mean?" asks Dulce, to gain time.

"Yes—cook," says the old lady, uncompromisingly. "She was"—severely—"in my opinion, one of the best cooks I ever met."

"Yes, of course, I dare say. We just think her cooking a little monotonous," says poor Dulce, feeling as if she is a culprit fresh brought to the bar of justice.

"Monotonous!" says Miss Gaunt, in an affronted tone, giving her bonnet an indignant touch that plants it carefully over her left ear. "I don't think I understand. A monotonous cook! In my day there were bad cooks, and good cooks, and indifferent cooks, but monotonous cooks—never! Am I to believe by your accusation that she repeats herself?"

"Like history; exactly so. Very neat, indeed," says Mr. Browne, approvingly.

"Well, in the matter of puddings, she does—rather," says Dulce, somewhat fearfully.

"Ah! In point of fact, she doesn't suit you," says Miss Gaunt, fixing Dulce with a stony glare.

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"There you are wrong," puts in Mr. Browne, regardless of the fact that she has treated all his other overtures with open contempt, "that is exactly what she does. Don't take a false impression of the case. She *suet*s us tremendously! Doesn't she, Dulce?"

Here Miss Blount, I regret to say, laughs out loud, so does Sir Mark, to everybody's horror. Mr. Browne alone maintains a dignified silence. What Miss Gaunt might or might not have said on this occasion must now forever remain unknown, as Sir Christopher enters at this moment, and shortly after him Mr. Boer.

"Was Florence unable to come? I hope she is quite well," says Dulce, with conventional concern.

"Quite, thank you. But she feared the air."

"The heir?" says Julia Beaufort, inquiringly, turning to Dicky, who is now unhappily quite close to her. Julia, who never listens to anything, has just mastered the fact that Florence Boer is under discussion, and has heard the word "air" mentioned in connection with her.

"Yes. Didn't you hear of it?" says Dicky Browne, confidentially.

"No," says Julia, also, confidentially.

"Why, it is common talk now," says Dicky, as if surprised at her ignorance on a subject so well known to the rest of the community.

"Never heard a word of it," says Julia. "Was it in the papers!"

"N—o. Hardly, I think," says Dicky.

Even as he ceases speaking, three words, emanating from Mr. Boer's ecclesiastical lips, attract Julia's attention. They are as follows: "sun and air!" He, poor man, has just been telling Dulce that his wife (who is slightly hypochondriacal) is very susceptible to the influences of both light and wind. Julia misunderstands. Misled by Dicky's wilfully false insinuation about Florence, whose incessant grievance it is that no baby has come to bless her fireside, she turns to the unfortunate

curate and says blandly.

"Dear Mr. Boer, *so* glad! I never knew of it until this very instant, when I heard you telling Dulce of your sweet little son and heir. I congratulate you. Of course"—coquettishly—"you are very proud of it. Having had three dear babies of my own I can quite rejoice with you and Mrs. Boer."

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Deadly silence follows this outburst. Mr. Boer blushes a dingy red. The others relapse into an awed calm; all is confusion.

Portia is the first to recover herself.

"Dear Dulce, may we have our tea?" she says, sweetly, pointing to the table in the distance, where the man, five minutes ago, had placed the pretty Sèvres cups and saucers.

By this time Julia has awakened to the fact that she has committed herself in some way unknown to her; has, in fact, taken a false step not now to be retrieved.

"What lovely cups!" she says, therefore, very hurriedly, to Dulce, pointing to the Sèvres on the distant table, with a view to covering her confusion; "so chaste—so unique. I adore old china. I myself am something of a connoisseur. Whenever I have a spare penny," with an affected little laugh, "I go about collecting it."

"I wish she would collect herself," says Dicky Browne, in a careful aside; "I'm sure it is quite awful the way she has just behaved to poor Boer. Putting him in such an awkward position, you know. He looks just as if he had been found guilty of some social misdemeanor. Look at him, Dulce, he isn't going to have a fit, is he?"

"I hope not," says Dulce, with a furtive glance at the discomfited Boer, "but what could have induced Julia to make that unlucky speech? Dicky, you horrid boy, I believe you could tell the truth about it if you would."

"I object to your insinuation," says Mr. Browne, "and I object also to being called a boy. Though, after all"—reflectively—"I don't see why I should. The difference between the boy and man is so slight that nobody need create a feud about it. A boy has apples, toffy, twine and penknives in his pocket—a young man has a pipe instead. It is really of no consequence, and perhaps the pipe is the cleanest. I give in, therefore, and I am *not* offended."

"But still, you have not answered me," says the astute Dulce. "Did you incite Julia to make that unpleasant speech?"

"I'd scorn to answer such a question," says Mr. Browne, loftily. "What a likely thing, indeed. If I had incited her she would have made a great deal more of her opportunity. 'Success,' says James, 'is passionate effort.' I made no effort, but—"

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"Nonsense," says Dulce. "She made a most disgraceful lot of *her* effort, at all events, and I do believe you were the instigator."

"You wrong me every way, you wrong me, Brutus," quotes Mr. Browne, reproachfully. "However, let that pass. Tea is ready, I think. Pour it out, and be merciful."

Thus adjured, Miss Blount pours it out. She looks so utterly sweet in her soft leaf-green tea gown as she does it, that Mr. Gower, in spite of her unkindness of an hour ago, feels sufficient courage to advance and offer himself a candidate for unlimited cups of tea.

He is quite three minutes at her elbow before she deigns to notice him. Then she turns; and letting her eyes rest on him as though she is for the first time made aware of his proximity, though in truth she has known of it for the past sixty seconds, she says, calmly—

"Bread and butter, or cake, Mr. Gower?" quite as innocently as if she is ignorant (which she is not) of his desire to be near her.

"Neither, thank you," says Stephen, gravely. "It was not that brought me to—"

"But, please, do have some cake," says Miss Blount, lifting her eyes to his, and making him a present of a sweet and most unexpected smile. As she says this, she holds out to him on a plate a pretty little bit of plum cake, which she evidently expects him to devour with relish. It is evident, too, that she presents it to him as a peace-offering, and as a sign that all animosity is at an end between them.

"No, thank you," says Mr. Gower, decidedly, but gratefully, and with a very tender smile, meant as a return for hers.

"Oh, but you must, indeed!" declares she, in a friendly fashion, with a decisive shake of the head and uplifted brows.

Now, Mr. Gower, poor soul, hates cake.

"Thanks, awfully," he says, in a deprecating tone, "I know it's nice, very nice, but—er—the fact is I can't bear cake. It—it's horrid, I think."

"Not this one," says Dulce remorselessly—"you have never eaten a cake like this. Let me let you into a little secret; I am very fond of cooking, and I made this cake *all myself*, with my own

hands, every bit of it! There! Now, you really must eat it, you know, or I shall think you are slighting my attempts at housewifery."

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"Oh! if you really made it *yourself*," says the doomed young man, in a resigned tone, trying to light his rejected countenance with an artificial smile, "that makes such a difference, you know. I shall quite enjoy it now. But—er"—glancing doubtfully at her small white hands, "did you really make it yourself?"

"Should I say it, if not sure?" reproachfully; "I even mixed it all up, *so*," with a pantomimic motion of her fingers, that suggests the idea of tearing handfuls of hair out of somebody's head. "I put in the raisins and currants and everything myself, while cook looked on. And she says I shall be quite a grand cook myself presently if—if I keep to it; she says, too, I have quite the right turn in my wrists for making cakes."

"Is this the cook you don't like?" asks he, gloomily, while sadly consuming the cake she has pressed upon him. He is eating it slowly and with care; there is, indeed, no exuberant enjoyment in his manner, no touch of refined delight as he partakes of the delicacy manufactured by his dainty hostess.

"Yes," says Miss Blount, in a somewhat changed tone. "But what do *you* know of her?"

"I think she's a humbug," says Gower, growing more moody every instant.

"Then you mean, of course, that she didn't mean one word she said to me, and that—that in effect, I can't make cakes?" says Dulce, opening her large eyes, and regarding him in a manner that embarrasses him to the last degree. He rouses himself, and makes a supreme effort to retrieve his position.

"How could you imagine I meant that?" he says, putting the last morsel of the cake, with a thankful heart, into his mouth. "I don't know when I have enjoyed anything so much as this."

"Really, you liked it? You thought it—"

"Delicious," with effusion.

"Have some more!" says Dulce, generously, holding out to him the cake plate near her. "Take a big bit. Take"—she has her eyes fixed rather searchingly upon his—" *this* piece."

Something in her manner warns him it will be unwise to refuse; with a sinking heart he takes the large piece of cake she has pointed out to him, and regards it as one might prussic acid. His courage fails him.

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"Must I," he says, turning to her with a sudden and almost tearful change of tone, "must I eat all this?"

"Yes—all!" says Miss Blount, sternly.

Sadly, and in silence, he completes his task. But so slowly that when it is finished he finds Mr. Boer and Miss Gaunt have risen, and are making their adieux to their pretty hostess, and perforce he is bound to follow their example.

When he is gone, Roger gives way to a speech of a somewhat virulent order.

"I must say I think Gower has turned out the most insufferable puppy I ever met," he says, an ill-subdued flash in his handsome eyes.

"Mr. Gower!" exclaims Dulce, in soft tones of wonder, and with a somewhat mocking smile. "Why, it is only a week or two ago since you told me he was your greatest chum or pal, or—I can't really remember at this moment the horrid slang word you used, but I suppose its English was 'friend.'"

"Fellows at school and fellows at college are very different from fellows when they are grown up and launched on their own hook," says Mr. Dare with a frown.

"What an abominably arranged sentence," says Sir Mark, with his fine smile, coming to the rescue for the third time to-day. "I couldn't follow it up. How many fellows were at school?—and how many at college?—and how many were grown up? It sounds like a small army!"

At this Roger laughs, and moves away to the upper end of the room, where Julia is sitting. Dulce shrugs her wilful little shoulders, and taking up the huge white cat that lies on the rug at her feet, kisses it, and tells it in an undertone that it is a "dear sweet" and a "puss of snow," and that all the wide world is cross and cranky, and disagreeable, except its own lovely self.

She has just arrived at this uncomplimentary conclusion about mankind generally, when Dicky Browne, who is standing at one of the lower windows, says abruptly:

"I say; look at Quail and her new puppies. Who let them out?"

At this Miss Blount drops the white cat suddenly, and, cruelly regardless of her indignant mew, rushes to catch a glimpse of the new pups; Roger rises precipitately from his chair, on the same purpose bent. As all the other windows are occupied, except the one nearest the fireplace, both he and Dulce make for it together.

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Quail the red setter, proud and happy, is marching past on the gravel outside, her two sons beside her. The yellowest puppy has purloined a bone from some unknown quarter, and is carrying it with him triumphantly. His brother, eyeing him furtively from time to time, is plainly filled with envy because of his good luck, and is inwardly consumed with a desire to make the delicacy above-mentioned his own.

At length avarice conquers prudence; there is a snap, two snarls, and a violent tussle, during which both puppies roll over and over each other on the damp path, and finally, the mother interfering, seizes the bone of contention as her own, and in canine language, desires the two culprits to follow her with hang-dog looks and lowered tails, to their kennel.

"Ha, ha, ha!" says Roger, forgetful of everything but the pretty pups and their tiny war.

"Ha, ha, ha!" says Dulce, equally unmindful of the stormy past. "How sweet they looked, naughty things. And how they *did* bark and bite. Dr. Watts should have been here to see them."

"I wonder will they get that bone back?" says Roger, turning to her, all animosity forgotten in the pleasurable excitement of the moment.

"Let us come and see," exclaims she, with considerable animation, and in the friendliest tone imaginable. She glances up at him from under her long lashes with one of her brightest and sunniest smiles, and moves a step nearer to him.

"We must run if we want to be in time for the finish," says Roger—"come."

He takes her hand, and together they move towards the door. They are, apparently, as happy and as good friends as if no harsh words had ever passed between them.

"Going out now," says Julia, as they pass the low wicker chair in which she is lounging, "so late?"

"Don't be long, Dulce," says Portia, in her plaintive way. "I miss you when you are out of my sight."

"I shan't be any time," says Dulce.

"Mr. Gower said it was going to rain, and it is a long way to the yard," says Julia again. "Stay here, and keep dry."

"I suppose Gower is not infallible," says Roger, hastily. "I think it will not rain."

"I think so too," says Dulce, adorably; "and as for Mr. Gower, I only know one thing; I shall never give *him* any of my own cake again, because he looked just as if he was going to die, or have a tooth drawn, all the time he was eating it to-day."

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Then they disappear, still hand-in-hand, in search of the refractory puppies, and Portia, turning to Sir Mark, says softly:

"What am I to think now? How is it with them? Have they—"

"Yes; quite that," says Sir Mark, airily. "All is forgotten; the storm is over—not even a breeze remains. The delicate charms of two snarling puppies have put an end to strife—for the present. Let us be grateful for small mercies—and the puppies."

"It is very wonderful," says Portia, still showing some soft surprise.

CHAPTER XI.

"There's something in a flying horse."

—PETER BELL.

"For of fortunes sharpe adversite,
The worst kind of infortune is this,
A man that hath been in prosperite
And it remember, whan it passed is!"

—CHAUCER.

"WHERE are you going, Uncle Christopher?" asks Dulce, as Sir Christopher enters the small drawing-room, booted and spurred for a long journey.

Portia, in the distance, bending over an easel; Julia is forming some miraculous flower, that never yet was seen by land or sea, on a coarse towel, with some crewel wools; the Boodie is lying on her little fat stomach, drawing diligently with a slate and pencil; Dulce, charmingly idle, is leaning back in a lounging chair, doing nothing.

"To Warminster," says Sir Christopher "What shall I bring you girls from that sleepy little town?"

"Something sweet," says Dulce, going up to him, and laying her soft arms lovingly round his neck.

"Like yourself," says Sir Christopher.

"Now that is sarcasm," says Miss Dulce, patting his fresh old cheek very fondly. "I meant chocolates, or burnt almonds, or even everton toffy, if all things fail."

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"And what shall I bring the others?" asks Sir Christopher, laughing; "you have a sweet tooth, you naughty child, perhaps they haven't."

"I have," says Portia, turning round on her seat. "Bring us as much as ever you can."

"Burnt almonds are my chief delight," murmurs Julia, affectedly and somewhat absently, being sick with grief, because she cannot reconcile it to her conscience that the stem of an arum lily should be peacock blue.

"Bring some crackers," says the Boodie, suddenly warming into life, and so far condescending to notice Sir Christopher as to roll round her portly person until she lies prone upon her back. From this dignified position she eyes Sir Christopher magisterially. "*Real* crackers, mind," she says severely, "that will say c-r-r-rack, and show fire! those last you brought"—contemptuously—"were a humbug!"

"Elizabeth!" exclaims her mother in a would-be shocked tone (the Boodie rejoices in that lengthy name), "what *are* you saying?"

"The truth," says the Boodie, unflinchingly; "the last he brought were a reg'lar swindle—ask Jacky; why they wouldn't go off even if you *stamped* on 'em."

She so plainly—by the severity of her glance—conveys to every one the impression that she believes Sir Christopher on that last unfortunate occasion had purposely bought for them crackers beneath notice, that the poor old gentleman, though innocent of offence, feels himself growing warm beneath her relentless gaze.

"It wasn't my fault, my dear," he says, apologetically; "I quite meant them to go off. I did, indeed."

"Perhaps so. Take care, however, it doesn't occur again," says the Boodie, with so careful, though unconscious, an imitation of her mother's manner when addressing her maid, that they all laugh, whereupon she rolls back again to her former position, and takes no further notice of them.

Just at this moment Fabian enters the room.

"Going to drive to Warminster?" he asks his uncle.

"Yes."

"Not Bess, I hope?" alluding to a very objectionable young mare in the stables.

"Yes," says Sir Christopher again. "Why not?"

"She is utterly unsafe. About the worst thing in chestnuts I ever met. I took her out myself the other day—rode her straight from this to Grange; and I confess, I should not care to do it again. Take one of the other horses, and let that beast lie quiet until you can get rid of her."

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"Nonsense!" says Sir Christopher, scornfully; "I wouldn't part with her for any money. She is the greatest beauty this side of the county."

"Her beauty is her one point; for the rest, she is vindictive and ill-mannered."

"Don't do anything foolish, dearest," says Dulce, with her eyes large and frightened. "Do listen to Fabian."

"And let myself be conquered by a pettish chestnut, at my age," says Sir Christopher, lightly—he had been a famous horseman in his day. "My dear child, you don't understand, and there are moments when Fabian romances. To satisfy you, however, I shall take George with me."

"Wilful man must have his way," quotes Fabian, with a slight shrug. "Before I go out, shall I look over those accounts with Slyme?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the warren, with the others, to have a few shots at the rabbits; they overrun the place."

"Very good. Just ask Slyme about the accounts. By-the-by, he gets more irregular daily."

"More drunk, do you mean?" says Fabian. There are moments when his manner is both cold and uncompromising.

Portia regards him curiously.

"Yes! yes! Just so," says Sir Christopher, hastily. "But for the melancholy story that attaches itself to him—and that, of course, is some excuse for him—I really should not feel myself justified in keeping him here much longer."

"What story?" asks Portia.

"Oh! well; it all lies in a nutshell. It is an old story, too; one has so often heard it. A bad son—dissipated—in perpetual hot water. A devoted father. Then, one day, a very bad story comes, and the son has to fly the country. And then, some time afterward, news comes of his death. Slyme never saw him again. He broods over that, I think; at least, he has never been the same man since the son, Matthew, left England. It was all a very unhappy business."

"For the father, perhaps. For the son, he had more than ordinary luck to die as soon as he did," says Fabian. He does not speak at all bitterly. Only hopelessly, and without heart or feeling. [92]

"Nobody knows how old Gregory got him out of the country so cleverly," says Sir Christopher. "It was a marvel how he managed to elude the grasp of the law."

"He satisfied the one principal creditor, I suppose?" says Fabian, indifferently.

"Oh! impossible," says Sir Christopher. "It came to hundreds, you know; and he hadn't a farthing. Well, good-by; I'm off. Expect me and the bon-bons about dinner-hour."

He nods to Portia and Julia, who smile at him in return, and, kissing Dulce, quits the room.

Fabian, following him, goes on to the library; and, having desired one of the men to send the secretary, Slyme, to him, sits down at one of the tables and turns over leisurely the pages of accounts that lie there.

After a brief examination, he tells himself impatiently that they are somewhat muddled, or have, at least, been attended to in a most slovenly manner. He has just discovered a serious mistake in the row of figures that adorns the end of the second page, when the door opens slowly, and Gregory Slyme comes in.

"Wait one moment, Slyme," says Fabian, without looking up from the figures before him. A moment passes in utter silence. Then Fabian, still with his eyes upon the account, says, somewhat sharply: "Why, it is altogether wrong. It has been attended to with extreme carelessness. Did you, yourself, see to this matter of Younge's?"

He waits, apparently for an answer but none comes. Lifting his eyes he fixes them scrutinizingly on the old man before him, and having fixed them, lets them rest there in displeased surprise.

Slyme, beneath this steady gaze, grows visibly uneasy. His eyes shift uncomfortably from one object in the room to another; his limbs are unsteady; the hand resting on the table near him is shaking. His face betrays vacancy mixed with a cunning desire to hide from observation the heaviness and sluggishness that is overpowering him.

"Speak," says Fabian, sternly and remorselessly; "you can frame an answer, I suppose." [93]

The old man mutters something that is almost unintelligible, so thick and husky are his tones. His eyes grow more restless;—mechanically, and as though unconscious of the act, he leans his body stupidly against the book-case near him.

"You are drunk," says Fabian, with slow scorn—"leave the room."

Having said this he turns again to his papers, as though from this moment contemptuously unaware of the other's presence.

Slyme attempts an explanation:

"You wrong me, sir," he says, in a thick uncertain voice—"I—I am ill—; my head is bad at times—I—"

"That will do," says Fabian, such ineffable disgust in his whole manner as makes the miserable, besotted old wretch before him actually cower. "No more lies. I have spoken to you already twice this week—and—; do you know what hour it is?—twelve o'clock! you begin your day early."

"I assure you, sir," begins Slyme again. But Fabian will not listen:

"Go," he says, briefly, with a disdainful motion of the hand, and in a tone not to be disobeyed. Slyme moves towards the door in his usual slouching fashion, but, as he reaches it, pauses, and for one instant lifts his heavy eyes, and lets them rest upon the young man at the distant table.

This one instant reveals his thoughts. In his glance there is fear, distrust, and, above and beyond all, a malignant and undying hatred—such a hatred as might project itself from the eyes of the traitor upon his victim. There is, too, upon Slyme's face a contortion of the muscles, that it would be sacrilege to call a smile, that is revengeful, and somehow suggests the possibility that this man, however impotent he may now appear, has, in some strange fashion, acquired a hidden and terrible power over the young man, who a moment since had treated him with such scorn and contumely.

The old secretary's countenance for this fateful moment is one brilliant, if wicked phantasmagoria, in which the ghosts of long sustained thoughts appear and disappear, going from fear and its brother, hatred, to lasting revenge. Then all vanish; the usual soddened look returns to the man's face; he opens the door, and once more, instead of the evil genius he looked a second ago, a broken-down, drunken old creature crosses the threshold, shambles over the hall, [94]

and is lost presently amongst the many passages.

Meantime, *ennui* is reigning triumphantly in the drawing-room, more conspicuously in the case of Dulce.

"Hey-day," she says, with a little, idle yawn; "how I do wish everybody would not go out shooting, all at once. I think they might take it by turns. But all men are selfish; they never consider how lonely we may be."

"Why should one miss them?" says Julia, who in her soul considers every moment unoccupied by the society of a man (that is a possible lover) as time misspent.

"I don't know," says Dulce, candidly; "I am only sure of this, that I want them always."

Portia says nothing.

"Well, certainly, at times they are amusing," says Mrs. Beaufort, as though just awaking to the fact that now and again one *can* find a man with some wit or humor in him—"and I honestly confess"—with a little laugh and a great assumption of candor—"that I wish even Stephen Gower would drop in now and help us to pass away an hour or two."

"*Even* Stephen Gower!" repeats Dulce. "Julia, what has that poor young man done to you, that you should speak thus meanly of him? *Even*, what an unkind word!"

"I don't believe I quite meant it, do you know," says Julia, relenting. "I like Stephen Gower very much. By-the-by, what do you think of him? I never yet heard you express an opinion, good or bad, about him. Do it now."

Leaning back in her chair, Dulce slowly and thoughtfully raises her arms in the air, with her fingers tipping each other, until presently they fall indolently behind her head, where she lets them lie.

"Well, let me see," she says, lazily, "I think, perhaps, like Chaucer's man, he is a 'veray parfit gentil knight.'"

Portia lifts her eyes from her painting and turns them slowly upon her cousin; she regards her very silently for a moment or two, and then she smiles, and leaning forward, opens her lips.

"And of his port as meke as is a mayde," she says, mischievously, purposely choosing the same poet for her quotation that Dulce had taken for hers. [95]

Miss Blount laughs.

"You, too, are severe upon our neighbor," she says, defending him more from obstinacy than from real desire to see justice done. "I confess he is at times a trifle too mild, but not effeminate, surely?"

"He is very handsome," says Portia, evasively.

"He has a charming mouth," says Dulce.

"I think you ought only to look at Roger's mouth," says Julia, prudishly, whereupon Dulce shrugs her shoulders, impatiently, and, turning, devotes herself for the next ten minutes to the small artist lying at her feet—an attention received by the imperturbable Boody with the most exasperating unconcern.

The afternoon wanes; day is sinking to its rest. Behind the tall dark firs "the great gold sun-god, blazing through the sky" may still be seen, but now he grows weary, and would fain give place to his sister, the pale moon.

"The sweet keen smell—the sighing sound" of coming night is on the air. The restless ocean is rolling inland with a monotonous roar; there is scarcely sufficient breeze to ruffle the leaves of the huge chestnut that stands near one corner of the old house, not far from the balcony outside the drawing-room windows, where Mrs. Beaufort and the two girls are sitting.

The children are playing somewhere in the distance. Their sweet and merry voices come up to the balcony now and then, and mingle with the breath of descending night.

And now from beneath the fir trees two figures emerge, and come towards the stone steps where their hostess is sitting.

"Are you clean?" asks Dulce, with a charming smile, leaning over the railings to see them better as they draw closer.

"To confess a horrid truth, I don't believe we are," says Stephen Gower, glancing up at her, and regarding his rough shooting coat somewhat ruefully. "Will that admission exclude us from Paradise?"

"Dulce," says Dicky Browne, who is the second of the two figures, "I'm worn out. I've been walking all day, a thing I very seldom do; I have been firing off an unlimited number of cartridges, without, I am bound to confess—I am, as experience has doubtless taught you, a [96]

remarkably truthful person—without any very brilliant consequences, and I feel that very little more fatigue will be my death. Have compassion on us. We faint, we die; show mercy and give us some tea and some cake. You're awfully hungry, Gower, aren't you?"

"Well, not very," says Mr. Gower, too occupied in his contemplation of Dulce's charming face to be quite alive to what is so plainly expected of him.

"Oh, nonsense! He is tremendously hungry," says Dicky Browne. "Let us up, Dulce, and we will sit out there on the balcony, and won't soil anything. Except gore, there isn't much staining about us."

"But that is worse than anything," says Dulce with a shudder. "However, come up, and if you keep *very* far away, I daresay I shan't mind much."

"Hard conditions," says Gower, in a lower tone.

So tea is got for them again, and the children, who always seem to *feel* when plum-cake is to be had, come trooping noisily up the steps to join, uninvited, in the festivities.

Great content follows, and, indeed, all is peace until something said by the Boodie creates a confusion that sweeps calm to the winds. She has *ensconced* herself on Mr. Gower's knee, without saying so much as "by your leave" or "with your leave," and now, raising one soft little dimpled hand to his chin, turns his face towards her own, and for a full minute regards him with silent curiosity.

"Well, is your Highness satisfied?" says Gower, feeling amused.

The Boodie takes no notice of this enquiry. She puckers up her smooth brows as if puzzled, and then says, slowly—

"I don't believe one word of it!"

"Of what?" says Gower. Everybody by this time is looking at the Boodie, and the Boodie is steadfastly regarding Stephen Gower.

"It wasn't true what she said," goes on the Boodie, meditatively, "because you have hair on your lip. *Girls* don't have hair on their lips—do they?"

"Not as a general rule," says Dicky Browne. "There *have* been noble exceptions, but unhappily they are rare. Miss Gaunt is perhaps the only girl down here who can boast of hirsute adornment, and the growth upon her upper lip is not to be despised. But then she belongs to the higher and more powerful class of females, in fact, as Wordsworth so touchingly expresses it, she

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'Wears upon her forehead clear
The freedom of a mountaineer.'

I always—mildly—think Wordsworth must have been acquainted with Miss Gaunt."

"Go on," says Stephen to the Boodie, who is still lost in thought. "You have not yet told me what it is you disbelieve."

"It was something Portia said," returns the Boodie, composedly.

"That *I* said! surely you are mistaken, darling," says Portia.

"No, I am not," persists the Boodie, in an unmoved tone.

"Stephen," again turning his face to hers, "are you 'meke'?"

At this word all the truth becomes at once known to Portia and Dulce. The Boodie had been in the room when they were discussing Stephen with her mother. She had heard everything. She is a little pitcher—she has long ears. Can nothing be done to stop her further speech?

"He is a very nice boy, but I'm not prepared to go as far as calling him meek," says Dicky Browne, who begins to scent mischief in the air. "Who applied that word to him?"

"I think it is time all you children ran away to nurse," says Julia, in answer to an agonized glance from both girls.

"It was Portia," says the Boodie to Dicky Browne, in her sweet innocent treble. "Dulce said first he was a 'knight,' and then Portia said he was a 'meek maid.' She said something, too, about 'port,' but I don't think she meant Uncle Christopher's port; I think she meant Stephen's."

Deadly silence follows this bombshell. As Mr. Gower, only the day before, had been reading the "Canterbury Tales" for them in his very best old English style, it is impossible to believe the two quotations from them, used in the morning, are not now alive in his memory.

Gower colors, and looks questioningly at Dulce. His expression is not altogether one of chagrin. The child had said she (Dulce) had called him a knight—"a veray parfit gentil knight" it must have been. There is comfort, and even gladness in this thought; so much comfort, that he even feels inclined to forgive Portia for comparing him to a "mayde." Still, some awkwardness is naturally felt by all—except the Boodie, who yawns indifferently, and finally follows the other children up to the nursery—and every one is vainly trying to think of some commonplace remark, that, when uttered, shall have the effect of restoring conversation once more into a safe channel,

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when an interruption occurs that puts chagrin and awkwardness out of their minds for the rest of the evening.

First upon the air the reports of two guns being fired off quickly, one after the other; then the quick flinty sound of a horse's galloping hoofs.

Nearer they came, and still nearer, with that mad haste belonging to them, that suggests unmanageable fury in the brute beast; and as all on the balcony rise simultaneously and press forward to see what may be coming, Bess and the dog-cart turn the corner near the chestnut tree, and dash onwards towards the lower lawn.

Sir Christopher, grim and as full of rage as the animal in whose power he now finds himself, is still holding the reins—but more for form's sake than anything else, as he has no control whatever over the infuriated chestnut, that, with reddened nostrils, and foam-covered flanks, is rushing madly down the green slope.

A sudden rise in the velvet lawn, causing the dog-cart to sway rather much to one side, unseats the groom, who is flung somewhat heavily to the ground. Being fortunately, however, unhurt, he rises hastily, and runs frantically after the mare, as though in foolish hope, that he may yet overtake her and be of some service to his master. With a smothered exclamation, Gower and Dicky Browne dash down the balcony steps to join him in his vain pursuit.

Vain, indeed! At the lower end, by the long lawn, runs a river, small, but swift, and turbulent, that flows for two miles through park, and waving field, and glowing valley, to throw itself finally into the arms of the thirsty ocean.

Towards this the horse is rushing madly. Once on its bank, who shall tell what next may happen. There will be a mad bound—a crash—a cry, perhaps, that will pierce through all other sounds—and then—and Sir Christopher—.

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As these thoughts force themselves upon the girls, they shudder, and involuntarily move closer to each other. Dulce covers her face with her hands, as though to shut out some dreadful sight, and a low dry sob escapes her. Portia, deadly pale, but calm and wide-eyed, is clinging to the balcony rails, and is gazing in speechless fear at the chestnut, that every instant is bringing nearer to the fateful goal. Julia, from time to time, emits short little shrieks of terror, she being the sort of person who, in moments of peril, would be always safe to scream.

Onward flies the mare. Sir Christopher (as yet bolt upright in his seat, and apparently, from the back view they can get of him, still so possessed with rage as to be unconscious of fear) is trying hopelessly to manage her.

Nearer and nearer to the brink of the stream they draw; now they are within a few yards of it; soon help will be of little use, and the panting groom and the two young men who are following him will only be in time to witness more closely the disaster. All seems, indeed, hopeless, when a man, springing from behind the thick laurel hedge that grows on the right, rushes forward, and, seizing Bess by the head by sheer force of mind and body, forces her upon her haunches.

"It is Fabian!" says Portia, in a voice sharp with fear. "Dulce!—Dulce!" there is positive agony in her tone.

Dulce, letting her hands fall from her face, looks up. Julia forgets to scream; all three watch with intensest anxiety the scene being enacted below.

And now ensues a struggle between man and beast; a struggle sharp but short. The beast, frightened, or, perhaps, with fury exhausted, it may be, compelled against its will to acknowledge the superior power of mind over matter—gives way, and after a good deal of prancing stands tolerably quiet, though still trembling from excitement and violent temper.

By this time the groom, with Gower and Dicky Browne, have joined them.

"Get out Sir Christopher," says the groom, in an agitated voice, the swift run having added to his anxiety.

"Not a bit of it," says Sir Christopher, indignantly, "I'll take her back to the stables, or—"

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"Get down at once," says Fabian, in a quick, decided tone. "Don't delay, she is dangerous still and may bolt again at any moment. Besides, you have had enough of it, surely!"

"I'm not going to be conquered by any mare born," says the old Baronet, obstinacy setting it at this point; "what d'ye think I bred her for, eh? To be made a laughing-stock for the county, I suppose, eh? Nothing of the sort. She shall own me as master if I die for it. Here, get out of my way all you boys—"

It is plain Sir Christopher is as yet undaunted, though, in truth, there is danger still; the chestnut is flinging up her head in an uncertain, frightened fashion, scattering angry foam as she does so, and her eyes are showing more white than is seemly.

Fabian, who is still holding the bridle with both hands, looks at his uncle, earnestly, almost, it might be said, curiously.

"If you are bent on taking this brute round yourself, of course, I shall go with you," he says, indifferently. "Hold her head, George, for a moment."

Even as he speaks the mare moves uneasily, and, as the groom approaches, throws up her head impatiently, and in so doing touches Fabian's right arm somewhat roughly. In spite of his self-control he winces perceptibly.

"You are hurt," says Sir Christopher, anxiously. "How?—where?"

"This arm," says Fabian, touching the injured part lightly. "A mere scratch, no doubt, but it hurts. Nevertheless, if you persist, I daresay I shall be able to hold her in check with the other."

"Here, George, lead her home," says Sir Christopher, hurriedly, throwing the reins he still holds to the groom, and hastily descending from the dog-cart. "To drive, indeed, with an injured arm! stuff and nonsense!" he says, severely. "Some people have no sense, eh? though I must say I believe that poor brute is maligned. But for those shots fired off just as I was entering the gates nothing would have happened."

"Roger and Sir Mark discharging their guns, I daresay," says Stephen; "awkward, they should have chosen just that moment to do it."

"Fate!" says Dicky Browne, solemnly.

Meantime, Fabian has turned away and gone quickly in the direction of the house. Dulce, running down the balcony steps, goes up to him with a very white little face. [101]

"Darling, how brave you were. I thought something dreadful was going to happen to you. It was a horrid moment. If that wicked Bess had persisted she might have thrown you down and killed you."

"Well, she didn't, you see," says Fabian, lightly—but he shrinks a little from her embrace, and moves so that she cannot touch his right arm. His eyes are fixed upon the balcony above, where Portia still stands, pale as an early snowdrop and thoroughly unnerved. There is, however, about her a certain calm, that is part of her nature, and that, perhaps, in her very greatest emergency, and in her bitterest hour of need, would still be hers.

At this moment, however, Fabian so far wrongs her as to attribute this inborn quietude to coldness and indifference. He turns again to Dulce.

"Take that terrified look off your face," he says, somewhat languidly, with a smile that is faintly bitter. "You should show more self-control. Take example by your cousin; see how composed she can be, and how sensible."

He smiles again, and indicates Portia by a glance. For an instant his eyes meet hers. Is he wrong in thinking she is even a shade paler now than she was a moment since? He is not sure; and he has not time given him to make the thought a certainty, as Miss Vibart, turning slowly, goes towards one of the drawing-room windows, and presently is lost to sight.

There was something in her eyes, in the hurried glance he got at them, that saddens Fabian. Almost forgetful of Dulce's presence, he walks away from her, and, having gained the house, goes moodily up the stairs towards his own room.

His soul is disquieted; an agony of unrest, that even in his first days of despair had not visited him, is on him now; a longing, a craving, for what he knows (ah! the deep grief of that!) can never be obtained.

Why had her soft eyes looked so reproachful a while ago? Why had she turned so quickly away from him when he had spoken those few harsh words, for which he hates himself now?

Her pallor returns to him, and the fear in her large eyes. Surely he should have taken note of them first, and not of the calmness and seeming coldness and her utter composure. [102]

And then a strange soft light comes into his face, as he remembers how sweet she looked standing there, half leaning over the balcony, and looking down on him—unworthy, pale, but full of beauty.

It may be that other women have been lovely in his eyes, but, surely, none have reached her standard. One, indeed, in the past years had appeared to him (though he had not loved her) as nearly perfect as a woman can be; but, now comparing her with Portia, as he has often done of late, she—the former beauty—had paled in comparison.

He has been reading some old book of late, and now, thinking of both women, a description in it of some ancient queen and one of her court comes to him as being applicable to the train of thought in which he is indulging.

"One, amongst other purposes, said unto them of late, that she (the queen) 'excelleth as far the duchess as the golden sun excelleth the silver moon,' which appeareth in the gravity of her face. Thus say they that have seen them both."

As he reaches the corridor, and gains the threshold of his own room, a light step behind him, causing him to turn, he finds himself looking once again into Portia's eyes.

She is very pale still, and there is something pathetic about her mouth. Slowly she comes up to him, without uttering a word, until she is so close to him that she can touch him, if she will. Then she speaks:

"You wronged me just now," she says, in a low voice: "you had an evil thought about me! But not *now*, I think," regarding him earnestly. "You have gone over it all again in your own mind, and you understand now you misjudged me."

"You are quite right in all you say; I did misjudge you. I have discovered my error. You will forgive me?"

"I suppose so." She is looking down now, and is tapping the ground impatiently with her foot.

"You ought," says Fabian, quietly. "To misjudge one's neighbor is one of the commonest failings of mankind."

There is meaning in his tone. She acknowledges unwillingly the fact that she comprehends this meaning by a sign, silent but perceptible: she colors deeply, and, still looking down, continues her tattoo upon the oaken flooring of the corridor. [103]

"You are not very humble," she says at length, "even now, when you have had to demand my pardon."

"Am I not?" says Fabian, with a partly suppressed sigh. "I should be. Forgive me that, too, and—" He pauses to draw his breath quickly, as if in pain. At this she lifts her head, and something she sees in his expression tells her the truth.

"You are hurt," she says, hastily, going nearer to him. "Where?—how?"

There is deep, unrestrained anxiety in her tone.

"My arm," confesses Fabian, who is, indeed, suffering greatly, laying his left hand upon his right arm, high up above the elbow.

"Is it a sprain or a bruise?"

"A little of both, perhaps. I came up-stairs just now to ring for Parkins to help me off with my coat, and do something for me."

"Parkins!" says Portia, with fine contempt; "of what use is a man in a case like this. Why not ask Dulce—"

"Oh! it is really nothing; and you saw how frightened she was already. I had pity on her nerves."

"Then let me be Parkins for a few minutes," says Portia, with a little smile. "I used to be of great use to George" (her brother, Colonel Vibart) "occasionally when he came to grief at football, or in the hunting field. Let me see if my hand has lost its cunning."

"You won't like it," says Blount, hesitating; "it will look nasty, you know, and there will be blood, I think, and perhaps it will be better for me to—"

"This is my sitting-room," interrupts Portia, calmly, throwing open a door on the opposite side of the corridor. "Come in here, and let me see what has happened to you."

Fabian follows her obediently. It all seems to him something like a dream, that this girl, usually so listless, should now brighten into life, and grow energetic and anxious for his sake.

With gentle fingers she helps him to take off his coat, and, in a business-like, very matter-of-fact fashion, unfastens the gold link at his wrist, and, though paling a little as she sees the blood upon his sleeve, resolutely rolls it up and lays bare the injured arm. [104]

It is looking dark and swollen, and the skin has been knocked off it in several places. The flesh has been a good deal bruised, and altogether the wound is an ugly one without being in any way serious. In spite of her efforts to the contrary, she blanches perceptibly, and shudders, and lets her lids droop rather heavily over her eyes.

"You are unfit for this sort of work," says Fabian, angry with himself, as he marks her agitation. "It was unpardonable of me even to permit you to attempt it." He moves back from her, and tries his shirt sleeve once more over his injured arm.

"Ah! do not touch it," says Portia, hastily; "the sleeve will only rub against it and make it worse."

Involuntarily she lays her hand on his to prevent his covering the wound, and looks at him with a glance full of sympathy and entreaty. So standing, with her eyes large and dark with pity, and her soft white hand trembling upon his, she seems to him so far

"Beyond all women, womanly,
He dreads to think how he should fare
Who came so near as to despair!"

A pang desolates his heart. Alas! is not despair the only portion that can be meted out for him! The joy and the gladness of living, and the one great treasure of all—the heart's love—that beautifies and refines all it touches, can never be his; never for him, while this shadow rests upon him, will there be home or "hearthstone," or that deeper, more perfected sense of fellowship that exists between two souls only.

And this girl, with her hand on his, and

"With eyes like open lotus flowers
Bright in the morning rain."

looking straight up at him, with gentlest concern in her regard, how might it have been with him and her, if life had flowed in a pleasant stream, and no turbulent waves had come to disturb its calm and musical ripple?

How short have been his days of grace, how long must be his years of misery; just in the very opening of his life, in the silken morning of his youth, the blow had fallen, deadening his sky, and rendering all things gray.

In what a very little space, indeed, lie all our happy moments; even the most successful of us can count them one by one, as it might be, on the fingers of one hand; and how tardy, how wearying, are those where sorrow, and trouble, and despair hold their own. [105]

"Ce qui nous charme s'en va, et ce qui fait peine reste. La rose vit une heure, et le cyprès cent ans."

Portia has gone into an inner room, and now returns with a basin and a sponge. Very gently (and as though afraid each movement may increase his pain) she bathes his arm, glancing up at him every now and then to see if, indeed, she is adding to or decreasing his agony.

If the truth be told, I believe he feels no agony at all, so glad he is to know her touch, and see her face. When she has sponged his arm with excessive tenderness, she brings a cambric handkerchief, and, tearing it into strips, winds it round and round the torn flesh.

"Perhaps that will do until Dr. Bland can see it," she says hopefully. "At least tell me you are in less pain now, and that I have done you some small good."

"Small!" says Fabian.

"Ah! well," she says, lightly, "then I suppose I have succeeded, but you must promise me, nevertheless, that you will have a doctor to look at you."

Her tone is still exquisitely kind; but there is now a studied indifference about it that hurts him keenly. Perhaps in his surprise at this sudden change of manner he overlooks the fact that the difference *is* studied!

"I have given you too much trouble," he says, stupidly, in a leaden sort of way. "But, as you say, you have been successful, I feel hardly any pain now."

"Then I suppose I may dismiss you," she says, with a frugal little smile, just glancing at the half opened door. The nervousness, the sympathy is over, and she remembers how lost to social consideration is the man to whose comfort she has been contributing for the past twenty minutes.

"I have taken up too much of your time already," he says in a frozen tone, and then he turns and goes toward the door. But, after a moment's reflection, he faces round again abruptly, and comes up to her, and stands before her with set lips and eyes aflame. His nostrils are dilated, there is intense mental pressure discernible in every line of his face.

"I do not mistake you," he says, with slow vehemence; "I am not such a dullard that I should count your bare charity as friendship. You have succoured me, as you would, of your grace, no doubt have succoured the vilest criminal that walks the earth, were he in death or pain." [106]

She has grown very pale, and is rather frightened, if her eyes speak truly.

"Now that the reaction has set in," he goes on, bitterly, "you believe you have demeaned yourself in that you have assisted one who——"

"You are saying what is not true," she says, in a low but clear voice; speaking slowly, and with difficulty, because her lips are white and dry.

"Am I?" exclaims he, passionately. "Say, if you can, that you believe me innocent of all guilt, and I will believe you!"

He pauses—she is silent. A terrible moment ensues, fraught with agony for Fabian, and still she makes no sign. Her hands, tightly clasped, are hanging before her; her head is turned aside; her eyes persistently seek the floor. As if every nerve in her body is strung to excess, she stands so motionless that she might almost be a statue cut in marble.

Her silence is painfully eloquent. Fabian, in an excess of passion, tears off the cambric bandages from his arm, and flings them at her feet.

"I will have none of your charity," he says, with pale lips, and, throwing wide the door, strides down the corridor, and is soon beyond recall.

When the last echo of his feet has died away Portia rouses herself, and, moving towards a low chair near the fireplace, sinks into it, and presses her hands convulsively against her heart.

Now that she is at last alone, the excitement of the last hour begins to tell upon her. Her cheeks and lips, that up to this have been positively bloodless, now grow dyed with richest

crimson, that is certainly not of this earth—earthy, as it gives no promise of health or youthful strength. She leans back in her chair as if exhausted; and, in truth, in the fair shell that harbors her soul but very little power remains to battle with the varied thoughts that rise within her.

Scene by scene the events of the last hour spread themselves before her: the maddened brute rushing violently over the soft, smooth lawn to where the treacherous stream awaits him, running gently between its damp green banks—Sir Christopher's danger—Fabian's unexpected interference—the short, but terrible fear for him—and then the sudden fall from the extreme agony of suspense to comparative calm. [107]

And yet, perhaps, all this does not haunt her so much as one or two other things, that, in reality, were of little moment. That time, for instance, when he—Fabian—stood beneath the balcony, and when he, with a glance, a half-spoken word, accused her of coldness and indifference. He had condemned her all too willingly. But this was only fair, no doubt. Had not she, in her innermost heart, condemned him, unheard, unquestioned.

And what was it he had said to Dulce? "Take example by your cousin; see how sensible *she* can be," or something like that. Sensible! When this terrible pain was tugging at her heart strings, and prolonged nervousness had made speech impossible.

And why had he said "*your* cousin," instead of "our cousin?" Was it that he did not care to claim kinship with her, or because—because—he did not count himself worthy—to—

Again she raises her hand, and presses it with undue force against her left side. She is unhappy and alone, and full of a vague uncertainty.

"Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows," and all the shadows of her grief seem now to hem her in, and encompass her on every side. The old troublesome pain in her heart, that drove her from the dissipations of town life to seek a shelter in the quiet country, returns to her again. At this moment the pain of which I speak grows almost past endurance. A faint, gray pallor supersedes the vivid carmine of a while ago. She sighs with evident difficulty, and sinks back heavily amongst her cushions.

CHAPTER XII.

"Friendship is constant in all other things,
Save in the office and affairs of love."

—MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

"I SHOULD think if we are going to give our dance at all, it ought to be soon," says Dulce, with a shrug and a somewhat listless little yawn. [108]

"So we ought," says Dicky Browne, briskly. It seems the most natural thing in the world that he should use the first person plural, and that he should appear to be the chief promoter of the dance in question. "We've been talking of it a considerable lot, you know," he goes on, confidentially, "and they will all think it a dodge on your part if you don't give it within the next fortnight."

"A dodge!" says Miss Blount, very justly incensed. "What dodge?"

"Well, look here," says Dicky—"there once was a fellow—"

He breaks off at this interesting juncture, and, fixing his glass in his best eye, stares at a figure coming slowly towards them from the house. They all follow his gaze, and find themselves criticising the approaching form in a vague, surprised fashion.

"Great hat! look at Julia!" says Dicky, at last, giving way to speech that will not be repressed. The exclamation is quite in keeping with the scene. Julia, in a head gear of the style usually described as a Rubens, of the very largest description, comes simpering up to them, filled with the belief that now, if ever, she is looking her very best. "Great" *is* the word for it. She is indeed all that.

"My dear Julia, where have you been!" says Dulce, ignoring the hat.

"Searching every room in the house for that last book of Ouida's," says Julia, promptly, who has in reality been posing before a mirror in her own room, crowned with a Rubens. "I'm always losing my things, you know—and my way; my boat, for example, and my train, and my umbrella." She is plainly impressed with the belief that she is saying something smart, and looks conscious of it.

"Why don't you add your temper," says Dicky Browne, with a mild smile—which rather spoils the effect of her would-be smartness.

"We were talking about our ball," says Dulce, somewhat quickly. "Dicky seems to think that we shall lose caste in the neighborhood if we put it off much longer."

"You'll create ill feeling," says Mr. Browne. "The Stanley girls have new gowns, and they want

to show them. They'll say nasty things about you."

"That's your second hint on that subject," says Sir Mark. "Get it out, Dicky, you are dying to say something. What was it you were going to say a few minutes ago about some fellow who—?"

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"Who for seven years was going to give a ball, and was asked everywhere on the strength of it. His friends hoped against hope, don't you see, but nothing ever came of it. At the end of the seven years he was as far off it as ever."

"And what did his friends do to him then," asks Julia, who is one of those people who always want *more* than enough.

"Deponent sayeth not," says Mr. Browne. "Perhaps it was too dark a tale for publication. I suppose they either smote him between the joints of his harness till he died, or else they fell upon him in a body and rent him in pieces."

"What nonsense you can talk at times," says Mrs. Beaufort, mindful of his speech of a few moments ago.

"Not I," says Dicky Browne.

It is about four o'clock, and already the shadows are lengthening upon the grass, the soft, cool grass upon which they are all sitting beneath the shade of the huge chestnut trees, that fling their branches in all directions, some east, some west, some heavenwards.

A little breeze is blowing towards them sweet essences of pinewood and dark fir. Above in the clear sky the fleecy clouds assume each moment a new form—a yet more tender color—now pale blue, now gray, now a soft pink that verges upon crimson. Down far in the hollows a white mist is floating away, away, to the ocean, and there, too, can be seen (playing hide and seek amongst the great trunks of the giant elms) the flitting forms of the children dancing fantastically to and fro.

The scent of dying meadow-sweet is on the air, and the hush and the calm of evening.

"Dulce, command us to have tea out here," says Sir Mark, removing his cigarette from his lips for a moment.

"Dear Dulce, yes; that will be sweet," says Portia, who is very silent and very pale and very beautiful to-day.

"Dicky, go and tell some one to bring tea here directly," says Dulce; "and say they are to bring peaches for Portia, because she loves them, and say anything else you like for yourself."

"Thanks; Curaçao will do me very nicely," says Dicky, with all the promptitude that distinguishes him.

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"And Maraschino," suggests Sir Mark, in the mildest tone.

"And just a suspicion of brandy," puts in Roger, almost affectionately. Overpowered by their amiability and their suggestions, Dicky turns towards the house.

"I fly," he says. "Think of me till my return."

"Do tell them to hurry, Dicky," says Dulce, anxiously. "They are always so slow. And tell them to bring lots of cake."

"You shall have it all in a couple of shakes," says Mr. Browne, encouragingly, if vulgarly.

"What's that?" asks Dulce, meaning reproof. "It isn't English, is it? How soon will it be?"

"Oh—half a jiff," returns he, totally unabashed.

Presently tea is brought, and they are all happy, notably Dicky, who walks round and into the cakes with unceasing fervor.

"By-the-by, I wonder Stephen hasn't been here to-day," says Julia, addressing no one in particular.

"Something better to do, perhaps," says Portia.

"Yes—where *can* he be?" says Dulce, waking into sudden animation. "'Something better to do?' Why, what could that be?"

"Writing sonnets to your eyebrow," answers Roger in an unpleasant tone.

"How clever you are!" retorts she, in a tone even more unpleasant, letting her white lids fall until they half-conceal the scorn in her eyes. *Only* half!

"He is such a jail bird—I beg his pardon, a town bird," says Sir Mark, lazily, "that I didn't think anything could keep him in the country so long. Yet, he doesn't *look* bored. He bears the solitary confinement very well."

"There is shooting, isn't there?" suggests Portia.

"Any amount of it," says Dicky; "but that don't solve the mystery. He couldn't shoot a haystack flying, not if his life depended on it. It's suicide to go out with him! He'd as soon shoot you or me

as anything else. I always say the grouse ought to love him; because I don't believe he knows the barrel of his gun from the stock."

"How perfectly dreadful!" exclaims Julia, who always takes everything *au grand serieux*.

"There is other game in the country besides grouse," says Roger, in a peculiar tone. [111]

"I dare say he can't bear to leave that dear old house now he has got into it," says Dulce; "it is so lovely, so quaint, so—"

"Now, is it?" asks Dicky Browne, meditatively. "I've seen nicer, I think. I always feel, when there, as if everything, ceilings, roof and all were coming down on my unfortunate head."

"But it is so old, so picturesque; a perfect dream, *I think*," says Dulce, rather affectedly.

"It isn't half a bad place, but not to be compared to The Moors, surely," says Sir Mark, gently, looking with some reproof at Dulce—reproof the spoiled child resents—The Moors is Roger's home. "I think The Moors one of the most beautiful places in England."

"And one of the draughtiest," says Miss Blount, ungraciously. "I was there once. It was a year ago. It occurred to me, I remember, that the sun had forgotten it; indeed, I had but one thought all the time I stayed."

"And that was?" asks Roger, defiantly.

"How to get away from it again as soon as possible."

"I am sorry my old home found such disfavor in your sight," says Roger, so quietly that remorse wakes within her breast, bringing with it, however, no good result, rather adding fuel to the flame that has been burning brightly since breakfast time. His rebuke is so abominably mild that it brings Miss Blount to the very verge of open wrath.

"I think Stephen such a dear fellow," says Julia, at this critical juncture. "So—er—well read, and that."

"Yes; though, I think, I have known better," says Sir Mark, looking at Dulce.

"Poor Mr. Gower," says that young lady, airily; "everyone seems determined to decry him. What has he done to everybody, and why should comparisons be drawn? There *may* be better people, and there may be worse; but—I like him."

"Lucky he," says Roger, with a faint but distinct sneer, his temper forsaking him; "I could almost wish that I were he."

"I could almost wish it, too," says Dulce, with cruel frankness.

"Thank you." Roger, by this time, is in a very respectable passion, though nobody but he and Dulce have heard the last three sentences. "Perhaps," he says, deliberately, "it will be my most generous course to resign in favor of—" [112]

"More tea, Portia?" interrupts Dulce, very quickly, in a tone that trembles ever so slightly.

"No, thank you. But, Dulce, I want you near me. Come and sit here."

There is anxiety, mixed with entreaty, in her tone. She has noticed the anger in Roger's face, and the defiance in Dulce's soft eyes, and she is grieved and sorry for them both.

But, Dulce, who is in a very bad mood indeed, will take no notice of either the entreaty or the grief.

"How can I?" she says, with a slow lifting of her brows. "Who will give anybody any tea, if I go away from this? And—" Here she pauses, and her eyes fix themselves upon a break in the belt of firs, low down, at the end of the lawn. "Ah," she says, with a swift blush, "you see I shall be wanted at my post for a little while longer, because—here is Mr. Gower, at last!"

The "at last" is intolerably flattering, though it is a question if the new comer hears it. He is crossing over the soft grass; his hat is in his hand; his eyes dark and smiling. He looks glad, expectant, happy.

"What superfluous surprise," says Roger to Dulce, with even a broader sneer than his last. "He always *is* here, isn't he!"

"Yes; isn't it good of him to come," says Miss Blount, with a suspicious dulness—Stephen has not yet come quite close to them. "We are always so wretchedly stupid here, and he is so charming, and so good to look at, and always in such a perfect temper!" As she finishes her sentence she turns her large eyes full on her *fiancé*.

Roger, muttering something untranslatable between his teeth, moves away, and then Gower comes up, and Dulce gives him her hand and her prettiest smile, and presently he sinks upon the grass at her feet, and lies there in a graceful position that enables him to gaze without trouble upon her piquante face. He is undeniably handsome, and is very clean-limbed, and has something peculiar about his smile that takes women as a rule.

"How d'ye do?" he says to Roger presently, when that young man comes within range,

bestowing upon him a little nod. Whereon Roger says the same to him in a tone of the utmost *bonhomie*, which, if hypocritical, is certainly very well done, after which conversation once more flows smoothly onwards.

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"What were you doing all day?" asks Dulce of the knight at her feet, throwing even kinder feeling than usual into her tone, as she becomes aware that Roger's eyes are fixed upon her.

"Wishing myself here," replies Gower, with a readiness that bespeaks truth.

"What a simple thing to say," murmurs Dulce, with a half-smile, glancing at him from under her long lashes. "But how difficult to believe. After all," with a wilful touch of coquetry, "I don't believe you ever do mean anything you say."

"Don't you," says Gower, with an eagerness that might be born of either passion or amusement. "You wrong me then. And some day—some day, perhaps, I shall be able to prove to you that what I say I mean." Then, probably, the recollection of many things comes to him, and the quick, warm light dies out of his eyes, and it is with an utter change of tone and manner he speaks next.

"Now, tell me what you were doing all day?" he says, lightly.

"Not very much; the hours dragged a little, I think. Just now, as you came to us, we were discussing—" it is almost on her lips the word "you," but she suppresses it in time, and goes on easily—"a dance we must give as soon as possible."

"An undertaking down here, I suppose?" says Gower, doubtfully; "yet a change, after all. And, of course, you are fond of dancing?" with a passing glance, that is almost a caress, at her lithe, svelte figure.

"Yes, very; but I don't care about having a ball here." She says this with a sigh; then she pauses, and a shade saddens her face.

"But why?" asks he, surprised.

"There are many reasons—many. And you might not understand," she says, rather confusedly. She turns her face away from his, and in doing so meets Portia's eyes. She has evidently been listening to what Dulce has just said, and now gives back her cousin's gaze as though against her will. After a moment she slowly averts her face, as if seeking to hide the pallor that is rendering even her lips white.

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"Both my evening suits are unwearable," says Dicky Browne, mournfully. "I shall have to run up to town to get some fresh things." He says this deprecatingly, as though utterly assured of the fact that every one will miss him horribly.

"You won't be long away, Dicky, will you?" says Roger, tearfully; at which Dulce, forgetful for the instant of the late feud, laughs aloud.

"I can't think what's the matter with me," says Dicky, still mournful; "my clothes don't last any time. A month seems to put 'em out of shape, and make 'em unwearable."

"No wonder," says Sir Mark, "when you get them made by a fellow out of the swim altogether. *Where* does he live? Cheapside or Westbourne Grove?"

"No; the Strand," says Mr. Browne, to whom shame is unknown, "if you mean Jerry."

"Dicky employs Jerry because his name is Browne," says Roger. "He's a hanger-on of the family, and is popularly supposed to be a poor relation, a sort of country cousin. Dicky proudly supports him in spite of public opinion. It is very noble of him."

"The governor sent me to him when I was a young chap—for punishment, I think," says Dicky, mildly, "and I don't like to give him up now. He is such a fetching old thing, and so conversational, and takes such an interest in my nether limbs."

"Who are you talking of in such laudatory terms?" asks Dulce, curiously, raising her head at this moment.

"Of Jerry—my tailor," says Dicky, confidentially.

"Ah! A good man, but—er—tiresome," says Julia, vaguely, with a cleverly suppressed yawn; she is evidently under the impression that they are discussing Jeremy Taylor, *not* the gentleman in the Strand.

"*Is* he good?" asks Dicky, somewhat at sea. "A capital fellow to make trousers, I know, but for his morality I can't vouch."

"I am speaking of the divine, Jeremy Taylor," says Julia, very justly shocked at what she believes to be levity on the part of Dicky. "*He* didn't make trousers, he only made maxims!"

"Poor soul!" says Mr. Browne, with heartfelt pity in his tone, to whom Jeremy Taylor is a revelation, and a sad one. "Did he die of 'em?"

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Of this frivolous remark Julia deigns to take no notice. And, indeed, they are all too accustomed to Mr. Browne's eccentricities of style to spend time trying to unravel them.

"You haven't yet explained to me the important business that kept you at home all day," Dulce is saying to Mr. Gower. She is leaning slightly forward, and is looking down into his eyes.

"Tenants and a steward, and such like abominations," he says, rather absently. Then, his glance wandering to her little white, slender fingers, that are idly trifling with her fan, "By-the-by," he goes on, "the steward—Mayne, you know—can write with both hands. Odd, isn't it? Just as well with his left as with his right."

"A rather useless accomplishment, I should think."

"I don't know. It occurred to me we should all learn how to do it, in case we should break our arms, or our legs, or anything."

"What on earth would our legs have to do with it," says Miss Blount, with a gay little laugh, which he echoes.

"Oh? well, in case we should sprain our right wrists, then. When Mayne went away I tried if I could make use of my left hand, and succeeded rather well. Look here, you hold your hand like this."

"It sounds difficult," says Dulce, doubtfully.

"It isn't though, really. Will you try?" Taking a pencil and an envelope from his pocket, he lays the latter on her knee, and hands her the former. "Now let me hold your hand just at first to guide you, and you will soon see how simple it is. Only practice is required."

"It will take a good deal of practice and a good deal of guidance, I shouldn't wonder," says Miss Blount, smiling.

"That will be my gain," returns he in a low tone. As he speaks he lays his hand on hers, and directs the pencil; so the lesson begins; and so it continues uninterrupted for several minutes; Dulce is getting on quite smoothly; Mr. Gower is plainly interested in a very high degree, when Roger, coming up to them, lays his hand lightly upon Dulce's shoulder. He is still passionately angry, and almost unable to control himself. To see Dulce's fingers clasped by those of Gower, however innocently, has fired his wrath, and driven him to open expression of his displeasure.

"If you have forgotten how to write, Dulce," he says in a low, strained voice, "I daresay it will be possible to find a master to re-instruct you. In the meantime, why trouble Gower?"

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"Does it trouble you, Mr. Gower?" asks she, sweetly, looking straight at Stephen and ignoring Roger.

"Need I answer that?" responds he, flushing warmly, and in his turn ignoring Dare.

"Then you need not worry yourself to get me a master, Roger," says Dulce, still quite sweetly. "It is very good of you to wish to take such trouble about me, but you see I have got one already."

"Not a master—a slave!" says Gower, impulsively. There's such evident and earnest meaning in his tone that she colors violently, and, with a rather open manifestation of shrinking, withdraws her hand from his clasp; the pencil falls to the ground, but Roger has turned aside, and this last act on her part is unseen by him.

"Is anything the matter with Roger?" says Gower, slowly.

"What should be the matter with him?" asks she, coldly.

"Do you remember what we were reading yesterday? Do you remember even one particular line? It comes to me now. 'So loving jealous.' You recollect?"

"No; and even if I did, what has it to do with Roger?"

"Nothing—*perhaps*." There is a small fine smile around his lips that incenses her, she scarcely knows why.

"Then what does your quotation mean?"

"Nothing, too, no doubt. Shall we go on with our lesson?"

"No, I am tired of it," she says, petulantly. "I like nothing, I think, for very long." She has grown somewhat restless, and her eyes are wistful. They are following Roger, who has thrown himself at Portia's feet.

"Are your friendships, too, short-lived?" asks Gower, biting his lips. You can see that he is lounging on the grass, and at this moment, having raised his hand, it falls again, by chance upon her instep.

Remorse and regret have been companions of her bosom for the past minute, now they quicken into extreme anger. Pushing back the garden chair on which she has been sitting, she stands up and confronts the stricken Gower with indignant eyes.

"Don't do that again," she says, with trembling lips. Her whole attitude—voice and expression—are undeniably childish, yet she frightens Gower nearly out of his wits.

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"I beg your pardon," he stammers, eagerly, growing quite white. "I must *insist* on your

understanding I did not mean it. How could you think it? I—"

At this instant Roger laughs. The laugh comes to Dulce as she stands before Gower grieved and angry and repentant, and her whole face changes. The grief and the repentance vanish, the very anger fades into weariness.

"Yes, I believe you—I was foolish—it doesn't matter," she says, heavily; and then she sinks into her seat again, and taking a small volume of selected poetry from a rustic table at her elbow, throws it into his lap.

"Read me something," she says, gently.

"What shall I select?" asks Stephen, puzzled by the sudden change in her manner, but anxious to please her.

"Anything. It hardly matters; they are all pretty," she says, disconnectedly, and so indifferently that he is fairly piqued; his reading being one of his strongest points; and taking up the book, he opens it at random, and begins to read in a low, sweet, rhyming voice that certainly carries its own charm.

Dulce, in spite of herself, is by degrees drawn to listen to it; yet though the words so softly spoken attract her and chain her attention, there is always a line of discontent around her lovely mouth, and a certain angry petulance within her eyes, and in the gesture with which she furls and unfurls her huge black fan.

Dicky Browne, who has confiscated all the cake, and is therefore free to go where he lists, has drawn near to her, and, under cover of a cigarette, is pretending to be absorbed in the poetry. Gower has fallen now upon Gray's *Elegy in a Churchyard*, and is getting through it most effectively. All the others have grown silent, either touched by the beauty of the dying daylight, or the tender lines that are falling on the air. When at length Stephen finishes the poem, and his voice ceases to break the stillness of the coming eve, no one stirs, and an utter calm ensues. It is broken by the irrepressible Julia.

"What a charming thing that is," she says, alluding, they presume, to the *Elegy*. She pauses here, but no one takes her up or seems to care to continue the praise of what is almost beyond it. But Julia is not easily discouraged.

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"One can almost see the gaunt trees," she says, sentimentally, "and the ivied walls of the old church, and the meadows beyond, and the tinkling of the tiny bells, and the soft white sheep as they move perpetually onward in the far, far distance."

She sighs, as though overcome by the perfect picture she has so kindly drawn for their benefit.

"I wish to goodness she would move on herself," says Dicky Browne. "It is enough to make poor Gray turn in his grave."

"I think she describes rather prettily, and quite as if she meant it," says Portia, softly.

"Not a bit of it," growls Dicky; "she *don't* mean it; she couldn't; It's all put on—regular plaster! She doesn't feel it; she knows as much about poetry as I do."

"You underrate yourself, my darling boy," says Roger, fondly.

"Oh! you get out," says Mr. Brown, most ungratefully.

"I think to be able to read *really* well is an intense charm," goes on Julia, glancing sweetly at Stephen. "If one had only some one to give one a kindly hint now and then about the correct intonation and emphasis and that, it would be a regular study, of course. I really have half a mind to go in for it."

"So glad she has at last arrived at a just appreciation of her own powers," says Dicky, *sotto voce*. "I should think she has just half a mind and no more, to do anything with."

He is hushed up; and then Stephen goes on again, choosing passages from Shakespeare this time, for a change, while silence once more reigns.

Roger is looking sulky and unkindly critical. Sir Mark has been guilty of a small yawn or two. Julia, in spite of the most heroic efforts to the contrary, is openly and disgracefully sleepy. Portia's eyes are full of tears. Dicky Browne, who is tired of not hearing his own voice, and whose only belief in the divine William is that he gave him "a jolly lot of trouble in his schooldays," is weary, and is only waiting an opportunity to cut in and make himself heard, in spite of all opposition.

It comes—the opportunity—and Dicky seizes it. Mr. Gower is at his very best. He has thrown his whole soul into his voice, and is even himself wrapt up in the piece he has before him.

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"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," his voice rings out clear and full of melancholy prophecy; it is a voice that should have impressed any right-minded individual, but Dicky's mind is below par.

"I should think he'd lie considerably more uneasy without it," he says, cheerfully. "He'd feel like being scalped, wouldn't he? And get dreaming about Comanches and tomahawks and Fenimore Cooper, eh?"

For once Dicky scores. The men have grown tired of Mr. Gower's performance, and hail the interruption with delight. Roger turns on his side, and laughs aloud. This attention, so unprecedented on his part, fills Dicky's soul with rapture. He instantly bestows upon his supporter a smile rich with gratitude; yet perhaps it is not Mr. Browne's wit alone that has called forth such open manifestation of mirth from Roger. There is, I think, just the faintest touch of malice in his merriment.

And then the faithless Dulce laughs too; the most musical, ringing little laugh in the world, but none the less galling for all its sweetness. It is the last straw. Mr. Gower, suppressing a very natural inclination, lays the book down gently on the grass beside him (he would have given anything to be able to fling it far from him), and makes some casual remark about the excessive beauty of the evening.

And, indeed, it is beautiful; all down the Western slope of the fir-crowned hill, the fading rays of light still wander, though even now in the clear heavens the evening star has risen, and is shining calm and clear as a soul entered on its eternal rest.

"Will you not read us something else?" says Dulce, feeling a little ashamed of herself.

"Some other time," returns he.

"Dicky rather took the sentiment out of it," says Roger, still maliciously mirthful. "I hardly think he and the Swan of Avon would be congenial souls."

"Well, I don't know," says Sir Mark, lazily. "We have been taught that extremes meet, you see."

"Dicky, how can you stand their impertinence?" asks Dulce, gaily. "Assert yourself, I entreat you."

"There is such a thing as silent contempt," says Mr. Browne, untouched by their darts. "There is also a passage somewhere that alludes to an 'unlettered small-knowing soul;' I do not desire to quote it in this company. Let us return to the immortal Bill." [120]

But they are all laughing still, and in the face of laughter, it is difficult to get back to tragedy. And so no one encourages Gower to continue his work, and this, in despite of the fact that the light growing as it is toward the gloaming, seems in keeping with dismal tales and softly-mouthed miseries.

Every moment the evening star grows brighter, gaining glory as the day declines. The mist has died away into the ocean, the breeze has sunk to slumber, only the song of many birds hymning themselves to roost amongst the quiet thickets disturbs the tranquility of the air.

Dead leaves that speak of Autumn and coming dissolution float toward the loiterers on the lawn, and, sinking at their feet, preach to them a lesson of the life that lasts not, and of that other life that in all its splendor may yet dawn upon them.

A soft and sullen roar from the ocean makes the silence felt. The sea, clothed round with raiment of white waves, and rich with sparkling life, dashing itself along the beach, breathes a monotonous murmur that wafts itself inland and falls with vague music upon the listening ear. Thoughts arise within the breast, born of the sweet solemnity of the hour, and the sadness that belongs to all life—but in this changeable world nothing lasts, and presently seeing something in the lawn below that puzzles her sight, Julia says, quickly: "What are the moving forms I see down there?"

"Only the children undulating," says Mr. Browne, promptly.

"What?" says Sir Mark.

"I have said!" returns Dicky.

"There is surely something besides children," says Portia, trying to pierce the gathering darkness. "See, what is that coming towards us now?"

They all peer eagerly in the direction of the firs, from between which a flying mass may be seen emerging, and approaching rapidly to where they are all seated.

"It is only Jacky on his fact," says Mr. Browne, at length after a careful examination of this moving form.

"On what?" asks Roger, curiously.

"His fact," repeats Dicky, unmoved. [121]

"What's that?" asks Jacky's mamma, somewhat anxiously—if a careless, it must be to her credit said, that Julia is a very kindly mother, and is now rather upset by Mr. Browne's mysterious declaration.

"You ought to know; you gave it to him," declares he. "He's sitting on it anyhow."

"Really, Dicky, we must ask you to explain yourself," says Sir Mark, with dignity.

"Why, it's only a donkey," says Dulce, "and Jacky is riding him."

"Just so," says Mr. Browne, equably; "and a very large donkey, too; I always call them facts

because they are stubborn things. At least, that one is, because I rode it yesterday—at least I tried to—and it behaved very ill indeed. It's—it's a very nasty animal, and painfully unamiable."

"What did it do to you?" asks Julia, who is again in secret fear about her first born, who every moment draws more near.

"Well, I got on him, incited thereto by Jacky and the Boodie, and when I had beaten him unceasingly for a full quarter of an hour, in the vain hope of persuading him to undertake even a gentle walk, he turned treacherously to the right, and squeezed my best leg against the garden wall. I bore it heroically, because I knew the Boodie was regarding me sternly, but I could have wept bitterly; I don't know if all walls are the same, but the *garden* wall hurts very much."

"I wonder where Dicky gets all his stories," says Dulce, admiringly.

"He evolves them out of his inner consciousness," replies Sir Mark.

Meantime, Jacky draws nearer and nearer. He advances on the donkey—and on them, at a furious pace. Surely, never was a lazy ass so ridden before! Perhaps those watching him are under the impression that when closer to them he will guide his steed to their right or to their left, or at least steer clear of them in some way, but if so they are mistaken.

Jacky is in his element. He gallops wildly up to them, with arms and legs flying north and south, and his cap many miles behind. That hidden sense that tells the young and artless one that the real meaning of all fun is to take some one by surprise and frighten the life out of him, is full upon him now.

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"Out of my way," he shrieks, in frenzied accents almost, as he bears down upon them. "Out of my way, I say, or he'll kill you; I can't pull him in. He is running away with me!"

With this the wily young hypocrite gives the donkey a final kick with his right heel, and dashes ungallantly into the very midst of them.

The confusion that follows is all his heart can desire. Great indeed is the rout. Camp chairs are scattered broadcast; shawls strew the lawn; Julia flies to the right, Dulce to the left; Portia instinctively finds refuge behind Dicky Browne, who shows great gallantry on this memorable occasion, and devotes himself to the service of the frail and weak. Indeed, it is on record, that, in the height of his zeal, he encircled Portia's waist with his arm, and cried aloud to the foe to "come on," as he waited for victory or death.

Jacky flies past, and is presently seen urging on his wild career in the little glade that leads to the wood. Once more they breathe, and order is restored, to Gower's deep regret, as he has managed, in the *melee*, to seize hold of Dulce's hand, and in an abstracted fashion has held it ever since.

"That boy deserves a sound whipping," says Sir Mark, indignantly, who is, nevertheless, a sworn friend of the graceless Jacky.

"You hear, Julia; you are to whip him at once?" says Roger.

"Whip him!" says Mrs. Beaufort, resentfully. "Indeed I shall not. I never whipped one of them in my life, and I never shall."

"You'd be afraid," says Dicky Browne. "You should see Julia when the Boodie attacks her; she literally goes into her boots, and stays there. It is, indeed, a pitiable exhibition. By-the-by, does anybody want dinner; because, if so, he may as well go and dress. It is quite half-past six."

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CHAPTER XIII.

"A vague unrest
And a nameless longing filled her breast."

TIME, as a rushing wind, slips by, and brings us Dulce's ball. The night is lovely and balmy as any evening in the Summer months gone by, though now September shakes the leaves to their fall. A little breeze sweeps up from the ocean, where the "lights around the shore" show mystical and bright; while overhead, all down the steep of heaven, myriad stars are set, to flood the sleeping world with their cold, clear beauty.

Upon the walls, and all along the balconies, lie patches of broken moonshine; and in the garden the pale beams revel and kiss the buds until they wake; and "all flowers that blow by day come forth, as t'were high noon."

In the library the lamps are lowered. Nobody has come down-stairs yet, and the footman, giving the last lingering touch to the little sweet gossiping fire that warns them of Winter's approach, turns to leave the room. On the threshold, however, he stands aside to let Miss Vibart enter.

She is dressed in a white satin gown, creamy in shade, and rather severe in its folds. Some pale water-lilies lie upon it, as though cast there by some lucky chance, and cling to it lovingly, as

if glad to have found so soft a resting place. There is no flower in her hair, and no jewels anywhere, except three rows of priceless pearls, that clasp her slender throat. Throwing her gloves and fan upon the centre table, she walks slowly to a mirror, and examines herself somewhat critically.

As if ungratefully dissatisfied with the lovely vision it presents to her, she turns away again, with an impatient sigh, and trifles absently with a paper knife near her. There is a discontented line about her mouth, a wistful, restless expression in her eyes. She moves slowly, too, as if gladness is far from her, and shows, in every glance and movement, a strange amount of languor.

As though her thoughts compel her to action, she walks aimlessly from place to place; and now, as if she is listening for something to come; and now, as if she is trying to make up her mind to take some step from which she shrinks in secret. [124]

At last, drawing her breath with a sudden quickness, born of determination, she opens a drawer in a cabinet, and, taking from it a little volume in the Tauchnitz binding, she opens the library door, and, turning to the right, walks swiftly down the corridor.

From out the shadow a figure advances toward her, a figure bent and uncomely, that tries in vain to avoid the meeting with her, and to get out of sight before recognition sets in.

It is the old man Slyme. As she sees him there returns to Portia the memory of many other times when she has met him here in this corridor, with apparently no meaning for his presence. Some unaccountable and utterly vague feeling of dislike for this man has been hers ever since she first saw him. He is repugnant to her in a remarkable degree, considering how little he has to do with her life in any way.

"He seems to haunt this part of the house," she says to herself now, uncomfortably. "If I were Fabian I should hate to know there was a chance of meeting him every time I opened my door. Has he, perhaps, a passion for Fabian—or—"

Instinctively she throws an additional touch of hauteur into her shapely head, and without deigning to notice the old man, sweeps by him, her glimmering white skirts making a gentle *frou-frou* as she goes.

When she has passed, the secretary raises his eyes and watches her departing form, furtively. There is great cunning mixed with malignity and resentment in his glance. He mutters something inaudible, that carries no blessing in its tone, but yet, as though fascinated by her beauty, he stands still and follows each step she takes upon the polished oaken flooring.

As she stops at a particular door, his whole face changes, and satisfied malice takes the place of resentment.

"Even such pride can stoop," he mutters, with a half-drunken chuckle. "And it is I, my fine lady—who can scarce breathe when I am by—that have power to ring your proud heart."

He turns, and shambles onwards towards his own den.

Portia's steps have grown slower as she gets nearer to the door before which Slyme has seen her stop. Her eyes have sought the ground; all along the floor her image may be seen, lengthened, but clear; almost with every step she seems to tread upon herself. As she reaches the door she hesitates, and then lifts her hand as if with the intention of knocking. But again she pauses, and her hand drops to her side. As if more nervous than she cares to own, she leans against the lintel of the door, as one might, desirous of support. [125]

Then the weakness vanishes; fastening her teeth upon her under lip, she rouses herself, and tapping gently but distinctly upon one of the panels, awaits an answer.

Presently she gets it. "Come in," says Fabian's voice, clear, indifferent; and slowly turning the handle she enters the room.

The lamps are alight; a fire is burning in the grate. At the upper table of this room, that is his study, his very *sanctum sanctorum*, Fabian is sitting with some papers and books before him.

At first, being unconscious of who his visitor is, he does not lift his head, but now, seeing her, he rises quickly to his feet, and says,

"You!" in accents of the most acute surprise.

She is standing barely inside the door with the little volume pressed closely, almost convulsively, between her fingers, and for a moment makes him no reply. It is the first time they have ever been alone since that day when he had injured his arm through the running away of Sir Christopher's mare.

Now, his face, his tone, is so unfriendly that a great fear falls upon her. Is he very angry with her still? Has she sinned past forgiveness? Will he, perhaps, order her to leave the room? She tries to rally her power of resistance against what fate—relentless, implacable—is preparing for her; but in vain. A terrible fear of him (the man regarding her with such stern eyes) and of herself crushes her. Her heart dies within her; what evil has fallen upon her days, that *once* were happy? and yet—and yet—of what—what exquisite sweetness is this evil formed!

She flushes, first painfully; and then the flush fades, and pallor holds full sway.

"I can do something for you?" asks Fabian, not advancing toward her, not letting even one kindly accent warm his frozen tone, and this when the silence has grown positively unbearable.

"Thank you—no." Her little cold hands are nervously twined around the book she holds. Speech has cruelly deserted her; a sob has risen in her throat, and she is battling with it so fiercely, that for a moment she can say nothing. Then she conquers, and almost piteously she lays the book upon the very edge of the table nearest her, and says with difficulty:

"I brought you this. At breakfast this morning you said you had not read it; and to-night I knew you would be alone, and I thought—it is 'The Europeans'—it might help you to while away an hour."

Her voice dies away and again silence follows it. She is really frightened now. She has met many men, has been the acknowledged beauty of a London season, has had great homage laid at her feet; but no man has had power to make her heart waken, until she met this man, upon whom disgrace lies heavy. It is *Kismet!* She feels cold now, and miserable, and humbled before him who should surely be humbled before her. What has she meant by coming to his room without so much as an invitation; to him—who in her sight is guilty, indeed, of an offense not to be forgiven in the world.

She grows tired and very weary, and the old pain at her heart, that always comes to her when she is miserable or perplexed, is tormenting her now, making her feel sick of life and dispirited.

"It was kind of you to think of me," says Fabian, coldly; "*too* kind. But there are some matters of importance I must get through to-night, and I fear I shall not have time for fiction."

She takes up the book again, the little instrument that betrays his determination to accept no benefits at her hands, and moves toward the door.

Coming quickly up to her, that he may open the door, he stands between her and it, and stops her.

"As you are here," he says, "let me look at you. Remember, I have never seen you dressed for a ball before."

As if astonished at his request, she stands quite still, and, letting her round, bare arms hang loosely before her, with her hands clasped, she lets him gaze at her sweet fairness in utter silence. It takes him some time. Then—

"You are very pale," he says—no more. Not a word of praise escapes him. She is woman enough to feel chagrin at this, and discontent. Has her glass lied to her, then? One small word of approbation, even about her gown, would have been sweet to her at this moment. *Is* she so very pale? Is it that this white gown does not become her? A quick dislike to the beautiful robe—and only an hour ago she had regarded it with positive affection—now takes possession of her.

"I am always pale," she says, with subdued resentment.

"Not always. To-night one hardly knows where your *dress* ends, and where *you* begin." She has hardly time to wonder if this is a compliment or the other thing, when he goes on again: "I don't think I ever saw you in white before?" he says.

"No; and it is probable you will never see me in it again," she says, petulantly. "I dislike it. It is cold and unbecoming, I think."

"No, not unbecoming."

"Well," she says, impatiently, "not becoming, at least."

"That, of course, is quite a matter of taste," he says, indifferently.

She laughs unpleasantly. To *make* him give a decided opinion upon her appearance has now grown to be a settled purpose with her. She moves her foot impatiently upon the ground, then, suddenly, she lifts her eyes to his—the large, sweet, wistful eyes he has learned to know so well, and that now are quick with defiance—and says, obstinately:

"Do *you* think it suits me?"

He pauses. And then a peculiar smile that, somehow, angers her excessively, grows round his lips and lingers there.

"Yes," he answers, slowly; "you are looking admirably—you are looking all you can possibly desire to-night."

She is deeply angered. She turns abruptly aside, and, passing him, goes quickly to the door.

"I beg your pardon," he says, hastily, following her, with a really contrite expression on his face. "Of course I know you did not want me to say that—yet—what was it you did want me to say? You challenged me, you know."

"I am keeping you from your work," says Portia, quietly. "Go back to it. I know I should not have come here to disturb you, and—"

"Do not say that," he interrupts her, eagerly. "I deserve it, I know, but *do not*. I have lost all

interest in my work. I cannot return to it to-night. And that book you brought, let me have it now, will you? I shall be glad of it by-and-by."

Before she can refuse, a sound of footsteps without makes itself heard; there is a tinkling, as of many bangles, and then the door is thrown wide, and Dulce enters.

She is looking very pretty in a gown of palest azure. There is a brightness, a joyousness, about her that must attract and please the eye; she is, indeed,

"One not tired with life's long day, but glad
I' the freshness of its morning."

"I have come to say good-night to you, Fabian," she says, regarding her brother with loving, wistful eyes. "I suppose I shan't be able to see you again until to-morrow. Promise me you will go to bed, and to sleep, *soon*."

"That is the very simplest promise one can give," returns he, mockingly. "Why should not one sleep?" Then, seeing the extreme sadness that has settled on her *mignonne* face, that should, by right, only be glad with smiles, goes on more gently: "Be happy; I shall do all you ask me."

"Ah, Portia, you here, too," says Dulce, smiling gratefully at her. "How sweet you are looking to-night—and your gown—how perfect. Isn't it lovely, Fabian?"

"Quite lovely," slowly.

"And she herself, too," goes on Dulce, enthusiastically, "isn't *she* lovely, as well?"

"Yes," says Fabian, still more slowly.

"She is like a dream of snow, or purity—or something," says Dulce, vaguely, but admiringly.

"Or ice?" says Fabian.

"Oh, *no*, not *ice*. It is too hard, too unsympathetic, too cold."

"They are both cold, are they not?" says Portia, with a very faint smile. "Both ice and snow."

"Dulce, Dulce!" calls somebody, from without.

"Now, who *is* that," says Miss Blount, irritably. "Roger, of *course*. I really never am allowed one moment to myself when he is in the house. He spends his entire time, first calling me, and then quarreling with me when he finds me. He does it on purpose, I think. He can't bear me to have even one peaceful or happy instant. I never met any one so utterly provoking as Roger." [129]

She runs to him, nevertheless, and Portia moves as if to follow her.

"Don't leave me in anger," entreats Fabian, in some agitation, detaining her by a gesture full of entreaty. "Do anything but that. Think of the long hours I shall have to put in here, by myself, with nothing but my own thoughts; and say something kind to me before you go."

"You forget," she says, with slow reproach, her eyes on the ground. "How can you hope for anything—even one word—sympathetic from *ice*. Let me go to Dulce."

"You *shall* not leave me like this," dictates he, desperately, shutting the door with sudden passion, and deliberately placing his back against it. "Am I not sufficiently unhappy that you should seek to make me even more so; to add, indeed, a very crown to my misery. I will not face the long night alone with this fresh grief! The remembrance of your face as it now looks at me, of your eyes, so calm, so unforgiving, would fill the weary hours with madness. *You* don't know what it is to endure the pangs of Tantalus, to have a perpetual hunger at your heart that can never be satisfied. *I* do. I have suffered enough. You must be friends with me before you go."

"I came to make friends with you. I wanted to be friends with you, and—"

"Yes, I know. I received you ungraciously; I grant it; but was there nothing for *me* to forgive? And even if I was unpardonably ungrateful for your kindness, is that so heavy a crime that I should be punished for it with what is worse than death? Portia, I entreat you, once again, put your hand in mine before you leave me."

He is very pale, and there is a very agony of expectation in his dark eyes. But yet she stands irresolute, not seeing his agony, because her head is bent, with her fair arms still hanging before her, with her fingers closely intertwined.

He can look unrebuked upon her beauty, upon the rounded whiteness of her arms, upon the tumultuous rise and fall of her bosom, upon the little shapely, perfect head, that might well have graced a throne. [130]

Each rich charm in her lovely downcast face is clear to him; a great yearning takes possession of his breast, an unconquerable desire to tell her all he feels for her. There have been moments when he has thought he *must* fall at her feet, and laying hold of the hem of her garment, cry aloud to her from out his heart's wild longing, "I have gone mad! I love you! Let me die!"

This is such a moment. Oh! to be able to take her in his arms for even one brief instant, and hold her close to his breaking heart—this silent girl, with her pride, and her beauty, and her cruel tenderness.

He sighs heavily, and turns his head away. Still no word escapes her. She might almost be cut in marble, so quiet, so motionless she stands. Is she indifferent to his pain; or careless of it—or ignorant?

"Go, then," he says, without looking at her, in a voice from which all warmth and feeling of any sort, be it anger or regret, has flown. "There is no reason at all why you should waste even one kind word or touch upon me. I was mad to ask it."

At this, life returns to her. Her lips quiver; she lifts her eyes to his, and such is the force of her regard that he is constrained, sorely against his will, to return it. Then he can see her eyes are full of tears—great liquid loving drops that tremble to their fall; and even as he watches them, in painful wonder, they part from her lids and run all down her pale but rounded cheeks.

She holds out to him, not one, but *two* hands. His whole face changes; a gladness, that has in it something of heaven, fills his eyes.

Taking the little trembling hands softly in his own, he lays them on his beating heart.

For a moment only, then he lets them fall; and then, before this divine joy has quite left him, he finds himself, once more alone.

CHAPTER XIV.

"What sudden anger's this? How have I reaped it? He parted frowning from me, as if ruin leaped from his eyes."—SHAKESPEARE.

The night wears on. By this time everybody is either pleased or disappointed with the evening. For the most part, of course, they looked pleased, because frowns are unbecoming; but, then, looks go for so little.

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Julia, who has impounded a middle-aged baronet, is radiant. The middle-aged baronet is not! He evidently regards Julia as a sort of modern albatross, that hangs heavily to his neck, and withers beneath her touch. She has been telling him all about her early life in India, and her troubles, and the way she suffered with her servants, and various other private matters; and the poor baronet doesn't seem to see it, and is very fatigued indeed. But Julia has him fast, and so there is little hope for him.

Dulce and Roger have been at open war ever since the second dance. From their eyes, when directed at each other, have darted forked lightning since that fatal dance.

"If they could only have been kept apart for 'this night only,'" says Sir Mark, in despair, "all might have been well; but the gods ordained otherwise."

Perhaps the careless gods had Stephen Gower's case in consideration; at all events, that calm young man, profiting by the dispute between the betrothed pair, has been making decided, if smothered, love to Dulce, all the evening.

By this time, indeed, the whole room has noticed his infatuation, and covert remarks about the probability of her carrying on to a successful finish her first engagement are whispered here and there.

Sir Christopher is looking grave and anxious. Some kind friend has been making him as uncomfortable about Dulce's future as circumstances will permit.

Meanwhile, Dulce herself, with a bright flush upon her cheeks and a light born of defiance in her blue-green eyes, is dancing gaily with Stephen, and is looking charming enough to draw all eyes upon her.

Dicky Browne, of course, is in his element. He is dancing with everybody, talking to everybody, flirting with everybody, and is, as he himself declares, "as jolly as a sand boy." He is making love indiscriminately all round—with old maids and young—married and single—with the most touching impartiality.

"Dicky is like the bee amongst the flowerets. By Jove, if he improves the shining hours, he ought to make a good match yet," says Dicky's papa, who has condescended to forsake his club for one night, and grace Dulce's ball with his somewhat attenuated charms.

As the above speech will prove, Mr. Browne senior's knowledge of Watts and Tommy Moore is limited and decidedly mixed.

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Among all the fair women assembled at the Hall to-night, to Portia, beyond dispute, must the golden apple be awarded. She is still pale, but exceedingly beautiful. The wistful, tired expression that darkens her eyes only serves to heighten her loveliness, and throw out the delicate tinting of her fair skin. Dulce, noticing her extreme pallor, goes up to her, and whispers gently:

"You are tired, darling. Do not dance any more, unless you wish it."

"I am not sure, I *don't* wish it; I don't exactly know what it is I *do* wish," says Portia, with a rather broken smile. "I daresay, like most other things in this life, I shall find out all about it when

it is too late. But finish your waltz, dearest, and don't puzzle your brain about me."

All the windows are thrown wide open. Outside the heavens are alight with stars. The air is heavy with the breath of dying flowers, and the music—faint and low at times, and again wild and sweet—rises and swells as the director waves to and fro his magic wand.

Inside, in the conservatories, the lamps are burning low; the tender blossoms are hanging down their heads. Between the dark green branches of the shrubs, lights blue and red and yellow gleam softly. In the distance may be heard the plaintive drip-drip of many fountains.

Roger, passing through one of the halls, and seeing Dulce and Mr. Gower standing before a huge Chelsea bowl of flowers, stops short, hesitates, and then, *bon gre mal gre*, goes up to them and makes some trivial remark that neither deserves an answer nor gets one.

Dulce is apparently wrapped up in the contemplation of a flower she has taken from the old bowl—that looks something like an indoor Marguerite; she is plucking it slowly to pieces, and as she so mutilates it, whispers softly the incantation that will help to declare her fortune:

"Il m'aime—un peu—beaucoup—passionément—pas du tout. Il m'aime—un peu—"

The petals are all gone; nothing remains but the very heart of the poor flower, which now, as she breaks it mercilessly in two, flutters sadly to her feet, and dies there.

"Yes—just so," she says, with a little hostile glance at Roger, distinctly seen by Gower—"and such a very little, that it need hardly count!"

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"What an unsatisfactory lover," says Roger, rather satirically, returning her glance with interest. "Of whom were you thinking?"

"My dear Roger, you forget," says Miss Blount, with admirable promptitude; "how could I think of any one in that light! I have never had a lover in my life. I have only had—*you!*" She says this slowly, and lets her lids fall half over her eyes, that are now gleaming with undue brilliancy.

"True!" replies Dare, with maddening concurrence, stroking his mustache softly.

"*Isn't* Roger charming," says Dulce (her own manner deeply aggravating in its turn), tapping Gower's arm lightly and confidentially with her fan; "*so* honest and withal *so* gracious."

"A compliment from you is, indeed, worth having," says Roger, who is in a dreadful temper; "but a truce to them now. By-the-by, were you really thinking of me just now when you plucked that unoffending flower to pieces? I can hardly bring myself to believe it."

"If not of you, of whom should I be thinking?" retorts she, calmly but defiantly.

"Well—Gower, for example," says Roger, with a sneering laugh, and unpardonable bad taste. "*He* looks as though he could do a lover's part at a moment's notice, and without the slightest effort."

As he makes this objectionable little speech, he turns on his heel and leaves them.

Dulce, crimson, and with her breath coming somewhat quickly, still lets her eyes meet Gower's bravely.

"I must ask you to excuse my cousin," she says, quietly. "How warm the rooms are; is there no air anywhere, I wonder?"

"On the balcony there is," says Gower, gently. "Shall we go there for a minute or two?"

She lays her hand upon his arm, and goes with him through the lighted, heavily-perfumed rooms on to the balcony, where the cool air is blowing, and where the fresh scent from the waving pines makes itself felt.

The moon is sailing in all its grandeur overhead. Below, the world is white with its glory. The music of many rivulets, as they rush sleepless to the river, sounds sweeter far than even the strains of the band within.

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It is past midnight. The stars are growing pale. Already the "world's heart" begins to throb,

"And a wind blows,
With unknown freshness over lands and seas."

Something in the silence and majesty of the hour, and something, perhaps, within her own heart, brings the unbidden tears to Dulce's eyes.

"What can be the matter with Roger?" asks Stephen, presently, in a low tone. "We used to be such good friends, long ago. I never saw anyone so changed. He *used* to be a genial sort of fellow." The emphasis is very expressive.

"Used he?" says Dulce, in a somewhat expressionless tone.

"Yes; a right down good sort."

"Is he so very bad now?" says Dulce, deliberately and dishonestly ignorant.

"To you—yes."

There is a pause.

"I think I hardly understand you," she says, in a tone that should have warned him to be silent.

"Have you forgotten the scene of a moment since?" he asks her, eagerly. "His voice, his glance, his whole manner were unbearable; you bore it like an angel—but—why should you bear *anything*? Why should you trouble yourself about him at all? Why not show that you care as little for him as he cares for—"

"Go on," says Dulce, imperiously.

"As he cares for *you*, then," says Stephen, recklessly.

"You have been studying us to some purpose, evidently," exclaims Dulce, turning to him with extreme bitterness. "I suppose, indeed, you are not alone in your judgment. I daresay it is apparent to the whole world that I am a matter of perfect indifference to—to—my cousin!"

"Who runs may read," says Stephen with quiet determination. "Why should I lie to you? He must be blind and deaf, I think—it is not to be accounted for in any other way. Why, that other morning in the garden, you remember how he then—"

"I remember nothing," interrupts she, haughtily, turning away from him, deep offence in her eyes.

But he follows her.

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"Now you are angry with me," he says, miserably, trying to look into her averted face.

"Why should I be angry?" she says, petulantly. "Is it because you tell me Roger does not care for me? Do you think I did not know that before? It is, indeed, a question with me whether I am or am not an object of aversion to the man I have promised to marry."

"You speak very hardly," he says.

"I speak what is in my heart," says Dulce, tremulously.

"Nevertheless, I should not have said what I did," says Stephen, remorsefully, "I know that. Whatever I might have thought, I should have kept it to myself; but"—in a low tone—"it maddens me to see you give yourself voluntarily to one incapable of appreciating the treasure that has fallen to his share—a treasure beyond price—when there are others who, for a word, a glance, a smile, would barter—"

He pauses. His voice is trembling. His eyes are bent upon the ground as though he is half afraid to meet her glance. There is genuine feeling in his tone.

Dulce, impressed by his open agitation, in spite of herself, leans over the balcony, and lets her fingers wander nervously amongst the leaves of the Virginian creeper that has intertwined itself in the ironwork, and is now fluttering within her reach. It is gleaming blood-red beneath the kiss of the fickle moonbeams, that dance hither and thither amidst its crimson foliage.

Plucking two or three of the reddest leaves, she trifles with them gently, and concentrating all her attention on them, gives herself an excuse for avoiding Stephen's earnest gaze. Her hands are unsteady. She is affected by the sincerity of his manner; and just now, too, she is feeling hurt and wounded, and, perhaps, a little reckless. Her self-pride (that dearest possession of a woman) has sustained a severe shock; for the first time she has been awakened to the fact that the whole country considers her as naught in the eyes of the man whose wife she has promised to be.

To prove to the country that she is as indifferent to Roger as he (it appears) is to her, becomes a settled desire within her heart; the more she dwells upon this, the more sweet it seems to her that there should be another man willing to be her slave; another in whose sight she is all that a woman should be, and to whom each tone of her voice, each glance of her soft eyes, is as a touch of heaven!

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Her silence emboldening Gower, he bends over her, and lays his hand upon the slender fingers that are still holding the scarlet leaves of the Virginian creeper.

"Do you understand me?" he asks, nervously.

"Yes."

She feels almost constrained to answer him honestly, so compelling is the extreme earnestness of his manner.

"It seems a paltry thing now to say that I love you," goes on Gower in an impassioned tone that carries her away with it, now that she is sore at heart; "You *know* that. You have known it for weeks." He puts aside with a gesture her feeble attempt at contradiction. "Every thought of my heart is yours; I live only in the hope that I shall soon see you again. Tell me now honestly, would it be possible to break off this engagement with your cousin?"

At this she shrinks a little from him, and a distressed look comes into her beautiful eyes.

"What are you saying?" she says, in a half-frightened way. "It has been going on for so long, this engagement—*always*, as it seems to me. How should I break it off? And then there is Uncle

Christopher, he would be unhappy; he would not forgive, and—besides—"

Her voice dies away. Memory vague but sharp, comes to her. If she should now deliberately discard Roger, how will it be with her in the future? And yet what if he should be glad of his freedom; should welcome it with open arms? If, indeed, he should be only waiting for her to take the initiative, and give him his release!

This reflection carries its sting; there is madness in it. She closes her lips firmly, and her breath comes quickly and uncertainly.

"It will be better for you later on," breaks in Gower, tempting her, surely but quietly. "When you are married—it is all very well for you now, when escape at any moment is possible; but when you are irrevocably bound to an unloving husband how will it be with you? Other women have tried it, and how has it ended with them? Not as it will with you, I know; you are far above the many; but still your life will drag with you—there will be no joy! no sympathy! no—Dulce have pity on yourself (I do not say on *me*), and save yourself while you can."

She makes a last faint protest.

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"How do you *know* he does not love me?" she asks, painfully. "How can you be sure?—and at least"—wistfully—"we are accustomed to each other, we have known each other all our lives, and we have quarrelled *so* hard already that we can scarcely do anything more—the worst with us is over."

"It will be different then," says Gower—he is speaking from his heart in all honesty. "Now you belong to him only in an improbable fashion; then—"

"It is your belief that he does not love me at all?" interrupts she, tapping her foot impatiently upon the ground.

"It is my belief," returns he slowly.

Almost as he speaks, some one steps from the lighted room beyond on the balcony and approaches them. It is Roger.

"This is ours, I think," he says, addressing Dulce, and alluding to the waltz just commencing.

"Is it—what a pity; I had quite forgotten," she says, wilfully. "I am afraid I have half promised it to Mr. Gower, and you know *he* dances charmingly."

The emphasis not to be mistaken. The remark, of course, is meant alone for Roger, and he alone hears it. Gower has gone away from them a yard or two and is buried in thought. As Roger dances divinely her remark is most uncalled for and vexes him more than he would care to confess.

"Don't let me interfere with you and your new friend," he says, lifting his brows. "If you want to dance all night with Gower, by all means do it; there is really no earthly reason why you shouldn't."

Here, as his own name falls upon his ears, Gower turns and looks at Roger expectantly.

"I absolve you willingly from your engagement to me," goes on Roger, his eyes fixed upon his wilful cousin, his face cold and hard. The extreme calmness of his tone misleads her. Her lips tighten. A light born of passionate anger darkens her gray eyes.

"Do you?" she says, a peculiar meaning in her tone.

"From this engagement only," returns he, hastily.

"Thank you. Of your own free will, then, you resign me, and give me permission to dance with whom I will."

The warm blood is flaming in her cheeks. He has thrown her over very willingly. He is evidently glad to escape the impending waltz. How shall she be avenged for this indignity?

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"Mr. Gower," she says, turning prettily to Stephen, "will you get me out of my difficulty? and will you dance this waltz with me? You see," with a brave effort to suppress some emotion that is threatening to overpower her, "I have to throw myself upon your mercy."

"You confer a very great honor upon me," says Gower, gently. The courtesy of his manner is such a contrast to Roger's ill-temper, that the latter loses the last grain of self-control he possesses. There is, too, a little smile of conscious malice upon Gower's lips that grows even stronger as his eyes rest upon the darkened countenance of his whilom friend. His whilom friend, seeing it, lets wrath burn even fiercer within his breast.

"You are not engaged to any one else?" says Dulce, sweetly, forgetting how a moment since she had told Roger she had half promised Gower the dance in question.

"Even if I was, I am at *your* service now and always," says Gower.

"As my dancing displeases you so excessively," says Roger, slowly, "it seems a shame to condemn you to keep the rest of your engagements with me. I think I have my name down upon your card for two more waltzes. Forget that, and give them to Gower, or any one else that suits

you. For my part I do not care to—" He checks himself too late.

"Go on," says Dulce, coldly, in an ominously calm fashion. "You had more to say, surely; you do not care to dance them with *me* you meant to say. Isn't it?"

"You can think as you wish, of course."

"All the world is free to do that. Then I may blot your name from my card for the rest of the evening?"

"Certainly."

"If those dances are free, Miss Blount, may I ask you for them?" says Stephen, pleasantly.

"You can have them with pleasure," replies she, smiling kindly at him.

"Don't stay too long in the night air, Dulce," says Roger, with the utmost unconcern, turning to go indoors again. This is the unkindest cut of all. If he had gone away angry, silent, revengeful, she might perhaps have forgiven him, but this careful remembrance of her, this calm and utterly indifferent concern for her comfort fills her with vehement anger. [139]

The blood forsakes her lips, and her eyes grow bright with passionate tears.

"Why do you take things so much to heart?" says Stephen, in a low voice. "Do you care so greatly then about an unpleasant speech from him? I should have thought you might have grown accustomed to his *brusquerie* by this."

"He wasn't brusque just now," says Dulce. "He was very kind, was he not? Careful about my catching cold, and that."

"*Very*," says Gower, significantly. "Yet there are tears in your eyes. What a baby you are."

"No, I am not," says Dulce, mournfully. "A baby is an adorable thing, and I am very far from being that."

"If babies are to be measured by their adorableness, I should say you are the very biggest baby I ever saw," declares Mr. Gower, with such an amount of settled conviction in his tone that Dulce, in spite of the mortification that is still rankling in her breast, laughs aloud. Delighted with his success, Gower laughs, too, and taking her hand draws it within his arm.

"Come, do not let us forget Roger gave you to me for this dance," he says. "If only for that act of grace, I forgive him all his misdeeds." With a last lingering glance at the beauty of the night, together they return to the ballroom.

CHAPTER XV.

"I would that I were low laid in my grave."

—KING JOHN.

"Proteus, I love thee in my heart of hearts."

—TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA.

THE last guest has departed. Portia has wished "good-night" to a very sleepy Dulce, and has gone upstairs to her own room. In the corridor where she sleeps, Fabian sleeps too, and as she passes his door lightly and on tip-toe, she finds that his door is half open, and, hesitating, wonders, with a quick pang at her heart, why this should be the case. [140]

Summoning courage she advances softly over his threshold, and then sees that the bed within is unoccupied, that to-night, at least, its master is unknown to it.

A shade darkens her face; stepping back on to the corridor she thinks deeply for a moment, and then, laying her candle on a bracket near, she goes noiselessly down the stairs again, across the silent halls, and, opening the hall door, steps out into the coming dawn.

Over the gravel, over the grass, through the quiet pleasaunce she goes unswervingly, past the dark green laurels into the flower garden, and close to the murmuring streamlet to where a little patch of moss-grown sward can be seen, surrounded by aged elms.

Here she finds him!

He is asleep! He is lying on his back, with his arms behind his tired head, and his beautiful face uplifted to the heavens. Upon his long dark lashes lie signs of bitter tears.

Who shall tell what thoughts had been his before kind sleep fell upon his lids and drove him into soothing slumber

"The sweetest joy, the wildest woe, is love;
The taint of earth, the odor of the skies
Is in it."

So sings Bailey. More of wild woe than joy must have been in Fabian's heart before oblivion came to him. Was he thinking of her—of Portia? For many days his heart has been "darkened by her shadow," and to-night—when all his world was abroad, and he alone was excluded from prostrating himself at her shrine—terrible despair had come to lodge with him, and grief, and passionate protest.

Stooping over him, Portia gazes on him long and earnestly, and then, as no dew lies upon the grass, she sits down beside him, and taking her knees into her embrace, stays there silent but close to him, her eyes fixed upon the "patient stars," that are at last growing pale with thought of the coming morn.

The whole scene is full of fantastic beauty—the dawning day; the man lying full length upon the soft green moss in an attitude suggestive of death; the girl, calm, passionless, clad in her white clinging gown, with her arms crossed, and her pale, upturned face beautiful as the dawn itself.

The light is breaking through the skies; the stars are dying out one by one. On the crest of the hill, and through the giant firs, soft beams are coming; and young Apollo, leaping into life, sends out a crimson ray from the far East.

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Below, the ocean is at rest—wrapt in sullen sleep. "The singing of the soft blue waves is hushed, or heard no more." And no sound comes to disturb the unearthly solemnity of the hour. Only a little breeze comes from the south, soft and gentle, and full of tenderest love that is as the

"Kiss of morn, waking the lands."

He stirs! His eyes open. He turns restlessly, and then a waking dream is his. But is it a dream? He is looking into Portia's eyes, and she—she does not turn from him, but in a calm, curious fashion returns his gaze, as one might to whom hope and passion are as things forgotten.

No word escapes him. He does not even change his position, but lies, looking up at her in silent wonder. Presently he lifts his hand, and slowly covers it with one of hers lying on the grass near his head.

She does not draw it away—everything seems forgotten—there is only for her at this moment the pale dawn, and the sweet calm, and the solitude and the love so fraught with pain that overfills her soul!

He draws her hand nearer to him—still nearer—until her bare soft arm (chilled by the early day) is lying upon his lips. There he lets it rest, as though he would fain drink into his thirsty heart all the tender sweetness of it.

And *yet* she says nothing, only sits silent there beside him, her other arm resting on her knees, and her eyes fixed immovably on his.

Oh! the rapture and the agony of the moment—a rapture that will never come again, an agony that must be theirs for ever.

"My life! my love!" he murmurs at last, the words passing his lips as if they were one faint sigh, but yet not so faint but she may hear them.

She sighs, too; and a smile, fine and delicate, parts her lips, and into her eyes comes a strange fond gleam, born of passion and nearness and the sweetness of loving and living.

The day is deepening. More rosy grows the sky, more fragrant the early breeze. Her love is at her feet, her arm upon his lips; and on the fair naked arm his breath is coming and going quickly, unevenly—the feel of it makes glad her very soul!

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Then comes the struggle. Oh! the sweetness, the perfectness of life if spent alone with the beloved. To sacrifice all things—to go away to some far distant spot with *him*—to know each opening hour will be their very own: they two, with all the world forgotten and well lost—what bliss could equal it?

Her arm trembles in his embrace; almost she turns to give herself into his keeping for ever, when a sound, breaking the great stillness, changes the face of all things.

Was it a twig snapping, or the rush of the brooklet beyond? or the clear first notes of an awakening bird? She never knows. But all at once remembrance returns to her, and knowledge and wisdom is with her again.

To live with a stained life, however dear; to feel his shame day by day; to distrust a later action because of a former one; to draw miserable and degrading conclusions from a sin gone by. *No!*

Her lips quiver. Her heart dies within her. She turns her eyes to the fast reddening sky, and, with her gaze thus fixed on heaven, registers an oath.

"As she may not marry him whom she loves, never will she be wife to living man!"

And this is her comfort and her curse, that in her heart, until her dying day will nestle her sullied love. Hidden away and wept over in secret, and lamented bitterly at times, but dearer far, for all that, than anything the earth can offer.

Gently—very gently—without looking at him, she draws her arm from his touch and rises to her

feet. He, too, rises, and stands before her silently as one might who awaits his doom.

"To hear with eyes belongs to Love's rare wit." *He* seems to know all that is now passing in her soul, her weakness—her longing—her love—her strength—her oath—her grief; it is all laid bare to him.

And she herself; she is standing before him, her rich satin gown trailing on the green grass, her face pale, her eyes large and mournful. Her soft white neck gleams like snow in the growing light; upon it the strings of pearls rise and fall tumultuously. How strange—how white she seems—like a vision from fairy, or dreamland. Shall he ever forget it?

Laying his hand upon her shoulders, he looks steadily into her eyes; and then, after a long pause—

"There should be proof," he says, sadly.

And she says,

"Yes, there should be proof," in a tone from which all feeling, and hope, and happiness have fled.

And yet the world grows brighter. The early morn springs forth and glads the air.

"But, nor Orient morn,
Nor fragrant zephyr, nor Arabian climes,
Nor gilded ceilings can relieve the soul
Pining in thralldom."

A long pause follows her sentence, that to him has savored of death. Then he speaks:

"Let me raise your gown," he says, with heart-broken gentleness, "the dew of morning is on the grass."

He lifts her train as he says this, and lays it across the bare and lovely arm that had been his for some blessed minutes. As he sees it, and remembers everything—all that *might* have been, and all that *has* been, and all that *is*—a dry sob chokes his voice and, stooping, he presses his lips passionately to her smooth, cool flesh.

At this she bursts into bitter weeping; and, letting her glimmering white gown fall once again in its straight, cold folds around her, gives way to uncontrollable sorrow.

"Must there be grief for you, too, my own sweetheart?" says Fabian; and then he lays his arms around her and draws her to him, and holds her close to his heart until her sobs die away through pure exhaustion. But he never bends his head to hers, or seeks to press his lips to those—that are sweet and dear beyond expression—but that never can be his. Even at this supreme moment he strives to spare her a passing pang.

"Were she to kiss me now," he tells himself, "out of the depths of her heart, when the cold, passionless morning came to her she would regret it," and so he refrains from the embrace he would have sold his best to gain.

"I wish there might be death, *soon*," says Portia, and then she looks upon the awakening land so full of beauty, and growing light, and promise of all good.

The great sun, climbing up aloft, strikes upon her gaze, and the swaying trees, and the music of all things that live comes to her ears, and with them all comes, too, a terrible sense of desolation that overwhelms her.

"How can the world be so fair?" she says. "How can it smile, and grow, and brighten into life, when there is no life—for—"

She breaks down.

"For us?" he finishes for her, slowly; and there is great joy in the blending of her name with his. "Yes, I know; it is what you would have said. Forgive me, my best beloved; but I am glad in the thought that we grieve together."

His tone is full of sadness; a sadness without hope. They are standing hand in hand, and are looking into each other's eyes.

"It is for the last time," she says, in a broken voice.

And he says:

"Yes, for the very last time."

He never tries to combat her resolution—to slay the foe that is desolating his life and hers. He submits to cruel fate without a murmur.

"Put your face to mine," she says, *so* faintly that he can hardly hear her; and then once more he holds her in his arms, and presses her against his heart.

How long she lies there neither of them ever knows; but presently, with a sigh, she comes back to the sad present, and lifts her head, and looks mournfully upon the quiet earth.

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And even as she looks the day breaks at last with a rush, and the red sunshine, coming up from the unknown, floods all the world with beauty.

CHAPTER XVI.

"The quarrel is a very pretty quarrel as it stands."
—THE RIVALS.

IT is two days later. Everyone you know is in the drawing-room at the Court—that is, everyone except Dulce. But presently the door opens, and that stormy young person enters, with her sleeves tucked up and a huge apron over her pretty cashmere gown, that simply envelops her in its folds.

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"I am going to make *jam*" she says, unmistakable pride in her tone. She is looking hopelessly conceited, and is plainly bent on posing as one of the most remarkable housekeepers on record—as really, perhaps, she is.

"Jam?" says Mr. Browne, growing animated. "What kind of jam?"

"Plum jam."

"You don't say so?" says Mr. Browne, with unaffected interest. "Where are you going to make it?"

"In the kitchen, of course. Did you think I was going to make it *here*, you silly boy?" She is giving herself airs now, and is treating Dicky to some gentle badinage.

"Are the plums in the kitchen?" asked he, regardless of her new-born dignity, which is very superior, indeed.

"I hope so," she says, calmly.

"Then I'll go and make the jam with you," declares Mr. Browne, genially.

"Are you really going to make it?" asks Julia, opening her eyes to their widest. "Really? Who told you how to do it?"

"Oh, I have known all about it for years," said Dulce, airily.

Every one is getting interested now—even Roger looks up from his book. His quarrel with Dulce on the night of her ball has been tacitly put aside by both, and though it still smoulders and is likely at any moment to burst again into a flame, is carefully pushed out of sight for the present.

"Does it take *long* to make jam?" asks Sir Mark, putting in his query before Stephen Gower, who is also present, can say anything.

"Well—it quite depends," says Dulce, vaguely. She conveys to the astonished listeners the idea that though it might take some unfortunately ignorant people many days to produce a decent pot of jam, *she*—experienced as she is in all culinary matters—can manage it in such a short time as it is not worth talking about.

Everybody at this is plainly impressed.

"Cook is *such* a bad hand at plum jam," goes on Miss Blount, with increasing affectation, that sits funnily on her, "and Uncle Christopher does so love mine. Don't you, Uncle Christopher?"

"It is the best jam in the world," says Uncle Christopher, promptly, and without a blush. "But I hope you won't spoil your pretty white fingers making it for me."

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"Oh, no, I shan't," says Dulce, shaking her head sweetly. "Cook does all the nasty part of it; she is good enough at that."

"I wonder what the nice part of it is?" says Roger, thoughtfully.

"There is no nice part; it is all work—*hard* work, from beginning to end," returns his *fiancée*, severely.

"I shan't eat any more of it if it gives you such awful trouble," says Dicky Browne, gallantly but insincerely; whereupon Roger turns upon him a glance warm with disgust.

"Dulce," says the Boodie, who is also in the room, going up to Miss Blount, whom she adores, and clasping her arms round her waist; "let *me* go and see you make it; *do*," coaxingly. "I want to get some when it is *hot*. Mamma's jam is always cold. Darling love of a Dulce, take me with you and I'll help you to *peel* them."

"Let us all go in a body and see how it is done," says Sir Mark, brilliantly. A proposal received with acclamations by the others, and accepted by Dulce as a special compliment to herself.

They all rise (except Sir Christopher) and move towards the hall. Here they meet Fabian coming towards them from the library. Seeing the cavalcade, he stops short to regard them with very pardonable astonishment.

"Where on earth are you all going?" he asks; "and why are Dulce's arms bare at this ungodly hour? Are you going in for housepainting, Dulce, or for murder?"

"Jam," says Miss Blount proudly.

"You give me relief. I breathe again," says Fabian.

"Come with us," says Dulce, fondly.

He hesitates. Involuntarily his eyes seek Portia's. Hers are on the ground. But even as he looks (as though compelled to meet his earnest gaze) she raises her head, and turns a sad, little glance upon him.

"Lead, and I follow," he says to Dulce, and once more they all sweep on towards the lower regions.

"After all, you know," says Dulce, suddenly stopping short on the last step of the kitchen stairs to harangue the politely dressed mob that follows at her heels, "it might, perhaps, be as well if I went on first and prepared cook for your coming. She is not exactly impossible you see, but to confess the truth she can be at times difficult."

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"What would she do to us?" asks Dicky, curiously.

"Oh! nothing, of course; but," with an apologetic gesture, "she might object to so many people taking possession of her kingdom without warning. Wait one moment while I go and tell her about you. You can follow me in a minute or two."

They wait. They wait a long time. Stephen Gower, with watch in hand, at last declares that not one or two, but quite five minutes have dragged out their weary length.

"Don't be impatient; we'll see her again some time or other," says Roger, sardonically, whereupon Mr. Gower does his best to wither him with a scornful stare.

"Let us look up the cook," says Sir Mark, at which they all brighten up again and stream triumphantly towards the kitchen. As they reach the door a sensation akin to nervousness makes them all move more slowly, and consequently with so little noise that Dulce does not hear their approach. She is so standing, too, that she cannot see them, and as she is talking with much spirit and condescension they all stop again to hear what she is saying.

She has evidently made it straight with cook, as that formidable old party is standing at her right hand with her arms akimbo, and on her face a fat and genial smile. She has, furthermore, been so amiable as to envelop Dulce in a *second* apron; one out of her own wardrobe, an article of the very hugest dimensions, in which Dulce's slender figure is utterly and completely lost. It comes up in a little square upon her bosom and makes her look like a delicious over-grown baby, with her sleeves tucked up and her bare arms gleaming like snow-flakes.

Opposite to her is the footman, and very near her the upper housemaid. Dulce being in her most moral mood, has seized this opportunity to reform the manners of the household.

"You are most satisfactory, you know, Jennings," she is saying in her soft voice that is trying so hard to be mistress-like, but is only sweet. "Most so! Sir Christopher and I both think that, but I do wish you would try to quarrel just a *little* less with Jane."

At this Jane looks meekly delighted while the footman turns purple and slips his weight uneasily from one leg to the other.

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"It isn't all my fault, ma'am," he says at length, in an aggrieved tone.

"No, I can quite believe that," says his mistress, kindly. "I regret to say I have noticed several signs of ill temper about Jane of late."

Here Jane looks crestfallen, and the footman triumphant.

"I wish you would *both* try to improve," goes on Dulce, in a tone meant to be still dignified, but which might almost be termed entreating. "*Do* try. You will find it so much pleasanter in the long run."

Both culprits, though silent, show unmistakable signs of giving in.

"If you only knew how unhappy these endless dissensions make me, I am sure you *would* try," says Miss Blount, earnestly, which, of course, ends all things. The maid begins to weep copiously behind the daintiest of aprons; while the footman mutters, huskily:

"Then I *will* try, ma'am," with unlooked-for force.

"Oh, *thank* you," says Dulce, with pretty gratitude, under cover of which the two belligerents make their escape.

"Well done," says Sir Mark at this moment; "really, Dulce, I didn't believe it was in you. Such dignity, such fervor, such tact, such pathos! We are all very nearly in tears. I would almost

promise not to blow up Jane myself, if you asked me like that."

"What a shame!" exclaims Dulce, starting and growing crimson, as she becomes aware they have all been listening to her little lecture. "I call it right down *mean* to go listening to people behind their backs. It is horrid! And you, too, Portia! So shabby!"

"Now who is scolding," says Portia; "and after your charming sermon, too, to Jennings, all about the evil effects of losing one's temper."

"If you only knew how unhappy it makes us," says Dicky Browne, mimicking Dulce's own manner of a moment since so exactly that they all laugh aloud; and Dulce, forgetting her chagrin, laughs, too, even more heartily than they do.

"You shan't have one bit of my jam," she says, threatening Dicky with a huge silver spoon; "see if you do! After all, cook," turning to that portly matron, "I think I'm tired to-day. Suppose you make this jam; and I can make some more some other time." [149]

As she says this, she unfastens both the aprons and flings them far from her, and pulls down her sleeves over her pretty white arms, to Gower's everlasting regret, who cannot take his eyes off them, and to whom they are a "joy forever."

"Come, let us go up-stairs again," says Dulce to her assembled friends, who have all suddenly grown very grave.

In silence they follow her, until once more the hall is gained and the kitchen forgotten. Then Dicky Browne gives way to speech.

"I am now quite convinced," he says, slowly, "that to watch the making of plum jam is the most enthralling sport in the world. It was so kind of you, dear Dulce, to ask us to go down to see it. I don't know *when* I have enjoyed myself so much."

"We have been disgracefully taken in," says Julia, warmly.

"And she didn't even offer us a single plum!" says Mr. Browne, tearfully.

"You shall have some presently, with your tea," says Dulce, remorsefully. "Let us go and sit upon the verandah, and say what we thought of our dance. No one has said anything about it yet."

Though late in September, it is still "one of those heavenly days that cannot die." The sun is warm in the heavens, though gradually sinking, poor tired god, toward his hard-earned rest. There are many softly-colored clouds on the sky.

Tea is brought to them presently, and plums for Dicky; and then they are all, for the most part, happy.

"Well, I think it was a deadly-lively sort of an evening," says Mr. Browne, candidly, *apropos* of the ball. "Every one seemed cross, I think, and out of sorts. For my own part, there were moments when I suffered great mental anguish."

"Well, I don't know," says Sir Mark, "for my part, I enjoyed myself rather above the average. Good music, good supper—the champagne I must congratulate you about, Dulce—and very pretty women. What more could even a Sybarite like Dicky desire? Mrs. George Mainwaring was there, and I got on capitally with her. I like a woman who prefers sitting it out, *some* times." [150]

"I don't think I even saw Mrs. George," says Dulce. "Was she here?"

"You couldn't see her," says Roger; "she spent her entire evening in the rose-colored ante-room with Gore."

"What a shameless tarradiddle," says Sir Mark.

"What did she wear?" asks Julia.

"I can't remember. I think, however, she was all black and blue."

"Good gracious!" says Dicky Browne, "has George Mainwaring been at it again? Poor soul, it *is* hard on her. I thought the last kicking he had from her brother would have lasted him longer than a month."

"Nonsense, Dicky," says Dulce; "I hear they are getting on wonderfully well together now."

"I'm glad to hear it," says Dicky, in a tone totally unconvinced.

"I don't think she is at all respectable," says Mrs. Beaufort, severely; "she—she—her dress was *very* odd, I thought—"

"There might, perhaps, have been a little more of it," says Dicky Browne. "I mean, it was such a pretty gown, that we should have been glad to be able to admire another yard or two of it. But perhaps that terrible George won't give it to her; and perhaps she liked herself as she was. '*Nuda veritas*.' After all, there is nothing like it. 'Honesty is the best policy,' and all that sort of thing—eh?"

"Dicky," says Sir Mark, austere, "go away! We have had quite enough of you."

"How did you all like the McPhersons?" Dulce asks, hurriedly.

"Now, there was one thing," says Dicky, who is not to be repressed, "how could any fellow enjoy himself in the room with the McPhersons? That eldest girl clings on to one like ivy—and precious tough old ivy too. She clung to me until I was fain to sit down upon the ground and shed salt and bitter tears. I wish she had stayed amongst her gillies, and her Highland flings, and those nasty men who only wear breeks, instead of coming down here to inflict herself upon a quiet, easy-going county."

"Why didn't you get her another partner, if you were tired of her?"

"I couldn't. I appealed to many friends, but they all deserted me in my hour of need. They wouldn't look at her. She was 'single in the field, yon solitary Highland lass.' She wasn't in the swim at all; she would have been as well—I mean, much better—at home."

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"Poor girl," says Portia.

"She isn't poor, she's awfully rich," says Roger. "They are all rich. They positively look at the world through a golden veil."

"They'd want it," says Dicky, with unrelenting acrimony; "I christened 'em the Heirs and Graces—the boys are so rich, and the girls think themselves so heavenly sweet. It is quite my own joke, I assure you. Nobody helped me." Here he laughs gaily, with a charming appreciation of his own wit.

"Did she dance well?" asks Stephen, waking up suddenly from a lengthened examination of the unconscious Dulce's fair features. An examination, however, overseen by Roger, and bitterly resented by him.

"She didn't dance at all, she only galumphed," says Dicky, wrathfully. "She regularly took the curl out of me; I was never so fatigued in my life. And she is so keen about it, too; she will dance, and keeps on saying, 'Isn't it a pity to lose this lovely music?'—and so on. I wished myself in the silent grave many times."

"Well, as bad as she is, I'd make an even bet she will be married before her sister," says Stephen.

"I don't think either of them will be married before the other," says Mr. Browne, gloomily; "one might go much farther than them without faring worse. I laughed aloud when at last I got rid of the elder one; I gave way to appropriate quotation; I fell back on my Wordsworth; I said:

'Nor am I loth, but pleased at heart,
Sweet (?) Highland girl, from thee to part.'

The query represents the expression of Mr. Browne's face as he mentions the word that goes before it.

"Well done, Dicky!" says Sir Mark.

"What has Dicky been saying now?" asks Fabian, who has been wandering in a very sad dreamland, and just come back to a sadder earth at this moment. "Has he been excelling himself?"

"I'll say it all over again for you, if you like," says Dicky, kindly; "but for nobody else."

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"Thanks, but later on," says Fabian, smiling.

He is sitting near Portia, but not very near. Now Dicky, filled with a desire to converse with Miss Vibart, gets off his seat and flings himself on a rug at her feet. Sir Mark, who is always kindly, though a trifle cynical at times, and thoughtful towards those he likes, is displeased at this change that Dicky has made. Fabian he likes—nay, if there be one friend in the world he *loves*, it is Fabian Blount. Portia, too, is a favorite of his, so great a favorite that he would gladly see her throw some sunshine into Fabian's life. To make these two come together, and by Portia's influence to induce Fabian to fling away from him and to conquer the terrible depression that has desolated his life ever since the fatal affair of the forged check, has become one of Sir Mark's dearest dreams.

Now it seems to him that when Fabian has so far overcome his settled determination to avoid society as to find a seat beside Portia, and to keep it for at least an hour, it is a vile thing in the thoughtless Dicky to intrude his person where so plainly it is not wanted.

Making some idle excuse, he brings the reluctant Dicky to his side.

"Can't you keep away from them?" says Sir Mark, in an angry whisper.

"Away from whom?" asks Dicky, resentfully.

"From them," with a gentle motion of the hand in the direction of Portia and Fabian.

"What on earth for?" says Dicky Browne, still more resentfully.

"Don't you see he *likes* her?" says Sir Mark, meaningly.

"I suppose he does," says Dicky Browne, obtusely. "I like her too. We all like her."

"Of course, my dear fellow, one can quite understand that she is about as likeable a person as I know; but—er—don't you see—he wants to be *alone* with her."

"I don't doubt him," says Dicky Browne. "So should I, if I got the chance."

Sir Mark shrugs his shoulders; there isn't much to be got out of Dicky.

"That goes without telling," he says; "you are always prowling around after her, for no reason that I can see. But you haven't grasped my idea, he—he's *in love* with her, and *you* aren't, I suppose?"

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"I don't see why you should suppose anything of the kind," says Dicky, bitterly aggrieved because of the word "prowling." "I can be as much in love with her as another, can't I, if I like? In fact," valiantly, "I think I *am* in love with her."

"Oh, you be hanged!" says Sir Mark, forcibly, if vulgarly, turning away from him in high disgust.

"Well, you needn't cut up so rough about nothing," says Dicky, following him. "He has had his chance of being alone with her, now, hasn't he? and see the result."

And when Sir Mark turns his eyes in the direction where Portia sits, lo! he finds Fabian gone, and Miss Vibart sitting silent and motionless as a statue, and as pale and cold as one, with a look of fixed determination in her beautiful eyes, that yet hardly hides the touch of anguish that lies beneath.

Meantime Dulce and Roger are sparring covertly, but decidedly, while Julia, who never sees anything, is fostering the dispute by unmeant, but most ill judging remarks. Stephen Gower has gone away from them to have a cigarette in the shrubberies.

Sir Mark and Dicky Browne are carrying on an argument, that in all human probability will last their time.

"I can't bear Mrs. Mildmay," says Dulce, *apropos* of nothing. Mrs. Mildmay is the Rector's wife, and a great friend of Roger's.

"But why?" says Julia, "she is a nice little woman enough, isn't she?"

"Is she? I don't know. To me she is utterly distasteful; such a voice, and such—"

"She is at least gentle and well-mannered," interrupts Roger, unpleasantly.

"Well, yes, there is a great deal in that," says Julia, which innocent remark incenses Dulce to the last degree, as it gives her the impression that Julia is taking Roger's part against her.

"I daresay she is an angel," she says, fractiously; "but I am not sufficiently heavenly-minded myself to admire her inanities. Do you know," looking broadly at Roger, "there are some people one hates without exactly knowing why? It is, I suppose, a Doctor Fell sort of dislike, 'the reason why I cannot tell,' and all that sort of thing."

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"I don't believe you can, indeed," says Roger, indignantly.

"Don't you?" says Dulce.

"My dear Roger, if you eat any more sugar, you will ruin your teeth," says Julia. Roger, who has the sugar bowl near him, and is helping himself from it generously, laughs a little. Julia is a person who, if you wore a smoking cap even once in your life, would tell you it would make you bald; or if you went out without a veil, you would have freckles for the rest of your life—and so on.

"*Don't* eat any more," says Julia, imploringly; "you can't like that nasty white stuff."

"Oh! doesn't he?" says Dulce, sarcastically. "He'd eat anything sweet. It isn't three days ago since he stole all my chocolate creams, and ate them every one."

"I did not," says Roger.

"Yes, he did," declares Dulce, ignoring Roger, and addressing herself solely to Julia. "He did, indeed, and *denied* it afterwards, which just shows what he is capable of."

"I repeat that I did not," says Roger, indignantly. "I found them certainly in your room up-stairs—your sitting-room—but I gave them to the Boodie."

"Oh! *say* so," says Miss Blount, ironically.

"Chocolate creams!" says the small Boodie, emerging from an obscure and unexpected corner. "What about them? Where are they? Have you any, mamma?"

"*You* ought to know where they are," says Dare, flushing; "you ate them."

"When?" asks the Boodie, in a searching tone.

"Yes, indeed, *when?*" repeats Dulce, unpleasantly.

"You remember the day Roger gave you some, don't you, darling?" says the darling's mamma,

with the kindly intention of soothing matters.

"No, I don't," says the uncompromising Boodie, her blue eyes wide, and her red lips apart.

"Do you mean to tell me I didn't give you a whole box full the day before yesterday?" exclaims Mr. Dare, wrathfully, going up to the stolid child, and looking as if he would like to shake her.

"Day before yesterday?" murmurs the Boodie, with a glance so far from the present moment that it might be in Kamtschatka.

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"Yes, exactly, *the day before yesterday!*" says Roger, furiously.

"How could I remember about that?" says the Boodie, most nonchalantly.

"Oh, don't scold the poor child," says Dulce, mildly, "she won't like it; and I am sure she is not in fault. Go away, Boodie, Roger doesn't like being shown up."

"Shown up! Upon my *life* I gave her those vile bon-bons," says Mr. Dare, distractedly, "If I wanted them couldn't I buy them? Do you suppose I go round the world stealing chocolate creams?"

At this, poor Julia getting frightened, and considering the case hopeless, rises from her seat and beats a most undignified retreat. This leaves the combatants virtually alone.

"There is hardly anything you wouldn't do in my opinion," says Dulce, scornfully.

A pause. Then:

"What a temper you have!" exclaims Roger, with the most open contempt.

"Not so bad as yours, at all events. Your face is as white as death from badly suppressed rage."

"It is a pity you can't see your own," says Roger slowly.

"Don't speak to me like that, Roger," says Dulce, quickly, her eyes flashing; "and—and say at once," imperiously, "that you know perfectly well I have the temper of an angel, in comparison with yours."

"Would you have me tell a deliberate lie?" says Roger, coldly.

This brings matters to a climax. Silence follows, that lasts for a full minute (a long time in such a case), and then Dulce speaks again. Her voice is quite changed; out of it all passion and excitement have been carefully withdrawn.

"I think it is time this most mistaken engagement of ours should come to an end," she says, quite quietly.

"That is as you wish, of course," replies he. "But fully understand me; if you break with me now, it shall be at once and forever."

"Your manner is almost a threat," she says. "It will be difficult to you, no doubt, but *please* do try to believe it will be a very great joy to me to part from you 'at once and forever.'"

"Then nothing more remains to be said; only this: it will be better for you that Uncle Christopher should be told I was the one to end this engagement, not—"

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"Why?" impatiently.

"On account of the will, of course. If you will say I have refused to marry you, the property will go to you."

"That you have *refused* me!" says Miss Blount, with extreme indignation. "Certainly, I shall never say that—never! You can say with truth I have refused to marry you, but nothing else."

"It is utter insanity," says Roger, gravely. "For the sake of a ridiculous whim, you are voluntarily resigning a great deal of money."

"I would resign the mines of Golconda rather than do that. I would far rather starve than give you the satisfaction of saying you had given me up!"

As she has a very considerable fortune of her own that nothing can interfere with, she finds it naturally the very simplest thing in the world to talk lightly about starvation.

"What should I say that for?" asks Roger, rather haughtily.

"How can I tell? I only know you are longing to say it," returns she, wilfully.

"You are too silly to argue with," protests he, turning away with a shrug.

Running down the steps of the balcony, Dulce, with her wrath still burning hotly within her, goes along the garden path and so past the small bridge, and the river, and the mighty beeches that are swaying to and fro.

Turning a corner she comes suddenly upon Gower, who is still smoking cigarettes, and no doubt day-dreaming about her.

"You have escaped from everybody," he says to her, in some surprise, Dulce being a person very little given to solitude or her own society undiluted.

"It appears I have not," returns she, bitterly.

"Well, I shan't trouble you long; I can take myself off in no time," he says, good-humoredly, drawing to one side to let her pass.

"No—no; you can stay with me if you care to," she says, wearily, ashamed of her petulance.

"*Care!*" he says, reproachfully; and then, coming nearer to her, "you are unhappy! Something has happened!" he says, quickly, "what is it?"

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"Nothing unhappy," says Dulce, in a dear, soft voice; "certainly not that. Something very different; something, indeed, I have been longing and hoping for, for weeks, for months, nay, all my life, I think."

"And—" says Stephen.

"I have broken off my engagement with Roger."

A great, happy gleam awakes within his dark eyes. Instinctively he takes a step nearer to her, then checks himself, and draws his breath quickly.

"Are you sure?" he says, in a carefully calm tone, "are you *sure* you have done wisely?—I mean, will this be for your own *good*?"

"Yes, yes, of course," with fretful impatience. "It was my own doing, I wished it."

"How did it all come about?" asks he, gently.

"I don't know. He has an abominable temper, as you know; and I—well, I have an abominable temper, too," she says, with a very wintry little smile, that seems made up of angry, but remorseful tears. "And—"

"If you are going to say hard things of yourself I shall not listen," interrupts Gower, tenderly; "you and Roger have quarreled, but perhaps, when time makes you see things in a new light, you will forgive, and—"

"No, never! I am sure of that. This quarrel is for—'*now and forever!*'"

She repeats these last four words mechanically—words that bear but the commonest meaning to him, but are linked in her mind with associations full of bitterness.

"And you have no regrets?" regarding her keenly.

"None."

"And does no faintest spark of love for him rest in your heart? Oh, Dulce, take care!"

"Love! I never loved," she says, turning her large eyes full on his. "I have seen people who loved, and so I know. *They* seem to live, think, breathe for each other alone; the very air seemed full of ecstasy to them; every hour of their day was a divine joy; but I—what have I known of all that?"

She pauses and lays her hand upon her heart.

"And he?" asks Gower, unwisely.

She laughs ironically.

"You have seen him," she says. "Not only that, but you have surely seen us together often enough to be able to answer your question for yourself. A very rude question, *by-the-by.*"

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"I beg your pardon," says Gower, heartily ashamed of himself.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," says Dulce, throwing out one hand in a quick, nervous fashion. "Nothing matters much, does it? And now that we are on it, I will answer your question. I believe if I were the only woman in the world, Roger would never have even liked me! He seemed *glad, thankful*, when I gave him a release; *almost*," steadily, "as glad as I was to give it!"

"*Were* you glad!" asks Gower, eagerly. Going up to her, he takes her hand and holds it with unconscious force in both his own.

"Am I to think that you doubt me?" she says with a frown.

"Shall I ever have occasion to doubt you?" says Gower, with sudden passion. "Dulce! now that you are free, will you listen to me? I have only one thought in the world, and that is you, always you! Have I any chance with you? My darling, my own, be kind to me and try to take me to your heart."

The tears well into her eyes. She does not turn from him, but there is no joy in her face at this honest outburst, only trouble and perplexity, and a memory that stings. There is, too, some very keen gratitude.

"*You* at least do not hate me," she says, with a faint, sobbing cadence in her voice, that

desolates, but sweetens it. Her lips quiver. In very truth she is thankful to him in a measure. Her heart warms to him. There is to her a comfort in the thought (a comfort she would have shrunk from acknowledging even to herself) in the certainty that he would be only too proud, too pleased, to be to her what another might have tried to be but would not. Here is this man before her, willing at a word from her to prostrate himself at her feet, while Roger—

"Hate you!" says Gower, with intense feeling. "Whatever joy or sorrow comes of this hour, I shall always know that I really *lived* in the days when I knew you. My heart, and soul and life, are all yours to do with as you will. I am completely at your mercy."

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"Do not talk to me like that," says Dulce, faintly.

"Darling, let me speak now, once for all. I am not perhaps just what you would wish me, but *try* to like me, will you?"

He is so humble in his wooing that he would have touched the hearts of most women. Dulce grows very pale, and moves a step away from him. A half-frightened expression comes into her eyes, and shrinking still farther away, she releases her hand from his grasp.

"You are angry with me," says Stephen, anxiously, trying bravely not to betray the grief and pain her manner has caused him; "but hear me. I will be your true lover till my life's end; your will shall be my law. It will be my dearest privilege to be at your feet forever. Let me be your slave, your servant, *anything*, but at least yours. I love you! Say you will marry me some time."

"Oh, no—*no*—*NO*!" cries she, softly, but vehemently, covering her eyes with her hands.

"You shall not say that," exclaims he passionately; "why should I not win my way with you as well as another, now that you say that you are heart whole. Let me plead my cause?" Here he hesitates, and then plays his last card. "You tell me you have discarded Roger," he says, slowly; "when you did so (forgive me), did he appeal against your decision?"

"No," says Dulce, in a tone so low that he can scarcely hear her.

"Forgive me once more," he says, "if I say that he never appreciated you. And you—where is your pride? Will you not show him now that what he treated with coldness another is only too glad to give all he has for in exchange? Think of this, Dulce. If you wished it I would die for you."

"I almost think I do wish it," says Dulce, with a faint little laugh; but there is a kindness in her voice new to it, and just once she lifts her eyes and looks at him shyly, but sweetly.

Profiting by this gleam of sunshine, Gower takes possession of her hand again and draws her gently towards him.

"You *will* marry me," he says, "when you think of everything." There is a meaning in his tone she cannot fail to understand.

"Would you," she says tremulously, "marry a woman who does not care for you?"

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"When you are once my wife I will teach you to care for me. Such love as mine must create a return."

"You think that now; you feel sure of it. But suppose you failed! No drawing back. It is too dangerous an experiment."

"I defy the danger. I will not believe that it exists; and even if it did—still I should have you."

"Yes, that is just it," she says, wearily. "But how would it be with me? I should have you, too, but—" Her pause is full of eloquence.

"Try to trust me," he says, in a rather disheartened tone. He is feeling suddenly cast down and dispirited, in spite of his determination to be cool and brave, and to win her against all odds.

To this she says nothing, and silence falls upon them. Her eyes are on the ground; her face is grave and thoughtful. Watching her with deepest anxiety, he tells himself that perhaps after all he may still be victor—that his fears a moment since were groundless. Is she not content to be with him? Her face—how sweet, how calm it is! She is thinking, it may be, of him, of what he has said, of his great and lasting love for her, of—

"I wonder whom Roger will marry now," she says, dreamily, breaking in cruelly upon his fond reverie, and dashing to pieces by this speech all the pretty Spanish castles he has been building in mid-air.

"Can you think of nothing but him?" he says, bitterly, with a quick frown.

"Why should I not think of him?" says Dulce, quite as bitterly. "Is it not natural? An hour ago I looked upon him as my future husband; now he is less to me than nothing! A sudden transition, is it not, from one character to another? *Then* a possible husband, *now* a stranger! It is surely something to let one's mind dwell upon."

"Well, let us discuss him, then," exclaims he, savagely. "You speak of his marrying. Perhaps he will bestow his priceless charms on Portia."

"Oh, no!" hastily; "Portia is quite unsuited to him."

"Julia, then?"

"Certainly not *Julia*," disdainfully.

"Miss Vernon, then? She has position and money and so-called beauty."

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"Maud Vernon! what an absurd idea; he would be wretched with her."

"Then," with a last remnant of patience, "let us say Lilian Langdale."

"A fast, horsey, unladylike girl like that! How could you imagine Roger would even *look* at her! Nonsense!"

"It seems to me," says Stephen, with extreme acrimony, "that no one in this county is good enough for Roger; even you, it appears, fell short."

"I did not," indignantly. "It was I, of my own free will, who gave him up."

"Prove that to him by accepting *me*."

"You think he wants proof?" She is facing him now, and her eyes are flashing in the growing twilight.

"I do," says Stephen, defiantly. "For months he has treated you with all the airs of a proprietor, and you have submitted to it. All the world could see it. He will believe you *sorry* by-and-by for what has now happened; and if he should marry before you, what will they all say—what will you feel? What—"

She is now as pale as death. She lifts her hand and lays it impulsively against his lips, as though to prevent his further speech. She is trembling a little (from anger, she tells herself), and her breath is coming quickly and unevenly, so she stands for a moment collecting herself, with her fingers pressed against his lips, and then the agitation dies, and a strange coldness takes its place.

"You are sure you love me?" she asks, at length, in a hard, clear voice, so unlike her usual soft tones, that it startles even herself.

"My beloved, can't you see it?" he says, with deep emotion.

"Very well, then, I will marry you some day. And—and to-morrow—it must be *to-morrow*—you will let Roger know I am engaged to you? You quite understand?"

He does, though he will not acknowledge it even to himself.

"Dulce, my own soul!" he says, brokenly; and, kneeling on the grass at her feet, he lifts both her hands and presses them passionately to his lips.

They are so cold and lifeless that they chill him to his very heart.

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CHAPTER XVII.

"Too early seen unknown, and known too late!"

—ROMEO AND JULIET.

"There's neither honesty, manhood, nor good fellowship in thee."

—HENRY IV.

It is next day. There has been rain in the night—*heavy* rain—and the earth looks soaked and brown and desolate. Great storms, too, had arisen, and scattered the unoffending leaves far and wide, until all the paths are strewn with rustling types of death. Just now the drops are falling, too—not so angrily as at the midnight past, but persistently, and with a miserable obstinacy that defies all hope of sunshine. "The windy night" has made "a rainy morrow," and sorrowful, indeed, is the face of Nature.

Sorrowful, too, is the household. A lack of geniality pervades it from garret to basement; no one seems quite to know what is the matter, but "*suspect*" that "crow that flies in Heaven's sweetest air" stalks rampant up stairs and down, and damps the ardor of everyone.

Dulce had waked early, had risen from her bed, and—with the curious feeling full upon her of one who breaks her slumber *knowingly* that some grief had happened to her over night, the remembrance of which eludes her in a tantalizing fashion—had thrown wide her window, and gazed with troubled eyes upon the dawning world.

Then knowledge came to her, and the thought that she had made a new contract that must influence all her life, and with this knowledge a sinking of the heart, but no drawing back and no repentance. She dressed herself; she knelt down and said her prayers, but peace did not come to her, or rest or comfort of any sort, only an unholy feeling of revenge, and an angry satisfaction

that should not have found a home in her gentle breast.

She dressed herself with great care. Her prettiest morning gown she donned, and going into the garden plucked a last Maréchal Niel rose and placed it against her soft cheek, that was tinted as delicate as itself.

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And then came breakfast. And with a defiant air, but with some inward shrinking she took her place behind the urn, and prepared to pour out tea for the man who yesterday was her affianced husband, but who for the future must be less than nothing to her.

But as fate ordains it she is not called upon to administer bohea to Roger this morning. Mr. Dare does not put in appearance, and breakfast is got through—without, indeed, an outbreak of any sort, but in a dismal fashion that bespeaks breakers ahead, and suggests hidden but terrible possibilities in the future.

Dulce is decidedly cross; a sense of depression is weighing her down, a miserable state of melancholy that renders her unjust in her estimate of all those around her. She tells herself she hates Roger; and then again that she hates Stephen, too; and then the poor child's eyes fill with tears born of a heartache and difficult of repression; to analyze them she knows instinctively would be madness, so she blinks them bravely back again to their native land, and having so got rid of them, gives herself up to impotent and foolish rage, and rails inwardly against the world and things generally.

Even to Portia she is impatient, and Julia she has annihilated twice. The latter has been lamenting all the morning over a milliner's bill that in length and heaviness has far exceeded her anticipations.

But this is nothing; Julia is always so lamenting, and indeed, I never yet saw the milliner's bill, however honest, that wasn't considered a downright swindle, and three times as exorbitant as it ought to be!

"Now look at this, my dear Dulce," says the unobservant Julia, holding out a strip of paper about half a yard in length to Miss Blount, who has been ominously silent for the past hour. "I assure you the trimmings on that dress *never* came to that. They were meagre to the last degree; just a little *suspicion* of lace, and a touch of velvet here and there. It is absurd—it is a fraud. Did *your* trimmings ever come to that?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," says Dulce, impatiently; "I never keep any accounts of my own money. I make a *point* of not doing that. If it's spent, it's spent, you know, and one gains nothing by thinking of it. It only shows one how extravagant one has been, and I do so *hate* scolding myself!"

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"But, my dear child, Madame Grande *must* have made a mistake. It is all nonsense; if you would just look it over, if only to convince yourself. I am not unreasonable."

"I won't look it over," says Miss Blount, promptly. "I *hate* looking over things, and I hate bills, and I hate Madame Grande, and I hate—everything."

After this outburst she makes for the door, and the morning-room knows her no more for a considerable time. Portia looks up from her painting in some surprise, and Julia tries to smother the thought that the final expression of hatred should have ended in the word "*you*."

In the hall outside, Dulce almost runs into Stephen's arms, who has come up to see her very early, being in a restless and most unsatisfactory mood. His eyes brighten and he flushes warmly as he meets her, but she, drawing back from him, gives him to understand by the very faintest of imperative gestures that he is to come no nearer.

"You!" she says, ungraciously.

"Yes—you expected me?" This question suggests the possibility that he fears he is not altogether welcome. She waives it, and goes on as though she had not heard him.

"Have you done what you promised?" she asks, coldly.

"No, you mean—?" he hesitates.

"You *must* remember. You were to tell Roger next day; *this* (though it hardly sounds right) is next day; *have* you told him that I have promised to marry you some time?"

There is not the faintest nervousness or girlish confusion in her tone. Stephen, watching her closely, feels a terrible despair that threatens to overwhelm him. If only one little blush would mantle her cheek, if for one second her beautiful, feverishly bright eyes would droop before his! He battles with the growing misery, and for the time being, allays it.

"Not yet;" he says. Then he colors hotly, and his eyes leaving her face seek the ground. A sense of shame betrays itself in every feature. "It is early yet," he says, in a strange reluctant tone; "and if—if you think it better to put it off for a day or two, or even to let him find out for himself by degrees—or—"

"No!"—remorselessly—"he shall be told *now—at once!* Remember all you said about him last evening. *I* have not forgotten. What!" cries she, with sudden passion, "do you think I will live another day believing he imagines me regretful of my decision—cut to the heart, perhaps, that I am no longer anything to him? I tell you no! The very thought is intolerable."

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"But—"

"There must be no hesitation," she says, interrupting him with a quick gesture. "It was in our agreement that he should be told to-day. If one part of that agreement is to be broken, why then, let us break it all; it is not too late yet. *I* shall not care, and perhaps it will be better if—"

Her cruelty stings him into vehement declaration.

"It will *not* be better," he says, wrathfully. "I will do anything, everything, you wish, except"—bitterly—"give you up."

To him it seems a wretched certainty that it *is* her wish *already* to break the bond formed between them but a few short hours ago. Has she so soon repented?

"Where is Roger?" he asks, turning from her, all the lover's gladness gone from his eyes. He is looking stern and pale, and as a man might who is determined to do that against which his soul revolts.

How shall he tell this man, who was once his dearest friend, that he has behaved as a very traitor to him.

"In the stables, no doubt," replies she, scornfully. The change in his manner has not touched her; nay, he tells himself it has not so much as been noticed by her.

Moving abruptly away, he goes down the hall and out of the open door, and down the stone steps across the gleaming sunshine, and so is lost to sight.

Dulce watches him until the portico outside hides him from view, and then, walking very slowly and with bent head, she goes in the direction of Fabian's room. She is so absorbed in her own reflections that she hardly hears approaching footsteps, until they are quite close to her. Looking up, with a quick start, she finds herself face to face with Roger.

The surprise is so sudden that she has not time to change color until she has passed him. Involuntarily she moves more quickly, as though to escape him, but he follows her, and standing right before her, compels her to stop and confront him.

"One moment," he says. His tone is haughty, but his eyes are more searching than unkind. "You meant what you said last evening?" he asks, quickly, and there is a ring in his voice that tells her he will be glad if she can answer him in the negative. Hearing it, she grows even paler, and shrinks back from him.

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"Have I given you any reason to doubt it?" she says, coldly.

"No—certainly not." His tone has grown even haughtier. "I wish, however, to let you know I regret anything uncivil I may have said to you on—that is—at our last interview."

"It is too late for regrets." She says this so low that he can scarcely hear her.

"You are bent, then, upon putting an end to everything between us?"

"Yes." At this moment it seems impossible to her to answer him in anything but a monosyllable. Her obstinacy angers him.

"Perhaps you are equally bent," he says, sneeringly, "upon marrying Gower?"

I suppose he has expected an indignant denial to this question, because, when silence follows it, he starts, and placing both his hands upon her shoulders, draws her deliberately over to a side window, and stares into her downcast face.

"Speak," he says roughly. "Are you going to marry him?"

"Yes."

The word comes with difficulty from between her pale, dry lips.

"He has asked you?"

"He has."

"You were engaged to him even *before* you broke off your engagement with me?"

"Oh, *no*, *no*!"

"Since when, then? Was it last evening he spoke to you?"

"Yes."

"After you had parted from me? Sharp work, upon my life."

He laughs—a short, unmirthful laugh—and taking his hands from her shoulders, moves back from her, yet always with his eyes on her face.

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"You should be glad," she says, slowly.

"No doubt. So he was your confidant—your father-confessor, was he? All my misdemeanors were laid bare to him. And then came pity for one linked to such an unsympathetic soul as mine,

and then naturally came what pity is akin to! It is a pretty story. And for its hero 'mine own familiar friend.'" He laughs again.

She makes a movement as though to leave him, but he stops her.

"No, do not go yet," he says. "Let me congratulate you. *Le roi est mort, vive le roi*. My successor, it seems, was not difficult to find; and—By-the-by, why are you alone now? Why is not your *new* lover by your side?"

"My *first* lover—not my new lover," she says, bitterly, speaking now with some spirit.

"I didn't count, I suppose."

"*You—!*" She draws her breath quickly, and, then, having subdued the indignation that had almost overcome her, goes on quietly: "you never loved me. There was never a moment in all my knowledge of you when I could have flattered myself with the thought that I was more to you than a cousin."

"He is very different, I suppose?" He flushes a dark crimson as he puts this question.

"Altogether—*utterly!* At least, I can tell myself, I am to him something more than a necessary evil, a thing forced upon him by circumstances. To *you* I was only that, and *worse*. There were moments when I believe you *hated* me."

"We need not discuss that now," says Dare coldly. "Where is Gower?"

"I don't know; at least, I am not sure. What do you want with him? There is no use in quarreling with him," she says, nervously.

"Why should I quarrel with any man because a woman chooses to prefer him to me? That is her affair altogether."

He walks away from her, and she, moving into the deep embrasure of the large bow window, stands staring blankly upon the sunlit landscape without.

But presently he returns and, standing beside her, gazes out, too, upon the flowers that are bowing and simpering as the light wind dances over them.

"I am going away this evening," he says, at length, very gently. "It is uncertain when I shall return. Good-by."

He holds out his hand, awkwardly enough, and even when, after a momentary hesitation, she lays hers in it, hardly presses it. Yet still, though he has paid his adieux, he lingers there, and loiters aimlessly, as if he finds a difficulty in putting an end to the miserable *tete-a-tete*.

"You were wrong just now," he says, somewhat abruptly, not looking at her; "there was never one second in my life when I *hated* you; you need not have said *that*."

"Where are you going?" asks she, brokenly.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. But before I go, I want to say to you—that—that—if ever you *want* me, even if I should be at the end of the world, *send* for me, and I will come to you."

Are there tears in his eyes? He drops her hand, and turning hastily away, goes down the corridor, and is beyond recall before she can muster courage to say anything to him kind or forgiving.

Going into the yard to order the dog-cart to take him to the station to catch the up-train, he encounters Stephen Gower (who, by-the-by, had gone to encounter him), on his knees before a kennel, fondling a two-months old setter pup.

This pup is a baby belonging to one of Roger's favorite setters, and is, therefore, a special pet of his.

"Put that dog down," he says, insolently.

"Why?" says Stephen, just as insolently.

"Because petting is bad for young things, and because *I* wish it."

"Oh, nonsense!" says Stephen, rather cavalierly, continuing his attention to the dog.

"Look here," says Dare, furiously, "it has nothing to do with the dog, you will understand—*nothing*—but I want to tell you now what I think of you, you low, mean, contemptible—"

Gower literally gasps for breath. Letting go the dog, he rises to his feet, and coming close to Roger, says, passionately,

"What do you mean by that?"

"Have you not been making love to my cousin behind my back? Deny that if you can!"

"I won't deny that I love her, certainly."

"Will you deny anything else? That you have acted as few men would have done. Without honor—without—"

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This of course puts an end to even enforced civility; Mr. Gower instantly and most naturally strikes out with the most exemplary vigor, and presently these two most mistaken young men are clasped in an embrace, warm indeed, but hardly so loving as one might desire.

How things might have ended, whether with death or only with bloody noses, no one now can tell, because Sir Mark Gore, coming on the scene just at this awful moment, seizes Roger by the shoulder and by sheer force of arm and will, forces him back from his adversary.

"What do you two boys mean by this burst of insanity?" he says, angrily. "Such an example to the young fellows in the yard; you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Roger." This is plainly meant for two stable boys in the distance, who, with open mouths, are staring at the combatants, and have been plainly enjoying themselves to the utmost.

"Well, I'm not," says Roger, doggedly, who is still thirsting for blood. "If shame should attach itself to any one, it should be to that fellow there," pointing contemptuously to Gower.

"Well, I forbid any more of this," says Sir Mark. "Stop it at once. It is all about that child indoors, I suppose; I never heard of—"

"At all events, I have told him what I think of him," says Roger, panting. "Low, underhand sneak."

"What?" says Stephen, fiercely, making a step forward.

"I insist on knowing what it is all about," says Sir Mark, authoritatively. "Of course, one understands a disgraceful scene like this *always* means a woman, but *is* it Dulce?"

"To come here under the guise of friendship and deliberately make love to the girl to whom he *knew* I was engaged; was there ever such treachery since the world began?" says Roger. "Would any fellow, with any claim to the word gentleman, do that? Now, I leave it to you, Gore?"

"My dear fellow, you must remember it is apparent to everybody that *you* don't want her," says Sir Mark, taking Stephen's part, though in his soul he is on Roger's side. "Would you act the part of the dog in the manger? You don't affect her yourself, yet nobody else must look at her. She has found out, I *suppose*, that she prefers some one else to you. Women, as a rule, will choose for themselves, and who shall blame them! When, later on, you choose for yourself too, you will be very grateful to her and Stephen for this hour. Just now self-love is disagreeing with you. If I were you I should clear out of this for a bit."

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"Oh? as for *that*, I'm going," says Roger; "but I'm glad I have had a chance of speaking to him before I go; he undermined me, and poisoned her mind with regard to me from first to last. I wasn't *quite* blind, though I said nothing. He spoke evilly of me behind my back, I have no doubt, and maligned me most falsely when there was a chance; a more blackguardly transaction—"

"You shall answer to me for this," says Gower, in a white rage; "you have lied in your statement from beginning to end."

"No one shall answer for anything," says Sir Mark, promptly; "I won't hear of it. Are you both gentlemen! and to dream of dragging a woman's name into a scandalous quarrel of this kind? For shame! Take my advice, Roger, and go abroad, or to the—or anywhere you like for a month or two, and see what that will do for you. You know you are only trying to make a grievance out of nothing; you never *really* cared for her, as a man should for his wife." Sir Mark's eyes sadden as he says this, and an irrepressible sigh escapes him; is he thinking of the time when he could have cared for a woman with all his heart and soul?

"No, of course not; you and she and all are quite agreed about *that*," says Roger, bitterly.

"My good boy, all your world knows it," says Sir Mark, persistently.

"My world is wiser than even *I* gave it credit for," says Roger, sneeringly. But there is a sob in his voice as he turns away that sends a pang through Sir Mark's heart. What has happened? Have they all been mistaken, then? Even have the principal actors in this small drama been blind until now, when the awakening has come too late.

Without another word to Stephen, Sir Mark goes slowly indoors, and, passing through the hall, meets Portia coming toward him, a troubled expression in her large sad eyes.

"What is it, Mark?" she says, laying her hand on his arm, "Something has happened to Dulce; she is lying on her bed, and will not speak to me or any one. Has she really quarreled finally with Roger?"

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"Oh, it is worse than that," says Gore, with something that is almost a groan.

"It can't be true that she has thrown him over for Mr. Gower?" says Portia, recoiling.

"One never knows what a woman will do," says Mark, gloomily, "I think she has."

"But what is it all about? How did it begin?"

"With a chocolate cream," says Sir Mark, sententiously. "I assure you, my dear Portia, for the sake of a paltry box of bon-bons she has sacrificed the entire happiness of her life!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"The firste vertue, sone, if thou wilt lerne,
Is to restreine, and kepen wel thy tonge."

—THE MANCIPLE'S TALE—CHAUCER.

THE days have grown shorter and shorter. Daylight now is to be prized, not sported with, as in the gay and happy Summer. "The inaudible and noiseless foot of Time" has carried us from "Golden September" to bleakest Winter, and into that month which claims Christmas for its own.

At the hall, everything is very much the same as it was when last we saw it, if we except the fact that Roger is absent. He is abroad; *so* much abroad, indeed, that nobody knows where he is. A week after his departure he had written to Sir Christopher, and the week after that again to Mark Gore; but, beyond these two meagre attempts at correspondence, no news has been heard of him. Whether, as Mr. Browne has elegantly expressed it, "he is up the Nile, or up the Spout," is a matter of speculation.

Sir Christopher is looking a little older, a little graver. He is not so testy as of yore, a change that fills Dulce's heart with misgivings. That he has fretted greatly over her broken engagement with Roger (who is to the old Baronet as dear as his own son should have been, and second only to Fabian in his affections) she well knows; she well knows, too, how magnanimously—to please her—he has tried to be civil to Stephen Gower, and to welcome him with cordiality as his future nephew. But the effort to do all this has aged and saddened him; and from time to time his mind wanders restlessly to the young man who left his home full of anger and indignant grief.

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As for Stephen, living in his "Fool's Paradise, he drinks delight," nor heeds how false is all the happiness that seems to surround him. Bitter is the fruit he feeds on, though he will not acknowledge it even to himself; and, looking on his dainty lady-love, he is still happy, and content to bear all things, and suffer all things, for the few grains of adulterated sweetness doled out by her every now and then with a niggard hand. He will see no cloud on his horizon, although it sits there heavily; nor will he notice aught but what is good and lovable in this girl, upon whom he has centred all his dearest hopes.

For the rest, there has been but little change amongst them. Julia Beaufort and the children had gone away for a month, but returned to the Hall a fortnight ago, and are now—that is, the children, at all events—anxiously awaiting Christmas Day with all its affectations of gaiety and goodwill, and its hideous paddings.

Sir Mark did pretty much the same as Julia. He went away, too, and came back again, thus filling up the measure of his days. Mr. Browne had declined to stir for any pretense whatever, and has been enjoying himself to the utmost, now at Portia's feet, now at Dulce's, and, when all things fail, at Julia's.

Perhaps to Fabian the days have seemed longest. He is silent, cold, self-contained as ever; but now there is something else, a settled melancholy, that yet has in it a mixture of extreme pride, that forbids any approach to it; a melancholy born of despair, and the knowledge that there is laid upon him "a burden greater than he can bear."

"Time, the subtle thief of youth," is stealing from him his best years; his life is going, and with it all chance of joy and gladness. Ever since that memorable evening in the garden, after the ball, a strange reserve has arisen between him and Portia. That morning, as the soft pink dawn came up from behind the hills—when passion, pale but triumphant, had held full sway—has never been forgiven by either. A sense of terror has possessed Portia ever since—the knowledge of a danger barely overcome; and with him there has been the memory of pain, and terrible self-restraint that has scathed him as it passed him by. And withal a settled coldness has fallen upon them, the greater because of the weakness that had characterised the hour of which I write.

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He does not condemn her, but in his heart he does not forgive her want of faith, her almost openly avowed distrust. Of his own will he never lets his eyes rest upon the fair beauty of her face, and turns aside when unlucky chance has flung him in her path.

And she—a contempt for her own want of self-control, together with the miserable knowledge that her heart is irrevocably his, has rendered her almost repellent in her manner toward him. When he is near, her eyelids droop, her lips take a harder curve, she is dumb, silent, unsympathetic; and yet when he is gone, when the door has closed behind him, the fever of her blood runs high, and but for social training, she would gladly rise, and, in spite of all things, call to him and implore him to return to her side once more.

To a casual observer, of course, all this is not apparent; but to these two, between whom Fate sits relentless, the pain and sorrow of it is deep and cruel. More deep, more sorrowful for him, of course. His whole life is a ruin; he had thought of many things when first the blight fell upon him; but that he should fall in love, and because of this curse that has blasted his best days, should be compelled to turn aside from the love of his heart, had not occurred to him. His life has grown too bitter to be borne with fortitude, almost he is "half in love with easeful death." Oh, the joy—the rapture! to pass away from all the tortures of this "work-a-day world" to a land unknown, but surely full of rest. To die—to disappear! To court a glad forgetfulness! In this alone lies hope, and, that sweetest of all sweet things, indifference.

Not coward enough to compel death, he still longs for it; he would slip away from all and sink into oblivion, and gladly deem himself and his sad history forgotten. "To cease upon the midnight with no pain?" What sweeter, kinder fate could visit him than that for which Keats longed—not vainly.

Into his life, too, some smaller worries are thrown. The old man Slyme, the secretary, has been going rapidly from bad to worse, of late. His intemperate habits are growing on him, and now seldom comes the day when he is not discovered to be unfit for duty of any kind.

Naturally such conduct incenses Sir Christopher to the last degree. The old man has been for years in his service, but time wears out all things, and even regard and use can be forgotten. Fabian, falling into the breach, seeks to mend it, although Slyme has never been a favorite of his, and although he is fully aware that he is very distasteful to the secretary for reasons unknown; still he pleads his cause, principally because the man is old and friendless; and this, too, he does secretly, the secretary being ignorant of the force brought to bear upon his delinquencies, a force that keeps a roof over his head, and leaves him a competence without which the world would be a barren spot to him indeed, with only the poor-house—that most degrading of all places—to which to turn.

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To-day is melancholy, cold and bleak. The winds are sighing; the earth is bare and naked; no vestige of a fresh and coming life can yet be seen. Upon the gray sands, far away, the white waves dash themselves tumultuously, the sea birds shriek, and, "blasting keen and loud, roll the white surges to the sounding shore."

Indoors there is warmth and comfort. Julia, sitting over the fire, finding she cannot get Dulce to gossip with—Dulce, indeed, is not come-at-able of late—turns gratefully to Portia, who happens to come into the room at this moment.

"The fire is the only delicious thing in the house," she says, fretfully. "*Do* come here and enjoy it with me."

"Anything the matter with you?" asks Portia, gently, seating herself on a low lounging chair at her side.

"Oh! nothing, nothing. But Dulce is very strange of late, is she not? Ever since Roger's going, don't you think? And all that affair was quite absurd, according to my lights. Stephen won't suit her half as well. Fancy any woman throwing over the man she likes, for a mere chimera. Wrecking her entire happiness for the sake of a chocolate cream!"

"It sounds absurd," says Portia; "but I cannot believe such a paltry thing as that has separated them. There must have been something else."

"Well, perhaps so. Sir Christopher, one can see, is very distressed about it. He is unfortunate about them all, is he not? poor old man. Fabian's affair was so wretched, so unlooked for, too," says Julia, in the comfortably gossiping tone one knows so well, drawing her chair a little nearer to the fire. "I can't think what could have tempted him to do it."

Portia turns abruptly toward her.

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"Do you, too, question his innocence?" she says, her breath coming quickly.

"Well—er—you see one doesn't like to talk about it," says Mrs. Beaufort with a faint yawn. "It seems pleasanter to look upon him as a suffering angel, but there are some who don't believe in him you know. Do come closer to the fire, Portia, and let us have a good chat."

"Go on," says Portia, "you were talking of Fabian, you were saying—"

"Yes, just so. Was I uncharitable? It doesn't make him a bit the worse in my eyes, you know, not a bit. It is all done and over years ago, and why remember nasty things. Really, do you know, Portia—it may be horrid of me—but really I think the whole story only makes him a degree more interesting."

Portia shivers, and ignores this suggestion.

"Do other people doubt him, too?" she asks in a strangely cold tone. Though she may disbelieve in him herself, yet it is agony to her that others should do the same.

"My dear, yes, of course; a great many; in fact, pretty nearly everybody but just those you see here—Sir Mark excepted, I think, and then Dicky Browne. But Dicky hasn't enough brains to believe or disbelieve in anybody."

"Ah!" says Portia. She leans back in her chair, and holds up a fan between her and the fire and Julia. She can hardly analyze her own thoughts; but, even at this moment, when all her finest feelings are ajar, she tells herself that surely—surely she cordially detests Julia Beaufort. She tells herself, too, that she loves Mark Gore.

"You see, in your doubt of him, you are not a solitary exception," says Julia, with elephantine playfulness. "Others think with you. It is the plainest case in the world, I think. I don't blame you."

"How do you know I *do* doubt him?" asks Portia, suddenly, turning her large eyes upon her, that are glittering in the firelight. At this Julia recoils a little and looks somewhat uncomfortable.

"Your voice, your manner, led me to believe so," she says, slowly, and with hesitation. "If you don't, of course it is so much to your credit."

"You mean—" asks Portia.

"Well, his whole bearing would preclude the thought of dishonor of any kind," says Julia, boldly, and with the utmost effrontery, considering all she had said a moment since. "Suspicion could hardly rest with such a man as Fabian. Of course, the whole thing is a wretched mistake, that will be cleared up sooner or later, let us hope sooner, as surely he has suffered enough already, poor dear fellow!"

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She pauses; Portia puzzled, and secretly indignant, says nothing. Seeing she will not speak, Julia goes on again even more impressively than before.

"I never entertained a shadow of a doubt with regard to him," she says, nobly, "never! Who could? I was always one of his very warmest supporters."

This is too much! Portia murmuring something civil, but distinct, rises abruptly, and, going to the door, opens it, and is soon beyond call, and beyond hearing of the voice that has grown hateful to her.

Just at this moment, Julia's absurd shufflings, and equivocations, and barefaced changes from one asseveration to another fill her with wrath. She is distressed, and at war with her own heart; and so, crossing the hall, makes for the one room that is especially dear to all women when in trouble, namely, her own bedroom.

But passing by Dulce's door, and finding it open, she pauses before it, and finally, after some hesitation, she crosses the threshold only to find it empty.

The fire is burning brightly; a little crushed glove lies upon the hearth-rug, showing how its owner but lately had knelt before the fire, or stood near it to gaze into its depths, and call up fancied faces from its coals.

A little low chair attracts her attention; sinking into it, she lets her chin fall into the palm of her hands, and presently is lost in painful and half-angry reflection.

"Pretty nearly everybody." The words ring in her ears; does the whole county, then, look upon Fabian with averted eyes? And perhaps—who knows—the very people beneath the roof may distrust him, too; she had not known until this evening Julia's private opinion; the others may agree with her, but naturally shrink from saying so. Roger, perhaps, believed him guilty; and Dicky Browne, it may be, in his secret soul, regards him with contempt, and Sir Mark—

No, *not* Sir Mark! She could not mistake him. However foolish it may be, certainly his belief in Fabian is genuine. And somehow of late, she has grown rather fond of Sir Mark; and here she sighs, and laying her hand upon her heart, presses it convulsively against it as though to still the pain that has sprung into life there, because of the agitation that has been hers for the past half hour.

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Dulce, coming up-stairs, presently, finds her still sitting over the fire, in an attitude that betokens the very deepest dejection.

"You here, *très chère*, and alone," she says, gaily, stooping over her in caressing fashion. "Naughty girl. You should have told me you were going to honor me with your presence, and I would have made my room gay to receive you."

"I don't want you to make a stranger of me. I like your room as it is," says Portia, with a smile.

"Well, don't sit crouching over the fire; it will spoil your complexion; come over to the window and see what the storm has done, and how lovely nature can look even when robed in Winter's garb."

Portia, rising, follows her to the window, but as she reaches it she sinks again wearily into a lounging chair, with all the air of one whose limbs refuse obstinately to support her.

As both girls gaze out upon the chilly landscape, white here and there with the snow that fell last night, Fabian, coming from between the dark green branches of an ancient laurustinus, with two red setters at his heels, and a gun upon his shoulder, passes beneath the window, going in the direction of the home wood.

Leaning forward, Dulce taps lightly on the pane, and Fabian, hearing the quick sound, stops short, and lifts his eyes to the window. As he sees his pretty sister, he nods to her, and a bright smile creeps round his lips, rendering his always handsome face actually beautiful for the moment.

Only for a moment; his gaze wandering, instinctively, falls on Portia, standing pale and calm beside her cousin. Their eyes meet, and, as if by magic, the smile dies, his lips grow straight and cold again, and, without another glance, he whistles to his dogs, and, turning the corner, is rapidly out of sight.

"Dear Fabian—poor darling," says Dulce, tenderly, who has noticed only the kindly smile vouchsafed to her. "How sad he always looks. Even his smile is more mournful than the tears of others. What a terrible pressure Fate has laid upon him. He—; how pale you are, Portia! What

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is it, dearest? I am sure you are not well to-day."

"I am quite well. I am only cold; go on," speaking with some difficulty; "you were saying something about—Fabian."

"I *think* so much of him that it is a relief to talk sometimes; but I won't make you doleful. Come over to the fire if you are cold."

"No, I like being here; and—do go on, I like listening to you."

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything very particular, you know. It has all been said so often. *So* often, and to no use. What a little thing, Portia, gives rise to the most terrible consequences; the mere fact that two people wrote alike, and formed their capitals in the same fashion, has been the utter ruin of a man's life. It sounds dreadful—cruel! sometimes—*often*—I lie awake thinking of it all, and wondering can nothing be done, and no hope ever comes to me. That is the saddest part of it, it will go on like this forever, he will go to his grave," mournfully, "and his very memory will be associated with disgrace."

She pauses and sighs heavily, and folds her fingers tightly together. Not Stephen, nor Roger, but this dishonored brother, is the love of her life—as yet.

"Of course you heard a good deal about it in town," she says, sadly. "He had many friends there at one time. Fair-weather friends! They, as a rule, are cruellest when evil comes; and they never remember. You heard him often discussed?"

This is a downright question to which Portia is constrained to give an answer.

"Yes; often," she says, sorely against her will.

"Aunt Maud would enlarge upon it, of course," says Dulce, bitterly. "She likes whisperings and slanderous tongues. And you, when first you heard it, what did you think?"

Portia shrinks from her. Must she answer this question, too?

"Think?" she says, evasively.

"Yes; what did you think of Fabian?"

"Very little," says Portia, who has grown quite white; "why should I think at all? I did not know him then. It was most natural, was it not? He was a stranger to me." [179]

"A stranger, yes. But still your cousin—your own blood. I should have thought much, I think. It was natural, I daresay, but even *then*—you must recollect—did you believe in him? Did you guess the truth?"

"I don't think I quite understand," said Portia, faintly.

Dulce, in a vague fashion, takes note of her confusion.

"Not understand! But it is such a simple matter," she says, in a changed tone. She looks puzzled, surprised, and a distressed look comes into her eyes. "I mean even *then*, did you believe him innocent?"

"How can I remember?" says Portia, drawing her breath quickly.

The distrust grows upon Dulce's tell-tale face. She comes a step nearer to her cousin.

"No," she says, slowly—her eyes are fixed attentively upon Portia—"it is some time ago. But you can at least tell me *this*. Now—*now*—that you know him—when you have been beneath the same roof with him for some months, how is it with you? You *feel* that he is innocent?"

There is a terrible amount of almost agonized earnestness in her tone.

"How you catechise one," says Portia, with a painfully bald attempt at indifference that does not impose upon the slowly awakening suspicions of the other for one instant. "Let us change the subject."

"In one moment. I want an answer to my question first. Now that you have seen and known Fabian, do you believe him innocent?"

A most fatal silence follows. Had the question referred to any one else—had even any one else asked the question, she might have evaded it successfully, or even condescended to an actual misstatement of her real thoughts on the subject rather than give pain or be guilty of a social error. She would, in all probability, have smiled and said, "Yes, oh! yes; one must see that he is incapable of such an act," and so on. But just now she seems tongue-tied, unable to say one word to allay her companion's fears. A strange sense of oppression that weighs upon her breast grows heavier and more insupportable at each moment, and Dulce's great gleaming eyes of blackest gray are reading her very soul, and scorching her with their reproachful fire. [180]

"Speak," she cries at last, in a vehement tone, laying her hand on Portia's arm, and holding her with unconscious force. "Say—say," with a miserable attempt at entreaty, and a cruel sob, "that you do not believe him guilty of this cursed thing."

Portia's lips are so dry and parched that they absolutely refuse to give utterance to any words.

In vain she tries to conquer the deadness that is overpowering her, but without avail. She lifts her eyes beseechingly, and then grows literally afraid of the girl leaning over her, so intense and bitter is the hatred and scorn that mar the beauty of her usually fair, childish face.

This upward, nervous glance, breaks the spell of silence, and gives voice to Dulce's wrath. It does more, it betrays to her the truth—the bitter fact—that in Portia's eyes her brother—her beloved—is neither more nor less than a successful criminal.

"No, do not trouble yourself to answer me," she says, in cold, cutting tones. "I want no lies, no pretty speeches. I thank you, at least, that you have spared me those. In your soul—I can see—you think him guilty of this shameful deed. Oh! it is horrible!" She covers her face with both her hands, and sways a little, as one might, who is, indeed, hurt to death. "And you, too," she says, faintly; "the only one of all our *friends*. And I so trusted you. I so *loved* you!"

"Dulce!" cries poor Portia, in an agonized tone. "Hear me!" She springs to her feet, but Dulce, removing her hands from her face, holds them both towards her in such a repellant manner, that she dares not approach. In the last half hour, this girl, so pliant, so prone to laughter and childish petulance, has sprung from the happy insolence of youth into the sad gravity of womanhood.

"What a fool I was," she says, in a low concentrated tone. "I watched all, and I was so *sure*. I thought—the idea will make you laugh, no doubt—but I thought that you *loved* him. Yet why should you laugh," she says with a sudden passion of remembrance. "Many women have loved him, the best, the loveliest—nay, all the world loved him, till this false blight fell upon him. And even since—"

She hesitates. It may be emotion, it may be recollection and a thought that he may not wish further disclosures, check her. [181]

"Yes, and even since?" echoes Portia, bending eagerly forward. Some feeling even greater than the anguish of the moment compels her to ask the question. But it is never answered. Dulce, with quivering lips and flashing eyes, follows out her own train of thought.

"I congratulate you upon your complete success as a coquette," she says. "No doubt, a London season can develop talents of that sort. You at least deserve praise as an apt pupil. Step by step, day by day, you led him on to his destruction—nay, I am not blind—until at last he laid his whole heart at your feet; you made him adore you only to—"

"Dulce—Dulce," cries Portia, throwing out her arms in passionate protest. "It is not true, I—"

"I *will* speak," says Dulce, pressing her back from her, "I *will* tell you what I think of you. Scorning him in your heart you still encouraged him, until his very soul was your own. Do you think I can't see how it is? Have you forgotten he is my own flesh and blood, and that I can read him as no one else can? He thinks you sweet and noble, and perfect, no doubt. Alas! how he has been deceived!"

"Listen to me."

"No, I will not listen. I have trusted you too far already. Oh!" piteously, "you who have seen him, and have noticed the beauty, the sweetness of his life, how could you have misjudged him? But," with vehement anger, "your narrow mind could not appreciate his! You lack generosity. You could not grasp the fact that there might be in this wide world such a thing as undiscovered wrong. You condemned without a hearing. Why," growing calmer, "there have been *hundreds* of cases where the innocent have suffered for the guilty."

"I know it," says Portia, feverishly, taking Dulce's hand and trying to draw her towards her; but the girl recoils.

"Do not touch me," she says. "There is no longer any friendship between us."

"Oh! Dulce, do not say that," entreats Portia, painfully.

"I will say it. All is at an end as far as love between us is concerned. Fabian is part of me. I cannot separate myself from him. His friends are mine. His detractors are mine also. I will not forgive them. I believe him a saint, you believe him defiled, and tainted with the crime of *forgery*." [182]

She draws her breath quickly; and Portia turns even whiter than before.

"Whereas I protest to you," goes on Dulce, rapidly losing all constraint, and letting her only half-suppressed passion have full sway. "I believe you to be less pure than him, less noble, less self-denying; *he* would be slow to believe evil of anyone. And this one thing I am resolved on. He shall no longer be left in ignorance of your scorn; he shall not any more spend his affection upon one who regards him with disdain; he shall know the truth before the day dies."

"Have you no pity?" says Portia, faintly.

"Have you none? You condemned him willingly."

"Oh! not willingly!"

"I don't care, you *have* condemned him."

"If you will only think, you will see—"

"Don't speak to me, I *hate* you," says Miss Blount, growling undignified because of her deep grief and agitation. "And don't think you can turn me from my purpose. I shall tell him what you think of him before this evening passes, be sure of that."

"There is no need to tell him," says Portia, in so low a tone that Dulce can scarcely hear her. "He—he knows already!"

"What!" cries Dulce, aghast. But her rout only lasts for a moment. "I don't care," she says, recklessly, "that is only another reason why I should warn him to beware of you!"

Then, as though some cruel thought strikes her, she suddenly bursts into tears.

"Were there not *others?*" she sobs, bitterly. "If a slave was indispensable to your happiness, was there not Roger, or Stephen, or Dicky Browne, or even Sir Mark, that you must needs claim *him?* He was heart-whole when you came; if not happy, he had at least conquered the first awful pain; could there be greater wickedness than to add another grief to his life? He had suffered as no man ever yet suffered, and yet you came to add another pang, and to destroy him, body and soul! When I think of it all, and the deliberate cruelty of it," cries she, with a gesture of uncontrollable passion, "if I could lay you dead at my feet this moment by a word I would do it!"

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"I wish you could do it," says Portia, quite calmly. The terrible grief of the poor child before her is almost more than she can bear. Her calmness that is born of despair, brings Dulce back to something that resembles quietude.

"I shall go now," she says; "you have had enough of me, no doubt; but remember I shall tell Fabian all that has passed. I warn you of this, honestly."

She moves towards the door. There is a moment's hesitation, and then Portia intercepts her, and placing her back against the door to bar egress, she says, in slow, determined tones:

"You shall tell him nothing. You shall not leave this room until you promise to keep secret all that has passed here. Do you understand?—you are to tell him *nothing.*"

"Oh! yes, I shall," says Miss Blount, contemptuously, knowing herself much the stronger of the two. "And even sooner than I first intended. I shall go to meet him on his return from the wood, and tell him then."

She turns back; and, crossing the room again, goes towards another door; that opening discloses a large closet beyond, in which many dresses and other articles of feminine attire are hanging, like so many Blue Beard's wives. A little window, lattice-paned, illumines this tiny chamber.

Portia following her, lays her hand upon her arm. She has changed her tone completely, from command to entreaty.

"Do not speak to Fabian of this," she says. "Do not let him think we two have discussed the wretched subject."

"I shall tell him precisely what has happened," says Dulce, unsoftened. "That you think him nothing less than a common *felon.*"

"Oh! do not put it into language," says Portia, sharp pain in her voice; she puts up her hands as she speaks, as, though to ward off a blow. "And I implore you, as you *love* him, to let things rest as they are."

"And so to give you scope to practise your wiles without hindrance," says Dulce, with a short, unlovely laugh. "No, I shall try my very utmost to lower you in his esteem, and so kill his fatal infatuation for you."

"You will fail," says Portia, hopelessly. "You will only succeed in hurting him."

"How sure you are of your power," says Dulce, angrily. "Yet I will not be disheartened. I will save him if I can."

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"You are quite determined?"

"Quite."

"You will go now to meet him, *now* when your anger is hot, and say to him what will surely grieve or wound him?"

"Let us talk sense," says Dulce, impatiently. "I shall simply warn him to have nothing more to do with a woman who looks upon him with scorn and contempt."

As she speaks she enters the closet that is nothing more than a big wardrobe, and, as she does so, Portia, quick as thought follows her, and, closing the door behind her, turns the key in the lock.

"You shall stay there until you promise me to tell nothing of this hour's conversation to Fabian," she says, with determination.

"Then I shall probably stay here forever," replies Dulce from within, with equal determination.

Portia going over to the fire seats herself by it. Dulce going to the latticed window inside seats

herself by *it*. An hour goes by. The little clock up over the mantelpiece chimes five. A gun is fired off in the growing dark outside. There is a sound as of many voices in the hall far down below. A laugh that belongs to Dicky Browne floats upwards, and makes itself heard in the curious stillness of the room above where the jailer sits guarding her prisoner.

Then Portia, rising, goes to the door of the condemned cell, and speaks as follows:

"Dulce."

There is no answer.

"Dulce; you are unwise not to answer me."

Still no answer; whereupon Portia, going back to the fire, lets another half hour pass in silence. Then she says, "Dulce!" again, and again receives no reply.

Time flies!—and now at last the dressing bell rings loud and clear through the house, warning the inmates that the best time in the day draws on apace.

"Dulce," says Portia, in despair, rising for the third time. To tell the truth, she is growing a little frightened at the persistent silence, and begins to wonder nervously if Dulce could get smothered in the small room, because of all the clothes that surround her.

"Dulce! *will* you promise?" she says. And now, to her relief, even though the words that come are unfavorable, Dulce answers.

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"Never. Not if I stayed here till Doomsday," says Miss Blount, in uncompromising tones, and quite as unconcernedly as if she was sitting in the room outside instead of having been ignominiously incarcerated for the last two hours. "The very moment you open the door, I shall go down-stairs and tell him everything."

"Then I won't let you out," says Portia, feebly, because she knows that soon dinner will come, and then she *must* let her out willy-nilly.

"I didn't ask you," says the rebel. "Dress yourself now, I would advise you, and go down to dinner. I hope you will enjoy it. When they make inquiries about my non-appearance, I should think you will have to explain it later on."

"Come out," says Portia, with a sigh of utter weariness; and then she opens the door and the incarcerated one steps forth, and sails past her with the air of a haughty queen, and with an unlowered crest.

Miss Vibart is vanquished. Even to her own soul she confesses so much. Dulce, passing her in dignified silence, goes toward the bedroom that opens off the boudoir, where they have been carrying on this most civil (or rather *uncivil*) war, and entering it, closes the door, and fastens it with unmistakable firmness behind her.

Conquered and subdued, and sick at heart, Portia traverses the corridor that divides her room from Dulce's, and prepares with languid interest to make her dinner toilette.

CHAPTER XIX.

"We must live our lives, though the sun be set,
Must meet in the masque, where parts we play,
Must cross in the maze of Life's minuet;
Our yea is yea, and our nay is nay:
But while snows of Winter or flowers of May,
Are the sad years' shroud or coronet,
In the season of rose or of violet,
I shall never forget till my dying day!"

A. LANG.

DINNER to-night, so far as Dulce and Portia are concerned, is gone through in utter silence. Not a word escapes either. To Portia, even to say yes or no to the butler, is a wearying of the flesh; to Dulce, it is an open annoyance. Their positive determination to enter into no conversation might have been observed sooner or later by somebody, but for Dicky Browne. He talks for everybody, and is, indeed, in such a genial mood, that their unusual silence passes unnoticed.

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Fabian, too, for a wonder, has risen above his usual taciturnity and is almost talkative. A change so delightful to Sir Christopher, that he, in his turn, brightens up, and grows more festive than he has been for many a day. In fact, for all but the two girls, the dinner may be counted a distinct success.

Portia, who is dressed in filmy black, is looking white and nervous, and has in her eyes an intense wrapt expression, such as one might have whose nerves are all unstrung, and who is in momentary expectation of something unpleasant, that may or may not happen. Dulce on the contrary is flushed and angry. Her eyes are brilliant, and round her generally soft lips lies a touch

of determination foreign to them, and hardly becoming.

Presently dinner comes to an end, and then the three women rise and rustle away toward the drawing-room, where follows a dreary half hour, indeed.

Julia, who is always drowsy after her claret, sinks complacently into the embrace of the cosiest arm-chair she can find, and under pretence of saving her priceless complexion (it really does cost a good deal) from the fire, drops into a gentle slumber behind her fan.

This makes things even harder for Portia and Dulce. I need hardly say they are not on speaking terms—that has explained itself, I hope. Thrown now, therefore, upon their own resources, they look anxiously around for a chance of mitigating the awkwardness of the situation that has thrust itself upon them.

At such trying moments as these how blessed is the society of children. Even crusty old bachelors, educated to the belief that the young and innocent are only one gigantic fraud, have been known on occasions like the present to bestow upon them a careful, not to say artful, attention.

To-night, Portia, Jacky and the Boodie are having it all their own way. "Quite a bully time, don't you know," says Master Jacky, later, to the all-suffering nurse, whose duty it is to look after them and put them to bed. They are talked to and caressed and made much of by both girls, to their excessive surprise; surprise that later on mounts to distrust.

"Why may I have this album to-night when I mightn't *last* night?" asks the Boodie, shrewdly, her big sapphire eyes bigger than usual. "You scolded me about it last night, and every other time I touched it. And what's the matter with your eyes?" staring up at Portia, who has turned a page in the forbidden album, and is now gazing at a portrait of Fabian that is smiling calmly up at her.

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It is a portrait taken in that happy time when all the world was fair to him, and when no "little rift" had come to make mute the music of his life. Portia is gazing at it intently. She has forgotten the child—the book—everything, even the fear of observation, and her eyes are heavy with unshed tears, and her hands are trembling.

Then the child's questioning voice comes to her; across the bridge of past years she has been vainly trying to travel, and perforce she gives up her impossible journey, and returns to the sure but sorry present.

Involuntarily she tightens her hand upon the Boodie's. There is entreaty in her pressure, and the child (children, as a rule, are very sympathetic), after a second stare at her, shorter than the first, understands, in a vague fashion, that silence is implored of her, and makes no further attempts at investigation.

After a little while the men come; all except Fabian. Their entrance is a relief to the girls, whatever it may be to Julia. She rouses herself by a supreme effort to meet the exigencies of the moment, and really succeeds in looking quite as if she has not been in the land of Nod for the past sweet thirty minutes.

"You have broken in upon a really delicious little bit of gossip," she says to Sir Mark, coquettishly; whereupon Sir Mark, as in duty bound, entertains her to retail it again to him.

She doesn't.

"I hope you have been miserable without us," says Dicky Browne, sinking into a chair beside Portia, and lifting the Boodie on to his knee. (It would be impossible to Dicky Browne to see a child anywhere without lifting it on to his knee). "We've been wretched in the dining-room; we thought Sir Christopher would never tip us the wink—I mean," correcting himself with assumed confusion, "give us the word to join you. What are you looking at? An album?"

"Yes; you may look at it, too," says Portia, pushing it anxiously towards him. She cannot talk to-night. There is a mental strain upon her brain that compels her to silence. If he would only amuse himself with the caricatures of his friends the book contains.

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But he won't. Mr. Browne rises superior to the feeble amusements of the ordinary drawing-room.

"No, thank you," he says, promptly. "Nothing on earth offends me more than being asked to look at an album. Why look at paper beauties when there are living ones in the room?"

Here he tries to look sentimental, and succeeds, at all events, in looking extremely funny. He has been having a good deal of champagne, and a generous amount of Burgundy, and is now as happy and contented as even his nearest and dearest could desire. Don't mistake me for a moment; nobody ever saw Mr. Browne in the very faintest degree as—well, as he ought not to be; but there is no denying that after dinner he is gaiety itself, and (as Dulce's governess used to say of him), "very excellent company indeed."

"I always feel," he goes on airily, still alluding to the despised album, "when any one asks me to look at a book of this kind, as if they thought I was a dummy and couldn't talk. And I *can* talk, you know."

"You can—you can, indeed," says Sir Mark, feelingly. "Dulce, what was that we were reading yesterday? I remember, now, a quotation from it *à propos* of talking, *not à propos* of our friend

Dicky, of course. "Then he will talk. Good gods, how he will talk!" Wasn't that it?"

"Sing us something, Dicky, do. You used to sing long ago," says Julia, insinuatingly, who thinks she might be able to accomplish another surreptitious doze under cover of the music.

"I've rather given it up of late," says Mr. Browne, with a modest air, and a chuck to his shirt collar.

"You used to sing 'Ye banks and braes o' bonny Doon' sweetly," says Julia, when she has recovered from a vigorous yawn, got through quite safely behind her sheet anchor—I mean her fan.

"Well—er—such a lot of fellows go in for the sickly sentimental; I'm tired of it," says Dicky, vaguely.

"You didn't tire of *that* song until that little girl of the Plunkets asked you what a 'brae' was and you couldn't tell her. She told me about it afterwards, and said you were a very amusing boy, but, she feared, uneducated. You gave her the impression, I think," says Sir Mark, pleasantly, "that you believed the word had something to do with that noble (if tough) animal, the donkey!"

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"I never told her anything of the kind," says Dicky, indignantly. "I never speak to her at all if I can help it. A most unpleasant girl, with a mouth from ear to ear and always laughing."

"What a fetching description," says Stephen Gower, with a smile.

"You *will* sing us something?" says Portia, almost entreatingly. She wants to be alone; she wants to get rid of Dicky and his artless prattle at any price.

"Certainly," says Mr. Browne, but with very becoming hesitation. "If I could only be sure what style of thing you prefer. I know a comic song or two, if you would like to hear them."

"Heavens and Earth!" murmurs Sir Mark, with a groan. He throws his handkerchief over his face, and places himself in an attitude suggestive of the deepest resignation.

"I'm afraid I shan't be able to remember *all* the words," says Dicky, regretfully. "There is any amount of verses, and all as funny as they can be. But I've a shocking memory."

"For small mercies—" says Sir Mark, mildly.

"Nevertheless I'll try," says Dicky, valiantly, moving toward the piano.

"No don't, Dicky," exclaims Sir Mark, with tearful entreaty. "It would break my heart if Portia were to hear you for the first time at a disadvantage. 'I had rather than forty shillings you had your book of songs and sonnets here,' but as you haven't, why, wait till you have. Now," says Sir Mark, casting a warning look upon the others; "I've done *my* part—hold him tight, some of you, or he will certainly do it still."

"Oh! if you don't *want* to hear me," returns Dicky, with unruffled good humor. "Why can't you say so at once, without so much beating about the bush. I don't want to sing."

"Thank you, Dicky," says Sir Mark, sweetly.

Stephen is sitting close to Dulce, and is saying something to her in a low tone. Her answers, to say the least of them, are somewhat irrelevant and disconnected. Now she rises, and, murmuring to him a little softly-spoken excuse, glides away from him to the door, opens it, and disappears.

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At this Portia, who has never ceased to watch her, grows even paler than she was before, and closes one hand so tightly on her fan that part of the ivory breaks with a little click.

Five minutes pass; to her they might be five interminable hours; and then, when she has electrified Mr. Browne by saying "yes" twice and "no" three times in the wrong places, she, too, gets up from her seat and leaves the room.

Before the fire in his own room Fabian is standing, with Dulce crying her heart out upon his breast. He has one arm around her, but his eyes are looking into a sad futurity, and he is gently, absently, tapping her shoulder with his left hand. He is frowning, not angrily, but thoughtfully, and there is an expression in his dark eyes that suggests a weariness of the flesh, and a longing to flee away and be at rest.

"Do not take this thing so much to heart," he says, in a rather mechanical tone, addressing his little sister, who is grieving so bitterly because of the slight that has been cast upon him from so unexpected a quarter. "She told you the truth; the very first moment my eyes met hers I knew she had heard all, and—had condemned."

He sighs wearily.

"Who shall blame her?" he says, with deepest melancholy.

"I blame her," cries Dulce, passionately. "Nay, more, I hate and despise her. She has seen you, known you. She must, therefore, be *mad—blind*—to credit so vile a thing of you. And you, my saint, my darling, what have you not endured all this time! Knowing everything, bearing

everything, without a murmur or reproach. Her scorn, her contempt. Oh, Fabian! at least you do not suffer alone, for I suffer with you."

"That only adds another drop to my cup," replies he, gently. "It does not comfort me. I had some faint pleasure in the thought that you and she were friends, and now, even that belief is denied me. *I* have severed you. What have I to do with either she or you? My misfortune is my own, let it be so. Your tears only aggravate my pain, my dear, *dear* little sister."

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He draws her closer to him, and kisses her warmly. Is she not the one being who has clung to him, and loved him, and believed in him through good and evil report?

"Who could dream she was so deceitful?" says Dulce, tearfully, alluding to the unhappy Portia. "I never once even suspected the real truth. Why, over and over again she has spoken of you, has compelled me to discuss you, has seemed to court the subject of—"

"Spoken of *me!*"

"Yes, often—often, hundreds of times. She seemed never to tire of you and your history; I thought she—"

Dulce hesitates.

"Go on; you thought she—"

"Well, then," recklessly, "I thought she was in love with you; I was *sure* of it."

"Dulce," sharply, "you forget yourself. What are you saying? Do you think your cousin would like you to speak like this?"

"I don't care what she likes," cries the rebel, angrily; "as I am speaking like this, I hope she wouldn't. When I think how good you have always been to her, how you gave her your friendship—your—" her voice fails her, and in a whisper, she adds, "*your love.*"

"Do not let us discuss this subject any more," says Fabian; though he speaks quickly one can hear the keen anguish in his tone. "Why could I not give her my friendship? Is it her fault that she cannot believe?"

"You would defend her!"

"I would be just. Is she the *only* one who feels distrust, who only half credits my version of the miserable story? Here, in this very house, are there none who hesitate between faith and unfaith? You have faith in me, and Roger had."

"Oh, yes, yes, *yes!*" cries she, suddenly. "*He* had faith in you, *he* loved you." Without a word of warning she breaks again into a very tempest of tears, and sobs bitterly.

"I would you could have loved him," says Fabian, in a low tone, but she will not listen.

"Go on," she says, vehemently, "you were saying something about the people in this house."

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"That, probably, after you and Roger, I have Dicky on my side," continues Fabian, obediently, a still deeper grief within his haggard eyes, "and, of course, Christopher and Mark Gore; but does Julia quite understand me? or Stephen Gower! Forgive me, dearest, for this last."

"Don't speak to me like that," entreats she, mournfully; "what is Stephen—what is anyone to me in comparison with you. Yet I will vouch for Stephen. But what is it you say of Julia—surely—"

"Yes—no doubt," impatiently. "But is her mind really satisfied? If to-morrow my innocence were shown up incontrovertibly to all the world, she would say triumphantly, 'I told you so.' And if my guilt were established, she would say just as triumphantly, 'I told you so,' in the very same tone."

"You wrong her, I think. She has lived with you in this house off and on for many months, and few have so mean a heart as Portia."

Someone, who a minute ago opened the door very gently, and is now standing irresolute upon the threshold, turns very pale at this last speech and lays her hand upon her heart, as though fearing, though longing, to go forward.

"Perhaps I *do* wrong Julia," says Fabian, indifferently. "It hardly matters. But you must not wrong Portia. Our suspicions, as our likes and dislikes, are not under our control; now, for example, there is old Slyme; he hates me, as all the world can see, yet he would swear to my innocence to-morrow."

"How do you know that?"

"I *do* know it; by instinct, I suppose; I am one of those unhappy people who can see through their neighbors. In spite of the hatred he entertains for me (why I know not) his eyes betray the fact that he thinks me guiltless of the crime imputed to me. So you see, vulgar prejudice has nothing to do with it, and Portia is not to be censured because she can not take me on trust."

"Oh, Fabian! how can you still love one who—"

"My dear, love and I are not to be named together, you forget that. I must live my life apart."

You can only pray that my misery may be of short duration. But I would have you forgive Portia," he says, gently—nay, as her name falls from his lips, a certain tenderness characterises both his face and tone—"if only for *my* sake."

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At this, the silent figure in the doorway draws her breath, painfully, and catches hold of the lintel as though to steady herself. Her lips tremble, a momentary fear that she may be going to faint terrifies her; then a voice, cold and uncompromising falling on her ears, restores her to something like composure.

"Do not ask me that, anything but that;" it is Dulce who is speaking. "I cannot."

At this, the girl standing in the doorway, as though unable to endure more, comes slowly forward, and advances until she is within the full glare of the lamplight. It is Portia. She is deadly pale; and her black robes clinging round her render the pallor of her face even more ghastly. She has raised one hand, and is trifling nervously with the string of pearls that always lies round her white throat; she does not look at Fabian, not even for one instant does she permit her eyes to seek his, but lets them rest on Dulce, sadly, reproachfully.

"Why can you not forgive me?" she says; "is not your revenge complete? You have, indeed, kept your word. Now that I am sad at heart, why will you not try to forgive?"

"Yes—forgive." It is Fabian who says this; he lays his hand upon Dulce's arm, and regards her earnestly.

"*You* ask me to forgive—*you!* You would have me be kind to this traitress!" returns she, passionately, glancing back at Portia, over her shoulder, with angry eyes. "Do you forgive her yourself?"

"I am beyond the pale of forgiveness so far as he is concerned," says Portia, slowly. "It is to you I appeal. I have loved you well, that should count for something. As for your brother, I understand—I know that he will never forgive and never forget!"

"You are right," says Fabian, addressing her for the first time, yet without letting his glance meet hers, "I shall *never forget!*"

A sob rises in Portia's throat; there is a terrible sadness in his tone, the more terrible because of the stern restraint he has laid upon himself.

"Go to her," he says to Dulce, and the girl who has never disobeyed a wish of his in all her life goes up to Portia and lays her hand in hers.

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Palm to palm, slender hands clasped close together, they move toward the door; Dulce, with bent head, trying to stay the mournful tears that are falling silently, one by one, down her cheeks; Portia, with head erect, but with an anguish in her lovely eyes sadder than any tears.

Just as she reaches the door she turns her head, and, with a passionate eagerness that will not be repressed, looks at Fabian. Their eyes meet. He makes a step toward her; he has forgotten everything but that he loves her, and that she—dearest but most agonizing of certainties—loves him, and that she is near him, searching, as it were, into his very soul; then remembrance comes to him, and, with a smothered groan, he turns from her, and, leaning his arms on the chimney-piece, buries his face in them.

Portia, to check the sob that rises in her throat, tightens her clasp on Dulce's hand and draws the girl quickly from the room. Perhaps, too, she seeks to hide his grief from other eyes than hers. The unwonted sharpness of her pressure, however, rouses Dulce from her sad thoughts, and as they reach the corridor outside she stops short, and glances half resentfully, half with a question on her face, at Portia.

The extreme pain and grief she sees in Portia's eyes awakens her to the truth; she draws her breath a little quickly and lays her hand impulsively upon her cousin's bare white arm.

"You suffer too—you!" she says, in a whisper full of surprise; "Oh, Portia! is it that you love him?"

"Has it taken you so long to discover that," says Portia, reproachfully, who has grown somewhat reckless because of the misery of the past few hours. The self-contained, proud girl is gone; a woman sick at heart, to whom the best good of this world is as naught, has taken her place. There is so much genuine pain in her voice that Dulce is touched; she forgets all, condones all; to see a fellow-creature in pain is terrible to this hot-blooded little shrew. The anger and disdain die out of her eyes, and coming even closer to Portia, she looks long and earnestly at her beautiful face.

"Oh, that you could believe in him," she says, at last, the expression of her desire coming from her in the form of a sigh.

"If I could, I should be too deeply blessed. Yet is it that I do not believe, or that I dread the world's disbelief? That is the sting. To know that a stain lies on the man I love, to know that others distrust him, and will *forever* pass him by on the other side. That is the horror. Dulce, I am ignoble, I fear many things; the future terrifies me; but yet, as I am so wretched, dear, *dear* Dulce, take me back into your heart!"

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She bursts into tears. They are so strange to her and have been so long denied, that by their

very vehemence they frighten Dulce. She takes Portia in her arms, and clings to her; and, pressing her lips to her cheek, whispers to her fondly that she is forgiven, and that from her soul she pities her. Thus peace is restored between these two.

CHAPTER XX.

"Time tries the troth in everything."

—THOMAS TUSSER.

THE voice comes to her distinctly across the sward, browned by Winter's frown, and over the evergreens that sway and rustle behind her back.

"Shall I answer?" says Dulce to herself, half uncertainly; and then she hesitates, and then belies the old adage because she is not lost, but decides on maintaining a discreet silence. "If he comes," she tells herself, "he will only talk, *talk*, TALK! and, at his best, he is tiresome; and then he worries so that really life becomes a burden with him near. And the day, though cold, is bright and frosty and delicious, and all it should be at Christmas time, and when one is wrapped in furs one doesn't feel the cold," and she really means to enjoy herself with her book, and now—

"Dulce!" comes the voice again, only nearer this time, and even more pathetic in its anxiety, and Dulce moves uneasily. Perhaps, after all, she ought to answer. Has she not promised many things. Shall she answer or not, or—

This time her hesitation avails her nothing; a step can be heard dangerously close, and then a figure comes up to her very back, and peers through the thick hedge of evergreens, and finally Stephen makes his way through them and stands before her.

He is flushed and half angry. He is uncertain how to translate the extreme unconcern with which she hails him. *Did* she hear him call, or did she not? That is the question. And Stephen very properly feels that more than the fate of a nation depends upon the solution of this mystery. [196]

"Oh! here you are at last," he says, in a distinctly aggrieved tone. "I have been calling you for the last hour. Didn't you hear me?"

When one has been straining one's lungs in a vain endeavor to be heard by a beloved object, one naturally magnifies five minutes into an hour.

Dulce stares at him in a bewildered fashion. Her manner, indeed, considering all things, is perfect.

"Why didn't you answer me?" asks Mr. Gower, feeling himself justified in throwing some indignation into this speech.

"Were you calling me?" she asks, with the utmost innocence, letting her large eyes rest calmly upon his, and bravely suppressing the smile that is dying to betray her; "really? How was it I didn't hear you? I was sitting here all the time. These evergreens *must* be thick! Do you know I am horribly afraid I shall grow deaf in my old age, because there are moments even now—such, for example, as the present—when I cannot bring myself to hear *anything*."

This last remark contains more in it than appears to Mr. Gower.

"Yet, only last night," he says resentfully, "you told me it would be dangerous to whisper secrets near you to another, as you had the best ears in the world."

"Did I say all that? Well, perhaps. I am troublesome in that way sometimes," says Miss Blount, shifting her tactics without a quiver. "Just now," glancing at a volume that lies upon her lap, "I daresay it was the book that engrossed my attention; I quite lose myself in a subject when it is as interesting as this one is," with another glance at the dark bound volume on her knee.

Gower stoops and reads the title of the book that had come between him and the thoughts of his beloved. He reads it aloud, slowly and with grim meaning—"Notes on *Tasmanian Cattle!* It sounds enthralling," he says, with bitter irony.

"Yes, doesn't it," says Miss Blount, with such unbounded audacity, and with such a charming laugh as instantly scatters all clouds. "You must know I adore cattle, especially Tasmanian cattle." As a mere matter of fact she had brought out this book by mistake, thinking it was one of George Eliot's, because of its cover, and had not opened it until now. "Come and sit here beside me," she says, sweetly, bent on making up for her former ungraciousness, "I have been so dull all the morning, and you wouldn't come and talk to me. So unfeeling of you." [197]

"Much you care whether I come to talk to you or not," says Mr. Gower, with a last foolish attempt at temper. This foolish attempt makes Miss Blount at once aware that the day is her own.

"You may sit on the edge of my gown," she says, generously—she herself is sitting on a garden-chair made for one that carefully preserves her from all damp arising from the damp, wintry grass; "on the *very* edge, please. Yes, just there," shaking out her skirts; "I can't bear people close to me, it gives me a creepy-creepy feel. Do you know it?"

Mr. Gower shakes his head emphatically. No, he does not know the creepy-creepy feel.

"Besides," goes on Dulce, confidentially, "one can see the person one is conversing with so much better at a little distance. Don't you agree with me?"

"Don't I always agree with you?" says Mr. Gower, gloomily.

"Well, then, don't look so discontented, it makes me think you are only answering me as you think I want to be answered, and no woman could stand that."

Silence. The short day is already coming to a close. A bitter wind has sprung from the East and is now flitting with icy ardor over the grass and streamlet; through the bare branches of the trees, too, it flies, creating music of a mournful kind as it rushes onward.

"Last night I dreamt of you," says Stephen, at last.

"And what of me?" asks she, bending slightly down over him, as he lies at her feet in his favorite position.

"This one great thing: I dreamt that you loved me. I flattered myself in my dreams, did I not?" says Gower, with an affectation of unconcern that does not disguise the fear that is consuming him lest some day he shall prove his dream untrue.

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"Now what is love, I will thee tell,
It is the fountain and the well
Where pleasure and repentance dwell,"

quotes she, gaily, with a quick, trembling blush.

"I expect some fellows do all the repentance," says Stephen, moodily. Then, with a sudden accession of animation born of despair, he says, "Dulce, once for all, tell me if you can care for me even a little." He has taken her hand—of course her right hand on which a ring is—and is clasping it in the most energetic manner. The ring has a sharp diamond in it, and consequently the pressure creates pain. She bears it, however, like a Cranmer.

"I don't think even my angelic temper would stand a cross-examination on such a day as this," she says, with a slight frown; it might be slighter but for the diamond. "Besides, I have made answer to that question a thousand times. Did I not, indeed, answer it in the most satisfactory manner of all when I promised to marry you?"

"Yes, you promised to marry me, I know that, but when?" asks he, quickly. "Up to this you have always declined to name any particular date."

"Naturally," says Miss Blount, calmly. "I'm not even dreaming of being married yet, why should I? I should hate it."

"Oh! if you would hate it," says Stephen, stiffly.

"Yes, hate it," repeats she, undauntedly. "Why, indeed, should we be married for years? I am quite happy, aren't you?"

No answer. Then, very severely, "Aren't *you*?"

"Yes, of course," says Mr. Gower, but in a tone that belies his words.

"Just so," says Dulce, "then let us continue happy. I am sure all these past months I have been utterly content."

"You mean ever since Roger's departure?" asks he, eagerly.

"Yes; principally, I suppose *because* of his departure." There is a good deal of unnecessary warmth in this speech. Yet the flush has faded from her cheeks now, and she is looking down toward the sea with a little set expression round her usually mobile lips.

"We are happy now, but why should we not be even happier if we were married?" asks Stephen, presently, trying to read her averted face.

"Why? Who can answer that?" exclaims she, turning her face inland again, with a little saucy smile. Her thoughts of a moment since are determinately put out of sight, resolutely banished. "You surely don't believe at this time of day that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush? That is old-world rubbish! Take my word for it, that *two* birds in the hand do not come up to even one sweet, provoking, unattainable bird in the bush!"

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She has risen, and is now standing before him, as she says this, with her hands clasping each other behind her head, and her body well thrown back. Perhaps she does not know how charming her figure appears in this position. Perhaps she does. She is smiling down at Gower in a half defiant, wholly tantalizing fashion, and is as like the "sweet, provoking, unattainable bird" as ever she can be.

Rising slowly to his feet, Gower goes up to her, and, as is his lawful right, encircles her bonnie round waist with his arm.

"I don't know about the bird," he says, "but this I *do* know, that in my eyes you are worth two of anything in all this wide world."

His tone is so full of feeling, so replete with real, unaffected earnestness and affection that she is honestly touched. She even suffers his arm to embrace her (for the time being), and turns her eyes upon him kindly enough.

"How fond you are of me," she says, regretfully. "Too fond. I am not worth it." Then, in a curious tone, "How strange it is that you should love me so dearly when Roger actually *disliked* me!"

"You are always thinking of your cousin," exclaims he, with a quick frown. "He seems never very far from your thoughts."

"How can I help that," says Dulce, with an attempt at lightness; "it is so difficult to rid the mind of a distasteful subject."

"And," eagerly—"it is a distasteful subject? You are really glad your engagement with him is at an end?"

"Of course I am glad," says Miss Blount, impatiently; "why should I be otherwise? How often have you told me yourself that he and I were unsuited to each other—and how many times have you reminded me of his unbearable temper! I hope," with passionate energy, "I shall never see him again!"

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"Let us forget him," says Gower, gently; "there are plenty of other things to discuss besides him. For one thing, let me tell you this—that though we have been engaged for a long time now, you have never once kissed me."

"Yes—and don't you know why?" asks Miss Blount, sweetly, and with all the air of one who is about to impart the most agreeable intelligence—"Can't you guess? It is because I think kissing a *mistake*. Not only a mistake, but a positive *bétise*. It commonizes everything, and—and—is really death to sentiment in my opinion."

"Death to it?—an aid to it, I should say," says Mr. Gower, bluntly.

"Should you? I am sure experience will prove you wrong," says Dulce, suavely, "and, at all events, I hate being kissed."

"Do you? Yet twice I saw you let your cousin kiss you," says Stephen, gloomily.

"And see what came of it," retorts she, quickly. "He got—that is—we *both* got tired of each other. And then we quarrelled—we were always quarrelling, it seems to me now—and then he—that is, we *both* grew to hate each other, and that of course ended everything. I really think," says Miss Blount, with suppressed passion, "I am the one girl in the world he cordially dislikes and despises. He almost told me so before—before we parted."

"Just like him, unmannerly beast!" says Mr. Gower, with deep disgust.

"It was just as well we found it all out in time," says Dulce, with a short, but heavily-drawn sigh—probably, let us hope so, at least—one of intense relief, "because he was really tiresome in most ways."

"I rather think so; I'm sure I wonder how you put up with him for so long," says Gower, contemptuously.

"Force of habit, I suppose. He was always in the way when he wasn't wanted. And—and—and the other thing," says Miss Blount, broadly, who wants to say '*vice versa*,' but cannot remember it at this moment.

"Never knew when to hold his tongue," says Stephen, who is a rather silent man; "never met such a beggar to talk."

"And so headstrong," says Dulce, pettishly.

"Altogether, I think he is about the greatest ass I ever met in my life," says Mr. Gower, with touching conviction, and out of the innocence of his heart.

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"Is he?" asks Dulce, with a sudden and most unexpected change of tone. A frown darkens the fair face. Is it that she is looking back with horror upon the time when she was engaged to this "ass," or is it—"You have met a good many, no doubt?"

"Well, a considerable few in my time," replies he. "But I must say I never saw a poorer specimen of his kind—and his name, too, such an insane thing. Reminds one of that romping old English dance and nothing else. Why on earth couldn't the fellow get a respectable name like any other fellow."

This is all so fearfully absurd, that at any other time, and under any other circumstances, it would have moved Dulce to laughter.

"Isn't the name, Roger, respectable?" asks she, sweetly, as though desirous of information.

"Oh, well, it's respectable enough, I suppose; or at least it is hideous enough for that or anything."

"Must a thing be hideous to be respectable?" asks she again, turning her lovely face, crowned

with the sunburnt hair, full on his.

"You don't understand me," he says, with some confusion. "I was only saying what an ugly name Dare has."

"Now, *do* you think so?" wonders Miss Blount, dreamily, "I don't. I can't endure my cousin, *as you know*, but I really think his name very pretty, quite the prettiest I know, even," innocently, "prettier than Stephen!"

"I'm sorry I can't agree with you," says Stephen, stiffly.

Miss Blount, with her fingers interlaced, is watching him furtively, a little petulant expression in her eyes.

"It seems to me you think more of your absent cousin than of—of anyone in the world," says Gower, sullenly. Fear of what her answer may be has induced him to leave his own name out of the question altogether.

"As I told you before, one always thinks most of what is displeasing to one."

"Oh, I daresay!" says Mr. Gower.

"I don't think I quite understand you. What do you mean by that?" asks she, with suspicious sweetness.

"Dulce," says Stephen, miserably, "say you *hate* Roger."

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"I have often said it. I detest him. Why," with a sudden touch of passion, "do you make me repeat it over and over again? Why do you make me think of him at all?"

"I don't know," sadly. "It is madness on my part, I think; and yet I believe I have no real cause to fear him. He is so utterly unworthy of you. He has behaved so badly to you from first to last."

"What you say is all *too* true," says Dulce, calmly; then, with most suspicious gentleness, and a smile that is all "sweetness and light," "*would* you mind removing your arm from my waist. It makes me feel faint. Thanks, *so* much."

After this silence again reigns. Several minutes go by, and nothing can be heard save the sougning of the rising wind, and the turbulent rushing of the stream below. Dulce is turning the rings round and round upon her pretty fingers; Stephen is looking out to sea with a brow as black as thunder, or any of the great gaunt rocks far out to the West, that are frowning down upon the unconscious ocean.

Presently something—perhaps it is remorse—strikes upon Dulce's heart and softens her. She goes nearer to him and slips one small, perfect hand through his arm, she even presses his arm to her softly, kindly, with a view to restoring its owner to good temper.

This advance on her part has the desired effect. Stephen forgets there is such a thing as a sea, and, taking up the little, penitent hand, presses it tenderly to his lips.

"Now, do not let us be disagreeable any more," says Dulce, prettily. "Let us try to remember what we were talking about before we began to discuss Roger."

Mr. Gower grasps his chance.

"I was saying that though we have been engaged now for some time you have never once kissed me," he says, hopefully.

"And would you," reproachfully, "after all I have said, risk the chance of making me, perhaps, hate you, too? I have told you how I detest being kissed, yet now you would argue the point. Oh, Stephen! is this your vaunted love?"

"But it is a curious view you take of it, isn't it, darling?" suggests Gower, humbly, "to say a kiss would raise hatred in your breast. I am perfectly certain it would make *me* love *you* MORE!"

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"Then you could love me more?" with frowning reproach.

"No, no! I didn't mean that, only—"

"I must say I am greatly disappointed in you," says Miss Blount, with lowered eyes. "I shouldn't have believed it of you. Well, as you are bent on rushing on your fate, I'll tell you what I will do."

"What?" he turns to her, a look of eager expectancy on his face. Is she going to prove kind at last?

"Sometime," begins she, demurely, "no doubt I shall marry you—some time, that is, in the coming century—and then, when the time is finally arranged, just the very morning of our marriage, you shall kiss me, not before. That will prevent our having time to quarrel and part."

"Do you mean to tell me," indignantly, "you have made up your mind never to kiss me until we are married?"

"Until the morning *of* our marriage," corrects she.

"You might as well say *never!*" exclaims Gower, very justly incensed.

"I will, if you like," retorts she, with the utmost *bonhommie*.

"It is getting too cold for you to stay out any longer," says Stephen, with great dignity; "come, let us return to the house."

CHAPTER XXI.

"'Tis impossible to love and be wise."

THEY return. The early Winter night has fallen, and in the smaller drawing-room the curtains are already drawn, and though no lamps are lit, a sweet, chattering, gossiping fire sheds a radiance round that betrays all things to the view.

As Dulce enters the room everyone says, "Well, Dulce," in the pleasantest way possible, and makes way for her, but Miss Blount goes into the shade and sits there in a singularly silent fashion.

Sir Mark, noting her mood, feels within him a lazy desire to go to her and break the unusual taciturnity that surrounds her.

"Why so mute, fair maid?" he asks, dropping into a chair near hers.

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"Am I mute?" she asks in her turn, thereby betraying the fact that she has been very far from them in her inmost thoughts.

"Rather," says Sir Mark; "would you think me rude if I asked the subject of your waking dreams?"

"No; I was merely thinking what an unsatisfactory place this world is." She says this slowly, turning her large eyes somewhat wistfully on his. If she likes any one on earth honestly it is Mark Gore.

"What a morbid speech," returns he. "Do you want a footstool, or a cup of tea, or what? Evidently something has made the whole world gray to you. And I can't even agree with you, I think this present world an uncommonly good old place, all things considered. Rough on us now and then, but quite passible."

"You are happy," she says.

"And you?"—he lets his keen eyes seek hers—"of what can you complain? You seem one of fortune's favorites. Have you not got as your most devoted slave the man of your heart?"

"I suppose so." There is a thorough lack of enthusiasm in her tone, that irritates him. He puts the end of his mustache into his mouth and chews it slowly, a certain sign that he is both grieved and annoyed. Then he changes his glass from his right eye to his left, after all of which he feels better for the moment.

"And besides," he says, with a valiant determination to follow his cross-examination to its bitter end, "you have successfully got rid of the man you hate. I refer to Roger."

"I suppose so." Just the same answer, in just the same tone.

Sir Mark is plainly indignant. Perhaps he had hoped to see her betray some emotion on the mention of her cousin's name, but if so he is disappointed.

"You grow apathetic," he says, somewhat sharply. "Soon you will care for nothing. A bad trick for any girl to learn."

"I have learned that trick already. I care for very little now," says Dulce, in a perfectly even tone. Her hands, lying in her lap, are without motion. Her eyelids are without a tremor. "And yet she is *not* heartless," says Sir Mark to himself, reflectively. "I suppose she is only acting for my special benefit, and though it is rather a good performance, it is of no earthly use, as I can see right through her."

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Nevertheless he is angry with her, and presently rising, he goes away from her to where Dicky Browne is holding high revelry amongst his friends.

Dicky has only just arrived. He has been absent all day, and is now being questioned—desired to give an account of himself and his time ever since breakfast-time.

"It is something new to be asked where I have been," says Mr. Browne, who also thinks it will be as new as it is nice for him to take the aggrieved tone and go in heavily on the ill-used tack.

"Never mind that," says Julia; "tell us only—where *have* you been?"

"Well, really, I hardly quite know," says Dicky, delightfully vague as usual. "Round about the place, don't you know."

"But you must remember where?"

"As a rule," says Mr. Browne, meditatively, "I come and go, and no account is taken of my wanderings. To-night all is different, now I am put under a cross-examination that reduces me to despair. This is unfair, it is cruel. If you would always act thus it would be gratifying, but to get up an interest in me on rare occasions such as the present, is, to say the least of it, embarrassing. I am half an orphan, some of you might be a father to me sometimes."

"So we will, Dicky, in a body," says Mark Gore, cheerfully.

"I like that," says Portia, laughing. "Instead of looking after *you*, Dicky, I rather think we want some one to look after *us*."

"Well, I'll do that with pleasure," says Mr. Browne. "It is my highest ambition. To be allowed to look after you has been the dream of my life for months:

"Thy elder brother I would be,
Thy *father*, *anything* to thee!"

"By-the-by, Dicky, where is your father now?" asks Stephen Gower, who is leaning against the mantelpiece in Dulce's vicinity, but not quite close to her. Ill-temper, called dignity, forbids his nearer approach to his goddess.

"Down South," says Dicky. "*Not* in Carolina, exactly, but in Devon. It *does* remind one of the ten little nigger boys, doesn't it?" Then he begins with a quite uncalled for amount of energy, "Eight little nigger boys traveling in Devon, one overslept hisself, and then there were seven," and would probably have continued the dismal ditty up to the bitter end, but that Sir Mark calls him up sharp.

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"Never mind the niggers," he says, "tell us about your father. Where is he now?"

"Down at the old place, cursing his fate, no doubt. By-the-bye, talking of my ancestral home, I wish some day you would all come and put in a month there. Will you?"

"We will," says Julia, directly. Julia is always ready to go anywhere, children and all, at a moment's notice.

"Is it a nice place, Dicky?" asks Sir Mark, cautiously.

"No, it isn't," says Mr. Browne; "not *now*, you know. I hear it used to be; but there's no believing old people, they lie like fun. I'll get it settled up for all of you, if you'll promise to come, but just at present it isn't much. It is an odd old place, all doors and dust, and rats, I shouldn't wonder."

"That's nothing," says Gower. "Anything else against it?"

"Well, I don't know," replies Dicky, gloomily. "It *smells*, I think."

"Smells! good gracious, of what?" asks Julia.

"*Bones!*" says Mr. Browne, mysteriously. "*Dead* bones!"

"What sort of bones?" asks Portia, starting into life, and really growing a little pale, even beneath the crimson glare of the pine logs.

"Human bones!" says Dicky, growing more gloomy as he says this, and marks with rapture the impression it makes upon his audience. "It reminds one of graves, and sarcophaguses, and cemeteries, and horrid things that rustle in coffin cloths, and mop and mow in corners. But if you will come, I will make you all heartily welcome."

"Thank you. No, I don't think *I'll* come," says Julia, casting an uneasy glance behind her; the recesses of the room are but dimly lit, and appear ghostlike, highly suggestive of things uncanny from where she sits. "Dicky," pathetically, not to say affrightedly, "you have told us plenty about your horrid old house; don't tell us any more."

"There isn't any more to tell," says Dicky, who is quite content with his success so far.

"You haven't yet told us where you were all day," says Portia, lowering her fan to look at him.

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"In the village for the most part—I dote on the village—interviewing the school and the children. Mr. Redmond got hold of me, and took me in to see the infants. It was your class I saw, I think, Dulce; it was so uncommonly badly behaved."

Dulce, in her dark corner, gives no sign that she has heard this gracious speech.

"I don't think much of your schoolmaster either," goes on Mr. Browne, unabashed. "His French, I should say, is not his strong point. Perhaps he speaks it 'after the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe,' for certainly 'Frenche of Paris, is to him unknowe?'"

"I shouldn't think one would look for foreign languages from a village schoolmaster," says Sir Mark, lazily.

"I *didn't* look for it, my good fellow, he absolutely showered it upon me; and in the oddest fashion. I confess I didn't understand him. He has evidently a trick of coloring his conversation with fine words—a trick beyond me."

"What did he say to you, Dicky?" asks Julia, whose curiosity is excited.

"He told me a story," says Mr. Browne; "I'll tell it again to you now, if you like, but I don't suppose you *will* like, because, as I said before, I don't understand it myself. It was hardly a story either, it was more a diatribe about his assistant."

"Peter Greene?"

"Ye—es. This objectionable young man's name was Peter, though, if the the schoolmaster is to be believed, he isn't *green*. 'Sir,' said he to me, 'that Peter is a bad lot—no worse. He can teach the Latin, and the Greek, and the astronomy, fust-class; but as for probity or truth, or honest dealin's of any sort, he is *au revoir!*' What on earth did he mean?" says Mr. Browne, turning a face, bright with innocence, upon the group that surrounds the fire.

"To-morrow will be Christmas Day," says the Boodie, suddenly. She is lying, as usual, full length upon the hearth-rug, with her chin sunk between both her palms, and her eyes fixed upon the fire. This remark she addresses apparently to a glowing cinder. "I wonder if I shall get many presents," she says, "and if they will be things to *love*."

"How sweet it is to study the simplicity, the lack of mercenary thought in the little child," says Dicky, regarding her with admiration; "now this dear Boodie of ours would quite as soon have an ugly present as a pretty one; she thinks only of the affection of the giver of it." [208]

"I do not," says the Boodie, stoutly, "and I'd *hate* an ugly present;" then, with a sudden change of tone, "have you anything for me?"

"Darling," murmured Julia, with mild reproof.

"Certainly not," says Mr. Browne, promptly; "I want you to love me for myself alone!"

"*Really* nothing?" persists the Boodie, as if unable to credit her senses.

"Really nothing."

"Then what did you go to London for last week?" demands the irate Boodie, with rising and totally unsuppressed indignation.

This question fills Mr. Browne with much secret amusement.

"There have been rare occasions," he says, mildly, "on which I have gone to town to do a few other things besides purchasing gifts for you."

"I never heard anything so mean," says the Boodie, alluding to his unprofitable visit to the metropolis, "I wouldn't"—with the finest, the most withering disgust—"have believed it of you! And let me tell you this, Dicky Browne, I'll take very good care I don't give you the present I have been keeping for you for a whole week; and by-and-bye, when you hear what it is, you will be sorrier than ever you were in your life."

This awful speech she delivers with the greatest gusto. Mr. Browne, without a moment's hesitation, flings himself upon his knees before her in an attitude suggestive of the direst despair.

"Oh, *don't* do me out of my Christmas-box," he entreats, tearfully; "I know what your gifts are like, and I would not miss one for any earthly consideration. My lovely Boodie! reconsider your words. I *will* give you a present to-morrow" (already the biggest doll in Christendom is in her nurse's possession, with strict injunctions to let her have it, with his love and a kiss, the first thing in the morning); "I'll do *anything*, if you will only bestow upon me the priceless treasure at which you have darkly hinted."

"Well, we'll see," returns the Boodie, in a reserved tone; after which Mr. Browne once more returns to his seat and his senses. [209]

But, unfortunately, the Boodie has not yet quite finished all she has to say. Rolling her little, lithe body over until she rests upon her back, and letting her arms fall behind her sunny head in one of her graceful, kittenish ways, she says, pathetically:

"Oh, how I wish Roger was here! He always was good to us, wasn't he, Pussy?" to her sister, who is striving hard to ruin her sight by stringing glass beads in the flickering firelight. "I wonder where he is now!"

As Roger Dare's name has been tabooed amongst them of late, this direct and open allusion to him falls like a thunderbolt in their midst.

Nobody says anything. Nobody does anything. Only in one dark corner, where the light does not penetrate, one white hand closes nervously upon another, and the owner of both draws her breath hurriedly.

Dicky Browne is the first to recover himself. He comes to the rescue with the most praiseworthy nonchalance.

"Didn't you hear about him?" he asks the Boodie, in a tone replete with melancholy. "He traveled too far, his hankering after savages was as extraordinary as it was dangerous; in *his* case it has been fatal. One lovely morning, when the sun was shining, and all the world was alight with smiles, they caught him. It was breakfast hour, and they were hungry; therefore they ate

him (it is their playful habit), nicely fried in tomato sauce."

At this doleful tale, Jacky, who is lying about in some other corner, explodes merrily, Pussy following suit; but the Boodie, who is plainly annoyed at this frivolous allusion to her favorite, maintains her gravity and her dignity at the same time.

"Nobody would eat Roger," she says.

"Why not? Like 'the boy, Billie,' he is still 'young and tender.'"

"Nobody would be unkind to Roger," persists the Boodie, unmoved. "And besides, when he was going away he told me he would be back on New Year's Day, and Roger never told a lie."

"He will return, I know him well," quotes Mr. Browne.

This quotation is thrown away upon the Boodie.

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"Yes, he will," she says, in all good faith. "He will be here, I *know*, to-morrow week. I am going to keep the present I have for him, until then. I'm afraid I won't be able to keep it any longer," says the Boodie, regretfully, "because—"

She hesitates.

"Because it wouldn't let you. I know what it is, it is chocolate creams," says Dicky Browne, making this unlucky speech triumphantly.

It is too much! The bare mention of these sweetmeats, fraught as they are to her with bitterest memories, awake a long slumbering grief within Dulce's breast. Fretted by her interview with Stephen; sore at heart because of the child's persistent allusion to her absent cousin, this last stab, this mention of the curious cause of their parting, quite overcomes her.

Putting up her hands to her face, she rises precipitately to her feet, and then, unable to control herself, bursts into tears.

"Dulce! what is it?" exclaims Portia, going quickly to her, and encircling her with her arms. Stephen, too, makes a step forward, and then stops abruptly.

"It is nothing—nothing," sobs Dulce, struggling with her emotion; and then, finding the conflict vain, and that grief has fairly conquered her, she lays down her arms, and clinging to Portia, whispers audibly, with all the unreasoning sorrow of a tired child, "*I want Roger.*"

Even as she makes it, the enormity of her confession comes home to her, and terrifies her. Without daring to cast a glance at Stephen, who is standing rigid and white as death against the mantelpiece, she slips out of Portia's arms and escapes from the room.

Another awkward pause ensues. Decidedly this Christmas Eve is not a successful one. To tell the truth, everyone is very much frightened, and is wondering secretly how Stephen will take it. When the silence has become positively unbearable, Sir Mark rises to the situation.

"That is just like Dulce," he says—and really the amount of feigned amusement he throws into his tone is worthy of all admiration; though to be quite honest I must confess it imposes upon nobody—"when she is out of spirits she invariably asks for somebody on whom she is in the habit of venting her spleen. Poor Roger! he is well out of it to-night, I think. We have all noticed, have we not," turning, with abject entreaty in his eyes, to every one in the room except Stephen, "that Dulce has been very much depressed during the last hour?"

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"Yes, we have all noticed that," says Portia, hurriedly, coming nobly to his assistance.

Dicky Browne, stooping towards her, whispers, softly:

"Quoth Hudibras—'It is in vain,
I see, to argue 'gainst the grain!'"

"I don't understand," says Portia; just because she doesn't want to.

"Don't you?—well, you ought. Can't you see that, in spite of her determination to hate Roger, she loves him a thousand times better than that fellow over there?—and I'm very glad of it," winds up Dicky, viciously, who has always sorely missed Roger, and, though when with him quarrelled from dawn to dewy eve, he still looks upon him as the one friend in the world to whom his soul cleaveth.

"Yes, I, too, have noticed her curious silence. Who could have vexed her! Was it you, Stephen?" asks Julia, who is as clever as Dicky at always saying the wrong thing.

"Not that I am aware of," replies Gower, haughtily. Calling to mind his late conversation with his betrothed, he naturally looks upon himself as the aggrieved party. All she had said then, her coldness, her petulance—worse than all, her indifference—are still fresh with him, and rankles within his breast. Coming a little more into the ruddy light of the fire, he says, slowly, addressing Portia,

"As—as Miss Blount seems rather upset about something, I think I shall not stay to dinner to-night. Will you excuse me to her?"

"Oh, do stay!" says Portia, uncertain how to act. She says this, too, in spite of a pronounced

prod from Dicky Browne, who is plainly desirous of increasing the rupture between Stephen and Dulce. May not such a rupture reinstate Roger upon his former throne? Oddly enough, Dicky, who has no more perspicacity than an owl, has arranged within himself that Roger would be as glad to renew his old relations with Dulce as she would be to renew hers with him.

"There are other things that will take me home to-night, irrespective of Dulce," says Stephen, smiling upon Portia, and telling his lie valiantly. "Good night, Miss Vibart."

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And then he bids adieu to the others, quite composedly, though his brain is on fire with jealousy, not even omitting the children. Sir Mark and Dicky, feeling some vague compassion for him, go with him to the hall door, and there, having bidden him a hearty farewell, send him on his way.

"I give you my word," says Dicky Browne, confidentially detaining Sir Mark, forcibly, "we haven't had a happy day since she engaged herself to Gower; I mean since Roger's departure. Look here, Gore, it is my opinion she doesn't care *that* for him," with an emphatic and very eloquent snap of his fingers.

"For once in my life, Dicky, I entirely agree with you," says Sir Mark, gloomily.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Sir, You are very welcome to our house:
It must appear in other ways than words,
Therefore I scant this breathing courtesy."

—SHAKESPEARE.

FROM Christmas Day to New Year's Day we all know is but a week—but *what* a week it is! For my part I think this season of supposed jollity the most uncomfortable and forlorn of any in the year. During all these seven interminable days the Boodie still clings to her belief in Roger, and vows he will surely return before the first day of '82 shall have come to an end. It is very nearly at an end now; the shadows have fallen long ago; the night wind has arisen; the snow that all day long has been falling slowly and steadily, still falls, as if quite determined never again to leave off.

They are all sitting in the library, it being considered a snugger room on such a dreary evening that the grander drawing-room. Stephen Gower, who has just come in, is standing by the centre-table with his back to it, and is telling them some little morsel of scandal about a near neighbor. It is a bare crumb, yet it is received with avidity and gratitude, and much laughter, so devoid of interest have been all the other hours of the day.

Nobody quite understands how it now is with Dulce and Stephen. That they have patched up their late quarrel is apparent to everybody, and as far as an ordinary eye can see, they are on as good terms with each other as usual.

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Just now she is laughing even more merrily than the rest at his little story, when the door opens, and Sir Christopher and Fabian enter together.

Sir Christopher is plainly very angry, and is declaring in an extremely audible voice that "he will submit to it no longer;" he furthermore announces that he has "seen too much of it," whatever "*it*" may be, and that for the future he "will turn over a very different leaf." I wonder how many times in the year this latter declaration is made by everybody?

Fabian, who is utterly unmoved by his vehemence, laying his hand upon his uncle's shoulder, leads him up to the fireplace and into the huge arm-chair, that is his perpetual abiding-place.

"What is it?" asks Sir Mark, looking up quickly.

"Same old story," says Fabian, in a low voice, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "Slyme. Drink. Accounts anyhow. And tipsy insolence, instead of proper explanation." As Fabian finishes, he draws his breath hastily, as though heartily sick and tired of the whole business.

Now that he is standing within the glare of the fire, one can see how altered he is of late. His cheeks are sunken, his lips pale. There is, too, a want of energy about him, a languor, a listlessness, that seems to have grown upon him with strange rapidity, and which suggests the possibility that life has become rather a burden than a favor.

If I say he looks as dead tired as a man might look who has been for many hours engaged in a labor trying both to soul and body, you will, perhaps, understand how Fabian looks now to the eyes that are gazing wistfully upon him from out the semi-darkness.

Moving her gown to one side, Portia (impelled to this action by some impulsive force) says, in a low tone:

"Come and sit here, Fabian," motioning gently to the seat beside her.

But, thanking her with great courtesy, he declines her invitation, and, with an unchanged face,

goes on with his conversation with Sir Mark.

Portia, flushing hotly in the kindly dark, shrinks back within herself, and linking her fingers tightly together, tries bravely to crush the mingled feelings of shame and regret that rise within her breast.

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"I can stand almost anything myself, I confess, but insolence," Sir Mark is saying, *à propos* of the intoxicated old secretary. "It takes it out of one so. I have put up with the most gross carelessness rather than change any man, but insolence from that class is insufferable. I suppose," says Sir Mark, meditatively, shifting his glass from his left to his right eye, "it is because one can't return it."

"One can dismiss the fellow, though," says Sir Christopher, still fuming. "And go Slyme shall. After all my kindness to him, too, to speak as he did to-night! The creature is positively without gratitude."

"Don't regret that," says Dicky Browne, sympathetically. "*You* are repining because he declines to notice your benefits; but think of what Wordsworth says—

'I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds,
With coldness still returning;
Alas! the *gratitude* of men
Has oftener left me mourning.'

Look here, Sir Christopher, my experience is, that if once you do a fellow a good turn he'll stick to you through life, and make you feel somehow as if he belonged to you, and *that* isn't pleasant, is it?"

Dicky pauses. Wordsworth is his strong point, and freely he quotes and misquotes him on all occasions. Indeed, I am of the opinion he is the only poet Dicky ever read in his life, and that because he was obliged to.

"I have done with Slyme," goes on Sir Christopher, hotly. "Yes, *forever*. Now, not a word, Fabian; when my mind is made up (as you all know) it is made up, and nothing can alter it." This is just what they do *not* all know. "As for you," continues Sir Christopher, indignantly, addressing himself solely to Fabian, "you plead for that miserable old sot out of nothing but sheer obstinacy—not because you like him. Now, *do* you like him? Come now, I defy you to say it."

Fabian laughs slightly.

"There, I knew it!" exclaims Sir Christopher, triumphantly, though Fabian in reality has said nothing; "and as for him, he positively detests you. What did he say just now?—that he—"

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"Oh, never mind that," says Fabian, poking the fire somewhat vigorously.

"Do let us hear it," says Julia, in her usual lisping manner. "Horrid old man; I am quite afraid of him, he looks so like a gnome, or—or—one of those ugly things the Germans write about. What did he say of dear Fabian?"

"That he had him in his power," thunders Sir Christopher, angrily. "That he could make or unmake him, as the fancy seized him, and so on. Give you my honor," says Sir Christopher, almost choking with rage, "it was as much as ever I could do to keep my hands off the fellow!"

Portia, sinking further into her dark corner, sickens with apprehension at these words. Suspicion, that now, alas! has become a certainty, is crushing her. Perhaps before this she has had her doubts—vague doubts, indeed, and blessed in the fact that they may admit of contradiction. But now—*now*—

What was it Slyme had said? That he could either "make or unmake him," that he "had him in his power." Does Slyme, then, know the—the *truth* about him? Was it through *fear* of the secretary that Fabian had acted as his defender, supporting him against Sir Christopher's honest judgment? How quickly he had tried to turn the conversation; how he had seemed to shrink from deeper investigation of Slyme's impertinence. All seems plain to her, and with her supposed knowledge comes a pain, too terrible almost to be borne in secret.

Fabian, in the meantime, had seated himself beside Julia, and is listening to some silly remarks emanated by her. The Boodie, who is never very far from Fabian when he is in the room, is sitting on his knee with her arms around his neck.

"Come here, Boodie," says Dicky Browne, insinuatingly. "You used to say you loved me."

"So I do," says the Boodie, in fond remembrance of the biggest doll in Christendom. "But—"

She hesitates.

"I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not Fabian more," parodies Mr. Browne, regretfully. "Well, I forgive you. But I thought it was Roger on whom you had set your young affections. By the by, he has disappointed you, hasn't he? Here is New Year's Day, and he has not returned to redeem his promise."

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"He will come yet," says the Boodie, undauntedly.

"He will return; I know him well," again quotes Mr. Browne; "that's your motto, I suppose, like

the idiotic young woman in the idiotic song. Well, I admire faith myself; there's nothing like it."

"Don't mind him," says Fabian, tenderly, placing his arm round the discomfited Boodie, and pressing her pretty blonde head down upon his breast. "I don't understand him, so, of course, you don't."

"But why?" says Dicky Browne, who is evidently bent on mischief; "she has a great deal more brains than you have. Don't be aspersed by him, Boodie; *you* can understand me, I know, but I dare say I can soar higher than he can follow, and what I say to you contains 'thoughts that lie beyond the reach of his few words of English speech.'"

"Thank you," says Fabian.

The Boodie is plainly puzzled.

"I don't know what you mean," she says to Dicky; "I only know this," defiantly, "that I am certain Roger will return to-night, even if I am in bed when he comes."

The words are hardly out of her mouth when the door opens and somebody appears upon the threshold. This somebody has had an evident tussle with the butler outside, who, perhaps, would fain have announced him, but having conquered the king of the servants' hall, the somebody advances slowly until he is midway between the centre of the room and the direct glare of the firelight.

Every one grows very silent. It is as though a spell has fallen upon them all; all, that is, except Dulce. She, rising hurriedly from her seat, goes toward the stranger.

"It is *Roger!*" she cries suddenly, in so glad a voice, in a voice so full of delight and intense thankfulness, that every one is struck by it.

Then Roger is in their midst, a very sunburnt Roger, but just at first his eyes are only upon Dulce, and after a little bit it becomes apparent to everybody that it is Dulce alone he sees; and that she is in fact the proud possessor of all the sight he owns.

He has taken between both his the two little trembling hands she has extended to him, and is pressing them warmly, openly, without the slightest idea of concealing the happiness he feels in being at her side again.

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A little happy smile wreathes her lips as she sees this, and with her white fingers she smooths down the gray sleeve of his coat, as if he were a priceless treasure, once lost, but now restored to her again.

I think Dare likes being looked upon as a long-lost priceless treasure, because he does not move, and keeps his eyes still on her as though he would never like to remove them, and makes no objection to his sleeve being brushed up the wrong way.

"It seems like a hundred thousand years since you went away," says Dulce, with a little happy sigh, after which every one crowds around him, and he is welcomed with extreme joy into the family circle again. Indeed, the Boodie exhibits symptoms of insanity, and dances round him with a vivacity that a dervish might be proud of.

This is, of course, very delightful, specially to Stephen Gower, who is sitting glooming upon space, and devoured with something he calls disgust, but might be more generally termed the commonest form of jealousy. The others are all crowding round Roger, and are telling him, in different language, but in one breath, how welcome he is.

This universal desire to light mythical tar-barrels in honor of the wanderer's return suggests at last to Mr. Gower the necessity of expressing his delight likewise. Rising, therefore, from his seat, he goes up to Roger, and insists on shaking him cordially by the hand. This proceeding on his part, I am bound to say, is responded to by Roger in a very niggardly manner—a manner that even undergoes no improvement when Mr. Gower expresses his overwhelming satisfaction at seeing him home again.

"We are all more pleased to see you again than we can say," declares Mr. Gower, purposely forgetful of that half-hour in the back-yard, when they had been bent on pommeling each other, and doubtless would have done so but for Sir Mark.

He says this very well indeed, and with quite an overflow of enthusiasm—perhaps rather too great an overflow; because Roger, looking at him out of his dark eyes, decides within himself that this whilom friend of his is now his bitterest enemy, hating him with all the passionate hatred of a jealous heart.

The Boodie is in a state of triumph bordering on distraction. "*She* had always said he (Roger) would return on New Year's Day; *she* had believed in his promise; *she* had known he would not disappoint," and so on. Every now and then she creeps up to the returned wanderer, to surreptitiously pat his sleeve or his cheek, looking unutterable things all the time. Finally she crowns herself by pressing into his hand a neatly tied little square parcel, with a whisper to the effect that it is his Christmas-box, that she has been keeping for him all the week.

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At this Roger takes her up in his arms and kisses her warmly, and tells her he has "something lovely" for her up-stairs in his portmanteau, and that after dinner she must come up with him to his room, and they will unpack it together.

This announcement is very near being the cause of bloodshed. Jacky and Pussy, who have been listening intently to every word of it, now glare fiendishly upon the favored Boodie, and sullenly, but with fell determination, make a movement toward her. In another moment all might have been over, and the poor Boodie a mangled corpse, but that Roger, coming hurriedly to the rescue, declares there are two *other* "lovely things" in his portmanteau, suitable to the requirements of Pussy and her brother, whereon peace is once more restored.

To Sir Christopher this unexpected return of Roger is an indescribable blessing. His mind at once rises above all things disagreeable; Slyme and his impertinence fade out of remembrance, at least for the present. He sees and thinks of nothing but his handsome lad, who has returned to him safe and sound. There is quite a confusion indeed just at first; every one is talking together, and nobody is dreaming of listening to anybody. All Dulce's heart seems to go out to Roger, as she marks the glad light that brightens his dark eyes as he returns Fabian's greeting.

After a little while every one sobers down, and Roger, who is looking brown and healthy, if a trifle thin, seats himself besides Dulce upon the small ottoman, that, as a rule, is supposed to be only equal to the support of one individual at a time. As neither Dulce nor Roger, however, appear in the very slightest degree uncomfortable upon it, a doubt is at once and forever afterwards thrown upon this supposition. Once only a little hitch occurs that throws a slight damp upon their content. Roger, feeling the Boodie's offering growing warm within his hands, mechanically opens it, even while carrying on his smiling *tete-a-tete* with Dulce, but soon the smiles vanish! There, on his open palm, lies a very serpent, a noisome reptile, a box of chocolate creams!

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A most improper word escapes him. He precipitately drops the box (it is a very pretty box with a lovely young lady on the cover), chocolates and all, behind the ottoman, where they fall softly, being in a high state of decay and damp, and looks gloomily at Dulce. She responds with fervor; she is, indeed, perhaps, a trifle the gloomiest, and for a moment silence is unbroken.

Then they sigh, then they look again, then they try to pretend that nothing has happened to disturb them, and presently so far succeed that conversation once more falls into an easy channel and flows on unbrokenly.

She is smiling up at him in a happy fashion, long unknown to her, and he is looking down at her with such an amount of satisfaction and content in his gaze as cannot be mistaken. One might easily believe he has forgotten the manner of their parting, and is now regarding her as his own particular possession.

When this sort of thing has gone on for five minutes, Gower, feeling he can stand it no longer, draws his breath quickly, and going over to the small ottoman seats himself upon a low chair, quite close to his betrothed; this effort he makes to assert his position, with all the air of a man who is determined to do or die. Her fan is lying on her knee. Taking it up, with a defiant glance at Roger, he opens it, and trifles with it idly, in a sort of proprietary fashion.

Yet even while he does it, his heart is sad within him and filled with a dire foreboding. The thought that he is unwelcome, that his presence at this moment is probably being regarded in the light of an intrusion by these two, so near to him, fills him with bitterness; he is almost afraid to look at Dulce, lest he shall read in her eyes a cold disapprobation of his conduct in thus interrupting her *tete-à-tete*, when to his surprise a little hand is laid upon his arm, and Dulce's voice asks him a question that instantly draws him into the conversation.

She is smiling very kindly at him; more kindly indeed than she has done for many days; she is in such a happy mood, in such wonderfully gay, bright spirits, that all the world seems good to her, and it becomes necessary to her to impart her joyousness to all around. *Every one* must be happy to-night, she tells herself; and so, as I have said before, she smiles on Gower, and pats him gently on the arm, and raises him at once to the seventh heaven out of the very lowest depths of despair.

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The change is so sudden that Stephen naturally loses his head a little. He draws his chair even nearer to the ottoman. He determines to outsit Roger. In five minutes—in half an hour, at all events—the fellow will be obliged to go and speak to somebody else, if only for decency's sake. And then there is every chance that the dressing-bell will soon ring. Dulce's extreme delight, so innocently expressed at her cousin's return had certainly given him a severe shock, but *now* there is no reason why he should not remain victor, and keep the prize he had been at such pains to win.

All is going well. Even with Roger freshly returned by her side, she has shown kindness to him, she has smiled upon him with a greater warmth than usual. I daresay she is determined to show her cousin her preference for *him* (Stephen). This thought makes him positively glow with hope and pride. By guarding against any insidious advances on the part of the enemy, by being ever at Dulce's side to interpose between her and any softly worded sentimental converse, he may conquer and drive the foe from off the field.

Not once this evening until the friendly bedroom candlesticks are produced will he quit her side—never until—

In one moment his designs are frustrated. All his plans are laid low. The voice of Julia breaks upon his ear like a death-knell. She, being fully convinced in her own mind that "poor dear Stephen" is feeling himself in the cold, and is, therefore, inconceivably wretched, determines,

with most mistaken kindness, to come to the rescue.

"Stephen, *may* I ask you to do something for me?" she says, in her sweetest tones and with her most engaging smile.

"You may," says Mr. Gower, as in duty bound, and in an awful tone.

"Then do come and help me to wind this wool," says Julia, still in her most fetching manner, holding out for his inspection about as much scarlet wool as it would take an hour to wind, doing it at one's utmost speed.

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With a murderous expression Stephen crosses the room to where she is sitting—at the very antipodes from where he would be, that is, from Dulce—and drops sullenly into a chair at her side.

"Poor dear fellow, already he is feeling injured and out of spirits," says Julia to herself, regarding him with furtive compassion.

"Beast! she is in a plot against me!" says Mr. Gower to his own soul, feeling he could willingly strangle her with her red wool.

So do we misunderstand the feelings and motives of our best friends in this world.

Dulce and Roger thus left to their own resources, continue to be openly and unrestrainedly happy. Every now and then a laugh from one or other of them comes to the stricken Stephen, sitting on his stool of repentance, winding the endless wool. By and by it becomes worse when no laugh is heard, and when the two upon the ottoman seem to be conversing in a tone that would be a whisper if it dared. To Gower it is already a whisper, and frenzy ensues.

Wild thoughts arise within his breast; something it seems to him must be done, and that *soon*. Shall he throw this vile wool, this scarlet abomination, in Julia's placid face, and with a naughty word defy her to hold him prisoner any longer? Or shall he fling himself bodily upon Roger and exterminate him? Or shall he publicly upbraid Dulce with her perfidy? No; this last is too mild a course, and something tells him would not create the havoc that alone can restore peace to his bosom. Shall he—

Oh, blessed sound, the dressing bell. Now she must tear herself away from this new-found cousin and go up-stairs—doubtless to array herself in her choicest garments for his delectation later on. He grinds his teeth again, as this thought comes to torment him.

Regardless of Julia's cry of horror and remonstrance, he drops the wool and rises to his feet, leaving it a hopeless mass on the carpet. He makes a step in Dulce's direction, but she, too, has got up, and before he can reach her has disappeared through the doorway, and is half-way up the old oak staircase.

He takes her in to dinner, certainly, later on, but finds, on seating himself, that Roger, by some unaccountable chance, has secured the seat on her other side. He finds out, too, presently, that she is devoting all her conversation to her cousin, and seems curiously inquisitive about his travels. She appears indeed positively athirst for information on this subject; and the soup is as naught, and the fish as sawdust, in the eyes of Mr. Gower.

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"You were in Egypt, too? Tell me all about it. I have always so *longed* to hear about Egypt," says Dulce, with soft animation.

"Egypt?" says Roger, with some natural hesitation as to how to begin; Egypt is a big place, and just now seems a long way off. "Well, there is a good deal of it, you know; what do you want to know most?"

"Whether you enjoyed yourself—whether you were happy there?" replies she, promptly. I daresay it isn't quite the answer he had expected, because he looks at her for half a minute or so very intently.

"Happy? That includes such a great deal," he says, at length. "It is a very interesting country beyond doubt, and there are Pyramids, you know; you heard of 'em once or twice, I shouldn't wonder; and there are beggars and robbers, and more sand than I ever saw in my life, and—*No*," with a sudden, almost startling change of tone, "I was *not* happy there, or anywhere else, since last I saw you!"

"Robbers!" says Dulce, hastily, with a rather forced little laugh; "regular brigands, do you mean, going about in hordes, with tunics, and crimson sashes, and daggers. How *could* one be happy with such terrible people turning up at every odd corner? I daresay," trifling nervously with a wine glass, "it would make one often wish to be at home again."

"I often wished to be at home again." Somehow his manner gives her to understand that the gentlemen in crimson sashes had nothing whatever to do with this wish.

"I fancied brigands belonged exclusively to Greece and Italy," says Dulce, still intent upon the wine-glass. "Are they very picturesque, and do they really go about dressed in all the colors of the rainbow?"

Plainly Miss Blount has been carefully studying the highly-colored prints in the old school-books, in which the lawless Greeks are depicted as the gayest of the gay.

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"They are about the most ill-looking ruffians it has ever been my fate to see," says Mr. Dare, indifferently.

"How disappointing! I don't believe you liked being in Egypt after all," says Dulce, who cannot resist returning to tread once more the dangerous ground.

"I think one place is about as good as another," says Mr. Dare, discontentedly, "and about as bad. One shouldn't expect too much, you know."

"Perhaps it would be as well if one didn't expect anything," says Dulce.

"*Better*, no doubt."

"You take a very discontented view of things; your traveling has made you cynical, I think."

"Not my *traveling*?"

This is almost a challenge, and she accepts it.

"What then?" she asks, a little coldly.

"Shall I tell you?" retorts he, with an unpleasant smile. "Well, no; I will spare you; it would certainly not interest *you*. Let us return to our subject; you are wondering why I am not in raptures about Egypt; I am wondering why I should be."

"No; I was finding fault with you because you gave me the impression that all places on earth are alike indifferent to you."

"Perhaps that is true. I don't defend myself. But I know there was a time when certain scenes were dear to me."

"There *was*?"

"Yes; I've outgrown it, I suppose; or else memory, rendering all things bitter, is to blame. It is our cruelest enemy, I dare say we might all be pretty comfortable forever if we could only 'Quaff the kind Nepenthe, and forget our lost Lenores!'"

"Ock, 'm?" asks the sedate butler at this emotional moment, in his most prosaic tones.

Dulce starts perceptibly, and says "No," though she means "Yes." Roger starts too, and, being rather absent altogether, mistakes the sedate butler's broken English for good German, and says, "Hockheim?" in a questioning voice; whereupon Dicky Browne, who has overheard him, laughs immoderately and insists upon repeating the little joke to everybody. They all laugh with him, except, indeed, Portia, who happens to be miles away in thought from them, and does not hear one word of what is being said. [224]

"Portia," says Dicky, presently.

No answer; Portia's soul is still winging its flight to unseen regions.

"Still deaf to my entreaties," says Mr. Browne, eyeing her fixedly. Something in his tone rouses her this time from her day-dreams, and, with a rather absent smile, she turns her face to his. Fabian, who has been listening to one of Mark Gore's rather pronounced opinions upon a subject that doesn't concern us here, looks up at this moment and lets his eyes rest upon her.

"Will you not deign to bestow even one word upon your slave?" asks Dicky, sweetly. "Do. He pines for it. And after all the encouragement, too, you have showered upon me of late, this behavior—this studied avoidance is strange."

"You were asking me—?" begins Portia vaguely, with a little soft laugh.

"Why art thou silent? Is thy love a plant?" quotes Mr. Browne, with sentimental reproach. As usual, he attacks his favorite author, and, as usual also, gives to that good man's words a meaning unknown to him.

Portia, raising her head, meets Fabian's eyes regarding her earnestly, and then and there colors hotly; there is no earthly reason why she should change color, yet she does so unmistakably, nay, painfully. She is feeling nervous and unstrung, and—not very well to-night, and even this light mention of the word love has driven all the blood from her heart to her cheeks. A moment ago they were pale as Lenten lilies, now they are dyed as deep as a damask rose.

For a moment only. She draws her breath quickly, full of anger at her own want of self-control, and then the flush fades, and she is even paler than she was before. Again she glances at Fabian, but not again do her eyes meet his. He has seemingly forgotten her very existence and has returned to his discussion with Sir Mark. He is apparently deeply interested, nay, animated, and even as she watches him he laughs aloud, a rare thing for him.

She tells herself that she is glad of this; *very* glad, because it may prove he has not noticed her emotion. Her awkward blush, doubtless, was unseen by him. Yet I think she is piqued at his indifference, because her eyes grow duller and her lips sadder, and there is a small, but painful, flutter at her heart, that reminds her of the days before she came to Old Court, and that compels her to press her fingers tightly together, under cover of the table-cloth, in a vain effort to subdue [225]

it.

Dicky, who had noticed her quick transitions of color, and who feels there is something wrong, without knowing what, and who also understands that he himself, however unwittingly, has been the cause of it, grows annoyed with himself, and, to distract attention, turns to the Boodie, who is generally to be found at his elbow when anything sweet is to be had.

The butler and his attendant are politely requesting the backs of all the heads to try a little jelly, or cream, or so on. This, at the Court, is virtually the children's hour, as Sir Christopher—who adores them—is of opinion that they prefer puddings to fruit, and that, as they should be made free of both, they are to put in an appearance with the first sweet every evening.

The Boodie, whose "vanity" is whipped cream, has just been helped to it, and Dicky, at this moment (that he may give Portia time to recover herself) turning to the golden-haired fairy beside him, adds to her felicity by dropping some crimson jelly into the centre of the cream.

"There now, I have made an island for you," he says.

Julia overhears him, and thinking this a capital opportunity to show off the Boodie's learning, says, proudly:

"Now, darling, tell Dicky what an island really is."

Dicky feels honestly obliged to her for following up his lead, and so breaking the awkward silence that has descended upon him and Portia.

"A tract of land entirely surrounded by water," says the Boodie, promptly, betraying a faint desire to put her hands behind her back.

"Not at all," says Mr. Browne, scornfully; "it is a bit of red jelly entirely surrounded by cream!"

"It is *not*," says the Boodie, with a scorn that puts his in the shade. To be just to the Boodie, she is always eager for the fray. Not a touch of cowardice about her. "How," demands she, pointing to the jelly, with a very superior smile, "how do you think one could live upon *that*?"

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"Why not? I don't see how anyone could possibly desire anything better to live upon."

"Just fancy Robinson Crusoe on it," says the Boodie, with a derisive smile.

"I could fancy him very fat on it; I could also fancy him considering himself in great luck when he found it, or discovered it. They always discovered islands, didn't they? *I* should like to live on just such an island for an indefinite number of years."

"You are extremely silly," says Miss Beaufort, politely; "you know as well as I do that it wouldn't keep you up."

"Well, not, perhaps, so strongly as a few other things," acknowledges Mr. Browne, gracefully; "but I think it *would* support me for all that,—for a *time*, at least."

"Not for one minute. Why, you couldn't stand on it."

"A prolonged acquaintance with it *alone* might make me totter, I confess," says Mr. Browne. "But yet, if I had enough of it, I think I *could* stand on it very well."

"You could *not*," says the Boodie, indignant at being so continuously contradicted on a point so clear. "If you had ten whole jellies—if you had one as big as this house—you couldn't manage it."

"I really beg your pardon," protests Mr. Browne, with dignity. "It is my belief that I *could* manage it in time. I'm very fond of jelly."

"You would go right through it and come out at the other side," persists the Boodie, nothing daunted.

"Like the Thames Tunnel. How nice!" says Dicky Browne, amiably.

"Well, you can't live on it *now*, anyway," says the Boodie, putting the last bit of the jelly island into her small mouth.

"No, no, indeed," says Dicky, shaking his head with all the appearance of one sunk in the very deepest dejection.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I do perceive here a divided duty."—*Othello*.

JEALOUSY is the keenest, the most selfish, the most poignant of all sufferings. "It is," says Milton, "the injured lover's hell." This monster having now seized upon Stephen, is holding him in a close embrace and is swiftly crushing within him all hope and peace and joy.

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To watch Dulce day after day in her cousin's society, to mark her great eyes grow brighter when he comes, is now more than he can endure. To find himself second where he had been first

is intolerable to him, and a shrinking feeling that warns him he is being watched and commented upon by all the members of the Blount household, renders him at times half mad with rage and wounded pride.

Not that Dulce slights him in any way, or is cold to him, or gives him to understand, even indirectly, that she would gladly know her engagement at an end. She is both kind and gentle—much more so than before—but any doubt he had ever entertained about her having a real affection for him has now become a certainty.

He had won her unfairly. He had wrought upon her feelings in an evil hour, when her heart was torn with angry doubts and her self-love grievously hurt; when all her woman's soul was aflame with the thought that she was the unwelcome property of a man who would gladly be rid of her.

Her parting with Roger, and the unexpected emotion he had then betrayed, had opened her eyes in part, and had shown her how she had flung away the thing she desired, to gain—naught. Even now, I think she hardly knows how well she loves her cousin, or how well he loves her, so openly displayed is her pleasure in his society, so glad is the smile that welcomes him whenever he enters the room where she is, or seats himself beside her—which is very often—or when he addresses her, which means whenever he has anything at all to say to anybody.

At first he had fought manfully against his growing fears, but when a week had gone by and he had had it forced upon him that the girl he loved was every day becoming more silent and *distracted* in his presence, and when he had seen how she would gladly have altogether avoided his coming if she could, he lost all heart, and, flinging up his cards, let a bitter revengeful feeling enter and take possession of his heart—where love, alone, before, had held full sway.

If not his—she shall at least never be Roger's. This he swears to himself, with white lips and eyes dangerously bright.

He has her promise, and he will keep her to it. Nothing shall induce him to release her from it; or if he has to consent to her not fulfilling her engagement with him, it shall be *only* on condition that she will never marry Dare. Even should she come to him with tears in her eyes and on her bended knees to ask him to alter this decision, she will beg in vain. He registers a bitter vow that Roger shall not triumph where he has failed.

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He knows Dulce sufficiently well to understand that she will think a good deal of breaking the word she gave him of her own free will, even though she gave it in anger and to her own undoing. He can calculate to a nicety the finer shades of remorse and self-contempt that will possess her when he lays his case in all its nakedness before her. She is a wilful, hot-tempered little thing, but the Blounts for generations have been famed for a strain of honor toward friend and foe that runs in their blood, and is dear to them as their lives. Therefore he knows her word will be as sacred to her as her bond.

To Stephen just at this time the world is a howling wilderness; there is no sun anywhere, and every spring is dry. He has fallen into the habit of coming very seldom to the Court, where he used to be morning, noon, and night, ever since his unlucky engagement; indeed, no one in the house or out of it has seen him since the day before yesterday.

Sitting at home, brooding over his wrongs, with a short and well-blackened pipe in his mouth, he is giving himself up a victim to despair and rage. That he can still love her with even, it seems to him, a deeper intensity than before, is the bitterest drop in his cup. It was all so sudden, so unexpected. He tortures himself now with the false belief that she was *beginning* to love him, that she *might* have loved him had time been given him, and had Egypt held Roger but a few months longer in her foster arms. In a little flash it had all come to him, and now his life is barren, void of interest, and full of ceaseless pain.

"Bring withered Autumn leaves,
Call everything that grieves,
And build a funeral pyre above his head!
Heap there all golden promise that deceives,
Beauty that wins the heart, and then bereaves,
For love is dead.

"Not slowly did he die.
A meteor from the sky
Falls not so swiftly as his spirit fled—
When, with regretful, half-averted eye,
He gave one little smile, one little sigh,
And so was sped."

These verses, and such as these, he reads between his doleful musings. It gives him some wretched comfort to believe Dulce had actually some sparks of love for him before her cousin's return. An *erroneous* belief, as she had never cared for him in that way at all, and at her best moments had only a calm friendship for him. It is my own opinion that even if Roger had never returned she yet would have found an excuse at some time to break off her engagement with Gower, or, at least, to let him understand that she would wish it broken.

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To-day is fine, though frosty, and everybody, the children included, are skating on the lake,

which is to be found about half a mile from the house at the foot of a "wind-beaten hill." The sun is shining coldly, as though steadily determined to give no heat, and a sullen wind is coming up from the distant shore. "Stern Winter loves a dirge-like sound," and must now, therefore, be happy, as Boreas is asserting himself nobly, both on land and sea.

Some of the *jeunesse doree* of the neighborhood, who have been lunching at the Court, are with the group upon the lake, and are cutting (some of them) the most remarkable figures, in every sense of the word, to their own and everybody else's delight.

Dulce, who is dressed in brown velvet and fur, is gliding gracefully hither and thither with her hand fast locked in Roger's. Julia is making rather an exhibition of herself, and Portia, who skates—as she does everything else—to perfection, but who is easily tired, is just now sitting upon the bank with the devoted Dicky by her side. Sir Mark, coming up to these last two, drops lazily down on the grass at Portia's other side.

"Why don't you skate, Mark?" asks Portia, turning to him.

"Too old," says Gore.

"Nonsense! You are not too old for other things that require far greater exertion. For one example, you will dance all night and never show sign of fatigue."

"I like waltzing."

"Ah! and not skating."

"It hurts when one falls," says Mark, with a yawn; "and why put oneself in a position likely to create stars before one's eyes, and a violent headache at any moment?"

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"Inferior drink, if you take enough of it, will do all that sometimes," says Mr. Browne, innocently.

"Will it? I don't know anything about it" (severely). "You do, I shouldn't wonder; you speak so feelingly."

"If you address me like that again, I shall cry," says Dicky, sadly.

"Why are not you and Portia skating? It is far too cold to sit still on this damp grass."

"I am tired," says Portia, smiling rather languidly. "It sounds very affected, doesn't it? but really I am very easily fatigued. The least little exertion does me up. Town life, I suppose. But I enjoy sitting here and watching the others."

"So do I," says Sir Mark. "It quite warms my heart to see them flitting to and fro over there like a pretty dream."

"What part of your heart?" asks Mr. Browne, with a suppressed chuckle—"the cockles of it?" It is plain he has not yet forgotten his snubbing of a minute since.

Nobody takes any notice of this outrageous speech. It is passed over very properly in the deadliest silence.

"By Jove!" says Sir Mark, presently, "there's Macpherson down again. That's the eighteenth time; I've counted it."

"He can't skate a little screw," says Dicky. "It's a pity to be looking at him. It only raises angry passions in one's breast. He ought to go home and put his head in a bag."

"A well-floured one," responded Sir Mark.

Portia laughs. Her laugh is always the lowest, softest thing imaginable.

"Charitable pair," she says.

"Why, the fellow can't stand," says Mr. Browne, irritably. "And he looks so abominably contented with himself and his deplorable performance. That last time he was merely trying to get from that point there to that," waving his hand in both directions. "Any fool could do it. See, I'll show you." He jumps to his feet, gets on to the ice, essays to do what Captain Macpherson had tried to do, and succeeds in doing exactly what Captain Macpherson *did*. That is to say, he instantly comes a most tremendous cropper right in front of Portia.

Red, certainly, but consumed with laughter at his own defeat, he returns to her side. There is no use in attempting it, nothing earthly could have power to subdue Dicky's spirits. He is quite as delighted at his own discomfiture as if it had happened to somebody else.

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"You were right, Dicky," says Sir Mark, when he can speak, "*Any* fool could do it. *You* did it."

"I did," says Dicky, roaring with laughter; "with a vengeance. Never mind—

'Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.'"

"I hardly think I follow you," says Sir Mark. "Where's the dust, Dicky, and where's the just? I can't see either of them."

"My dear fellow, never be literal; nothing is so—so boring," says Mr. Browne, with conviction. "I'm," striking his chest, "the dust, and there," pointing to the lake, "is the just, and—no, by-the-by, that don't sound right—I mean—"

"Oh, never mind it," says Sir Mark.

Dulce and Roger having skated by this time past all the others, and safely over a rather shaky part of the ice that leaves them at the very farthest corner of the lake, stop somewhat out of breath and look at each other triumphantly.

Dulce is looking, if possible, more bonny than usual. Her blood is aglow, and tingling with the excitement of her late exertion; her hair, without actually having come undone, is certainly under less control than it was an hour ago, and is glinting and changing from auburn to brown, and from brown to a warm yellow, beneath the sad kisses of the Wintry sun. One or two riotous locks have escaped from under her otter-skin cap and are straying lovingly across her fair forehead, suggesting an idea of coquetry in the sweet eyes below shaded by their long dark lashes.

"Your eyes are stars of morning,
Your lips are crimson flowers,"

says Roger softly, as they still stand hand in hand. He is looking at her intently, with a new meaning in his glance as he says this.

"What a pretty song that is!" says Miss Blount, carelessly. "I like it better almost every time I hear it."

"It was you made me think of it now," says Roger; and then they seat themselves upon a huge stone near the brink, that looks as if it was put there on purpose for them.

"Where is Gower?" asks Roger, at length, somewhat abruptly.

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"Yes—where?" returns she, in a tone suggestive of the idea that now for the first time she had missed him. She says it quite naturally and without changing color. The fact is it really *is* the first time she has thought of him to-day, but I regret to say Roger firmly believes she is acting, and that she is doing it uncommonly well.

"He hasn't been at the Court since yesterday—has he?" he asks, somewhat impatiently.

"N—o. But I dare say he will turn up by-and-by. Why?" with a quick glance at him from under her heavy lashes. "Do you want him?"

"Certainly not. *I* don't want him," said Roger, with exceeding emphasis upon the pronoun.

"Then I don't know anybody else who does," finishes Dulce, biting her lips.

"She is regularly piqued because the fellow hasn't turned up—a lover's quarrel, I suppose," says Mr. Dare, savagely, to himself, reading wrongly that petulant movement of her lips.

"*YOU* do!" he says. To be just to him, he is, and always, I think, will be, a terribly outspoken young man.

"*I* do?"

"Yes; you looked decidedly cut up just now when I spoke of his not being here since yesterday."

"You are absurdly mistaken," declares Miss Blount, with dignity. "It is a matter of the most perfect indifference to me whether he comes or goes." (Oh, if he could only know how true this is!)

"Even more piqued than I supposed," concludes Roger, inwardly.

"However, I have no doubt we shall see him this evening," goes on Dulce, calmly.

"*That* will be a comfort to you, at all events," murmurs he, gloomily.

Silence follows this. Nothing is heard save the distant laughter of the skaters at the other end of the lake and the scraping noise of their feet. The storm is rising steadily in the hills above, but as yet has not descended on the quiet valley. The gaunt trees are swaying and bending ominously, and through them one catches glimpses of the angry sky above, across which clouds are scudding tempestuously. The dull sun has vanished: all is gray and cheerless. The roar of the breakers upon the rock-bound coast comes up from afar: while up there upon the wooded hill the

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"Wind, that grand old harper, smites
His thunder-harp of pines."

"Perhaps we had better return to the others," says Dulce, coldly, making a movement as though to rise.

"Now I have offended you," exclaims Roger, miserably, catching her hand, and drawing her down to the stone beside him again. "I don't know what's the matter with me; I only know I am as wretched as ever I can be. Forgive me, if you can."

He pulls his hat over his eyes and sighs deeply. At this moment his whole appearance is so decidedly suicidal that no true woman could look at him unmoved. Miss Blount is a true woman,

her *hauteur* of a moment since vanishes like snow, and compassion takes its place.

"What is making you wretched?" she asks, in a tone meant to be severe, but which is only friendly.

"When I remember what a fool I have been," begins Roger, rather as if he is following out a train of thought than answering her.

"Oh, no; not that," says Dulce, very kindly; "don't call yourself that."

"There is no other name for me," persists Roger, with increasing melancholy. "Of course, at *that time*—I knew you didn't particularly care for me, but," disconsolately, "it never occurred to me you might care for any other fellow!"

"I didn't!" said Miss Blount, suddenly; and then, as suddenly, she remembers everything, her engagement to Stephen, her horror of that engagement, all that her last words have admitted, and, growing as red as a rose, she seeks to hide her confusion by burying her rounded chin as deep as she can in her soft furs. At the same time she lowers her lids over her shamed eyes and gazes at her boots as if she never saw small twos before.

Roger, I need hardly say, is too much of a gentleman to take any notice of this impulsive admission on her part. Besides, he hardly gets as much consolation out of it as he should. He is in that stage when to pile up the agony becomes a melancholy satisfaction, and when the possibility of comfort in any form takes the shape of a deliberate insult.

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"Did you ever once think of me all the time I was away?" he asks, presently, in a low tone that distinctly gives her to understand he believes she didn't. That in fact he would—in in his present frame of mind—*rather* believe she didn't. His voice is growing absolutely tragic, and, altogether, he is as deplorably unhappy as any young woman could desire.

"I wish," says poor Dulce, her voice quivering, "that you would not speak to me like this now, or—or that you had spoken like it long ago!"

"I wish I had, with all my soul," says Roger, fervently. "However," with a heavy sigh, "you are engaged to *him* now, you know, so I suppose there is no use in talking about it."

"If I do know it, why tell me again about it?" says Dulce reproachfully, her eyes full of tears. "Just like you to remind me—of—my *misfortune!*"

It is out. She has been dying to tell him for the last half-hour of this trouble that has been pressing upon her for months, of this most distasteful engagement, and now that she has told him, though frightened, yet she would hardly recall her words. Her lashes linger on her cheeks, and she looks very much as if she would like to cry but for the disgrace of the thing.

"Your misfortune!" repeats Roger, in a strange tone. "Are you not happy, then?"

He has risen to his feet in his surprise and agitation, and is looking down on her as she sits trembling before him, her hands tightly clasped together.

"Do you mean to tell me he is not good to you?" asks Roger, seeing she either cannot or will not speak.

"He is too good to me; you must not think that," exclaims she, earnestly. "It is only—that I don't care about his goodness—I don't care," desperately, "for anything connected with him."

"You have made a second mistake, then?"

"Not a *second*," in a very low tone.

"Then let us say, you have again changed your mind?"

"No."

"You liked him once?" impatiently.

"No."

"You might as well say you *did* like me," says Roger, with angry warmth; "and I know I was actually abhorrent in your sight."

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"Oh, no, *no*," says Dulce for the third time, in a tone so low now that he can hardly hear it; yet he does.

"Dulce! do you know what you are implying?" asks he, in deep agitation. "It is one of two things now: either that you never liked Stephen, and always lov—liked me, or else you are trying to make a fool of me for the second time. Which is it?"

To this Miss Blount declines to make any reply.

"I won't leave this spot to-day until you answer me," says Roger, fell determination on his brow; "Which—is—it?"

"I'm sure, at least, that I never liked Stephen in *that way*," confesses she, faintly.

"And you did like me?"

Silence again.

"Then," says Mr. Dare, wrathfully, "for the sake of a mere whim, a caprice, you flung me over and condemned me to months of misery? Did you know what you were doing? Did *you* feel unhappy? I hope to goodness you *did*," says Roger, indignantly; "if you endured even one quarter of what I have suffered, it would be punishment sufficient for you."

"Had you nothing to do with it?" asks she, nervously.

"No; it was entirely your own fault," replies he, hastily. Whereupon she very properly bursts into tears.

"Every woman," says some one, "is in the wrong till she cries; then, instantly, she is in the right."

So it is with Dulce. No sooner does Roger see "her tears down fa" than, metaphorically speaking, he is on his knees before her. I am sure but for the people on the lake, who might find an unpleasant amount of amusement in the tableau, he would have done so literally.

"Don't do that," he entreats, earnestly. "Don't Dulce. I have behaved abominably to you. It was *not* your fault; it was all mine. But for my detestable temper—"

"And the chocolate creams," puts in Dulce, sobbing.

"It would never have occurred. Forgive me," implores he, distractedly, seeing her tears are rather on the increase than otherwise. "I must be a brute to speak to you as I have done."

"I won't contradict you," says Miss Blount, politely, still sobbing. There is plainly a great deal of indignation mingled with her grief. To say it was all *her* fault, indeed, when he knows.

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"Don't cry any more," says Roger, coaxingly, trying to draw her hands down from her eyes; "don't, now, you have got to go back to the others, you know, and they will be wondering what is the matter with you. They will think you had a bad fall."

This rouses her; she wipes her eyes hastily and looks up.

"How shall I explain to them?" she asks, anxiously.

"We won't explain at all. Let me take off your skates, and we will walk up and down here until your eyes are all right again. Why, really," stooping to look at them, "they are by no means bad; they will be as good as ever in five minutes."

Inexpressibly consoled, she lets him take off her skates, and commences a gentle promenade with him up and down the brown and stunted grass that lies upon the path.

"There was a time," says Roger, after a pause, "when I might have dared to kiss away your tears, but I suppose that time is gone forever."

"I suppose so," dismally; tears are still wetting the sweet eyes she turns up to his.

"Dulce! let me understand you," says Roger, gravely. "You are quite sure you don't care for him?"

"Quite," says Dulce, without a second's hesitation.

"Then ask him to give you up—to release you from your promise," says Roger, brightly.

"I—I'd be afraid," replies Miss Blount, drooping her head.

"Nonsense!" says Roger (of course it is not *he* who has to do it). "Why should you feel nervous about a thing like that? You don't want to marry him, therefore say so. Nothing can be simpler."

"It doesn't sound simple to me," says Dulce, dolefully.

Just at this moment a young man, dressed in gray, emerges from the group of alders that line the south edge of the lake, very near to where Dulce and Roger are standing. He is so situated that he is still concealed from view, though quite near enough to the cousins to hear what they are saying. The last two sentences having fallen on his ears, he stands as if spell-bound, and waits eagerly for what may come next.

"He can't possibly want to marry you if you don't want to marry him," says Roger, logically, "and you *don't*?" a little doubtfully still.

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"I don't, indeed," says Dulce, with a sad sigh and a shake of her auburn head.

At this the young man in the gray suit, with a bitter curse, turns away, and, retracing his steps, gets to the other side of the lake without being seen by either Dulce or his companion.

Here he declines to stay or converse with anyone. Passing by Portia and the two men who are still attending to her, he bows slightly, and pretends not to hear Dicky's voice as it calls to him to stop.

"He is like that contemptible idiot who went round with the 'banner with the strange device,'" says Dicky Browne, looking after him; "nothing will stop him."

"What's up with him now?" asks Sir Mark, squeezing his glass into his eye, the better to watch Stephen's figure, as it hurriedly disappears.

"I expect he has eaten something that has disagreed with him," says Dicky, cheerfully.

"Well, really, he looked like it," says Gore. "A more vinegary aspect it has seldom been my lot to gaze upon, for which I acknowledge my gratitude. My dear Portia, unless you intend to go in for rheumatics before your time, you will get up from that damp grass and come home with me."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Never morning wore
To evening, but some heart did break."
—*In Memoriam.*

"DID *he*—I mean did *you*—ever—; Dulce, will you be very angry with me if I ask you a question?"

"No. But I hope it won't be a disagreeable one," says Dulce, glancing at him cautiously.

"That is just as you may look at it," says Roger. "But I suppose I may say it—after all, we are like brother and sister are we not?"

"Ye-es. *Quite* like brother and sister," says Dulce, but somehow this thought seems to give her no pleasure.

"Only we are *not*, you know," puts in Roger, rather hastily. [238]

"No, of course we are *not*," replies she, with equal haste.

"Well, then, look here—"

But even now that he has got so far, he hesitates again, looks earnestly at her, and pulls his mustache uncertainly, as if half afraid to go any further.

It is the afternoon of the next day, and as the sun has come out in great force, and the mildness of the day almost resembles Spring in its earliest stages; they are all about the place, strolling hither and thither, whithersoever pleasant fancy guides them.

Roger and Dulce, after lingering for some time in the Winter garden looking at the snowdrops, and such poor foster-babes as have thrust their pallid faces above the warm earth, that, like a cruel stepmother, has driven them too early from her breast, have moved slowly onwards until they find themselves beside a fountain that used to be a favorite haunt of theirs long ago.

Dulce, seating herself upon the stone-work that surrounds it, though the water is too chilly to be pleasant, still toys lightly with it with her idle fingers, just tipping it coquettishly now and then, with her eyes bent thoughtfully upon as it sways calmly to and fro beneath the touch of the cold wind that passes over it.

Just now she raises her eyes and fixes them inquiringly on Roger.

"Go on," she says, quietly. "You were surely going to ask me something. Are you afraid of me?"

"A little, I confess."

"You need not." She is still looking at him very earnestly.

"Well, then," says Roger, as though nerving himself for a struggle—"tell me this." He leaves where he is standing and comes closer to her. "Did—did you ever kiss Gower?"

"Never—*never!*" answers Dulce, growing quite pale.

"I have no right to ask it, I know that," says Roger. "But," desperately, "did he ever kiss *you?*"

"Never, indeed."

"Honor bright?"

"Honor bright."

A long silence. Miss Blount's fingers are quite deep in the water now, and I think she does not even feel the cold of it. [239]

"He has been engaged to you for three months and more and never wanted to kiss you!" exclaims Roger at last, in a tone expressive of great amazement and greater contempt.

"I don't think I said quite *that*," returns she, coloring faintly.

"Then"—eagerly—"it was *you* prevented him!"

"I don't care much about that sort of thing," says Dulce, with a little shrug.

"Don't you? Then I don't believe you care a button about *him*," replies he, with glad conviction.

"That is mere surmise on your part. Different people"—vaguely—"are different. I don't believe if I had any affection for a person that a mere formal act like kissing would increase the feeling."

"Oh, wouldn't it, though!" says Mr. Dare—"that's all you know about it! You just try it, that's all."

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the kind," says Dulce, with much indignation, and some natural disappointment—that *he* should recommend such a course to her!

"I didn't mean that you should—should—I didn't, in the least, that you should be a bit civiler to Gower, or any one, than you are *now*," says Roger, hastily, greatly shocked at the construction she has put upon his words, and rather puzzled for language in which to explain himself more clearly. At this the cloud disappears from her pretty face, and she bestows a smile upon him that at once restores him to equanimity.

"I can't say I think much of Gower as a lover," he says, after a while, a touch of scorn in his voice. "To be engaged to you for three whole months, and never once to kiss you."

"*You* were engaged to me for three whole *years*," replies his cousin, quietly, yet with a flash from her deep gray eyes that means much, "and I cannot remember that you ever cared to kiss me *at all*."

This is a home-thrust.

"I don't know what was the matter with me then," he says, making no attempt at denial, though there certainly were one or two occasions he might have referred to; "I don't believe"—in a low tone—"I ever knew I was fond of you until—until I lost you."

"Oh, you must not talk to me like this!" entreats she, the tears coming into her eyes and trembling on her long lashes. [240]

"I suppose not. But this new-found knowledge is hard to suppress; why *did* I not discover it all sooner?"

"Better late than never," says Dulce, with a poor attempt at lightness and a rather artificial little laugh, meant to conceal the sorrow that is consuming her. "I think you ought to feel gladness in the thought that you know it at last. Knowledge is power, isn't it?"

"I can feel only sorrow," says Roger, very sadly. "And I have no power."

Dulce's wretched fingers are getting absolutely benumbed in the cold water, yet she seems to feel nothing. Roger, however, stooping over her, lifts the silly little hand and dries it very tenderly, and holds it fast between both his own; doubtless only with the intention of restoring some heat to it. It is quite amazing the length of time it takes to do this.

"Dulce!"

"Well?" She has not looked at him even once during the last five minutes.

"If you are unhappy in your present engagement—and I think you are—why not break with Gower? I spoke to you of this yesterday, and I say the same thing to-day. You are doing both him and yourself an injustice in letting it go on any longer."

"I don't know what to say to him."

"Then get some one else to say it. Fabian, or Uncle Christopher."

"Oh, *no!*" says Dulce, with a true sense of delicacy. "If it is to be done at all I shall do it myself."

"Then do it. Promise me if you get the opportunity you will say something to him about it."

"I promise," says Dulce, very faintly. Then she withdraws the hand from his, and without another word, not even a hint at what the gaining of her freedom may mean to either—or rather both—of them, they go slowly back to the garden, where they meet all the others sitting in a group upon a huge circular rustic seat beneath a branching evergreen; all, that is, except Fabian, who of late has become more and more solitary in his habits.

As Stephen has not put in an appearance at the Court now for fully two days, speculation is rife as to what has become of him. [241]

"It is the oddest thing I ever knew," Julia is saying, as the cousins come up to the rustic-seat.

"What is it?" asks Roger, idly.

"Stephen's defection. He used to be as true as the morning post, and now—I hope he hasn't made away with himself," says Dicky Browne.

"He has had since this time yesterday to do it," says Sir Mark. "I wonder if it takes long to cut one's throat."

"It entirely depends on whether you have sharpened your razor sufficiently, and if you know *how* to sharpen it. I should think a fellow devoid of hirsute adornment would take a good while to it," returns Mr. Browne, with all the air of one who knows. "He wouldn't be up to it, you know."

But our late lamented Stephen was all right. He shaved regular."

"He was at the lake yesterday," says Portia. "He came up to us from the southern end of it."

At this both Dulce and Roger start, and the former changes color visibly.

"I really wonder *where* he can be," says Julia.

"So do I," murmurs Dulce, faintly, but distinctly, feeling she is in duty bound to say something. "Stephen never used to miss a day."

"Here I am, if you want me," says Stephen, coming leisurely up to them from between the laurels. "I thought I heard somebody mention my name."

He is looking pale and haggard, and altogether unlike the languid, unemotional Stephen of a month ago. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his mouth looks strangely compressed, and full of an unpleasant amount of determination.

"I mentioned it," says Dulce. She is compelled to say this, because he has fixed his eyes upon her, and plainly everybody expects her to reply to him.

"Did you want me?" asks he, casting a scrutinizing glance upon her. So absorbed is he in his contemplation of her that he has positively forgotten the fact that he has omitted to bid any one a "fair good-morrow."

"I was certainly wondering where you were," says Dulce, evasively. She is frightened and subdued—she scarcely knows why. There is something peculiar in his manner that overawes her. [242]

"It was very good of you to remember my existence. Then you were only wondering at my absence. You did not want me?"

Dulce makes no reply. She would have given anything to be able to make some civil, commonplace rejoinder, but at this moment her wits cruelly desert her.

"I see. Never mind," says Stephen. "Well, even if you don't want me, I do want *you*—you will come with me as far as the Beeches?"

His tone is more a command than a question. Hearing it, Roger moves involuntarily a step forward, that brings him nearer to Dulce. He even puts out his hand as though to lay it upon her arm, when Stephen, by a gesture, checks him.

"Don't be alarmed," he says, with a low, sneering laugh, every vestige of color gone from his face. "I shall do her no harm. I shan't murder her, I give you my word. Be comforted, she will be quite as safe with me as she would even be with—*you*." He laughs again, dismisses Roger from his thoughts by an indescribable motion of his hand, and once more concentrates his attention upon the girl near him, who, with lowered eyes and a pale, distressed face, is waiting unwillingly for what he may say next.

All this is so unusual, and really, every one is so full of wonder at Stephen's extraordinary conduct, that up to this none of the spectators have said one word. At this juncture, however, Sir Mark clears his throat as if to say something, and, coming forward, would probably have tried the effect of a conciliatory speech, but that Stephen, turning abruptly away from them, takes Dulce's hand in his, and leads her in silence and with a brow dark as Erebus, up the gravelled path, and past the chilly fountain, and thus out of sight.

It is as though some terrible ogre from out of a fairy tale had descended upon them and plucked their fairest damsel from their midst, to incarcerate her in a 'donjon keep' and probably eat her by and by, when she is considered fit to kill.

"Do—*do* you think he has gone mad?" asked Julia, with clasped hands and tearful eyes.

"My dear Mark, I think something ought to be done,—some one ought to go after her," says Portia, nervously. "He really looked quite dreadful."

"I'll go," says Roger, angrily. [243]

"No, you won't," says Sir Mark, catching hold of him. "Let them have it out,—it is far the best thing. And if she gets a regular, right-down, uncommonly good scolding, as I hope she will"—viciously,—"I can only say she richly deserves it."

"I can only say I don't know whether I am standing on my head or on my heels," says Mr. Browne, drawing a long breath; "I feel cheap. Any one might have me now for little or nothing—quite a bargain."

"I don't think you'd be a bargain at any price," says Sir Mark; but this touching tribute to his inestimable qualities is passed over by Mr. Browne in a silence that is almost sublime.

"To think Stephen could look like that!" he goes on, as evenly as if Sir Mark had never spoken. "Why, Irving is a fool to him. Tragedy is plainly his *forte*. Really, one never knows of what these aesthetic-looking people are capable. He looked murderous."

At this awful word the children—who have been silent and most attentive spectators of the late scene, and who have been enchanted with it—turn quite pale, and whisper together in a subdued

fashion. When the whispering has reached a certain point, the Boodie gives Jacky an encouraging push, whereupon that young hero darts away from her side like an arrow from a bow, and disappears swiftly round the corner.

Meanwhile, having arrived at the Beeches, a rather remote part of the ground, beautiful in Summer because of the luxuriant foliage of the trees, but now bleak and bare beneath the rough touch of Winter, Stephen stops short and faces his companion steadily. His glance is stern and unforgiving; his whole bearing relentless and forbidding.

To say Miss Blount is feeling nervous would be saying very little. She is looking crushed in anticipation by the weight of the thunderbolt she *knows* is about to fall. Presently it descends, and once down, she acknowledges to herself it was only a shock after all, worse in the fancy than in the reality; as are most of our daily fears.

"So you wish our engagement at an end?" says Stephen, quite calmly, in a tone that might almost be termed mechanical.

He waits remorselessly for an answer.

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"I—I— I didn't tell you so," stammers Dulce.

"No prevarications, please. There has been quite enough deception of late." Dulce looks at him curiously. "Let us adhere to the plain truth now at least. This is how the case stands. You never loved me; and now your cousin has returned you find you do love him; that all your former professions of hatred toward him were just so much air—or, let us say, so much wounded vanity. You would be released from me. You would gladly forget I ever played even a small part in the drama of your life. Is not all this true?"

For the second time this afternoon speech deserts Dulce. She grows very white, but answer she has none.

"I understand your silence to mean yes," goes on Stephen, in the same monotonous tone he had just used, out of which every particle of feeling has been absolutely banished. "It would, let me say, have saved you much discomfort, and your cousin some useless traveling, if you had discovered your passion for him sooner." At this Dulce draws her breath quickly, and throws up her head with a haughty gesture. Very few women like being *told* they entertain a passion for a man, no matter how devotedly they adore him.

Mr. Gower, taking no notice of her silent protest, goes on slowly.

"What your weakness and foolish pride have cost *me*," he says, "goes for nothing."

There is something in his face now that makes Dulce sorry for him. It is a want of hope. His eyes, too, look sunk and wearied as if from continued want of sleep.

"If by my reprehensible pride and weakness, of which you justly accuse me, I have caused you pain—" she begins tremulously, but he stops her at once.

"That will do," he says, coldly. "Your nature is incapable of comprehending all you have done. We will not discuss that subject. I have not brought you here to talk of myself, but of you. Let us confine ourselves to the business that has brought me to-day—for the last time, I hope—to the Court."

His tone, which is extremely masterful, rouses Dulce to anger.

"There is one thing I *will* say," she exclaims, lifting her eyes fairly to his. "But for *you* and your false sympathy, and your carefully chosen and most insidious words that fanned the flame of my unjust wrath against him, Roger and I would never have been separated."

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"You can believe what you like about that," says Gower, indifferently, unmoved by her vehement outburst. "Believe anything that will make your conduct look more creditable to you, anything that will make you more comfortable in your mind—if you *can*. But as I have no wish to detain you here longer than is strictly necessary, and as I am sure you have no wish to be detained, let us not waste time in recriminations, but come at once to the point."

"What point? I do not understand you," says Dulce, coldly.

"Yesterday, when passing by the southern end of the lake, hidden by some shrubs, I came upon you and your cousin unawares, and heard you distinctly tell him (what I must be, indeed, a dullard, not to have known before) that you did not love me. This was the substance of what you said, but your tone conveyed far more. It led me to believe you held me in positive detestation."

"Oh! You were eavesdropping," says Dulce, indignantly.

Stephen smiles contemptuously.

"No, I was not," he says, calmly. He takes great comfort to his soul in the remembrance that he might have heard much more that was not intended for his ears had he stayed in his place of concealment yesterday, which he had not. "Accident brought me to that part of the lake, and brought, too, your words to my ears. When I heard them I remembered many trivial things, that at the moment of their occurrence had seemed as naught. But now my eyes are opened. I am no longer blind. I have brought you here to tell you I will give you back your promise to marry me,

your *freedom*"—with a sudden bitterness, as suddenly suppressed—"on *one* condition."

"And that?" breathlessly.

"Is, that you will never marry Roger without my consent."

The chance of regaining her liberty is so sweet to Dulce at this first moment that it chases from her all other considerations. Oh, to be free again! In vain she strives to hide her gladness. It will *not* be hidden. Her eyes gleam; her lips get back their color; there is such an abandonment of joy and exultation in her face that the man at her side—the man who is now resigning all that makes life sweet to him—feels his heart grow mad with bitter hatred of her, himself, and all the world as he watches her with miserable eyes. And he—poor fool!—had once hoped he might win the priceless treasure of this girl's love! No words could convey the contempt and scorn with which he regards himself. [246]

"Do not try to restrain your relief," he says, in a hoarse, unnatural tone, seeing she has turned her head a little aside, as though to avoid his searching gaze. "You know the condition I impose—you are prepared to abide by it?"

Dulce hesitates. "Later on he will forget all this, and give his consent to my marrying—any one," she thinks, hurriedly, in spite of the other voice within her, that bids her beware. Then out loud she says, quietly:

"Yes."

Even if he *should* prove unrelenting, she tells herself, it will be better to be an old maid than an unloving wife. She will be rid of this hateful entanglement that has been embittering her life for months, and—and, of course, he *won't* keep her to this absurd arrangement after a while.

"You swear it?"

"I swear it," says Dulce, answering as one might in a dream. Hers is a dream, happy to recklessness, in which she is fast losing herself.

"It is an oath," he says again, as if to give her a last chance to escape.

"It is," replies she, softly, still wrapt in her dream of freedom. She may now love Roger without any shadow coming between them, and—ah! how divine a world it is!—he may perhaps love her too!

"Remember," says Gower, sternly, letting each word drop from him as if with the settled intention of imprinting or burning them upon her brain, "I shall never relent about this. You have given me your solemn oath, and—I shall *keep you to it!* I shall never absolve you from it, as I have absolved you from your first promise to-day. Never. Do not hope for that. Should you live to be a hundred years old, you cannot marry your cousin without my consent, and that I shall never give. You quite understand?"

"Quite." But her tone has grown faint and uncertain. What has she done? Something in his words, his manner, has at last awakened her from the happy dream in which she was reveling. [247]

"Now you can return to your old lover," says Stephen, with an indescribably bitter laugh, "and be happy. For your deeper satisfaction, too, let me tell you that for the future you shall see very little of me."

"You are going abroad?" asks she, very timidly, in her heart devoutly hoping that this may be the reading of his last words.

"No; I shall stay here. But the Court I shall trouble with my presence seldom. I don't know," exclaims he, for the first time losing his wonderful self control and speaking querulously, "what is the matter with me. Energy has deserted me with all the rest. You have broken my heart, I suppose, and that explains everything. There, *go*," turning abruptly away from her; "your being where I can see you only makes matters worse."

Some impulse prompts Dulce to go up to him and lay her hand gently on his arm.

"Stephen," she says, in a low tone, "if I have caused you any unhappiness forgive me now."

"Forgive you?" exclaims he, so fiercely that she recoils from him in absolute terror.

Lifting her fingers from his arm as though they burn him, he flings them passionately away, and, plunging into the short thick underwood, is soon lost to sight.

Dulce, pale and frightened, returns by the path by which she had come, but not to those she had left. She is in no humor now for questions or curious looks; gaining the house without encountering any one, she runs up-stairs, and seeks refuge in her own room.

But if she doesn't return to gratify the curiosity of the puzzled group on the rustic-seat, somebody else does.

Jacky, panting, dishevelled, out of breath with quick running rushes up to them, and precipitates himself upon his mother.

"It's all right," he cries, triumphantly. "He didn't do a bit to her. I watched him all the time and

he never *touched* her."

"Who? What?" demands the bewildered Julia. But Jacky disdains explanations.

"He only talked, and talked, and talked," he goes on, fluently; "and he said she did awful things to him. And he made her swear at him—and—and—"

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"*What?*" says Sir Mark.

"It's impossible to know anybody," sighs Dicky Browne, regretfully, shaking his head at this fresh instance of the frailty of humanity. "Who could have believed Dulce capable of using bad language? I hope her school-children and her Sunday class won't hear it, poor little things. It would shake their faith forever."

"How do you know he is talking of Dulce?" says Julia, impatiently. "Jacky, how *dare* you say dear Dulce swore at any one?"

"He *made* her," says Jacky.

"He must have behaved awfully bad to her," says Dicky, gravely.

"He said to her to swear, and she did it at once," continues Jacky, still greatly excited.

"*Con amore*," puts in Mr. Browne.

"And he scolded her very badly," goes on Jacky, at which Roger frowns angrily; "and he said she broke something belonging to him, but I couldn't hear what; and then he told her to go away, and when she was going she touched his arm, and he pushed her away awfully roughly, but he didn't try to *murder* her at all."

"What on earth is the boy saying?" says Julia, perplexed in the extreme, "Who didn't try to murder who?"

"I'm telling you about Dulce and Stephen," says Jacky, in an aggrieved tone, though still ready to burst with importance. "When he took her away from this, I followed 'm; I kept my eyes on 'm. Dicky said Stephen looked murderous; so I went to see if I could help her. But I suppose he got sorry, because he let her off. She is all right; there isn't a *scratch* on her."

Sir Mark and Dicky were consumed with laughter. But Roger, taking the little champion in his arms, kisses him with all his heart.

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CHAPTER XXV.

"For aught that ever I could read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth."
—*Midsummer Night's Dream*.

WHEN dinner comes Dulce is wonderfully silent. That is the misfortune of being a rather talkative person, when you want to be silent you can't, without attracting universal attention. Every one now stares at Dulce secretly, and speculates about what Stephen may, or may not, have said to her.

She says yes and no quite correctly to everything, but nothing more, and seems to find no comfort in her dinner—which is rather a good one. This last sign of depression appears to Dicky Browne a very serious one, and he watches her with the gloomiest doubts as he sees dish after dish offered her, only to be rejected.

This strange fit of silence, however, is plainly not to be put down to ill temper. She is kindly, nay, even affectionate, in her manner to all around, except, indeed, to Roger, whom she openly avoids, and whose repeated attempts at conversation she returns with her eyes on the table-cloth, and a general air about her of saying anything she *does* say to him under protest.

To Roger this changed demeanor is maddening; from it he instantly draws the very blackest conclusions; and, in fact, so impressed is he by it that later on, in the drawing-room, when he finds his tenderest glances and softest advances still met with coldness and resistance, and when his solitary effort at explanation is nervously, but remorselessly, repulsed, he caves in altogether, and, quitting the drawing-room, makes his way to the deserted library, where, with a view to effacing himself for the remainder of the evening, he flings himself into an arm-chair, and gives himself up a prey to evil forebodings.

Thus a quarter of an hour goes by, when the door of the library is opened by Dulce. Roger, sitting with his back to it, does not see her enter, or, indeed, heed her entrance, so wrapt is he in his unhappy musings. Not until she has lightly and timidly touched his shoulder does he start, and, looking round, become aware of her presence.

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"It is I," she says, in a very sweet little voice, that brings Roger to his feet and the end of his musings in no time.

"Dulce! What has happened?" he asks, anxiously, alluding to her late strange behavior. "Why won't you speak to me?"

"I don't know," says Dulce, faintly, hanging her head.

"What can I have done? Ever since you went away with Stephen, down to the Beeches to-day, your manner toward me has been utterly changed. Don't—*don't* say you have been persuaded by him to name your wedding day!" He speaks excitedly, as one might who is at last giving words to a fear that has been haunting him for long.

"So far from it," says Miss Blount, with slow solemnity, "that he sought an opportunity to-day to formally release me from my promise to him!"

"He has released you?" Words are too poor to express Roger's profound astonishment.

"Yes; on one condition."

"A condition! What a Jew! Yes; well, go on—?"

"I *can't* go on," says Dulce, growing crimson. "I can't, *indeed*," putting up her hands as she sees him about to protest; "it is of no use asking me. I neither can or will tell you about that condition, *ever*."

"Give me even a *hint*," says Roger, coaxingly.

"No, *no*, *no*! The rack wouldn't make me tell it," returns she, with a stern shake of her red-brown head, but with very pathetic eyes.

"But what *can* it be," exclaims Roger, fairly puzzled.

"*That* I shall go to my grave without divulging," replies she, heroically.

"Well, no matter," says Roger, after a minute's reflection, resolved to take things philosophically. "You are free, that is the great point. And now—*now*, Dulce, you will marry me?"

At this Miss Blount grows visibly affected (as they say of ladies in the dock), and dropping into the nearest chair, lets her hands fall loosely clasped upon her knees, and so remains, the very picture of woe.

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"I can't do that, either," she says at last, without raising her afflicted lids.

"But why?" impatiently. "What is to prevent you?—unless, indeed," suspiciously, "you really don't care about it."

"It isn't that, indeed," says Dulce, earnestly, letting her eyes, suffused with tears, meet his for a moment.

"Then *what* is it? You say he has released you, and that you have therefore regained your liberty, and yet—yet—Dulce, *do* be rational and give me an explanation. At least, say why you will not be my wife."

"If I told that I should tell you the condition, too," says poor Dulce, in a stifled tone, feeling sorely put to it, "and *nothing* would induce me to do that. I told you before I wouldn't."

"You needn't," says Roger, softly. "I see it now. And anything more sneaking— So he has given you your liberty, but has taken good care you sha'n't be happy in it. I never heard of a lower transaction. I—"

"Oh! how did you find it out?" exclaims Dulce, blushing again generously.

"I don't know," replies he, most untruthfully, "I guessed it, I think; it was so like him. You—did you agree to his condition, Dulce?"

"Yes," says Dulce.

"You gave him your word?"

"Yes."

"Then he'll keep you to it, be sure of that. What a pity you did not take time to consider what you would do."

"I considered *this* quite quickly," says Dulce: "I said to myself that *nothing* could be worse than marrying a man I did not love."

"Yes, yes, of course," says Roger, warmly. "Nothing could be worse than marrying Gower."

"And then I thought that perhaps he might relent; and then, besides—I didn't know what to do, because," here two large tears fall down her cheeks and break upon her clasped hands, "because, you see, *you* had not asked me to marry you, and I thought that perhaps you never might ask me, and that so my promise meant very little."

"How could you have thought that?" says Roger, deeply grieved.

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"Well, you hadn't said a word, you know," murmurs she, sorrowfully.

"How could I?" groans Dare. "When you were going of your own free will, and my folly, to marry another fellow."

"There was very little free will about it," whispers she, tearfully.

"Well, I'm sure I don't know what's going to be done now," says Mr. Dare, despairingly, sinking into a chair near the table, and letting his head fall in a distracting fashion into his hands.

He seems lost in thought, sunk in a very slough of despond, out of which it seems impossible to him he can ever be extricated. He has turned away his face, lest he shall see the little disconsolate figure in the other arm-chair, that looked so many degrees too large for it.

To gaze at Dulce is to bring on a state of feeling even more keenly miserable than the present one. She is looking particularly pretty to-night, her late encounter with Stephen, and her perplexity, and the anxiety about telling it all to Roger, having added a wistfulness to her expression that heightens every charm she possesses. She is dressed in a white gown of Indian muslin made high to the throat, but with short sleeves, and has in her hair a diamond star, that once belonged to her mother.

Her hands are folded in her lap, and she is gazing with a very troubled stare at the bright fire. Presently, as though the thoughts in which she has been indulging have proved too much for her, she flings up her head impatiently, and, rising softly, goes to the back of Roger's chair and leans over it.

"Roger," she says, in a little anxious whisper, that trembles ever so lightly, "you are not angry with me, are you?"

Impulsively, as she asks this, she raises one of her soft, naked arms and lays it round his neck. In every action of Dulce's there is something so childlike and loving, that it appeals straight to the heart. The touch of her cool, sweet flesh, as it brushes against his cheek, sends a strange thrill through Roger—a thrill hitherto unknown to him. He turns his face to hers; their eyes meet; and then, in a moment, he has risen, and he has her in his arms, and has laid his lips on hers; and they have given each other a long, long kiss, a kiss of youth and love!

"Angry—with you—my darling!" says Roger, at length, in a low tone, when he has collected his scattered senses a little. He is gazing at her with the most infinite tenderness, and Dulce, with her head pressed close against his heart, feels with a keen sense of relief that she can defy Stephen, the world, cruel Fate, *all!* and that her dearest dream of happiness is at last fulfilled. [253]

When they have asked each other innumerable questions about different matters that would concern the uninitiated world but little, but are fraught with the utmost importance to them, they grow happily silent; and, sitting hand in hand, look dreamily into the glowing embers of the fire. Trifles light as air rise before them, and strengthen them in the belief at which they have just arrived, that they have been devoted to each other for years. All the old hasty words and angry looks are now to be regarded as vague expressions of a love suppressed, because fearful of a disdainful reception.

Presently, after a rather prolonged pause, Dulce, drawing a deep but happy sigh, turns to him, and says, tenderly, though somewhat regretfully:

"Ah! if only you had not stolen those chocolate creams!"

"I didn't steal them," protested Roger, as indignantly as a man can whose arm is fondly clasped around the beloved of his heart.

"Well, of course, I mean if you hadn't *eaten* them," says Dulce, sadly.

"But, my life, I never *saw* them!" exclaims poor Roger, vehemently; "I swear I didn't."

"Well, then, if I hadn't *said* you did," says Dulce, mournfully.

"Ah! that indeed," says Mr. Dare, with corresponding gloom. "If you hadn't all might now be well; as it is— Do you know I have never since seen one of those loathsome sweets without feeling positively murderous, and shall hate chocolate to my dying day."

"It was a pity we fought about such a trifle," murmurs she, shaking her head.

"Was it?" Turning to her, he lifts her face with his hand and gazes intently into her eyes. Whatever he sees in those clear depths seem to satisfy him and make glad his heart. "After all, I don't believe it was," he says.

"Not a pity we quarreled, and—and lost each other?" Considering the extremely close proximity to each other at this moment, the allusion to the loss they are supposed to have sustained is not very affecting. [254]

"No. Though we were rather in a hole now," says Mr. Dare, rather at a loss for a word. "I am very *glad* we fought."

"Oh, Roger!"

"Aren't you?"

"How can you ask me such a heartless question?"

"Don't you see what it has done for us? Has it not taught us that"—very tenderly this—"we *love* each other?" His tone alone would have brought her round to view anything in his light. "And somehow," he goes on, after a necessary pause—"I mean," with an effort that speaks volumes for his sense of propriety, "Gower will give in, and absolve you from your promise. He may as well, you know, when he sees the game is up."

"But when will he see that?"

"He evidently saw it to-day."

"Well, he was very far from giving in to-day, or even dreaming of granting absolution."

"Well, we must make him see it even *more* clearly," says Roger, desperately.

"But how?" dejectedly.

"By making violent love to me all day long, and by letting me make it to you. It will wear him out," says Mr. Dare confidently. "He won't be able to stand it. Would—would you much mind trying to make violent love to me?"

"Mind it?" says Dulce, enthusiastically, plainly determined to render herself up a willing (very willing) sacrifice upon the altar of the present necessity. "I should *like* it!"

This *naïve* speech brings Roger, *if possible*, a little closer to her.

"I think I must have been utterly without intellect in the old days, not to have seen then what a darling you are."

"Oh, no," says Dulce, meekly, which might mean that, in her opinion, either *he* is not without intellect, or she is not a darling.

"I was abominable to you then," persists Roger, with the deepest self-abasement. "I wonder you can look with patience at me now. I was a perfect bear to you!"

"*Indeed* you were not," says Dulce, slipping her arm round his neck. "You couldn't have been, because I am sure I loved you even then; and besides," with a little soft, coaxing smile, "I won't listen to you at all if you call my own boy bad names." [255]

Rapture; and a prolonged pause.

"What *shall* we do if that wretched beggar won't relent and let me marry you?" says Roger, presently.

"Only bear it, I suppose," with profoundest resignation; it is *so* profound that it strikes Mr. Dare as being philosophical, and displeases him accordingly.

"*You* don't seem to care much," he says, in an offended tone, getting up and standing with his back to the mantelpiece, and his face turned to her, as though determined to keep an eye on her.

"I don't care?" reproachfully.

"Not to any very great extent, I think; and of course it is not to be wondered at. I'm not much, I allow, and perhaps there are others—"

"Now that is not at all a pretty speech," interrupts Dulce, sweetly; "so you sha'n't finish it. Come here directly and give me a little kiss, and don't be cross."

This decides everything. He comes here directly, and gives her a little kiss, and isn't a bit cross.

"Why shouldn't you defy him and marry me?" says Roger, defiantly. "What right has he to extort such a promise from you? Once we were man and wife he would be powerless."

"But there is my word—I swore to him," returns she, earnestly. "I cannot forget that. It was an understanding, a bargain."

"Well, but," begins he again; and then he sees something in the little, pale, but determined face gazing pathetically up into his that deters him from further argument. She will be quite true to her word once pledged, he knows that; and though the knowledge is bitter to him, yet he respects her so highly for it, that he vows to himself he will no longer strive to tempt her from her sense of right. Lifting one of her hands, he lays it upon his lips, as though to keep himself by her dear touch from further speech.

"Never mind," he says, caressing her soft fingers tenderly. "We may be able to baffle him yet, and even if not, we can be happy together in spite of him. Can we not. I know *I* can." Drawing her closer to him, he whispers gently, [256]

"A smile of thine shall make my bliss!"

After a while it occurs to them that they ought to return to the drawing-room and the prosaic humdrumness of everyday life. It is wonderful how paltry everything has become in their sight, how it is dwarfed and stunted by comparison with the great light of love that is surrounding them. All outside this mist seems lost in a dull haze, seems pale, expressionless.

Opening the library-door with slow, reluctant fingers, they almost stumble against a figure

crouching near the lintel. This figure starts into nervous life at their appearance, and, muttering something inaudible in a heavy indistinct tone, shuffles away from them, and is lost to sight round a corner of the corridor.

"Surely that was old Gregory," says Dulce, after a surprised pause.

"So it was," returns Roger, "and, as usual, as drunk as a fiddler."

"Isn't it dreadful of him?" says Dulce. "Do you know, Roger, his manner is so strange of late, that I verily believe that man is going mad."

"Well, he won't have far to go, at any rate," says Mr. Dare, cheerfully. "He has been on the road, I should say, a considerable time."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Let the dead past bury its dead."—LONGFELLOW.

JUST at first it is so delightful to Dulce to have Roger making actual love to her, and so delightful to Roger to be able to make it, that they are content with their present and heedless of their future.

Not that everything goes quite smoothly with them, even now. Little skirmishes, as of old, arise between them, threatening to dim the brightness of their days. It was, indeed, only yesterday that a very serious rupture was near taking place, all occasioned by a difference of opinion about the respective merits of Mr. Morton's and Messrs. Crosse & Blackwell's pickles; Dulce declaring for the former, Roger for the latter.

Fortunately, Mark Gore coming into the room smoothed matters over and drew conversation into a more congenial channel, or lamentable consequences might have ensued. [257]

They hold to their theory about the certainty of Stephen's relenting in due time until they grow tired of it; and as the days creep on, and Gower sitting alone in his castle in sullen silence refuses to see or speak to them, or give any intimation of a desire to soften towards them, they lose heart altogether, and give themselves up a prey to despair.

Roger one morning had plucked up courage, and had gone over to the Fens, and had forced himself into the presence of its master and expostulated with him "mildly but firmly," as he assured Dulce afterwards, when she threw out broad hints to the effect that she believed he had lost his temper on the occasion. Certainly, from all accounts, a good deal of temper *had* been lost, and nothing indeed came of the interview beyond a select amount of vituperation from both sides, an openly avowed declaration on Mr. Gower's part that as he had not requested the pleasure of his society on this, or any other, occasion, he hoped it would be the last time Roger would present himself at the Fens; an equally honest avowal on the part of Mr. Dare to the effect that the discomfort he felt in coming was *almost* (it never could be *quite*) balanced by the joy he experienced at departing, and a few more hot words that very nearly led to bloodshed.

When Roger thought it all over dispassionately next morning, he told himself that now indeed all things were at an end, that no hope lay anywhere; and now February is upon them, and Spring begins to assert itself, and the land has learned to smile again, and all the pretty early buds are swelling in the hedgerows.

I wonder they don't get tired of swelling only to die in the long run. What does their perseverance gain for them? There is a little sunshine, a little warmth, the songs of a few birds flung across their trailing beauty, and then one heavy shower, and then—death! What a monotonous thing is nature, when all is told? Each year is but a long day; each life but a long year: at morn we rise, at night we lay our weary heads upon our pillows: at morn we rise again, and so on. As Winter comes our flowers fade and die; Spring brings them back again; again the Winter kills them, and so—forever!

Now Spring has come once more to the old Court, to commence its triumphant reign, regardless of the fact that no matter how bright its day may be while it lasts, still dissolution stares it in the face. The young grass is thrusting its head above ground, a few brave birds are singing on the barren branches. There is a stir, a strange vague flutter everywhere of freshly-opening life. [258]

"We shall have to shake off dull sloth pretty early to-morrow," says Dicky Browne, suddenly, *apropos* of nothing that has gone before; his usual method of introducing a subject.

"Why?" asks Portia, almost startled. It is nearly five o'clock, and Mr. Browne, having sequestered the remainder of the cake, the last piece being the occasion of a most undignified skirmish between him and the Boodie, the Boodie proving victor, is now at liberty to enter into light and cheerful conversation.

"The meet, you know," says Dicky. "Long way off. Hate hunting myself, when I've got to leave my bed for it."

"You needn't go," says Dulce; "nobody is pressing you."

"Oh! I'm not like *you*," says Mr. Browne, contemptuously, "liking a thing to-day and hating it to-morrow. You used to be a sort of modern—I mean—decent Diana, but lately you have rather shirked the whole thing."

"I had a cold last day, and—and a headache the day before that," stammers Dulce, blushing scarlet.

"Nobody could hunt with a headache," says Roger, at which defence Mr. Browne grins.

"Well, you've got *them* over," he says. "What's going to keep you at home to-morrow?"

"I don't understand you, Dicky," says Miss Blount, with dignity. "I am going hunting to-morrow; there is nothing that I know of likely to keep me at home."

She is true to her word. Next morning they find her ready equipped at a very early hour, "Taut and trim," as Dicky tells her, "from her hat to her boots."

"Do you know," he says, further, as though imparting to her some information hitherto undiscovered, "joking *apart*, you will understand, you are—*really*—quite a pretty young woman."

"Thank you, Dicky," says she, very meekly; and as a more substantial mark of her gratitude for this gracious speech, she drops a fourth lump of sugar into his coffee.

Shortly after this they start, Dulce still in the very gayest spirits, with Roger on her right hand and Mark Gore on her left. But, as they near the happy hunting-grounds, her brightness flags; she grows silent and preoccupied, and each fresh hoof upon the road behind her makes her betray a desire to hide herself behind somebody.

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Of late, indeed, hunting has lost its charm for her, and the meets have become a source of confusion and discomfort. Her zest for the chase has sustained a severe check, so great that her favorite hounds have solicited the usual biscuit from her hands in vain.

And all this is because the one thing dear to the soul of the gloomy Stephen is the pursuit of the wily fox, and that therefore on the field of battle it becomes inevitable that she must meet her whilom lover face to face.

Looking round fearfully now, she sees him at a little distance, seated on an irreproachable mount. His brows are knitted moodily, his very attitude is repellent. He responds to the pleasant salutations showered upon him from all quarters by a laconic "How d'ye do," or a still more freezing nod. Even Sir Christopher's hearty "Good-morning, lad," has no effect up on him.

"Something rotten in the state of Denmark, *there*," says the master, Sir Guy Chetwoode, turning to Dorian Branscombe. "Surely, eh? Rather a safe thing for that pretty girl of Blount's to have given him the go-by, eh?"

"Wouldn't have him at any price if *I* were a girl," says Branscombe. "I don't like his eyes. Murderous sort of beggar."

"Faith, I don't know," says Geoffrey Rodney, who is riding by them, and who is popularly supposed always to employ this expletive, because his wife is Irish. "I rather like the fellow myself; so does Mona. It's rough on him, you know, all the world knowing he has been jilted."

"I heard it was *he* gave *her* up," says Teddy Luttrell, who has been fighting so hard with a refractory collar up to this that he has not been able to edge in a word.

"Oh, I daresay!" says Branscombe, so ironically, that every one concludes it will be useless to say anything further.

And now the business of the day is begun. Every one has settled him or herself into the saddle and is preparing to make a day of it.

Two hours later many are in a position to acknowledge sadly that the day they have made has not been exactly up to the mark. The various positions of these many are, for the most part, more remarkable than elegant. Some are reclining gracefully in a ditch; some are riding dolefully homeward with much more forehead than they started with in the morning; some, and these are the saddest of all, are standing forlorn in the middle of an empty meadow, gazing helplessly at the flying tail of the animal they bestrode only a short five minutes ago.

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The field is growing decidedly thin. Lady Chetwoode, well to the front, is holding her own bravely. Sir Guy is out of sight, having just disappeared over the brow of the small hill opposite. Dicky Browne, who rides like a bird, is going at a rattling pace straight over anything and everything that comes in his way, with the most delightful impartiality, believing, as he has never yet come a very violent cropper, that the gods are on his side.

Roger and Dulce got a little way from the others, and are now riding side by side across a rather hilly field. Right before them rises a wall, small enough in itself, but in parts dangerous, because of the heavy fall the other side, hidden from the eye by some brambles growing on the top of the stone-work.

Lower down, this wall proves itself even more treacherous, hiding even more effectually the drop into the adjoining field, which is here too deep for any horse, however good, to take with

safety. It is a spot well known by all the sportsmen in the neighborhood as one to be avoided, ever since Gort, the farmer, some years before, had jumped it for the sake of an idle bet, and had been carried home from it a dead man, leaving his good brown mare with a broken back behind him.

It would seem, however, that either ignorance or recklessness is carrying one of the riders today towards this fatal spot. He is now bearing down upon it with the evident intention of clearing the traitorous wall and so gaining upon the hounds, who are streaming up the hill beyond, unaware that almost certain destruction awaits him at the point towards which he is riding so carelessly.

Dulce, turning her head accidentally in his direction, is the first to see him.

"Oh, see there!" she cries, in a frightened tone, to Roger, pointing to the lower part of the field. "Who is that going to take Gort's Fall?"

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Roger, following her glance, pulls up short, and stares fixedly at the man below, now drawing terribly near to the condemned spot. And, as he looks, his face changes, the blood forsakes it, and a horrified expression creeps into his eyes.

"By Jove! it is Stephen," he says at last, in an indescribable tone; and then, knowing he cannot reach him in time to prevent the coming catastrophe, he stands up in his stirrups and shouts to the unconscious Stephen, with all the strength of his fresh, young lungs, to turn back before it is too late.

But all in vain; Stephen either does not or cannot hear. He has by this time reached the wall; his horse, the gallant animal, responds to his touch. He rises—there is a crash, a dull thud, and then all is still.

Involuntarily Dulce has covered her eyes with her hand, and by a supreme effort has suppressed the cry that has risen from her heart. A sickening sensation of weakness is overpowering her. When at length she gains courage to open her eyes again she finds Roger has forsaken her, and is riding like one possessed across the open field, and—there beyond, where the sun is glinting in small patches upon the dry grass, she sees, too, a motionless mass of scarlet cloth, and a dark head lying—oh! so strangely quiet.

Roger having safely cleared the unlucky wall higher up, has flung himself from his saddle, and is now on his knees beside Gower, and has lifted his head upon his arm.

"Stephen, Stephen!" he cries, brokenly. But Stephen is beyond hearing. He is quite insensible, and deaf to the voice that in the old days used to have a special charm for him. Laying him gently down again, Roger rises to his feet, and looks wildly round. Dulce has arrived by this time and, having sprung to her feet, has let her horse, too, go to the winds.

"He is not dead?" she asks at first, in a ghastly whisper, with pale and trembling lips.

"I don't know, I'm not sure," says Roger, distractedly. "Oh, if somebody would *only* come!"

Not a soul is in sight. By this time every one has disappeared over the hill, and not a human being is to be seen far or near.

"Have you no brandy?" asks Dulce, who is rubbing the hands of the senseless man, trying to restore animation by this means.

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"Yes, yes, I had forgotten," says Roger, and then he kneels down once again, and takes Stephen into his arms, and raising his head on his knee, tries to force a few drops of the brandy between his pallid lips.

At this supreme moment all is forgotten—all the old heartaches, the cruel taunts, the angry words. Once again he is his earliest friend; the boy, the youth, the man, he had loved, until a woman had come between them. Everything rushes back upon him, as he stoops over Gower, and gazes, with passionate fear and grief, upon his marble face.

After all, there had been more good points than bad about Stephen, more good, indeed, than about most fellows. How fond he had been of him in the old days; how angry he would have been with any one who had dared then to accuse him of acting shabbily, or— Well, well, no use in raking up old grievances, now, and no doubt there was great temptation; and besides, too, uncivil things had been said to him, and he (Roger) had certainly not been up to the mark himself in many ways.

Memories of school and college life crowd upon Roger now, as he gazes with ever-increasing fear upon the rigid features below him; little scenes, insignificant in themselves, but enriched by honest sentiment, and tenderly connected with the dawn of manhood, when the fastidious Gower had been attracted and fascinated by the bolder and more reckless qualities of Dare, recur to him now with a clearness that, under the present miserable circumstances, is almost painful.

He tries to shake off those tormenting recollections; to bury his happy college life out of sight, only to find his mind once more busy on a fresh field.

Again he is at school, with Stephen near him, and all the glory of an Eton fight before him. What glorious old days they were! so full of life and vigor! and now, it is with exceeding pathos he calls to mind one memorable day on which he had banged Stephen most triumphantly about

the head with a Latin grammar—Stephen's grammar, be it understood, which had always seemed to add an additional zest to the affair; and then the free fight afterwards, in which he, Roger, had been again victorious; and Stephen had not taken it badly either; had resented neither the Latin banging nor the victory later on. No, he was certainly not ill-tempered *then*, dear old chap. Even before the blood had been wiped from their injured noses on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion Stephen had shaken hands with him, and they had sworn publicly a life-long friendship.

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And here is the end of it! His sworn friend is lying stark and motionless in his embrace, with a deathly pallor on his face that is awfully like death, and with a heart, if it still beats, filled with angry thoughts of him, as he bends, scarcely less bloodless than himself, above him.

Will *no* one *ever* come?

Roger glares despairingly at Dulce, who is still trying to get some brandy down the wounded man's throat, and even as she does so Stephen's eyes unclose, and a heavy sobbing sigh escapes him.

Strangely enough, as the two bend over him, and his gaze wanders from one face to the other, it rests finally, with a great sense of content, not on Dulce's face but Roger's. Instinctively he turns in his hour of need from the woman who had wronged him to the man whom *he* had wronged in the first instance, and who—though he had suffered many things at his hands of late—brings to him now a breath from that earlier and happier life, where love—which has proved so bitter—was unknown.

"Stephen! Dear old fellow, you are not *much* hurt, are you?" asks Roger, tenderly. "Where is the pain? Where does it hurt you most?"

"Here!" says Stephen, faintly, trying to lift one of his arms to point to his left side; but, with a groan, the arm falls helpless, and then they know, with sickening feeling of horror, that it is broken. Stephen loses consciousness again for a moment.

"It is broken!" says Roger. "And I am afraid there must be some internal injury besides. What on earth is to be done, Dulce?" in a frantic tone; "we shall have him here all night unless we do something. Will you stay with him while I run and try to find somebody?"

But Stephen's senses having returned to him by this time, he overhears and understands the last sentence.

"No, don't leave me," he entreats, earnestly, though speaking with great difficulty. "Roger, are you there? Stay with me."

"There is Dulce," falters Roger.

"No, no; don't leave me here alone," says the wounded man, with foolish persistency, and Roger, at his wits' end, hardly knows what to do.

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"Are you anything easier now?" he asks, raising Stephen's head ever so gently. Dulce, feeling her presence has been thoroughly ignored, and fearing lest the very sight of her may irritate her late lover, draws back a little, and stands where he can no longer see her.

"Try to drink this," says Roger, holding the flask again to Gower's lips and forcing a few drops between them. They are of some use, as presently a slight, a very slight tinge of red comes into his cheek, and his eyes show more animation.

"It is very good of you, old man," he whispers, faintly, looking up at Roger. "I believe you are sorry for me, *after all*."

The "after all" is full of meaning.

"Why shouldn't I be sorry for you?" says Roger, huskily, his eyes full of tears. "Don't talk like that."

"I know you think I behaved badly to you," goes on Stephen, with painful slowness. "And perhaps I did."

"As to that," interrupted Roger, quickly, "we're quits there, you know; nothing need be said about that. Why can't we forget it? Come, Stephen, forget it all, and be friends again."

"With all my heart," says Gower, and his eyes grow glad, and a smile of real happiness illumines his features for a moment.

"Now, don't talk any more; don't, there's a good fellow," says Roger, with deep entreaty.

"There is—one thing—I must say," whispers Gower, "while I have time. Tell *her*—that I have behaved like a coward to her, and that I give her back her promise. Tell her she may marry whom she pleases." He gasps for breath, and then, pressing Roger's hand with his own uninjured one, says, with a last effort, "And that will be *you*, I hope."

The struggle to say this proves too much for his exhausted strength; his head drops back again upon Roger's arm, and, for the third time, he falls into a dead faint.

The tears are running down Roger's cheeks by this time, and he is gazing with ever-increasing terror at the deathly face below him, when looking up to address some remark to Dulce, he finds

she is nowhere to be seen. Even as he looks round for her in consternation, he sees two or three men hurrying toward him, and two others following more slowly with something that looks like a shutter or door between them. Dulce, while he was listening to Stephen's last heavily-uttered words, had hurried away, and, climbing over all that came in her way, had descended into a little valley not far from the scene of the accident, where at a farmhouse she had told her tale, and pressed into her service the men now coming quickly toward Roger.

With their help the wounded man (still happily unconscious) is carried to the farm-house, where he remains until, the carriage from the Court having arrived, they take him home in it as carefully as can be managed.

In a few hours the worst is known; and, after all, the worst is not so very bad. His arm is broken and two of his ribs, and there is rather a severe contusion on his left shoulder. Little Dr. Bland has pledged them his word in the most solemn manner, however, that there is no internal injury, and that his patient only requires time and care to be quite himself again in *no time*. This peculiar date is a favorite one with the little medico.

The household being reassured by this comfortable news, every one grows more tranquil, and dinner having proved a distinct failure, supper is proposed; and Roger having hunted the whole house unsuccessfully for Dulce, to compel her to come in and eat something, unearths her at last in the nursery, where she is sitting all alone, staring at the sleeping children.

"Where's nurse?" asks Roger, gazing around. "Has she been dismissed, and have you applied for the situation?"

"She has gone down for a message. I came here," says Dulce, "because I didn't want to speak to anybody. I feel so strange still, and so frightened."

"Come down and eat something," says Roger. "You *must*. I shall carry you if you won't walk, and think how the servants will speak about your light behavior afterwards! *Do* come, darling; you know you have eaten nothing since breakfast."

"I wonder if he is really in no danger?" says Dulce wistfully.

"He certainly is not. I have it from Bland himself; and, Dulce," and here he hesitates, as if uncertain whether he ought to proceed or not, "now it is all right, you know, and—and that—and when we have heard he is on the safe road to recovery, it can't be any harm to say what is on my mind, can it?"

"No; I suppose not," says Dulce, blushing vividly.

"Well, then, just say you will marry me the very moment he is on his feet again," says Roger, getting this out with considerable rapidity. "It will seem ungracious of us, I think, not to take advantage of his kindness as soon as possible."

"Supposing he was *to go back of it all* when he got well," says Dulce, timidly.

"Oh, he *can't*; a promise is a promise, you know—as he has made us feel. Poor old Stephen!" this last hastily, lest he shall seem hard on his newly-recovered friend.

"If you think that," says Dulce, going close up to him and looking at him with soft love-lit eyes, "I will marry you just whenever you like." To make this sweet assurance doubly sweet, she stands on tiptoe, and, slipping her arms round her lover's neck, kisses him with all her heart.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"About some act
That has no relish of salvation in't."

—*Hamlet*.

"Sweet mercy is nobility's true badge."
—*Titus Andronicus*.

"BEFORE you begin, Fabian, it is only fair to tell you that I will not listen favorably to one word in his defense. Under the farsical term of secretary, Slyme has been a disgrace and a torment to me for years; and last night has finished everything."

"It was very unfortunate, no doubt," says Fabian, regretfully. "What a curse the love of drink is!—a madness, a passion."

"I have told him he must go," says Sir Christopher, who is in a white heat of rage, and is walking up and down the room with an indignant frown upon his face. Just now, stopping short before Fabian, he drops into a seat and says, testily, "*Unfortunate!* *that* is no word to use about it. Why, look you how it stands; you invite people to your house to dine, and on your way to your dining-room, with a lady on your arm, you are accosted and insolently addressed by one of your

household—your secretary, forsooth—*so* drunk that it was shameful! He reeled! I give you my word, sir—he *reeled!* I thought Lady Chetwoode would have fainted: she turned as pale as her gown, and but for her innate pluck would have cried aloud. It was insufferable, Fabian. Waste no more words over him, for go he shall."

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"After all these years," says Fabian, thoughtfully, thrumming gently on the table near him with his forefinger.

All night long the storm has raged with unexampled fury, and even yet its anger is fierce and high as when first it hurled itself upon a sleeping world. The raindrops are pattering madly against the window-panes, through the barren branches of the elms the wind is shrieking, now rising far above the heads of the tallest trees, now descending to the very bosom of the earth, and, flying over it, drives before its mighty breath all such helpless things as are defenceless and at its mercy.

Perhaps the noise of this tempest outside drowns the keen sense of hearing in those within, because neither Fabian nor Sir Christopher stir, or appear at all conscious of the opening of a door at the upper end of the library, where they are sitting. It is a small door hidden by a portière leading into another corridor that connects itself with the servants' part of the house.

As this door is gently pushed open, a head protrudes itself cautiously into the room, though, on account of the hanging curtains, it is quite invisible to the other occupants of the apartment. A figure follows the head, and stands irresolutely on the threshold, concealed from observation, not only by the curtain, but by a Japanese screen that is placed just behind Sir Christopher's head.

It is a crouching, forlorn, debased figure, out of which all manliness and fearlessness have gone. A figure crowned by gray hair, yet gaining no reverence thereby, but rather an additional touch of degradation. There is, too, an air of despondency and alarm about this figure to-day new to it. It looks already an outcast, a miserable waif, turned out to buffet with the angry winds of fortune at the very close of his life's journey. There is a wildness in his bloodshot eyes, and a nervous tremor in his bony hand, as it clutches at the curtain for support, that betrays the haunting terror that is desolating him.

"I don't care," says Sir Christopher, obdurately. "I have suffered too much at his hands; I owe him nothing but discomfort. I tell you my mind is made up, Fabian; he leaves me at once, and forever."

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At this, the crouching figure in the doorway shivers, and shakes his wretched old head, as though all things for him are at an end. The storm seems to burst with redoubled fury, and flings itself against the panes, as though calling upon him to come out and be their pastime and their sport.

"My dear Sir Christopher," says Fabian, very quietly, yet with an air of decision that can be heard above the fury of the storm, "it is impossible you can turn the old man out *now*, at his age, to *again* solicit Fortune's favor. It would be terrible."

At this calm, but powerful intervention of Fabian's, the old head in the doorway (bowed with fear and anxiety) raises itself abruptly, as though unable to believe the words that have just fallen upon his ears. He has crept here to listen with a morbid longing to contemptuous words uttered of him by the lips that have just spoken; and lo! these very lips have been opened in his behalf, and naught but kindly words have issued from them.

As the truth breaks in upon his dulled brain that Fabian has actually been defending his—*his* case, a ghastly pallor overspreads his face, and it is with difficulty he suppresses a groan. He controls himself, however, and listens eagerly for what may follow.

"Do you mean to tell me I am bound to keep a depraved drunkard beneath my roof?" demands Sir Christopher, vehemently. "A fellow who insults my guests, who—"

"The fact that he has contracted this miserable habit of which you speak is only another reason why you should think *well* before you discard him now, in his old age," says Fabian, with increasing earnestness. "He will starve—die in a garret or by the wayside, if you fling him off. He is not in a fit state to seek another livelihood. Who would employ him? And you he has served faithfully for years—twenty years, I think; and of all the twenty only three or four have been untrustworthy. You should think of that, Christopher. He was your right hand for a long time, and—and he has done neither you nor yours a real injury."

Here the unhappy figure in the doorway raises his hand and beats his clenched fist in a half-frantic, though silent, manner against his forehead.

"You are bound, I think," says Fabian, in the same calm way, "to look after him, to bear with him a little."

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"*You* defend him!" exclaims Sir Christopher, irritably, "yet I believe that in his soul he hates you—would do you a harm if he could. It is his treatment of *you* at times," says Sir Christopher, coming at last to the real germ of the danger he is cherishing against Slyme, "that—that—Remember what he said only last week about you."

"Tut!" says Fabian, "I remember nothing. He was drunk, no doubt, and said what he did not mean."

"I believe he did mean it. *In vino veritas.*"

"Well, even so; if he does believe in the story that has blasted my life, why"—with a sigh—"so do many others. I don't think the poor old fellow would really work me any mischief, but I doubt I have been harsh to him at times, have accused him somewhat roughly, I dare say, of his unfortunate failing; and for that, it may be, he owes me a grudge. Nothing more. His bark is worse than his bite. It is my opinion, Christopher, that underneath his sullen exterior there lurks a great deal of good."

The trembling figure in the doorway is growing more and more bowed. It seems now as if it would gladly sink into the earth through very shame. His hand has left the curtain and is now clinging to the lintel of the door, as though anxious of more support than the soft velvet of the portière could afford.

"Well, as you seem bent on supporting a most unworthy object," says Sir Christopher, "I shall pension Slyme, and send him adrift to drink himself to death as soon as suits him."

"Why do that?" says Fabian, as quietly as ever, but with all the determination that characterizes his every word and action. "This house is large, and can hide him somewhere. Besides, he is accustomed to it, and would probably feel lost elsewhere. He has been here for the third of a lifetime—a long, *long* time." (He sighs again. Is he bringing to mind the terrible length of the days that have made up the sum of the last five years of his life?) "Give him two rooms in the West wing, it is seldom used, and give him to understand he must remain there; but do not cast him out now that he is old and helpless."

At this last gentle mark of thoughtfulness on Fabian's part the figure in the doorway loses all self-control. With a stifled cry he flings his arms above his head, and staggers away down the corridor outside to his own den.

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"What was that?" asks Sir Christopher, quickly; the smothered cry had reached his ears.

"What? I heard nothing," says Fabian, looking up.

"The storm, perhaps," says his uncle, absently. Then, after a pause, "Why do you so strongly espouse this man's cause, Fabian?"

"Because from my soul I pity him. He has had many things of late to try him. The death of his son a year ago, upon whom every thought of his heart was centered, was a terrible blow, and then this wretched passion for strong drink having first degraded, has, of course, finished by embittering his nature. I do not blame him. He has known much misfortune."

Sir Christopher, going up to him, places his hands upon the young man's shoulder and gazes earnestly, with love unutterable, in his eyes. His own are full of tears.

"No misfortune, however heavy, can embitter a *noble* nature," he says, gently. "One knows that when one knows *you*. For your sake, Fabian—because you ask it—Slyme shall remain."

It grows towards evening, and still the rain descends in torrents. Small rivers are running on the gravel-walks outside, the snow-drops and crocuses are all dead or dying, crushed and broken by the cruel wind.

Down below in the bay the sea has risen, and with a roaring sound rushes inland to dash itself against the rocks. Now and then a flash of lightning illumines its turbulent breast and lets one see how the "ambitious ocean" can "swell, and rage, and foam, to be exalted with the threatening clouds." The sailors and boatmen generally, in the small village, are going anxiously to and fro, as though fearful of what such a night as this may produce.

Now a loud peal of thunder rattles overhead, rendering insignificant the wild howling of the wind that only a moment since had almost been deafening. And then the thunder dies away for a while, and the storm shrieks again, and the windows rattle, and the gaunt trees groan and sway, and the huge drops upon the window panes beating incessantly, make once more a "mournful music for the mind."

They are all assembled in Dulce's boudoir, being under the impression, perhaps, that while the present incivility of the elements continues, it is cosier to be in a small room than a large one. It may be this, or the fact that both Dulce and Portia have declined to come down stairs or enter any other room, until dinner shall be announced, under any pretext whatever. And so as the mountain won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed has come to the mountain.

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Sir Christopher has just gone through an exaggerated *resume* of old Slyme's disgraceful conduct last night, when the door is opened, and they all become aware that the hero of the story is standing before them.

Yes, there stands Gregory Slyme, pale, breathless, and with one hand already uplifted, as though to deprecate censure, and to stay the order to "begone," that he plainly expects from every lip.

"Why, he is here again!" cries Sir Christopher, now incensed beyond measure. "Even my

niece's room is not safe from him."

He points angrily to the secretary, who cowers before his angry look, yet shows no intention of retiring. With all his air of hopeless sottishness, that clings to him like a spotted garment, there is still something strange about the man that attracts the attention of Mark Gore. He has been closely watching him ever since his entrance, and he can see that the head usually buried in the chest is now uplifted, that in the sunken eyes there is a new meaning, a fire freshly kindled, born of acute mental disturbance; and indeed in his whole bearing there is a settled *purpose* very foreign to it.

"Hear me, hear me!" he entreats, with quivering accents, but passionate haste. "Do not send me away *yet*, I *must* speak now—now, or never!"

The final word sinks almost out of hearing. His hands fall to his sides. Once again his head sinks to its old place upon his breast. Sir Christopher, believing him to be again under the influence of drink, opens his lips with the evident intention of ordering him from his presence, when Sir Mark interposes.

"He has come to say something. Let him say it," he says, tapping Sir Christopher's arm persuasively.

"Ay, let me," says Slyme, in a low tone, yet always with the remnant of a wasted passion in it. "It has lain heavy on my heart for years. I shall fling it from me now, if the effort to do it kills me."

Turning his bleared eyes right and left, he searches every face slowly until he comes to Fabian. Here his examination comes to an end. Fastening his eyes on Fabian, he lets them rest there, and never again removes them during the entire interview. He almost seems to forget, or to be unaware, that there is any other soul in the room, save the man at whom he is gazing so steadfastly. It is to him alone he addresses himself.

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"I call you to witness," he says, now striking himself upon his breast, "that whatever I have done has not gone unpunished. If my crime has been vile, my sufferings have been terrible. I have endured torments. I want no sympathy—none. I expect only detestation and revenge, but yet I would have you remember that there was a time when I was a man, not the soddened, brutish, contemptible *thing* I have become. I would ask you to call to mind all you have ever heard about remorse; its stings, its agony, its despair, and I would have you know that I have felt it all; yea, more, a thousand times more!"

All this time he has had his hand pressed against his chest in a rigid fashion. His lips have grown livid, his face pale as any corpse.

"This is mere raving," exclaims Sir Christopher, excitedly; but again Gore restrains him as he would have gone forward to order Slyme to retire.

"To-day," goes on Slyme, always with his heavy eyes on Fabian, "I heard you speak in my defence—*mine!* Sir, if you could only know how those words of yours burned into my heart, how they have burned since, how they are burning *now*," smiting himself, "you would be half avenged. I listened to you till my brain could bear no more. You spoke kindly of *me*, you had pity on my old age—upon *mine*, who had no pity on your youth, who ruthlessly ruined your life, who—"

"Man, if you have anything to confess—to explain—*say it!*" breaks in Sir Mark, vehemently, who is half mad with hope and expectancy.

Portia has risen from her low seat, and forgetful or regardless of comment, is gazing with large, white eyes at the old man. Sir Christopher has grasped Mark Gore's arm with almost painful force, and is trembling so violently that Gore places his other arm gently round him, and keeps it there as a support. All, more or less, are agitated. Fabian alone makes no movement; with a face white to the very lips, he stands with his back against the mantelpiece, facing Slyme, so motionless that he might be a figure carved in marble.

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Really deaf and blind to all except Fabian, the secretary takes no heed of Sir Mark's violent outburst. He has paused, indeed, at the interruption, some vague sense telling him he will not be heard while it continues, but now it has subsided he goes on again, addressing himself solely to Fabian, as though it had never occurred.

"It was for *him* I did it, for *his* sake," he says, monotonously. He is losing his head a little now, and his mind is wandering back to earlier days. "For my boy, my son—to save him. It was a sore temptation; and he never knew, he never knew." A gleam of something like comfort comes into his eyes as he says this.

"What *did* you do?" demands Dicky Browne, in an agony of hope and doubt. "Can't you say it at once and be done with it? Speak out, man—*do!*"

"Curse me! *Kill* me if you will!" cries Slyme, with sudden vehemence, stretching out his hands to Fabian, and still deaf to any voice but his. "You have been deceived, falsely accused, most treacherously dealt with. It was I forged that check—not you!"

The miserable man, as he makes this confession, falls upon his knees and covers his face with his hands.

A terrible cry bursts from Dulce; she springs to her feet, and would have rushed to Fabian but

that Roger, catching her in his arms, prevents her. And indeed, it is no time to approach Fabian. He has wakened at last into life out of his curious calm, and the transition from his extreme quietude of a moment since to the state of ungovernable passion in which he now finds himself is as swift as it is dangerous.

"*You!*" he says, staring at the abject figure kneeling before him, in a tone so low as to be almost inaudible, yet with such an amount of condensed fury in it as terrifies the listeners. "*You!*" He makes a step forward as though he would verily fall upon his enemy and rend him in pieces, and so annihilate him from the face of the earth; but before he can touch him, a slight body throws itself between him and Slyme, and two small, white hands are laid upon his breast. These little hands, small and powerless as they are, yet have strength to force him backwards.

"Think," says Portia, in a painful whisper. "Think! Fabian, you would not harm that old man." [274]

"My dear fellow, don't touch him," says Dicky Browne. "Don't. In your present frame of mind a gentle push of yours would be his death."

"Death!" says old Slyme, in such a strange voice that instinctively they all listen to him. "It has no terrors for me." He has raised his head from his hands, and is now gazing again at Fabian, as though fascinated, making a wretched and withal a piteous picture, as his thin white locks stream behind him. "What have I to live for?" he cries, miserably. "The boy I slaved for, sinned for, for whom I ruined you and my own soul, is dead, cold in his grave. Have pity on me, therefore, and send me where I may rejoin him."

Either the excitement of his confession, or the nervous dread of the result of it, has proved too much for him; because just as the last word passes his lips, he flings his arms wildly into the air, and, with a muffled cry, falls prone, a senseless mass, upon the ground.

When they lift him, they find clutched in his hand a written statement of all he has confessed so vaguely. They are very gentle in their treatment of him, but when he has recovered consciousness and has been carried by the servants to his own room, it must be acknowledged that they all breathe more freely.

Sir Christopher is crying like a child, and so is Dicky Browne. The tears are literally running in little rivulets all down Dicky's plump cheeks, but he is not in the least ashamed of them—as indeed, why should he be? As in between his sobs he insists on telling everybody he is so glad—so awfully glad, his apparent grief, had they been in the mood for it, would have struck them all as being extremely comic.

The effect of their tears upon the women has the most desirable result. It first surprises, and then soothes them inexpressibly. It leaves indeed a new field entirely open to them. Instead of being petted, they can pet.

Julia instantly undertakes Dicky, who doesn't quite like it; Dulce appropriates Sir Christopher, who likes it very much.

Fabian, now that his one burst of passion is at an end, is again strangely silent. Mark Gore, laying his hand upon his shoulder, says something to him in a low tone unheard by the rest, who are all talking together and so making a solitude for these two.

"It is too late," says Fabian, replying to him slowly; "too late." There is more of settled conviction than of bitterness in his tone, which only renders it the more melancholy. "He was right. He has ruined my life. Were I to live twice the allotted time given to man, I should never forget these last five horrible years. They have killed me; that is, the best of me. I tell you, deliverance has come *too late!*" [275]

Even as his voice dies away another rises.

"Do not say that—*anything* but that," entreats Portia, in deep agitation. Once more this evening she lays her small, jeweled hand upon his breast and looks into his eyes. "Fabian, there is renewed hope, a fresh life before you; take courage. Remember—Oh, Mark, *speak* to him!"

She is trembling violently, and her breath is coming with suspicious difficulty. Her lips are quivering, and pain, actual physical pain, dimming the lustre of her violet eyes. The old ache is tugging angrily at her heart strings now.

Still Fabian does not relent. As yet the very salve that has cured his hurt has only made the hurt more unendurable by dragging it into public notice. Now that he is free, emancipated from the shadow of this crime that has encompassed him as a cloud for so long, its proportions seem to grow and increase until they reach a monstrous size. To have been wounded in the body, or deprived of all one's earthly goods at a stroke, or bereaved of one's nearest and dearest, would all have been sore trials no doubt. But, alas! to make him a fixed figure for scorn to point his slow, unmoving finger at. What agony, with misfortune, could cope with that?

And she, who had not trusted him when she *might*, will he care that she should trust him now when she *must*?

Slowly he lifts the pale, slender hand, and very gently lets it fall by her side. His meaning is not to be misunderstood; he will none of her. Henceforth their paths shall lie as widely apart as they have lain (of *her own* choice) for the past few months.

"I repeat it," he says, quietly, letting his eyes rest for a moment upon hers, "it is *too late!*"

And outside the wild winds, flying past with an even fiercer outbreak of wrath, seem to echo those fatal words, "Too late!" The very rain, being full of them, seeks to dash them against the window panes. A sudden roar of thunder resounding overhead comes as a fit adjunct to the despair embodied in them. All nature is awake, and the air seems full of its death-knells.

Portia, sick at heart, moves silently away.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

"If you have tears, prepare to shed them now."

—*Julius Cæsar.*

"Eyes, look your last;
Arms, take your last embrace!"

—*Romeo and Juliet.*

THE night closes in, the rain has ceased, or only now and then declares itself in fitful bursts, but still the wind rages and the storm beats upon land and sea, as though half its fury is not yet expended. The clouds are scudding hurriedly toward the West, and now and then, as they separate, one catches a glimpse of a pale, dying moon trying to shine in the dark vaults above, her sickly gleam only rendering more terrible the aspect of the land below.

Still the lightning comes and goes, and the thunder kills the sacred calm of night; Dulce and Julia, standing in the window, gaze fearfully towards the angry heavens, and speak to each other in whispers. Portia, who is sitting in an arm-chair, with her colorless face uplifted and her head thrown back, is quite silent, waiting with a kind of morbid longing for each returning flash. The very children are subdued, and, lying in a pretty group upon the hearth-rug, forget to laugh or play, or do anything save cry aloud, "Ah! wasn't *that* a big one?" when the lightning comes, or, "That was the loudest one yet," when the deafening thunder rolls.

The men are standing in another window, talking in low tones of Fabian's exculpation, when Fabian himself comes in, eagerly, excitedly, and so unlike the Fabian of old that Portia gazes at him in silent wonder.

"There's a ship in sore trouble down there," he says, pointing as though he can see the sea down below, where now the angry surf is rolling in, mountains high, hoarsely roaring as it comes. "Brown from the coast-guard station has just run up to tell us of it. They are about to man the life-boat; who will come down to the beach with me?"

They have all come forward by this time, and now the men, going eagerly to seize on any coats and hats nearest to them, make themselves ready to go down and render any assistance that may be required of them. The station is but a little one, the coast-guards few, and of late a sort of intermittent fever has laid many of the fishermen low, so that their help may, for all they yet can know, be sorely needed.

Fabian, who has been delayed in many ways, is almost the last to leave the house. Hurrying now to the doorway, he is stopped by a slight figure, that coming up to him in the gloom of the night, that rushes in upon him from the opened hall-door, seems like some spirit of the storm.

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It is Portia. Her face is very white, her lips are trembling, but her eyes are full of a strange, feverish fire.

"May I go, too? Do not prevent me," she says, in an agitated tone, laying her hand upon his arm. "I *must* go, I cannot stay here alone; thinking, thinking."

"You!" interrupts he; "and on such a night as this! Certainly not. Go back to the drawing-room at once." Involuntarily he puts out his hand across the doorway, as though to bar her egress. Then suddenly recollection forces itself upon him, he drops his extended arm, and coldly averts his eyes from hers.

"I beg your pardon," he says; "Why should I dictate to you? You will do as you please, of course; by what right do I advise or forbid you?"

Oppressed by the harshness of his manner and his determined coldness, that amounts almost to dislike, Portia makes no reply. When first he spoke, his words, though unloving, had still been full of a rough regard for her well-being, but his sudden change to the indifferent tone of an utter stranger had struck cold upon her heart. Cast down and disheartened, she now shrinks a little to one side, and by a faint gesture of the hand motions him to the open door.

As though unconscious, or cruelly careless of the wound he has inflicted, Fabian turns away from her and goes out into the sullen, stormy night, and, reaching the side-path that leads direct through the wood to the shore, is soon lost to sight.

Upon the beach dark forms are hurrying to and fro. Now and then can be heard the sound of a

distant signal-gun; small knots of fishermen are congregated together, and can be seen talking anxiously when the lurid lightning, flashing overhead, breaks in upon the darkness.

There is terrible confusion everywhere. Hurried exclamations and shrill cries of fear and pity rise above the angry moaning of the wind, as now and then a faint lull comes in the storm; then, too, can be heard the bitter sobs and lamentations of two women, who are clinging to their men, as though by their weak arms they would hold them from battling with the waves to-night.

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The sea is dashing itself in wildest fury against rock and boulder, and rushing in headlong up from the sands only to recede again in haste, as though in a hurry to fly back again to swell the power of the cruel waves that would willingly deal out death with every stroke.

The clouds, having changed from black to murky yellow, are hanging heavily in mid-air, as though undecided as to whether they will not fall in a body and so overwhelm the trembling earth. The spray, dashed inland by the terrific force of the wind, lighting on the lips of those who stand with straining eyes looking seaward, fills their mouths with its saltness, and blinds their aching sight.

All the people from the little village are on the shore, and are talking and gesticulating violently. Some of them have fathers, brothers, and, perhaps, "nearer and dearer ones still than all others," on the point of incurring deathly danger to-night. Some of them are standing, with clinched hands and stony eyes, watching as though fascinated by the cruel, crawling sea, as it runs up to their feet, gaily, boisterously, heedless of the unutterable misery in their pallid faces. But for the most part, people are full of energy, and are shouting from one to the other, and examining ropes or asking eager questions of grizzled old sailors, who, with plug in cheek and stoical features, are staring at the sea.

"Where is the ship?" asks Dicky Browne, laying his hand on the arm of one of those ancient mariners to steady himself, while the old salt, who is nearly thrice his age, stands steady as a rock.

"Close by; a schooner from some furrin' port, with wine, they say." So shouts the old man back again.

"And the life-boat?"

"Is manned an' away. 'Twill be a tussle to-night, sir; no boat can live in such a sea, I'm thinking. Hark to the roar of it."

The dull moon, forcing itself through the hanging clouds, casts at this moment a pallid gleam upon the turbid ocean, making the terrors of the hour only more terrible. Now at last they can see the doomed vessel; the incessant dashing of the waves is slowly tearing it in pieces; some figure with flowing hair can be seen near one of the dismantled masts. Is it a woman? and what is that she holds aloft?—a child! a little child!

The agony increases. Some run along the beach in frantic impotency, calling upon heaven to show pity now, in tones that even pierce the ghastly howling of the wind. Anon, the quivering lightning comes again, shedding a blue radiance over all.

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Twice has the life-boat been repulsed and beaten back, in spite of the strenuous efforts of its gallant crew. The second time a cry goes up that strikes dismay to the hearts of those around, as a man is laid upon the damp beach, who had gone forth full of courage with his fellows, but now lies stiffening into the marble calm of death.

Dulce, who has run down to the strand without a word to any one, and who is now standing a little apart with Roger's arm round her, hearing this unearthly cry, covers her face with her hands and shivers violently in every limb. The darting lightning has shown her the ghastly outline of the poor, brave figure on the sand, now hushed in its last sleep.

At this moment, Portia, creeping up to where they are standing, with hands uplifted to her forehead, tries to pierce the gloom. The spray from a projecting rock being flung back upon them, drenches them thoroughly. Roger, putting out his hand hurriedly, draws Dulce out of its reach, and would have persuaded Portia to come to a more sheltered spot, but she resists his entreaty, and, waving him from her impatiently, still continues her eye-search for something that she evidently supposes to be upon the beach. Where she is standing, a shadow from a huge rock so covers her that she is invisible to any comer.

Now some one is advancing towards them through the darkness and clinging mist. Dulce, who is sitting on the ground and weeping bitterly, does not see him, but Roger goes quickly toward him. It is Fabian, pale, but quite composed, and with a certain high resolve in his dark eyes. There is, indeed, in this settled resolve something that might be almost termed gladness.

"Ah! it is you," he says, hurriedly beckoning to Roger to come farther away from Dulce, which sign Roger obeying brings both him and Fabian a degree nearer to Portia. Yet, standing motionless as she does within the gloom, they neither see her nor feel her presence.

"Here, catch my watch," says Fabian, quickly, in a business-like tone; "and," with a short laugh, "keep it if I don't get back." He flings him the watch as he speaks.

"Where are you going?" asks Roger, breathlessly, "where?"

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"With those fellows in the life-boat. They want another hand now poor Jenkins has been bowled over, and I shall go; they are losing heart, but my going with them will change all that. Tell Dulce—"

"You *shall* not go!" cries Roger, frantically. "It is throwing away your life. There are those whose lives can be better spared; let *them* go. Let *me* go. Fabian, think of that old man at home."

"My dear fellow, don't bury me in such a hurry," says Fabian, lightly. "These poor fellows below have wives and families depending on them, and no one implores them not to go. I will take my chance with them. Now listen—"

"But not alone!" says Roger; "you shall not go alone. I will go with you. To venture in such a sea—but, of course, that should not be considered. Well, come then, come!" The poor boy, in spite of himself, does consider it, but bravely pushes forward in the vague thought that if he goes he may be of use to his friend, his brother.

"Impossible!" says Fabian. "There is not room for another. If we come back again unsuccessful, I promise you, you shall try your chance then. Here, don't look so gloomy, but hold my coat, and keep it dry, as I daresay I shall be chilly enough when I get back to you."

He speaks with the utmost cheerfulness, indeed with a subdued gayety that might emanate from a quiet man just starting on a pleasurable expedition.

"Do you know the danger?" says Roger, in a broken voice, clinging to his hand, but feeling that all remonstrance will be in vain.

"Tut! why should there be more danger for me than for another? Now go back to her—she is there, is she not? my *dear* little Dulce. Tell her from me— No!—tell her nothing. Good-by, old man; wish me a safe return till I come; and—and—be good to her—always love her—"

He turns abruptly aside, and, springing down from the rock where he has been standing, finds himself again on the beach. He is hurrying once more toward the boat, which having sustained some slight injuries in its last attempt is not quite seaworthy, but requires some looking after by the men before they can start afresh, when he is stopped by the pressure of two soft hands upon his arm.

Turning, he looks into Portia's eyes. She is haggard, ghastly in her pallor, but unspeakably beautiful. Her fair hair, having come undone, is waving lightly in the tempestuous wind. Her lips are parted.

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"You are not going *out there*?" she says, pointing with a shudder to the tumultuous waves, and speaking in a tone so full of agony and reckless misery that it chills him. "You *shall* not! Do you hear? Fabian! Fabian! listen to me."

It is so dark and wild that no one can see her; no ears but his can hear. She flings herself in a passion of despair upon her knees before him, and encircles him with her arms.

"My darling! My best beloved, stay with me!" she cries, wildly. "Hate me—spurn me—live—*live!* that sea will tear you from me—it will kill—"

Stooping over her, with a very gentle movement, but with determination, he unclasps her clinging arms and raises her to her feet.

"You must not kneel there on the wet sand," he says, quietly; "and forgive me if I remind you of it, but you will not care to remember all this to-morrow."

"I shall not remember it to-morrow," replies she, in a strange, dreamy tone, her hands falling nerveless at her sides. She does not seek to touch or persuade him again, only gazes earnestly up at him, through the wretched mist that enshrouds them, with a face that is as the faces of the dead.

Upon his arm is a shawl one of the women below (he is very dearly beloved in the village) had forced upon him an hour ago. He is bringing it back now to return it to her before starting, but, a thought striking him, he unfolds it, and crosses it over Portia's bosom.

"One of the women down there lent it to me," he says, coldly still, but kindly. "Return it to her when you can."

With a little passionate gesture she flings it from her, letting it lie on the ground at her feet.

"It is too late—the coldness of death is upon me," she says, vehemently. Then in an altered tone, calmed by despair, she whispers, slowly, "Fabian, if you *will* die—forgive me first?"

"If there is anything to forgive, I have done so long ago. But there is nothing."

"Is there nothing in the thought that I love you, either? Has not this knowledge power to drag you back from the grave?"

"Too late for the balm when the heart is broke,"

quotes he, sadly.

"And yet you loved me once," she says, quickly.

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"I love you now as I never loved you," returns he, with sudden, eager passion. Her arms are round his neck, her head is thrown back, her lovely eyes, almost terrible now in their intensity, are gazing into his. Instinctively his arms close around her—he bends forward.

A shout from the beach! The boat is launched, and they only await him to go upon their perilous journey. When death is near, small things of earth grow even less.

"They call me! All is over now between us," he murmurs, straining her to his heart. Then he puts her a little away from him—still holding her—and looks once more into her large, tearless eyes. "If life on earth is done," he says, solemnly, "then in heaven, my soul, we meet again!"

He lays his lips on hers.

"In heaven, my love, and soon!" returns she, very quietly, and so they part!

It is but a little half-hour afterwards when they bring him back again, and lay him gently and in silence upon the wet sand—cold and dead! Some spar had struck him, they hardly know what, and had left him as they brought him home.

Many voices are uplifted at this sad return, but all grow hushed and quiet as a girl with bare head presses her way resolutely through the crowd, and, moving aside those who would mercifully have delayed her, having reached her dead, sits down upon the sand beside him, and, lifting his head in her arms, dank and dripping with sea-foam, lays it tenderly upon her knees. Stooping over it, she presses it lovingly against her breast, and with tender fingers smooths back from the pale forehead the short, wet masses of his dark hair. She is quite calm, her fingers do not even tremble, but there is a strange, strange look in her great eyes.

His eyes are closed. No ugly stain of blood mars the beauty of his face. He lies calm and placid in her embrace, as though wrapt in softest slumber—but oh! how irresponsive to the touch that once would have thrilled his every sense with rapture!

There is something so awful in the muteness of her despair, that a curious hush falls upon those grouped around her—and him. The whole scene is so fraught with a weird horror, that when one woman in the background bursts into bitter weeping, she is pushed out of sight, as though emotion of a demonstrative nature is out of place just here. Noisy grief can have no part in this hopeless sorrow.

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Dicky Browne, bending over her (Roger has taken Dulce home), says:

"Oh, Portia! that it should end like this, and just now—*now*, when life had opened out afresh for him!" His voice is choked and almost inaudible. Now that he is gone, they all know how dear he has been to them, how interwoven with theirs has been his quiet melancholy life.

"I knew it," says Portia, not quickly, but yet with some faint, soft vehemence. "I am not surprised, I am not grieved." She whispers something else after this repeatedly, and Dicky, bending lower, hears the words, "And soon—and soon." She repeats them in an ecstatic undertone; there is joy and an odd *certainty* in it. They are the last words she ever spoke to *him*.

"He is very cold," she says then, with a little shiver.

Sir Mark, seeing the tears are running down Dicky's cheeks and that he is incapable of saying anything further, pushes him gently to one side, and murmurs something in Portia's ear. She seems quite willing to do anything they may desire.

"Yes, yes. He must come home. It will be better. I will come home with him." And then with a long-drawn sigh, "Poor Uncle Christopher!" This is the last time her thoughts ever wander away from her dead love. "It will be well to take him away from the cruel sea," she says, lifting her eyes to the rough but kindly faces of the boatmen who surround her. "But," piteously, "oh! do not *hurt* him!"

"Never fear, missy," says one old sailor, in a broken voice; and a young fellow, turning aside, whispers to a comrade that he was "her man" in tones of heartfelt pity.

Still keeping his head within her arms, she rises slowly to her knees, and then the men, careful to humor her, so lift the body that she—even when she has gained her feet—has still this dear burden in her keeping. At the very last, when they have laid him upon the rude bier they have constructed for him in a hurry, she still hesitates, and regards with anguish the hard spot where she must lay her burden down.

She gazes distressfully around her, and then plucks with a little mournful, helpless fashion at a dainty, fleecy thing that lies close to her throat, and is her only covering from the angry blast. One of the women divining her purpose, presses forward, and, in silence, folds her own woollen shawl and lays it on the bier, and then unfastening the white Shetland fabric round Portia's neck, lays that upon her own offering, so that the dead man's cheek will rest on it. Her womanly soul has grasped the truth, that the girl wants his resting-place to be made softer by some gift of hers; and when her task is completed, and the men, gathering up their load, silently prepare to move with it towards the old Court, Portia turns upon this woman a smile so sweet, so full of gratitude, that she breaks into bitter weeping, and, flinging her apron over her honest, kindly, sunburnt

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face, runs hurriedly away.

"She was his lass. Poor soul! poor soul!" says another woman in a hushed tone, and with deep pathos.

Holding his dead hand in hers, Portia, with steady steps, walks beside the rough bier, and so the sad procession winds its solemn way up to the old Court, with Sir Mark at its head and Dicky Browne at his feet, and Portia, with bare uplifted head and wrapt eyes, still clinging fondly to the poor clay, so well beloved by all.

Silently, with breaking hearts, they carry him into the grand old hall, and lay him reverently upon the marble flooring. Silently, they gaze upon his unmarred beauty. Not a sound—not a sob—disturbs the sacred stillness. Portia, always with his hand in hers, falls upon her knees, and, pressing it against her breast, raises her eyes devoutly heavenward. One by one, they all withdraw—Sir Mark, to break the terrible news to the old man. She is alone with her dead! With a little sigh she crouches close to him, and lays her cheek against his. The icy contact conveys no terror to her mind. She does not shrink from him, but softly, tenderly, caresses him from time to time, and yet he moves not, nor wakens into life beneath her gentle touch. Truly,

"After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"'Whom the gods love die young,' was said of yore."
—DON JUAN.

"Death came with friendly care."
—COLERIDGE.

It all happened only yesterday, yet how long ago it seems already; and now the sun is shining again, bravely, cheerily, as though life is all made up of joy and gladness, and as though storms that despoil the earth, and heavier storms that wreck the soul, are miseries unknown; and yet he is dead, and she—

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In silence they had carried him to his own chamber, and had laid him on his bed, she going with him always with his clay-cold hand in hers, and never a moan from her pale lips.

The storm had gone down by that, and a strange mournful stillness, terrible after the late rioting of the elements, covered all the land. The silence might be felt, and through it they listened eagerly for her sighs, and hoped for the tears that should have come to ease her stricken heart, but all in vain; and watching her they knew at last that the springs of grief within her were frozen, and that the blessed healing waters that can cool the burning fever of despair were not to flow for her. Only a certain curious calm lay on her, killing all outward demonstrations of grief. She spoke to no one, she was hardly, perhaps, at times, aware of the presence of those around her. Dulce's sobs did not rouse her. She showed no symptom of emotion when Sir Christopher bent his white head in inexplicable woe over the form of the man who had been dear to him as his own soul. As she knelt beside the corpse, she moved now and then, and her breath came and went softly, regularly, but her eyes never departed from the face before her, with its closed eyes and sad, solemn smile. Perhaps, in her strange musings, she was trying to follow him in spirit to where he had

"Gone before,
To that unknown and silent shore"

so dimly dreamt of here, because her eyes are gleaming large and clear, and almost unearthly in their brilliance.

At first, though somewhat in awe of her, they had sought by tenderest means to draw her from the room. But she had resisted, or rather been utterly deaf to all entreaties, and, kneeling by the bed that held all that she had loved or ever could love, still fed her eager gaze with sight of him, and pressed from time to time his ice-cold hand to her cheeks, her lips, her eyes.

Then Sir Mark had admonished them to let her be, and sinking into a chair, with a heavy sigh, had kept her vigil with her. Tall candles gleamed on distant tables. The night wind sighed without; footsteps came and went, and heart-broken sighs and ill-suppressed sobs disturbed the air. The little child he had loved—the poor Boodie—would not be forbidden, and, creeping into the sad room, had stolen to the bedside, and had laid upon his breast a little pallid blossom she had, secretly and alone, braved all the terrors of the dark night to gain, having traversed the quiet garden to pluck it from the tiny plot out there she called her own.

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She had not been frightened when she saw him, but had stood gazing in some wonder at the indescribably pathetic smile that glorified his lips, after which she had given her hand obediently to Dicky Browne, and had gone back with him to her nursery, content, and far less sad than when she came.

Sometimes they all came and gazed on him together; Julia trembling, but subdued; Dulce with her hand in Roger's; the old man inconsolable. Now Dicky Browne whispers feeble but well-meant words of comfort to him, now Sir Mark touches his arm in silent sympathy. But they all keep somewhat apart from Portia; she has grown suddenly sacred in their eyes, as one to whom the beloved dead more especially belongs.

One of them, Sir Mark, I believe, seeing a little bit of dark-hued ribbon round his neck, bent forward, and, loosening it, draws to light a flat gold locket with the initials P. V. sunk deeply in it. His hand shook at this discovery; he hesitated; then, some fine instinct revealing to him that it might contain some hidden charm strong enough to rouse her from her unnatural calm, he touched Portia's shoulder and laid the locket in her hand.

Mechanically she opened it, yet testily too, as if unwilling or unable to keep her eyes for even the shortest space of time from the lifeless face so dear to her. But, once opened, her glance riveted itself upon its contents. Her own face looked up at her, her own eyes smiled at her. It was her portrait that she saw, painted by him, no doubt, sadly and in secret, and worn against his heart ever since.

Long she gazed at it. Her whole face changed. The terrible calm has broken up, but no grief came in its place. There was only joy unutterable and a rapture most blessed and divine.

"My love, I knew it without this," she said, softly. Her eyes once more returned to him; a quick but lengthened sigh escaped her; her head fell forward on his breast.

They waited. The minutes grew, but still she never stirred. Some one, whispering comfort to her, tried to raise her head, but comfort from heaven itself had reached her. She was *with him!* She was quite dead!

They said some tissue in her heart had given way, and perhaps it was so, but surely grief had severed it.

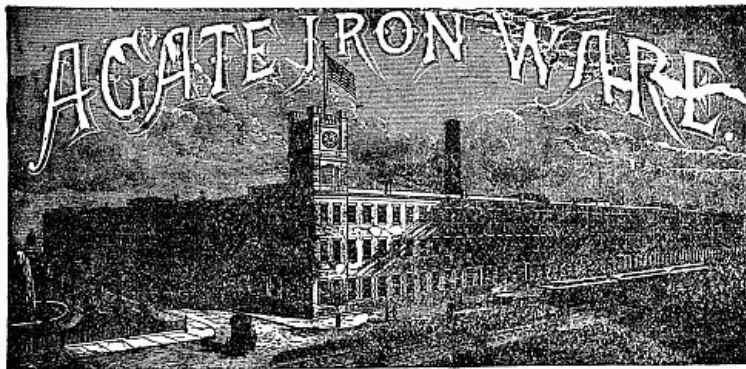
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Approximately halfway through the text, the printer began placing em-dashes (—) before the sources of the quotes that begin each chapter. These dashes have now been added to the first half of the text's sources for consistency.

Text uses: *àpropos*, *à propos*, *apropos* and *apropos*. This was retained. Text also uses "Virginian creeper" instead of the more common "Virginia creeper." Text uses both: "tete-a-tete" and "tete-à-tete."

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

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