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A LIFE SENTENCE.

A NOVEL.

BY
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MONTREAL:
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A LIFE SENTENCE.

[Pg 3]

CHAPTER I.

"Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

"We find the prisoner guilty, my lord."

A curious little thrill of emotion—half sigh, half sob—ran through the crowded court. Even the most callous, the most world-hardened, of human beings cannot hear unmoved the verdict which condemns a fellow-creature to a shameful death. The spectators of Andrew Westwood's trial for

the murder of Sydney Vane had expected, had predicted, the result; yet it came with the force of a shock to their excited nerves. The trial had lasted for two whole days already, and the level rays of sunshine that streamed through the west windows of the court-house showed that the afternoon of a third day was drawing to a close. The attention of the patient sitters with whom the seats were closely packed had been strained to the uttermost; the faces of many were white and weary, or flushed with excitement and fatigue. The short absence of the jurymen had only strung their nerves to a higher pitch; and the slight murmur that passed through the heavy air when the verdict was made known showed the tension which had been reached.

The prisoner was well known in the locality, and so also had been his victim. This fact accounted for the crowding of the court by friends and acquaintances of the man murdered and his murderer, and for the breathless interest with which every step of the legal process had been followed. Apart from this, the case had excited much attention all over England; the papers had been filled with its details, and a good deal of discussion on the laws of circumstantial evidence had arisen during its course. Not that there could be any reasonable doubt as to the prisoner's [Pg 4] guilt. True, nobody had seen him commit the crime. But he was a poacher of evil character and violent disposition; he had been sent to gaol for snaring rabbits by Mr. Vane, and had repeatedly vowed vengeance upon him; there was a presumption against him from the very first. Then one evening he had been seen lurking about a covert near which Mr. Vane passed shortly afterwards; shots were heard by passers-by and Mr. Vane was discovered lying amongst the springing bracken in the depths of a shadowy copse, shot through the heart. A scrap of rough tweed found in the dead man's hand was said to correspond with a torn corner of Westwood's coat, and the murder was supposed to have been committed by the poacher with a gun which was afterwards found in Westwood's cottage. Several persons testified that they had seen Andrew issuing from the copse or walking along the neighboring road, before or after the hour when Mr. Vane met his fate, that he had his gun in his hand, that his demeanor was strange, and that his clothes seemed to have been torn in a scuffle. Little by little the evidence accumulated against him until it proved irresistible. Facts which seemed small in themselves became large and black, and charged with damnatory significance in the lawyer's hands. The best legal talent of the country was used with crushing effect against poor Andrew Westwood. Sydney Vane had been a popular man; he belonged to a well-known county family, and had left a widow and child. His friends would have moved heaven and earth to bring his murderer to justice. After all—as was said later—the man Westwood never had a chance. What availed his steady sullen denial against the mass of circumstantial evidence accumulated against him? The rope was round his neck from the time when that morsel of cloth was found clasped close in the dead man's hand.

If there had been a moment when the hearts of his enemies were softened, when a throb of pity was felt even by Sydney Vane's elder brother, the implacable old General who had vowed that he would pursue Andrew Westwood to the death, it was when the prisoner's little daughter had been put into the witness-box to give evidence against her father. Every one felt that the moment was terrible, the situation almost unbearable. [Pg 5] The child was eleven years old, a brown, thin, frightened-looking little creature, with unnaturally large dark eyes and masses of thick dark hair. Her appearance evidently agitated the prisoner. He looked at her with an expression of anguish, and wrung his gaunt nervous hands together with a groan that haunted for many a long year the memories of those who heard it. The child's dilated black eyes fixed themselves upon him, and her lips, drawn back a little from her teeth, turned ashy white. No one who saw her pathetic little face could feel anything but compassion for her, and a wish to spare her as much as possible.

The counsel certainly wished to spare her. Only one or two questions were to be asked, and these were not of great importance; but at the very outset a difficulty occurred. She was small for her age, and the judge chose to ask whether she was aware of the nature of an oath. He got no answer but a frightened stare. A few more questions plainly revealed a state of extraordinary ignorance on the child's part. Did she know who made her? No. Had she not heard of God? No. Did she attach any meaning to the words "heaven" or "hell?" Not in the very least. By her own showing, Andrew Westwood's little daughter was no better than a heathen.

The judge decided that her evidence need not be taken, and made a severe remark about the unwisdom of bringing so young and untaught a witness into court, especially when—as appeared to him—the child was of feeble intellect and weakly constitution.

It was murmured in reply that the girl had previously shown herself quick-witted and ready of tongue, and that it was only since the shock of her father's arrest that she had lapsed into her present state of apparent semi-imbecility. No further attempt was made however to bring her forward; and little Jenny Westwood, as she was usually called, on stepping down from the box, was bidden to go away, as the court in which her father was being tried for his life was no place for her. But she did not go. She shrank into a corner, and waited until the Court rose that day. In the morning she came again, resisting all efforts made by some kindly countrywomen to take her away to their homes. She did not speak, but struggled out of their hands with so wild a look in her great black eyes that they shrank back from her aghast, whispering to each other that she [Pg 6] was purely "not right in the head," and perhaps they had better leave her alone. They made her sit beside them, and tried to persuade her to share the food that they had brought to eat in the middle of the day; but they did not succeed in their kindly efforts. The child seemed stupefied; she had a blind look, and did not respond when spoken to.

She heard the foreman declare the finding of the jury—"Guilty, my lord," but she hardly knew at that moment what was meant. Then came the usual question. Had the prisoner anything to say? Was there any defence which even now he desired to urge, any plea in mitigation of his crime?

Andrew Westwood raised his head. He had a sullen, defiant countenance; his wild dark eyes, the shock of black hair tumbled across his lowering brows, his rugged features, had told against him in popular estimation and given him a ruffianly aspect in the eyes of the crowd; and yet, when he stood up, and with a sudden rough gesture tossed the hair back from his brows, and faced the judge with a look of unflinching resolution, it was felt that the man possessed a rude dignity which compelled something very like admiration. Courage always commands respect, and, whatever his faults, his vices, his crimes might be, Andrew Westwood was a courageous man. He gripped the rail of the dock before him with both hands, and gave a quick look round the court before he spoke. His face was a little paler than usual, but his strong, hard voice did not falter.

"I have only to say what I said before. I take God to witness that I am innocent of this murder, and I pray that He'll punish the man that did kill Mr. Vane and left me to bear the burden of his crime! That's all I have to say, my lord. You may hang me if you like—I swear that I never killed him; and I curse the hand that did!"

The hard, defiant tone of his speech effectually dissipated the momentary sympathy felt for him by his audience. The judge sternly cut him short, and said a few solemn words on the heinousness of his offence and the impenitence which he had evinced. Then came the tragic conclusion of the scene.

It had grown late; lights were brought in and placed before the judge, upon whose scarlet robes and pale, agitated face they flickered strangely in the draught from an open window at the back [Pg 7] of the court-house. The greater part of the building was in shadow; here and there a chance ray of light rested on one or two in a row of raised faces, and threw some insignificant countenance into startling temporary distinctness. A breathless hush pervaded the whole room. Every eye was fixed on the central figures of the scene—on the criminal as he stood with hands still grasping the side of the dock, his head defiantly raised, his shoulders braced as if to support a blow; on the judge, whose pale features quivered with emotion as he donned the black cap and uttered the fatal words which condemned Andrew Westwood to meet death by the hangman's hand.

"And may the Lord have mercy upon your soul!"

The words were scarcely spoken before a loud scream rang through the hall. Westwood turned round sharply; his eyes roved anxiously over the throng of faces, and seemed to pierce the gloom that had gathered about the benches in the background. He saw a little group of persons gathered about the body of a child whom they were carrying into the fresh air. It was his own little daughter who had cried out and fainted at the sound of those fateful words.

The prisoner was instantly removed by two warders; but it was noted that before he left the dock he threw up his hands as if in a wild gesture of supplication to the heavens that would not hear. He made eager inquiries of the warders as to the welfare of his child; and it was perhaps owing to the compassion of one of them that the chaplain came to him an hour later in his cell with news of her. She was better, she was in the hands of kindly women who would take care of her, and she would come to see her father by-and-bye. A convulsive twitch passed over Andrew's face.

"No, no," he said; "I don't want to see her. What good would that do?"

The chaplain, a kindly man whose sensibilities were not yet blunted by the painful scenes through which he had constantly to pass, uttered a word of remonstrance.

"Surely," he said, "you would like to see her again? She seems to love you dearly."

"I'm not saying that I don't love her myself," said the man, turning away his face. Then, after a [Pg 8] moment's pause, and in a stifled voice—"She's dearer to me than the apple of my eye. And that's where the sting is. I'm to go out of the world, it seems, with a blot on my name, and she'll never know who put it there."

"If you saw her yourself——"

"Nay," said Westwood resolutely—"I won't see her again. She'd remember me all her life then, and she'd better forget. You're a good man, sir, and a kind—couldn't you take her away somewhere out of hearing of all this commotion, to some place where they would not know her father's story, and where she'd never hear whether he was alive or dead?"

The chaplain shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, Westwood," he said compassionately. "I know of no place where she could be safe from gossip."

"She will hear my story wherever she goes, I suppose you mean," said Westwood wearily. "Ah, well, she will learn to bear it in time, poor soul."

The chaplain looked at him curiously. There was more sincerity of tone, less cant and affectation in this man than in any criminal he had ever known.

"I suppose, sir," said the prisoner, after a short silence, during which he sat with his eyes fixed on the floor—"I suppose there is no chance of a reprieve—of the sentence being commuted?"

"I'm afraid not, Westwood. And you must let me say that your own conduct during the trial makes it more improbable that any commutation of the sentence should be obtained. If, my man, you could have shown any penitence—if you had confessed your crime——"

"The crime that I never committed?" said Westwood, with a flash of his sullen dark eyes. "Ah, you all speak alike! It's the same story—'Confess—repent.' I may have plenty to confess and repent of, but not this, for I never murdered Sydney Vane."

The chaplain shook his head.

"I am sorry that you persist in your story," he said sadly. "I had hoped that you would come to a better mind."

"Do you want me to go into eternity with a lie on my lips?" asked Westwood, fiercely. "I tell you that I am speaking the truth now. My coat was torn on a briar; I fired my gun at a crow as I went [Pg 9] over the fields to my cottage. I saw a man go into the copse after Mr. Vane just as I came out. Find him, if you want to know who killed Mr. Vane."

"You have told us the same story before," said the chaplain, in a discouraged tone. "For your own sake, Westwood, I wish I could believe you. Who was the man? What was he like? Where did he go? Unless those questions are answered, it is impossible that your story should be believed."

"I can't answer them," said Westwood, in a sullen tone. "I did not know the man, and I did not look at him. All I know is that he has murdered me as well as Mr. Vane, and blasted the life of my innocent child. And I shall pray God night and morning as long as the breath is in my body to punish him, and to bring shame and sorrow on himself and all that he loves, as he has brought shame and sorrow on me and mine."

Then he turned his face to the wall and would say no more.

CHAPTER II.

Beechfield Hall was the name of the old manor-house in which the Vanes had lived for many generations. The present head of the family, General Richard Vane, was a man of fifty-five, a childless widower, whose interests centred in the management of his estate and the welfare of his brother Sydney and Sydney's wife and child. In the natural course of events, Sydney would eventually have succeeded to the property. It had always been a matter of regret to the General that neither he nor his brother had a son; and, when Sydney's life was prematurely cut short, the General's real grief for his brother's loss was deepened and embittered by the thought that the last chance of an heir was gone, and that the family name—one of the most ancient in the county—would soon become extinct, for a daughter did not count in the General's meditation. It did not occur to his mind as within the limits of possibility that he himself should marry again. He had always hoped that Sydney—twenty years younger than himself, and the husband of a fair and [Pg 10] blooming wife—would have a son to bear his name. Hitherto the Sydney Vanes had been unfortunate in their offsprings. Of five beautiful children only one had lived beyond the first few months of babyhood—and that one was a girl! But father, mother, and uncle had gone on hoping for better things. Now it seemed likely that little Enid, the nine-year-old daughter, would be the last of the Vanes, and that with the General the name of the family would finally die out.

Beechfield Hall had long been known as one of the pleasantest houses in the county. It was a large red-brick, comfortable-looking mansion, made picturesque by a background of lofty trees, and by the ivy and Virginia creeper and clematis in which it was embowered, rather than by the style of its architecture. Along the front of the building ran a wide terrace, with stone balustrades and flights of steps at either end leading to the flower garden, which sloped down to an ornamental piece of water fed by springs from the rich meadow-land beyond. This terrace and the exquisitely-kept garden gave the house a stateliness of aspect, which it would have lost if severed from its surroundings; but the General was proud of every stick and stone about the place, and could never be brought to see that its beauty existed chiefly in his own fond imagination.

Whether Beechfield Hall was beautiful or not, however, mattered little to the county squires and their families, to whom it had been for many years a centre of life and gaiety. The General and his brother were hunting-men; they had a capital stud, and were always ready to give their friends a mount in the hunting season. They preserved strictly, and could offer good shooting and good fishing to their neighbors; and they were liberal of such offers—they were generous and hospitable in every sense of the word. Mrs. Sydney Vane was of a similar disposition. Her dances, her dinners, her garden-parties, were said to be the most enjoyable in the county. She was young and pretty, vivacious and agreeable, as fond of society as her husband and her brother-in-law, always ready to fill her house with guests, to make up a party or organise a pic-nic, adored by all young people in the neighborhood, the chosen friend and confidante of half the older ones. And now the innocent mirth and cordial hospitality of Beechfield Hall had come to an untimely end. [Pg 11] Poor Sydney Vane was laid to rest in the little green churchyard behind the woodland slope which fronted the terrace and the lawn. His wife, prostrated by the shock of his death, had never left her room since the news of it was brought to her; his brother, the genial and warm-hearted General, looked for the first time like a feeble old man, and seemed almost beside himself. Even little Enid was pale and frightened, and had lost her inclination for mirth and laughter. The servants moved about in their sombre mourning garments with grave faces and hushed, awe-stricken ways. It seemed almost incredible that so great a misfortune should have fallen upon the

house, that its brightness should be quenched so utterly.

As soon as the misfortune that had befallen the Vanes was made known, the General's maiden-sister descended from London upon the house, and took possession, but not in any imperious or domineering way. Miss Leonora Vane was far too shrewd and too kindly a woman to be aught but helpful and sympathetic at such a time. But it was in her nature to rule—she could not help making her influence felt wherever she went, and the reins of government fell naturally into her hands as soon as she appeared upon the scene. She was the General's junior by five years only, and had always looked on Sydney and his wife as poor, irresponsible, frivolous young creatures, quite incapable of managing their own affairs. A difference of opinion on this point had driven her to London, where she had a nice little house in Kensington, and was great on committees and boards of management. But real sorrow chased all considerations of her own dignity or comfort from her mind. She hurried down to Beechfield as soon as she knew of her brother's need; and during the weary days and weeks between Sydney's death and Westwood's trial, she had been invaluable as a friend, helper, and capable mistress of the disorganised household.

She sat one June morning at the head of the breakfast-table in the dining-room at Beechfield Hall, with an unaccustomed look of dissatisfaction and perplexity upon her handsome resolute face. Miss Vane was a woman of fifty, but her black hair showed scarcely a line of silver, and her brown eyes were as keen and bright as they had ever been. With her smooth, unwrinkled forehead, her colorless but healthy complexion, and her thin well-braced figure, she looked ten [Pg 12] years younger than her age. Not often was her composure disturbed, but on this occasion trouble and anxiety were both evinced by the knitting of her brows and the occasional twitching of her usually firm lips. She sat behind the coffee-urn, but she had finished her own breakfast long since, and was now occupying her ever-busy fingers with some knitting until her brother should appear. But her hands were unsteady, and at last, with an exclamation of disgust, she laid down her knitting-pins, and crossed the long white fingers closely over one another in her lap.

"Surely Hubert got my telegram!" she murmured to herself. "I wish he would come—oh, how I wish that he would come!"

She moved in her seat so as to be able to see the marble clock on the massive oak mantelpiece. The hands pointed to the hour of nine. Miss Vane rose and looked out of the window.

"He might have taken the early train from town. If he had, he would be here by this time. But no doubt he did not think it worth while. 'An old woman's fancy!' he said to himself perhaps. Hubert was never very tolerant of other people's fancies, though he has plenty of his own, Heaven knows! Ah, there he comes, thank Heaven! For once he has done what I wished—dear boy!"

Miss Vane's hard countenance softened as she said the words. She sank down into her chair again, crossed her hands once more upon her knees, and assumed the attitude of impenetrable rigidity intended to impress the observer with a sense of her indifference to all mankind. But the new-comer, who entered from the terrace at that moment, was too well used to Miss Vane's ways and manners to be much impressed.

"Good morning, aunt Leo. I have obeyed your orders, you see," he said, as he bent down and touched her forehead lightly with his lips.

He was a young man, not more than one or two and twenty, but he had already lost much of the freshness and youthfulness of his years. He was of middle height, rather slenderly built, well dressed, well brushed, with the air of high-bred distinction which is never attained save by those [Pg 13] to the manner born. His face was singularly handsome, strong, yet refined, with sharply-cut features, dark eyes and hair, a heavy black moustache, and a grave, almost melancholy expression—altogether a striking face, not one easily to be forgotten or overlooked. As he seated himself quietly at the breakfast-table, and replied to some query of his aunt's respecting the hour of his arrival, it occurred to Miss Vane that he was looking remarkably tired and unwell. The line of his cheek, always somewhat sharp, seemed to have fallen in, there were dark shadows beneath his eyes, and his olive complexion had assumed the slightly livid tints which sometimes mark ill-health. In spite of her preoccupation with other matters, Miss Vane could not repress a comment on his appearance.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Hubert? You look positively ghastly!"

"Do I!" said Hubert, glancing up with a ready smile. "I shouldn't wonder. I was up all last night with some fellows that I know—we made a night of it, aunt Leo—and I have naturally a headache this morning."

"You deserve it then. Surely you might have chosen a more fitting time for a carouse!"

It seemed to her, curiously enough, that he gave a little shiver and drew in his lips beneath his dark moustache. But he answered with his usual indifference of manner.

"It was hardly a carouse. I can't undertake to make a recluse of myself, my dear aunt, in spite of the family troubles."

"Hubert, don't be so heartless!" cried Miss Vane imperiously; then, checking herself, she pressed her thin lips slightly together and sat silent, with her eyes fixed on the cups before her.

"Am I heartless? Well, I suppose I am," said the young man, with a slight mocking smile in which his eyes seemed to take no part. "I am sorry, but really I can't help it. In the meantime perhaps

you will give me a cup of coffee—for I am famishing after my early flight from town—and tell me why you telegraphed for me in such a hurry last night."

Miss Vane filled his cup with a hand that trembled still. Hubert Lepel watched her movements with interest. He did not often see his kinswoman display so much agitation. She was not his aunt by any tie of blood—she was a faraway cousin only; but ever since his babyhood he had addressed her by that title. [Pg 14]

"I sent for you," she said at last, speaking jerkily and hurriedly, as if the effort were almost more than she could bear—"I sent for you to tell the General what you yourself telegraphed to me last night."

A flush of dull red color stole into the young man's face. He looked at her intently, with a contracted brow.

"Do you mean," he said, after a moment's pause, "that you have not told him yet?"

Miss Vane averted her eyes.

"No," she answered; "I have not told him. You will think me weak—I suppose I am weak, Hubert—but I dared not tell him."

"And you summoned me from London to break the news? For no other reason?"

Miss Vane nodded,—"That was all."

Hubert bit his lip and sipped his coffee before saying another word.

"Aunt Leo," he said, after a silence during which Miss Vane gave unequivocal signs of nervousness, "I really must say that I think the proceeding was unnecessary." He leaned back in his chair and toyed with his spoon, a whiteness which Miss Vane was accustomed to interpret as a sign of anger showing itself about his nostrils and his lips. She had long looked upon it as an ominous sign.

"Hubert, Hubert, don't be angry—don't refuse to help me!" she said, in pleading tones, such as he had never heard from her before. "I assure you that my post in this house is no sinecure. Poor Marion"—she spoke of Mrs. Sydney Vane—"is rapidly sinking into her grave. Ay, you may well start! She has never got over the shock of Sydney's death, and the excitement of the last few days seems to have increased her malady. She insisted on having every report of the trial read to her; and ever since the conviction she has grown weaker, until the doctor says that she can hardly outlast the week. Oh, that wicked man—that murderer—has much to answer for!" said Miss Vane, clasping her hands passionately together.

Hubert was silent; his eyebrows were drawn down over his eyes, his face was strangely white.

"Your uncle," Miss Vane continued sadly, "is nearly heart-broken. You know how much he loved poor Sydney, how much he cares for Marion. He has been a different man ever since that terrible day. I am afraid for his health—for his reason even, if——" [Pg 15]

"For Heaven's sake, stop," said the young man hoarsely. "I can't bear this enumeration of misfortunes; it—it makes me—ill! Don't say any more."

He pushed back his chair, rose, and went to the sideboard, where he poured out a glass of water from the carafe and drank it off. Then he leaned both elbows on the damask-covered mahogany surface, and rested his forehead on his hands. Miss Vane stared at his bowed head, at his bent figure, with unfeigned amazement. She thought that she knew Hubert well, and she had never numbered over-sensitiveness amongst his virtues or vices. She concluded that the last night's dissipation had been too much for his nerves.

"Hubert," she said at length, "you must be ill."

"I believe I am," the young man answered. He raised his face from his hands, drew out his handkerchief, and wiped his forehead with it before turning round. It were well that his aunt should not see the cold drops of perspiration standing upon his brow. He tried to laugh as he came forward to the table once more. "You must excuse me," he said. "I have not been well for the last few days, and your list of disasters quite upset me."

"My poor boy," said aunt Leo, looking at him tenderly. "I am afraid that I have been very thoughtless! I should have remembered that these last few weeks have been as trying to you as to all of us. You always loved Marion and Sydney."

It would have been impossible for her to interpret aright the involuntary spasm of feeling that flashed across Hubert's face, the uncontrollable shudder that ran through all his frame. Impossible indeed! How could she fancy that he said to himself as he heard her words——

"Loved Sydney Vane! Merciful powers, I never sank to that level, at any rate! When I think of what I now know of him, I am glad to remember that he was my enemy!"

CHAPTER III. [Pg 16]

At that moment a heavy step was heard in the hall, a hand fumbled with the lock of the door. Miss Vane glanced apprehensively at Hubert.

"He is there," she said—"he is coming in. The London papers will arrive in half an hour. Hubert, don't leave him to learn the news from the papers or from his London lawyer."

"What harm if he did?" muttered Hubert; but, before Miss Vane could reply, the door was opened and the General entered the room.

He was a tall, white-haired man, with a stoop in his shoulders which had not been perceptible a year before. His finely-cut features strongly resembled those of his sister, but there was some weakness in the slightly receding chin, some hint of irresolution in the lines of the handsome mouth, which could not be found in Leonora Vane's expressive countenance. The General's eyes were remarkably fine, clear and blue as sea-water or the sky, but their expression on this occasion was peculiar. They had a wild, wandering, irresolute look which impressed Hubert painfully. He rose respectfully from his chair as the old man came in; but for a moment or two the General gazed at him unrecognisingly.

"Hubert has come to spend the day with us, Richard," said Miss Vane.

"Hubert? Oh, yes, Hubert Lepel!" murmured the General, as if recalling a forgotten name. "Florence Lepel's brother—a cousin of ours, I believe? Glad to see you, Hubert," said the General, suddenly awakening, apparently from a dream. "Did you come down this morning? From London or from Whitminster?"

"From London, sir."

"Oh, yes—from London! I thought perhaps that you had been"—the General's voice sank to a husky whisper—"to see that fellow get his deserts. Hush—don't speak of it before Leonora; ladies should not hear about these things, you know!" He caught Hubert by the sleeve and drew him [Pg 17] aside. "The execution was to be this morning; did you not know?" he said, fixing his wild eyes upon the young man's paling face. "Eight o'clock was the hour; it must be over by now. Well, well —the Lord have mercy upon his sinful soul!"

"Amen!" Hubert muttered between his closed teeth. Then he seemed to make a violent effort to control himself—to assume command over his kinsman's disordered mind. "Come, sir," he said —"you must not talk like that. Think no more of that wretched man. You know there was a chance —a loophole. Some people were not convinced that he was guilty. There have been petitions signed by hundreds of people, I believe, to the Home Secretary for mercy."

"Mercy—mercy!" shouted the General, his pale face growing first red and then purple from excitement. "Who talks of mercy to that ruffian? But Harbury"—naming the Home Secretary for the time being—"Harbury will stand firm; Harbury will never yield! I would take my oath that Harbury won't give in! Such a miscarriage of justice was never heard of! Don't talk to me of it! Harbury knows his duty; and the man has been punished—the man is dead!"

Hubert's voice trembled a little as he spoke.

"The man is not dead, sir," he said.

The General turned upon him fiercely.

"Was not this morning fixed for the—is this not the twenty-fifth?" he said. "What do you mean?"

There was a moment's silence, during which he read the answer to his question in Hubert's melancholy eyes. Miss Vane held her breath; she saw her brother stagger as if a sudden dizziness had seized him; he caught at the back of an antique heavily-carved oak chair for support. In the pause she noted involuntarily the beauty of the golden sunshine that filled every corner of the luxuriously-appointed room, intensifying the glow of color in the Persian carpet, illuminating as with fire the brass-work and silver-plate which decorated the table and the sideboard, vividly outlining in varied tones of delicate hues the masses of June roses that filled every vase and bowl in the room. The air was full of perfume—nothing but beauty met the eye; and yet, in spite of this material loveliness, how black and evil, how unutterably full of sadness, did the world appear to [Pg 18] Leonora Vane just then! And, if she could have seen into the heart of one at least of the men who stood before her, she would almost have died of grief and shame.

"You don't mean," stammered the General, "that the ruffian who murdered my brother—has been —reprieved?"

"It is said, sir, that imprisonment for life is a worse punishment than death," said Hubert gently. The face of no man—even of one condemned to life-long punishment—could have expressed deeper gloom than his own as he said the words. Yet mingling with the gloom there was something inflexible that gave it almost a repellent character. It was as if he would have thrown any show or pity back into the face of those who offered it, and defied the world to sympathise with him on account of some secret trouble which he had brought upon himself.

"Worse than death—worse than death!" repeated the old man. "I do not know what you mean, sir. I shall go up to town at once and see Harbury about this matter. It is in his hands——"

"Not now," interposed Hubert. "The Queen——"

"The Queen will hear reason, sir! I will make my way to her presence, and speak to her myself.

She will not refuse the prayer of an old man who has served his country as long and as faithfully as I have done. I will tell her the story myself, and she will see justice done—justice on the man who murdered my brother!"

His voice grew louder and his breath came in choking gasps between the words. His face was purple, the veins on his forehead were swollen and his eyes bloodshot; with one hand he was leaning on the table, with the other he gesticulated violently, shaking the closed fist almost in Hubert's face, as if he mistook him for the murderer himself. It was a pitiable sight. The old man had completely lost his self-command, and his venerable white hairs and bowed form accentuated the harrowing effect which his burst of passion produced upon his hearers. Hubert stood silent, spell-bound, as it seemed, with sorrow and dismay; but Miss Vane, shaking off her unwonted timidity, went up to her brother and laid her hand upon his outstretched quivering arm.

"Richard, Richard, do not speak in that way!" she said. "It is not Christian—it is not even human. You are not a man who would wish to take away a fellow-creature's life or to rob him of a chance of repentance." [Pg 19]

The General's hand fell, but his eyes flamed with the look of an infuriated beast of prey as he turned them on Miss Leonora.

"You are a woman," he said harshly, "and, as a woman, you may be weak; but I am a man and a soldier, and would die for the honor of my family. Not take away that man's life? I swear to you that, if I had him here, I would kill him with my own hands! Does not the Scripture tell us that a life shall be given for a life?"

"It tells us that vengeance is the Lord's, Richard, and that He will repay."

"Yes—by the hands of His servants, Leonora. Are you so base as not to desire the punishment of your brother's murderer! If so, never speak to me, never come near my house again! And you, young gentleman, get ready to come with me to London at once! I will see Harbury before the day is over."

"My dear General," said Hubert, looking exceedingly perplexed, "I think that you will hardly find Harbury in town. I heard yesterday that he was leaving London for a few days."

"Nonsense, sir! Leaving London before the close of the session! Impossible! But we can get his address and follow him, I suppose? I will see Harbury to-night!"

"It will be useless," said Hubert, with resignation, "but, if you insist——"

"I do insist! The honor of my house is at stake, and I shall do my utmost to bring that ruffian to the gallows! I cannot understand you young fellows of the present day, cold-blooded, effeminate, without natural affection—I cannot understand it, I say. Ring the bell for Saunders; tell him to put up my bag. I will go at once—this very moment—this——"

The General's voice suddenly faltered and broke. For some time his words had been almost unintelligible; they ran into one another, as if his tongue was not under the control of his will. His face, first red, then purple, was nearly black, and a slight froth was showing itself upon his discolored lips. As his sister and cousin looked at him in alarm, they saw that he staggered backwards as if about to fall. Hubert sprang forward and helped him to his chair, where he lay back, with his eyes half closed, breathing stertorously, and apparently almost unconscious. The rage, the excitement, had proved too much for his physical strength; he was on the verge, if he had not absolutely succumbed to it, of an apoplectic fit. [Pg 20]

The doctor was sent for in haste. All possibility of the General's expedition to London was out of the question, very much to Miss Vane's relief. She had been dreading an illness of this kind for some days, and it was this fear which had caused her to telegraph for Hubert before breaking to her brother the news that she herself had learned the night before. She had seen her father die of a similar attack, and had been roused to watchfulness by symptoms of excitement in her brother's manner during the last few days. The blow had fallen now, and she could only be thankful that matters were no worse.

When the doctor had come—he was met half-way up the drive by the messenger, on his way to pay a morning visit to Mrs. Sydney—and when he had superintended the removal of the General to his room, Hubert was left for a time alone. He quitted the dining-room and made his way to his favorite resort at Beechfield Hall—a spacious conservatory which ran the whole length of one side of the house. Into this conservatory, now brilliant with exotics, several rooms opened, one after another—a small breakfast-room, a study, a library, billiard-room, and smoking-room. These all communicated with each other as well as with the conservatory, and it was as easy as it was delightful to exchange the neighborhood of books or pipes or billiard-balls for that of Mrs. Vane's orchids and stephanotis-blossoms. Poor Mrs. Vane used to grumble over the conservatory. It was on the wrong side of the house—the gentlemen's side, she called it—and did not run parallel with the drawing-room; but the very oddness of the arrangement seemed to please her guests.

Hubert had always liked to smoke his morning cigar amongst the flowers, and, as he paced slowly up and down the tesselated floor, and inhaled the heavy perfume of the myrtles and the heliotrope, his features relaxed a little, his eyes grew less gloomy and his brow more tranquil. He glanced round him with an air almost of content, and drew a deep breath.

"If one could live amongst flowers all one's life, away from the crimes and follies of the rest of the [Pg 21]

world, how happy one might be!" he said to himself half cynically, half sadly, as he stooped to puff away the green-fly from a delicate plant with the smoke of his cigar. "That's impossible, however. There's no chance of a monastery in these modern days! What wouldn't I give just now to be out of all this—this misery—this deviltry?" He put a strong and bitter accent on the last word. "But I see no way out of it—none!"

"There is no way out of it—for you," a voice near him said.

Without knowing it, he had spoken aloud. This answer to his reverie startled him exceedingly. He wheeled round to discover whence it came, and, to his surprise, found himself close to the open library window, where, just inside the room, a girl was sitting in a low cushioned chair.

He took the cigar from his mouth and held it between his fingers as he looked at her, his brow contracting with anger rather than with surprise. He stood thus two or three minutes, as if expecting her to speak, but she did not even raise her eyes. She was a tall, fair girl with hair of the palest flaxen, artistically fluffed out and curled upon her forehead, and woven into a magnificent coronet upon her graceful head; her downcast eyelids were peculiarly large and white, and, when raised, revealed the greatest beauty and the greatest surprise of her face—a pair of velvety dark-brown eyes, which had the curious power of assuming a reddish tint when she was angry or disturbed. Her skin was of the perfect creaminess which sometimes accompanies red hair—and it was whispered by her acquaintances that Florence Lepel's flaxen locks had once been of a decidedly carroty tinge, and that their present pallor had been attained by artificial means. Whether this was the case or not it could not be denied that their color was now very becoming to her pale complexion, and that they constituted the chief of Miss Lepel's many acknowledged charms. For, in a rather strange and uncanny way, Florence Lepel was a beautiful woman; and, though critics said that she was too thin, that her neck was too long, her face too pale and narrow, her hair too colorless for beauty, there were many for whom a distinct fascination lay in the unusual combination of these features.

She was dressed from head to foot in sombre black, which made her neck and hands appear almost dazzlingly white. Perhaps it was also the sombreness of her attire which gave a look of fragility—an almost painful fragility—to her appearance. Hubert noted, half unconsciously, that her figure was more willowy than ever, that the veins on her temples and her long white hands were marked with extraordinary distinctness, that there were violet shadows on the large eyelids and beneath the drooping lashes. But, for all that, the bitter sternness of his expression did not change. When he spoke, it was in a particularly severe tone. [Pg 22]

"I should be obliged to you," he said, still holding his cigar between his fingers, and looking down at her with a very dark frown upon his face, "if you would kindly tell me exactly what you mean." [Pg 24]

CHAPTER IV.

Florence Lepel raised her beautiful eyes at last to her brother's face.

"I only repeat what you yourself have said. There is no way out of it—for you."

Her voice was quite even and expressionless, but Hubert's face contracted at the sound of her words as if they hurt him. He raised his cigar mechanically to his lips, found that it had gone out, and, instead of relighting it, threw it away angrily from him amongst the flowers. His sister, her eyes keen notwithstanding the velvety softness of their glance, saw that his hands trembled as he did so.

"I should like to have some conversation with you," he said, in a tone that betokened irritation, "if you can spare a little time from your duties."

"They are not particularly engrossing just now," said Miss Lepel evenly, indicating the book that lay upon her lap. "I am improving my mind by the study of the French language," she said. "The General knows nothing of French authors since the days of Racine, and will think me quite laudably employed in reading a modern French novel."

"The General is not likely to find you anywhere to-day, nor for many a day to come."

"Is he dead?" asked his sister, ruffling the pages of her book. She did not look as if anybody's death could disturb her perfect equanimity. [Pg 23]

"Are you a fiend, Florence," Hubert burst out angrily, "that you can speak in that manner of a man who has been so great a benefactor, so kind a friend, to both of us? Have you no heart at all?"

"I am not sure. If ever I had one, I think that it was killed—three months ago."

Her voice sank to a whisper as she uttered the last few words. Her breath came a little faster for a second or two—then she was calm again. Her brother looked at her with an air of stupefaction.

"How dare you allude to that shameful episode in your life," he said sternly, "and to me, of all people!"

"If not to you, I should certainly speak of it to no one," she answered quietly. There was a sudden blaze of light in the red-brown eyes beneath the heavily-veined eyelids.

"You are my only safety-valve; I must speak sometimes—or die. Besides"—in a still lower tone—"I see nothing shameful about it. We have done no harm. If he loved me better than he loved his chattering commonplace little wife, I was not to blame. How could I help it if I loved him too? It was *kismet*—it had to be. You should not have interfered."

"And pray what would have happened if I had not interfered? What shame, what ruin, what disgrace!"

"It is useless for you to rant and rave in that manner," said Florence Lepel, letting her eyes drop once more to the open pages of her French novel. "You did interfere, and there is an end of it. And what an end! You must be proud of your work. He dead, Marion dying, the General nearly mad with grief, the man Westwood hanged for a crime that he never committed!"

"Westwood has been reprieved," said Hubert sharply.

"What a relief to you!" commented his sister, with almost incredible coolness.

He turned away from her, catching at his throat as if something rose to choke him there. His face was very pale; the lines of pain about his eyes and mouth were plainer and deeper than they had been before. Florence glanced up at him and smiled faintly. There was a strange malignity in her smile.

"You can tell me," she said, when the silence had lasted for some minutes, "what you meant by saying that the General would not find me here to-day."

"He has narrowly escaped a fit of apoplexy. He is to be kept quiet; he will not be able to see any one for some days to come."

"Oh! What brought it on?"

"The news," Hubert answered reluctantly, "of Westwood's reprieve."

Miss Lepel smiled again.

"Was he so very angry?" she said. "Ah, he would do anything in his power to bring his brother's murderer to justice—I have heard him say so a hundred times! You ought to be very grateful to me, Hubert, for remembering that you are my brother."

"I wish to Heaven I were not!" cried the young man.

"For some things I wish you were not too," said Florence slowly. She sat up, clasped her white hands round her knees, and looked at him reflectively. "If you had not been my brother, I suppose you would not have interfered," she went on. "You would have left me to pursue my wicked devices, and simply turned your back on me and Sydney Vane. I agree with you. I wish to Heaven —if you like that form of expression—that you were not my brother, Hubert Lepel! You have made the misery of my life."

"And you the disgrace of mine!" he said bitterly.

"Then we are quits," she answered, in the listless, passionless voice that she seemed especially to affect. "We need not reproach each other; we have each had something to bear at one another's hands."

"Florence," said Hubert—and his voice trembled a little as he spoke—"what are you going to do? It is, as you say, useless for us to reproach each other for the past; but for the future let me at least be certain that my sacrifice will avail to keep you in a right path, that you will not again—not again——"

"This is very edifying," said Florence quietly, as the young man broke off short in his speech, and turned away with a despairing stamp of the foot—his sister's face would have discomfited a man of far greater moral courage than poor Hubert Lepel—"it is something new for me to be lectured by my younger brother, whose course has surely not been quite irreproachable, I should imagine! [Pg 25] Come, Hubert—do not be so absurd! You have acted according to your lights, as the old women say, and I according to mine. There is nothing more for us to talk about. Let us quit the subject; the past is dead."

"I tell you that it is the future that I concern myself about. Upon my honor, Florence, I did not know that you were here when I came down to-day! I thought that you had gone to your friend Mrs. Bartolet at Worcester, as you said to me that you would when I saw you last. Why have you not gone? You said that life here was now intolerable to you. I remember your very words, although I have not been here for weeks."

"Your memory does you credit," said the girl, with slow scorn.

"Why have you stayed?"

"For my own ends—not yours."

"So I suppose."

"My dear brother Hubert," said Florence, composing herself in a graceful attitude in the depths of her basket-chair, "can you not be persuaded to go your own way and leave me to go mine? You have done a good deal of mischief already, don't you know? You have ruined my prospects, destroyed my hopes—if I were sentimental, I might say, broken my heart! Is not that enough for you? For mercy's sake, go your own way henceforward, and let me do as I please!"

"But what is your way? What do you please?"

"Is it well for me to tell you after the warning I have had?"

"If you had a worthy plan, an honorable ambition, you could easily tell me. Again I ask, Why are you here?"

"Yes, why?" repeated Florence, her lip curling, and, for the first time, a slight color flushing her pale cheeks. "Why? Your dull wits will not even compass that, will they? Well, partly because I am a thoroughly worldly woman, or rather a woman of the world—because it is not well to give up a good home, a luxurious life, and a large salary, when they are to be had for the asking—because as Enid Vane's governess, I can have as much freedom and as little work as I choose. Is not that answer enough for you?"

"No," said Hubert doggedly, "it is not."

She shrugged her graceful shoulders. [Pg 26]

"It should be, I think. But I will go on. I look three-and-twenty, but you know as well as I do that I am twenty-nine. In another year I shall be thirty—horrible thought! An attack of illness, even a little more trouble, such as this that I have lately undergone, will make me look my full age. Do you know what that means to a woman?" She pressed her eyelids and the hollows beneath her eyes with her fingers. "When I look in the glass, I see already what I shall be when I am forty. I must make the best of my youth and of my good looks. You spoiled one chance in life for me; I must make what I can of the other."

"You mean," said the young man, with white dry lips, which he vainly attempted to moisten as he spoke—"you mean—that you must make what the world calls a good marriage?"

She bowed her head.

"At last you have grasped my meaning," she said coldly; "you have hitherto been exceedingly slow to do so."

He looked at her silently for a moment or two, almost with abhorrence. Her fair and delicate beauty affected him with a sort of loathing; he could not believe that this woman with the cold lips and malignant eyes had been born of his mother, had played with him in childhood, had kissed him with loving kisses, and spoken to him in sisterly caressing fashion. It took him some minutes to conquer the terrible hatred which grew up within him towards her, as he remembered all that she had been and all that she had done; but, when at last he was able to speak, his voice was calm and studiously gentle.

"Florence," he said, "I will not forget that you are my sister. You bear my name, you come of my race, and, whatever you do and whatever you are, I cannot desert you. I promised our mother on her death-bed that I would care for you as long as you needed care; and, if ever you needed it in your life, you need it now! I have not done my duty to you during the past few weeks. I have left you to yourself, and thought I could never forgive you for what you had done. But now I see that I was wrong. If it would be of any service to you, I would make a home for you at once—I would place all my means at your disposal. Come back with me to London, and let us make a home for [Pg 27] ourselves together. We are both weary, both have suffered; could we not try to console and strengthen each other?"

The wistfulness of his tone, of his looks, would have softened any heart that was not hard as stone. But Florence Lepel's pale face was utterly unmoved.

"You offer me a brilliant lot," she said—"to live in a garret, I suppose, and darn your stockings, while you earn a paltry pittance as a literary man, eked out by aunt Leo's charity! You know very well that sooner than do that I put up for two years with Marion Vane's patronage and the drudgery of the schoolroom! And now, when the woman who alternately scolded and cajoled me, the woman who once took it upon her to lecture me for my behavior to her husband, the woman whom I hated as I should hate a poisonous snake—when that woman is slowly dying and leaving the field to me, am I to throw up the game, give up my chances, and go to vegetate with you in London? You know me very little if you think I would do that."

"I seem to have known you very little all my life," said Hubert bitterly. "I certainly do not understand you now. What can you get by staying here?"

"Oh, nothing, of course!" she answered tranquilly.

"What is your scheme, Florence?"

"It is of no use telling you—you might interfere again."

The anguish of doubt and anxiety in his dark eyes, if she had looked at him, would surely have moved her. But she did not look.

"I mean to stay here," she said quietly, "teaching Enid Vane, putting up with aunt Leonora's impertinences as well as I can, until I get another chance in the world. What that chance may be of course I cannot tell, but I am certain that it will come."

"You can bear to stay in this house which I—I—infinitely less blameworthy than yourself—can hardly endure to enter?"

"The world would not call you less blameworthy. I am glad that you are so far on good terms with your conscience."

"Florence," he said, almost threateningly, "take care! I will not spare you another time. If I find you involved in any other transaction of which you ought to be ashamed, I will expose you. I will tell the world the truth—that you were on the point of leaving England with Sydney Vane when I —when I——" [Pg 28]

"When you shot him," she said, without a trace of emotion manifest in either face or voice, "and let Andrew Westwood bear the blame."

The young man winced as if he had received a blow.

"It was to shield you that I kept silence," he said, passionate agitation showing itself in his manner. "It was to save your good name. But even for your sake I would not have let the man suffer death. If we had obtained no reprieve for him, I swear that I would have given myself up and borne the punishment!"

"You were at work then? You tried to get the reprieve for him?" said his sister, with the faintest possible touch of eagerness.

"I did indeed." Hubert's voice fell into a lower key, as if he were trying, miserably enough, to justify to himself, rather than to her, what he had done. "It would be almost useless to confess my own guilt. It would be thought that I was beside myself. Who would believe me—unless you—you yourself corroborated my story? The man Westwood was a poacher, a thief, wretchedly poor and in ill-health; he has no character to lose, no friends to consider. Besides, he was morally guiltier than I. I know that he was lying in wait for Sydney Vane; I know that he had resolved to be revenged on him. Now I—I met my enemy in fair fight; I did not lie in ambush for him."

But from the darkness of his countenance it was plain that the young man's conscience was not deceived by the specious plea that he had set up for himself. Beneath her drooping eyelids Florence watched him narrowly. She read him in his weakness, his bitterness of spirit, more clearly than he could read himself. Suddenly she sat up and leaned forward so that she could touch him with one of her soft cold hands—her hands were always cold.

"Hubert," she said, with a gentle inflection of her voice which took him by surprise, "I am perhaps not as bad as you think me, dear. I do not want to quarrel with you—you are my only friend. You have saved me from worse than death. I will not be ungrateful. I will do exactly as you wish."

He looked bewildered, almost dismayed.

"Do you mean it, Florence?" he asked doubtingly. [Pg 29]

"I do indeed. And, in return, oh, Hubert, will you set my mind at rest by promising me one thing? You will give me another chance to retrieve my wasted, ruined life, will you not? You will never tell to another what you and I know alone? You will still shield me—from—from—disgrace, Hubert —for our mother's sake?"

The tears trembled on her lashes; she slipped down from her low chair and knelt by his side, clasping her hands over his half-reluctant fingers, appealing to him with voice and look alike; and, in an evil hour for himself, he promised at any cost to shield her from the consequences of her folly and his sin.

CHAPTER V.

"Oh, you two are here together!" There was a note of surprise in Miss Vane's voice as she turned the corner of a great group of foliage-plants, and came upon brother and sister at the open library window. "I could not tell what had become of either of you. If you have finished your conversation"—with a sharp glance from Florence's wet eyelashes to Hubert's pale agitated face —"I have work for both of you. Florence, Enid has been alone all the morning; do take the child for a walk and let her have a little fresh air! And I want you to go for a stroll with me, Hubert; the General is sleeping quietly, and I have two or three things to consult you about before I go up to Marion."

The sudden gleam in Florence's eyes, quickly as it was concealed, did not escape Miss Leonora's notice as she moved away.

"What's the matter with Flossy?" she asked abruptly, stopping to throw over her head a black-lace scarf which she had been carrying on her arm. "She has been crying."

"She feels the trouble that has come upon us all, I suppose," said Hubert rather awkwardly. He

pressed forward a little, so as to hold open the conservatory door for his aunt. He was glad of the opportunity of averting his face for a moment from the scrutiny of her keen eyes.

"That is not all," said Miss Vane, as she quitted the great glass-house, with its wealth of bloom and perfume, for the freshness of the outer air. She struck straight across the sunny lawn, leaving the house behind. "That is not all. Come away from the house—I don't want what I have to say to you to be overheard, and walls have ears sometimes. Your sister Florence, Hubert, was never remarkable for a very feeling heart. She is, and always was, the most unsympathetic person I ever knew." [Pg 30]

"She has perhaps greater depth of feeling than we give her credit for," said Hubert, thinking of certain words that had been said, of certain scenes on which his eyes had rested in by-gone days.

"Not she—excuse me! Hubert, I know that she is your sister, and that men do not like to hear their sisters spoken against; but I must remind you that Florence lived ten years under my roof, and that a woman is more likely to understand a girl's nature than a young man."

"I never pretended to understand Florence," said Hubert helplessly; "she got beyond me long ago."

"She is a good deal older than you, my dear, and she has had more experiences than she would like to have known. How do I know? I only guess, but I am certain of what I say. She is nine-and-twenty, and she has been out in the world for the last eight years. There is no telling what she may not have gone through in that space of time."

Hubert was dumb—it was not in his power just then to contradict his aunt's assertions.

"I would gladly have kept her under the shelter of my roof," said Miss Vane, pursuing the tenor of her thoughts without much reference to her listener's condition of mind; "but you know as well as I do that she refused to live with me after she was twenty-one—would be a governess. Ugh! Wonder how she liked it?"

"She seemed to like it very well; she stayed four years in Russia."

"Yes, and hoped to get married there, but failed. I know Flossy. She must have mismanaged matters frightfully, for she is an attractive girl. She went to Scotland then for a year or two, you know, and was engaged for a time to that young Scotch laird—I never heard why the engagement was broken off."

"Why are you deep in these reminiscences, aunt Leonora?" asked Hubert, with an uneasiness which he tried to conceal by a nervous little laugh. "I should have thought that you would be absorbed in anxiety for the General; and, as for me, I want to know what the doctor says about the dear old boy." [Pg 31]

"I am absorbed in anxiety for him," said Miss Vane decisively; "and that is just why I am calling these little details of Florence's history to your mind. As to the General's health, the doctor says that we may be easier about it now than we have been for many a day. The crisis that we have been expecting has come and passed, and we may be thankful that he is no worse. If he keeps quiet, he will be about again in a few days, and may not have another attack for years."

"And Marion?"

"Ah, poor Marion! She is not long for this world, Hubert. I must be back with her at twelve. Till then the nurse has possession and I am free. Poor soul! It is a dark ending to what seemed a bright enough life. Her mind has failed of late as much as her body."

Hubert could not reply.

"Sit down here," said Miss Vane, as they reached a rustic seat beneath a great copper-beech-tree on the farther side of the lawn. "Here we can see the house and be seen from it; if they want me, they will know where to find me. I am not speaking at random, Hubert; there is a thing that I want to say to you about your sister Florence."

Hubert seated himself at her side with a thrill of positive fear. Had she some accusation to bring against his sister? He was miserably conscious that he was quite unprepared to defend her against any accusation whatsoever.

"What I mean first of all to say," Miss Vane proceeded, looking straight before her at the house, "is that Florence is a girl of an unusual character. She looks very mild and meek, but she is not mild and meek at all. Most girls are, on the whole, affectionate and well-principled and timid; Flossy is not one of the three."

"You are surely hard on her!"

"No, I am not. Long ago I made up my mind that she wanted to get married; that is nothing—every girl of her disposition wants more or less to be married. But I came across a piece of information the other day which made me feel almost glad that poor Sydney's life ended as it did. There was danger ahead." [Pg 32]

"It is all done with now," said Hubert hurriedly; "why should you rake up the past? Cannot it be left alone?"

He was sitting with his elbows on his knees, his chin supported by his hands, a look of settled gloom upon his face. Miss Vane's eyes flashed.

"You know what I mean then?" she said sharply.

Hubert started into an upright position, crossed his arms, and looked her imperturbably in the face.

"I have not the slightest idea of what you are going to say."

"You know something, nevertheless," said Miss Vane, with equal composure. "Well, I don't ask you to betray your sister. I only wish to mention that, in looking over my brother Sydney's papers the other day, I came across a letter from Florence which I consider extremely compromising. It was written from Scotland while she was still engaged to that young laird, but it showed plainly that some sort of understanding subsisted between her and Sydney Vane. They must have met several times without the knowledge of any other member of our family; and it seems that she proffered her services to Marion as Enid's governess at his instigation. What do you think of that?"

"I think," said Hubert deliberately, "that Florence has always proved herself something of a plotter, and that the letter shows that she was scheming to get a good situation. You can't possibly make anything more out of it, aunt Leonora"—with a stormy glance. "I think you had better not try."

Miss Vane sat for a moment or two in deep meditation.

"Well," she said at length, "that may be true, and I may be an old fool. Perhaps I ought not to betray the girl to her brother either; but——"

"Oh, say the worst and get it over, by all means!" said Hubert desperately, "Out with your accusation, if you have any to make!"

Leonora Vane studied his face for a minute or two before replying. She did not like the withered paleness about his mouth, the look of suffering that was so evident in his haggard eyes.

"It is hardly an accusation, Hubert," she said, with sudden gentleness. "I mean that I believe that [Pg 33] she was in love—as far as a girl of her disposition can be in love—with my brother Sydney. I need not tell you how I have come to think so. In the first hours of our great loss she betrayed herself. To me only—you need not be afraid that she would ever wear her heart upon her sleeve, but to me she did betray her secret. Whether Sydney returned her affection or not I am not quite sure—for his wife's sake, I hope not."

Again she looked keenly at her young kinsman; but he, with his eyes fixed upon the ground and his lips compressed, did not seem disposed to make any remark on what she had said.

"I felt sorry for the girl," Miss Vane went on, "although I despised her weakness in yielding to an affection for a married man. Still I thought that her folly had brought its own punishment, and that I ought not to be hard on her. Otherwise I should have recommended her to leave Sydney's daughter alone, and get a situation in another house. I wish I had. I cannot express too strongly to you, Hubert, how much I now wish I had!"

"Why?"

"I misunderstood her," said his cousin slowly. "I thought that she had a heart, and that she was grieving—innocently perhaps—over Sydney's death."

"Well, was she not?"

"I don't think so. If she ever cared for him at all, it was because she wanted the ease and luxury that he could give her. For, if she cared for him, Hubert—I put it to you as a matter of probability—could she immediately after his death begin to plan a marriage with somebody else?"

Hubert looked up at last, with a startled expression upon his face.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, my dear boy, that your sister Florence now wants to marry the General."

In spite of his distress of mind, Hubert could not stifle a short laugh.

"Aunt Leonora, you are romancing! This is really too much!"

"I should not mention it to you if I had not good reason," said Miss Vane, with a series of mysterious nods. "I have sharp eyes, Hubert, and can see as far as most people. I repeat it— [Pg 34] Florence wants to marry the General."

"She will not do that."

"I am not sure—if she is left here when I am gone. I must go back to London at some time or other, I suppose. But it won't do to leave Flossy in possession."

"She would not think of staying, surely, if——"

"If poor Marion died? Yes, she would. Believe me, I know what I am saying. I have watched her

manner to him for the last few weeks, and I feel sure of it. She has her own ends in view."

"I have no doubt of that," said Hubert, rather bitterly. "But what are we to do?"

"Let our wits work against hers," replied Miss Vane briskly. "If poor Marion dies, we must suggest to the General that Enid should go to school. In that way we may get Florence out of the house without a scene. But—mark my words, Hubert—she will not go until she is forced. She is my second cousin once removed and your sister, but for all that she is a scheming unprincipled intriguer and adventuress, who has never brought and never will bring good to any house in which she lives. You may try to get her away to London if you like, but you'll never succeed."

"I have tried already; I thought that she would be better with me," said Hubert. "But it was of no use."

"You offered her a home? You are a good fellow, Hubert! You have always been a good brother to Florence, and I honor you for it," said Miss Vane heartily.

"Don't say so, aunt Leo; I'm not worth it," said the young man, starting up and walking two or three paces from her, then returning to her side. "I only wish that I could do more for her—poor Florence!"

"Poor Florence indeed!" echoed Miss Vane, with tart significance. "But I must go, Hubert. See her again, and persuade her, if you can, to leave Beechfield. Don't tell her what I have said to you. She is suspicious already and will want to know. Did you notice the look she gave me when I said that I wished to talk to you? Be on your guard."

"I shall not have time to talk with her much. I must go back to London by the four o'clock train."

"Must you? Well, do your best. See—the blind is drawn up in Marion's dressing-room—a sign that I am wanted;" and Miss Vane turned towards the house. [Pg 35]

Hubert's anticipations were verified. Florence was not to be persuaded by anything that he could say. And, when he begged her to tell him why she wanted so much to stay at Beechfield, and hinted at the reason that existed in Miss Leonora's mind, Florence only laughed him to scorn. He was obliged sorrowfully to confess to Miss Vane, when she walked with him that afternoon before he set out for London, that he had obtained no information concerning Flossy's plans, and that he could hope to have no influence over her movements.

He had five minutes to spare, and was urging her to walk with him a little way along the road that led to the nearest railway-station, when Miss Vane's attention was arrested by two little figures in the middle of the road. She stopped short, and pointed to them with her parasol.

"Hubert," she cried, in a voice that was hoarse with dismay, "do you see that?"

"I see Enid," said Hubert rather wonderingly. "I suppose she ought not to be here alone; she must have escaped from Florence. Why are you so alarmed? She is talking to a beggar-child—that is all."

Miss Vane pressed his arm with her hand.

"Are you blind?" she said. "Do you not know to whom she is talking? Can you bear to see it?"

"Upon my soul, aunt Leo," said the young man, "I don't know what you mean!"

He looked at the scene before him. The white country road stretched in an undulating line to right and left, its smooth surface mottled with patches of sunlight and tracts of refreshing shade. A broad margin of grass on either side, tall hedges of hawthorn and hazel, soothed the eye that might be wearied with the glare and whiteness of the road. On one of these grassy margins two children were standing face to face. Hubert recognised his little cousin Enid Vane, but the other —a sunburnt, gipsy-looking creature, with unkempt hair and ragged clothes—who could she be?

"You were at the trial," Miss Vane whispered to him, in dismayed, reproachful tones. "Do you not know her? it is no fault of hers, poor child, of course; and yet it does give me a shock to see poor little Enid talking in that friendly way with the daughter of her father's murderer." [Pg 36]

For the child was no other than little Jenny Westwood, whom Hubert had seen for a few minutes only at her father's trial three weeks before.

CHAPTER VI.

Hubert stopped short. If Miss Vane had been looking at him, she would have seen that his face flushed deeply and then turned very pale. But she herself, with her gold eye-glasses fixed very firmly on the bridge of her high nose, was concentrating her whole attention upon the children.

"Enid," she called out rather sharply, "what are you doing there? Come to me."

Enid turned to her aunt. She was a singularly sensitive looking child, with lips that paled too rapidly and veins that showed with almost painful distinctness beneath the soft white skin. Her features were delicately cut, and gave promise of future beauty, when health should lend its

vivifying touch to the white little face. Her eyes, of a tender violet-gray, were even now remarkable, and her hair was of rippling gold.

Her sombre black dress and the sunshine that poured down upon the spot where she was standing contributed to the dazzling effect produced by her golden hair and white skin. There could not have been a greater contrast than that between her and Andrew Westwood's daughter, upon whom at that moment Hubert Lepel's eyes were fixed.

Jenny Westwood, as she was generally called, although her father gave her a different name, was thinner, browner wilder-looking, than she had even been before. Miss Vane knew her by sight, but she had imagined that the child had been taken away from the village by friends, or sent to the workhouse by the authorities. It was a shock to her to find the little creature at the park gates of Beechfield Hall.

Enid did not seem to be embarrassed by her aunt's call. She ran up to her at once, dragging the ragged child with her by the hand. Her face was anxious and puzzled.

"Oh, aunt Leo," she said, "this little girl has nowhere to go to—no home—no anything!" [Pg 37]

"Let her hand go, Enid!" said aunt Leo, with some severity. "You have no business to be out here in the road, talking to children whom you know nothing about."

Enid shrank a little, but she did not drop the child's hand.

"But, aunt Leo, she is hungry and——"

"Were you begging of this young lady?" Miss Vane said magisterially, her eyes bent full on the ragged girl's dark face.

But Andrew Westwood's daughter would not speak.

"I'll talk to her," said Hubert, in a low tone. "You take Enid back to the house, aunt Leo, and I'll send the child about her business."

"No, no; you'll miss your train. It is time for you to go. Enid can run back to the house by herself. Go, Enid!"

"Why may I not speak to the little girl too?" said Enid wistfully. It was not often that she was rebellious, but her face worked now as if she were going to cry.

"Never mind why—do as I tell you!" cried Miss Vane, who was growing exasperated by the pain and difficulty of the situation, "I will see what she wants."

Enid hesitated for a moment, then flung herself impetuously upon Hubert.

"Won't you help her?" she said, looking up into his face with sweet entreaty. "I am sure you will be kind. The poor little girl has had nothing to eat all day—I asked her. You will be kind to her, for you are always kind."

Hubert pressed her to him without speaking for a moment, then answered gently—

"Both your aunt and I will be kind to her and help her, Enid—you may be sure of that. Now run away home and leave us; we will do all we can."

For the first time, the little outcast who had excited Enid's pity broke the silence.

"I don't want nothing; I wasn't begging, nor meaning to beg. She found me asleep by the road and asked me if I was hungry—that was all."

"And she is hungry," said Enid, with passion, "and you don't want me to help her. You are unkind! Here, little girl—here is my shilling; it's the only one I've got, and it has a hole in it, but you may have it, and then you can get yourself something to eat in the village." [Pg 38]

She dashed forward with the coin, eluding a movement of Miss Vane's hand designed to stop her in her course. The shilling lay in Jenny Westwood's grimy little hand before the lady could interfere.

"Don't take it away," Hubert whispered in his aunt's ear; "it will only make her remember the scene for a longer time."

"I know," Miss Vane answered grimly; and she stood still.

Enid turned sorrowfully, half ashamed of her momentary rebellion, towards the park gate. The other child seemed dazed by the excitement of the speakers, and only half understood what had been going on. She stood looking first at the coin in her hand and then at the donor, with a strange questioning expression on her little brown face. Miss Vane and Hubert also waited in silence, until Enid was out of hearing. Then, as if by the same instinct, each drew a long breath and looked doubtfully at the other and then at the child.

"You will miss your train," said Miss Leonora.

"I have done that already; so we may as well find out what brings the girl here. Why not take her inside the park gates? If any one passes by——"

"You are right, Hubert, as usual. Come here, child—come inside for a minute or two; I want to

speak to you."

The little girl glanced doubtfully at Miss Vane's handsome imperious face. She seemed inclined to break away from her questioners and run down the road; but a look from under her long lashes at Hubert seemed to reassure her. The young man's face had certainly an attractive quality—there was some sort of passion and pain in it, some mark of a great struggle which had not been all ignoble; even if he had failed to win the victory, a look which worked its way into the hearts of many who would have refused their hands to him in sign of fellowship if they had known the whole story of his life. This subtle charm had its influence on little Jenny Westwood, although she had no suspicion of its cause. She moved a little closer to him, and followed him inside the iron gates of Beechfield Park. The great trees flung their shade over the broad drive which ran [Pg 39] between mossy banks for a mile before the house was reached. Between their trunks the sunshine flickered on sheets of bracken, already turning a little yellow from the heat; the straight spikes of the foxglove, not yet in bloom, were visible here and there amongst the undulating forms of the woodland fern. Hubert closed the gate carefully behind him, and stood with his aunt so as to screen the child from observation, should friends or acquaintances pass by. He had a keen perception of the fact that Miss Vane was making an enormous effort over pride and prejudice and affectionate prepossessions of all kinds in even speaking a word to Andrew Westwood's child. He himself, in the troubled depths of his soul, was stirred by a wild rush of pity and remorse, of sharp unaffected desire to undo what had been done already, to amend the injury that his hand had wrought—a far greater injury indeed than he had dreamt of doing. He had always fancied Andrew Westwood as lonely a man as—in the world's eyes—he was worthless; he had not known until the day of the trial that the prisoner had a child.

"Your name is 'Westwood,' I think?" Miss Vane began stonily.

Hubert was keenly aware of the harshness of her tones. The girl nodded.

"Your father is Andrew Westwood?"

She nodded again, a dull red creeping into her brown cheeks.

"What are you doing here?" There was a tragic intensity of indignation in Miss Vane's way of putting the question, which Hubert wondered whether the child could comprehend. "You ought to be far away from Beechfield—it is the last place to which you should come!"

The child lowered her face until it was nearly hidden on her breast, and spoke for the second time.

"Hadn't nowhere to go," she muttered.

"Have you no home?" said Miss Vane sternly.

"Only the cottage down by the pond where father lived. It is all shut up now."

"Where have you lived for the last few weeks? I heard that you were in the workhouse."

"Yes." Then, evidently with difficulty—"I ran away."

"Then you were a bad wicked girl to do so," said Miss Vane, with severity; "and you ought to be [Pg 40] sent back again—and well whipped, into the bargain!"

Hubert made an impatient movement. He had never seen his aunt so much to her disadvantage. She was harsh, unwomanly, inhuman. Was it in this way that every woman would treat the poor child, remembering the story of her father's crime?

Miss Vane read the accusation in his eyes. She turned aside with an abrupt gesture, half of defiance, half of despair.

"I can't help it, Hubert," she said in an undertone. She raised her handkerchief to her eyes and dashed away a tear. "I feel it a wrong to Sydney, to Marion, to the child, that I should try to benefit any of Westwood's family. I can't bear to speak to her—I can't bear her in my sight. It makes me ill to see her."

She covered her eyes with her hand, so that she might not see the ragged miserable-looking little creature any longer.

"It would make matters no better if the child were to die of neglect and starvation at your gates, would it?" said Hubert bitterly. "She must be got out of Beechfield at any rate; you will never be able to bear seeing her about the roads—even amongst the workhouse children."

"No, no, indeed! And Enid—Enid might meet her again!"

"Go back to the house, aunt Leo," said the young man tenderly, "and leave her to me. It is too great a strain upon your endurance, I see. I will take the child to the Rectory; Mrs. Rumbold will know of some home where she will be taken in—the farther away from Beechfield the better."

Miss Vane was unusually agitated. Her face was pale, and her lips moved nervously; she carefully averted her eyes from the little girl whom she had undertaken to question. Evidently she was on the verge of a breakdown.

"I never was so foolish in my life as I have been to-day. My nerves are all unstrung," she said, turning her back on little Jenny Westwood. "I think I'll take your advice, Hubert. Ask Mr. and

Mrs. Rumbold, from me, to see after the child. If they want money, I don't mind supplying it. But [Pg 41]
do make them understand that the child must be kept out of Beechfield." And with these words she walked briskly down the avenue, without looking back. As she had said, the very sight of Andrew Westwood's daughter made her ill.

Hubert turned again towards the girl, wondering whether she had overheard the conversation, which had been carried on in low tones, and, if she had overheard it, how much she had understood. He could not find out from her face. It was not a face that lacked intelligence, but it was at present sullen and forbidding in expression. The black hair that hung over her eyes hid her forehead, and gave her a rough, almost a savage look.

"You do not want to go back to the workhouse, do you?" Hubert said, keenly regarding the stubborn face.

"No—I won't go back."

"Why not?"

A hot burning blush sprang to the child's cheeks.

"They call me names," she said in a low voice.

"They? Who? And what names?"

"The other girls, and the mistress too, and the women. They said that my father's wicked, and that I am wicked too. They say that he is to be hanged."

The child suddenly burst out crying; her sobs, loud and unrestrained, fell painfully on Hubert's ear.

"I went to the prison to see him, but they would not let me; and then I came back here."

She sobbed for a minute or two longer, and then became quiet as suddenly as she had broken into tears, rubbing her eyes with one hand, and peering furtively at Hubert between the black fingers.

"They were wrong," Hubert said at length. "Your father is not dead; he is not to be hanged at all." He paused before he spoke again. "He is in prison; he will be in prison for the rest of his life—a life sentence!"

He spoke rather to himself than to the child. Never had he realised so fully as at that moment what prison actually meant. To be shut up, away from friends, away from home, away from the sweet wild woods, the country air, the summer sun, to labor all day long at some heavy monotonous task, such as breaks the spirit and the heart of man with its relentless uniformity of toil—to wear the prison garb, to be known by a number, as one dead to the ordinary life of men, [Pg 42]
leaving at the prison gates that name which would be henceforth only a badge of disgrace to all who bore it in the outer world—these aspects of Andrew Westwood's sad case flashed in a moment across Hubert Lepel's mind with a thrill of intolerable pain. What could he do? Rise up and offer to bear that terrible punishment himself? It could not be—for Florence's sake, he told himself, it could not be. And yet—yet——Would that at the very beginning he had told the truth, and stood where Andrew Westwood stood, so that the ruffian and the poacher might not have to bear a doom that separated him for ever from his only child!

"Do you mean," said Jenny Westwood slowly, "that father will never come out of prison any more?"

"Perhaps—after many years—he may come out."

"Many years? Three—or five?"

"More—more, I am afraid, my little girl—perhaps in twenty years—if he is still alive."

He scarcely knew what impulse prompted him then to tell her the truth. He repented it the next moment, for, after a horrified stare into his face, the child suddenly flung herself down upon the gravelled path and burst into tears, accompanied by passionate shrieking sobs and wild convulsive movements of her limbs.

"He shall come out—he shall come out!" Hubert heard her cry between her gasps for breath. "He can't do without me. Take me to him, or I shall die!"

In utter dismay Hubert tried persuasion, argument, rebuke, for some time in vain. At last he turned away from her, and began walking up and down a short stretch of the drive, bitterly regretting the impulse that had caused him to take the care of this strange child, even for a few moments, on his hands. But he had promised to get rid of her, and he must do so, if only for Enid's sake. It would never do to let this little wild creature go on roaming about the village, asking questions about her father. And there were better motives at work within the young man's breast. It seemed to him that he had brought a duty on himself—that he was at least responsible for Andrew Westwood's forlorn and neglected child.

He had not paced the drive for many minutes before the sobs began to grow fainter. Finally they ceased, and the child drew herself into a crouching position, with her head resting against the [Pg 43]
steep mossy bank just within the gate. Seeing her so quiet, Hubert thought that he might venture

to speak to her again.

"You must not cry so bitterly," he said, almost as he might have spoken to a grown-up person, not to a child.

"Grieving can do your poor father no good. Wait and grow up quickly. He may come out of prison some day, and want his little daughter. If I take you to a place where you can be taught to be a good girl, like other girls, will you stay there?"

The child raised her head and fixed her dark eyes upon him.

"Not to the workhouse?" she said apprehensively.

"I promise you—not to a workhouse, if you will be a good child."

She scrambled to her feet at once, and, rather to Hubert's surprise, put one hot and dirty little hand into his own.

"I will be good," she said briefly; "and I will go wherever you like."

Nothing seemed easier to her just then.

CHAPTER VII.

"But, dear me, Mr. Lepel," said Mrs. Rumbold, "there's no place for a child like that but the workhouse."

Hubert stood before the Rector's wife in a pretty little room opening out upon the Rectory garden. Jenny had been left in the hall, seated on one of the high-backed wooden chairs, while her protector told his tale. Mrs. Rumbold—a short, stout, elderly woman with a good-natured smile irradiating her broad face and kind blue eyes—sat erect in the basket-chair wherein her portly frame more usually reclined, and positively gasped as she heard his story.

"To think of that child's behavior! I assure you, Mr. Lepel, that we tried to do our duty. We knew how painful it would be for the dear General and Miss Vane if any member of that wretched man's family were left in the village, and we thought it simplified matters so much that there was only one child—didn't we, Alfred?"

Alfred was the Rector, a tall thin man, very slow in expressing his ideas, and therefore generally [Pg 44] resigning the task of doing so to his wife's more nimble tongue. On this occasion, unready as usual with a response, he crossed his legs one over the other, cleared his throat, and had just prepared to utter the words, "We did indeed, my dear," when Mrs. Rumbold was off again.

"Some neighbors took care of her before the trial," she said confidentially. "Indeed we paid them a small sum for doing so, Mr. Lepel—we didn't like to send the child to the workhouse before we knew how matters would turn out. But, when the poor wretched man was condemned, I said to Alfred,'We really can't let the Smiths be burdened any longer with Andrew Westwood's child—she must go to the Union!' And Alfred actually went to Westwood, and asked him if he had any relatives to whom the child could be sent—didn't you, Alfred?—and, when he said that there were none, and that the girl might as well be brought up in the workhouse as anywhere else, for she would always be an outcast like himself—I quote his very words, Mr. Lepel—his graceless, reckless, wicked words!—why, then, I just put on my hat and cloak, and I went to the Smiths at once, and I said, 'Mrs. Smith, I've come to take little Westwood to the workhouse;' and take her I did that very afternoon."

"Do you know when she ran away?" Hubert asked.

Mrs. Rumbold shook her head.

"I haven't heard. Not more than a day or two ago, I should fancy, for nobody seems to have been looking for her in this direction. I wonder she came back to Beechfield, the hardened little thing!"

"Oh, come, I don't think she is that, Mrs. Rumbold!" said Hubert, affecting a lightness which assuredly he did not feel. "I fancy that she wandered back to Beechfield out of love for her father and her old home, poor child. She is not to be blamed for her father's sins, surely!" he added, seeing rather an odd expression on Mrs. Rumbold's face as the involuntary words of pity passed his lips.

"Oh, no, no—of course not!" Mrs. Rumbold hastened to reply. "It is very kind of you, Mr. Lepel, and very kind of Miss Vane too, to interest yourselves in the fate of Andrew Westwood's daughter —very Christian, I am sure!"

"I don't know that," said Hubert, somewhat awkwardly. "I fancy that my cousin simply wishes to [Pg 45] get the child away from the place before the General is well enough to go out again—I suppose he knows her by sight. It would be painful to him—and little Enid might come to hear."

"Of course, of course! I quite understand, Mr. Lepel. And the Churton workhouse is so near Beechfield too!"

"She shall not go back to the workhouse," said Hubert, with firmness. "I am resolved on that!"

"An orphanage, I suppose? Well, we might get her into an orphanage if we paid a small sum for her; but who would pay? There's the Anglican Sisterhood at East Winstead—not that I quite approve of Sisterhoods myself," said Mrs. Rumbold grimly—"but I know that in this case the Sisters are doing a good work and for a small annual payment——"

"I don't much like the idea of a Sisterhood. Do you know of a smaller place—an ordinary school perhaps—where she could be taken in and clothed and taught and civilised?"

"No, Mr. Lepel, I don't. You could not send a child like that to a lady's house without letting the whole story be told; and who would take her then? In a charitable institution, now, she could be admitted, and no questions asked."

"I did not think—I did not exactly want to find a charitable institution," said Hubert, suddenly seeing that his position would appear very strange in the Rumbolds' eyes, and yet resolved to stick to his point. No, whatever happened, "little Westwood," as Mrs. Rumbold called her, should not be brought up as a "charity-girl." He had an instinctive understanding of the suffering that the child would endure if she were not in kindly hands; and he did not think that the atmosphere of a large semi-public institution would be favorable to her future welfare.

Mrs. Rumbold looked at him in open-eyed perplexity.

"But, Mr. Lepel, what do you want?"

"I want the child to be happy," Hubert cried, with some vexation—"I want her to be where she will never be taunted with her father's position, where she will be kindly treated, and brought up to earn her own living in a suitable way."

"Then," said the Rector, startling both his hearers by the ponderous solemnity of his tones, "send her to Winstead." [Pg 46]

Hubert turned towards him respectfully.

"You think so, sir?"

"The Sisters are good women," said Mr. Rumbold. "They love the children and train them well. I have twice sent orphans from this village to their care, and in each case I believe that there could not have been a happier result."

"You'll be charmed if you go over the house at Winstead, Mr. Lepel," said Mrs. Rumbold coaxingly. "Do go over and see yourself what it is like. Such a lovely house, half covered with purple clematis and Virginia creeper, and a dear little chapel, and beautiful grounds! And the expense is quite trifling—twelve or sixteen pounds a year, I believe, for each of the dear little orphans!"

"If you speak so highly of it, I am sure I may take it on trust," answered Hubert, with a smile. He was growing weary of the discussion. "Take the child and do the best for her, will you, Mrs. Rumbold? My cousin and I will supply all funds that may be needed."

"I am sure that's very good of you, Mr. Lepel. The child couldn't be happier anywhere than she will be at Winstead. Alfred will write at once about it—will you not, Alfred?"

Alfred bowed assent.

"I suppose it will take a few days to settle," said Hubert, looking from one to the other. "In the meantime——"

"Oh, in the meantime she can stay here!" said Mrs. Rumbold expansively. "She will be no trouble, poor thing! I can put up a little bed for her in one of the attics."

"She's not very clean, I'm afraid, Mrs. Rumbold. She looks exceedingly black."

"I expect that the black's all on the surface," said the Rector's wife. "You needn't laugh, Alfred; Mr. Lepel knows what I mean, I'm sure. The child's been in the workhouse for more than a fortnight, and has left it only for the last day or two; she is just dusty and grimy with the heat and exercise, and will be glad of a bath, poor thing! I'll make her look beautiful before she goes to Winstead, you'll see."

"Then I may leave her in your charge? It is exceedingly good of you," said Hubert, rising to take his leave. "I don't know what I should have done with her but for you." [Pg 47]

"My dear Mr. Lepel, I am sure the goodness is all on your side!" cried Mrs. Rumbold. "I should not have thought of a gentleman like you, one of your family, troubling himself about a ragged miserable child like this little Westwood girl. I'm sure she ought to be eternally grateful to you all!"

"Oh, by-the-bye," said Hubert, turning round as he was nearing the door, "you have reminded me of something that I may as well mention now, Mrs. Rumbold! Oblige me by not telling any one that I—we have anything to do with providing for the child. Do not speak of it to the girl herself or to any one in the village. And pray do not allude to it in conversation with my cousins at the Hall!"

"If you wish it, of course I will not mention it to any one," said Mrs. Rumbold, bridling a little at what she conceived to be an imputation on her discretion. "You may trust me, I am sure, Mr. Lepel. We will not breathe a word."

"And particularly not a word to the child herself," Hubert said, turning his eyes upon the Rector's wife with such earnestness in their troubled depths that she was quite impressed. "I do not wish her to be burdened with the feeling that she owes anything to us."

"Oh, Mr. Lepel, how generous, how delicate-minded!" cried the effusive little woman, throwing up her hands in admiration. "Now I wouldn't have believed that there was a young man that could be so thoughtful of others' feelings—I wouldn't indeed, Mr. Hubert! Must you go? Won't you stay and have dinner with us to-night?"

"Thank you—no; I am engaged—a dinner in town," said Hubert hastily. "I will leave you my address"—he produced a card from his pocket-book, and with it a ten-pound note—"and this will perhaps be useful in getting clothes and things of that kind for her. If you want more, you will let me know."

He escaped with difficulty from Mrs. Rumbold's rapturous expression of surprise at his liberality, and at last got out into the hall. Andrew Westwood's little girl was still sitting on the chair where she had been placed, her hands crossed before her on her lap, her bare feet swinging idly to and fro, her dark eyes fixed vaguely on the trees and shrubs of the Rectory garden, which she could see from the hall window. Hubert paused beside her and spoke. [Pg 48]

"I am going to leave you with this lady—Mrs. Rumbold," he said. "You know her already, and know that she will be kind to you. You are to go to a good school, where I hope that you will be happy."

The child's eyes dilated as she listened to him.

"Are you going away?" she said.

"Yes; I am going back to London," the young man answered kindly. "You will stay here, like a good little girl, won't you?"

"Do you want me to?" she said, pushing her hair back from her forehead and gazing at him anxiously.

"Yes, I do."

She nodded. "I'll stay," she said curtly.

And then she lapsed once more into her former state of silence and sullenness; and Hubert left her with a smile of farewell and a secret aspiration that he might not see her again; for it seemed to him that he could never look upon the face of Andrew Westwood's daughter without a pang.

He decided to catch the seven o'clock train to London.

"You'll be late for your engagement, I am afraid," Mrs. Rumbold said to him; thinking of his excuse for running away.

He only smiled and nodded as he walked off, by way of reply. His dinner in town, he knew well enough, would be eaten in solitude at his club. He had no other engagement; but he would have invented half a hundred excuses sooner than stay an hour longer than was necessary under General Vane's hospitable roof.

He dined silently and expeditiously at his club, and then made his way through the lighted streets to his lodgings in Bloomsbury. A barrister by profession, he had found his real vocation in literature, and he liked to live within easy reach of libraries and newspaper offices. He had been making a fair income lately, and his earnings were very acceptable to him, for he was not a man of particularly economical habits. He had about a hundred a year of his own, and Miss Vane allowed him another hundred—all else had to be won by the work of his own hands. And yet, as he passed up the staircase to his own rooms, he was wondering whether he could not manage to dispense with Miss Vane's hundred a year. [Pg 49]

He had let himself in with his latch-key, and the room which he entered was lighted only by the lamps in the street. He had not been expected so early, and his landlady had forgotten to bring the lamp which he was in the habit of using. He struck a match and lit the gas, pulled down the blinds, and threw himself with a heavy sigh into the great leathern arm-chair that stood before his writing-table.

He felt mortally tired. The events of the day had been such as would have tried a strong man's nerve, and Hubert Lepel was at this time out of sorts, physically as well as mentally. He had seldom gone through such hours of keen torture as he had borne that day; and his face—pale, worn, miserable—seemed to have lost all its youth as he lay back in the great arm-chair and thought of the past.

He rose at last with an impatient word.

"It is madness to brood over what cannot be undone," he said to himself. "I must 'dree my own weird' without a word to any living soul. Florence has my secret, and I have hers; to her I am bound by a tie that nothing on earth can break. And I can have no other ties. I am bad enough,

Heaven knows, but I am not so bad as to render myself responsible for the happiness of a wife, for the welfare of children, for a home! With this hanging over me, how can I hope for any happiness in life? I am as much under punishment as poor Westwood in his prison-cell. I have no rights, no hopes, no love. A life sentence did I say that he had received? And have I not a life sentence too?"

He was standing beside his writing-table, and his eyes fell upon a photograph which had adorned it for the last six months. It represented a girl's face—a bright, pretty, careless face, with large eyes and parted smiling lips. For the first time he did not admire it very much; for the first time he found it a trifle soulless and vapid.

"Poor Mary," he said, looking at it with a kind of wonder in his eyes—"what will she say when she finds that I do not go to her father's house any more? I do not think that she will care very much. [Pg 50] She has seen little enough of me lately! I could not ask her now to link her fate with mine, poor child! She would hate me if she knew. Best to forget her, as she will forget me!"

He took the photograph out of its frame and deliberately tore it across; then he set himself to reduce it to the smallest possible fragments, until they lay in a little heap upon his writing-table. His face was grave and rigid as he performed the task, but it showed little trace of pain. His fancy for "Mary," the pretty daughter of an old professor, had taken no deep root. Henceforth it vanished from his life, his memory, his heart. "Mary," like all his other dreams, was dead to him.

A knock at the door startled him as he completed his work. A servant brought in a telegram, which he tore open hastily. As he expected, it was from Miss Vane.

"Marion died this evening at seven o'clock, from syncope of the heart. Funeral on Thursday."

"Another victim!" Hubert said to himself, laying down the pink paper with something like a groan. "Am I responsible for this too? A life sentence, did I say? It would take a hundred lives to compensate for all the harm that Florence and I have done!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"'Cynthia Westwood'—is that your name?" said Mrs. Rumbold. "Dear me, I always thought that it was just 'Jane' or 'Jenny!' Wouldn't it be better to change it, and call her something more appropriate to her station?"

"Perhaps," said the injudicious Rector, "she may not like to be called by a name that does not belong to her."

He was looking at Jenny—or Cynthia, as she had just informed them that she was called—a transformed and greatly altered Cynthia under Mrs. Rumbold's management—Cynthia with hair cut short, hands and face scrupulously clean, a neat but ugly print frock, and a coarse holland pinafore—a perfectly subdued and uninteresting Cynthia—uninteresting save for the melancholy beauty of her great dark wistful eyes.

"What she likes has nothing to do with it," said Mrs. Rumbold, rather sharply. "Besides, she has [Pg 51] another name—she told me so herself—'Cynthia Janet'—that's what she was christened, she tells me. She can be called 'Jane Wood' at Winstead."

The Rector looked up in mild surprise.

"Why not 'Jane Westwood,' my dear? 'Westwood' is her name."

"She had much better not be known as Westwood's daughter," said Mrs. Rumbold, with decision, quite heedless of Cynthia's presence. "It will be against her all her life. I have told Sister Louisa about her, and she asked me to let her be called 'Wood.' 'Jane Wood' is a nice sensible name."

"Well, as you please. You will not mind being called 'Jane,' will you, my dear?" said the Rector, mindful of the red flush that was creeping into the little pale cheeks.

He was a kindly old gentleman, in spite of his slow, absent-minded ways; and there was a very benevolent light in his eyes as he sat in his elbow-chair, newspaper on knee, spectacles on nose, and surveyed the child who had been brought to his study for inspection.

Mrs. Rumbold fairly lost her patience at the question.

"How can you ask her such a thing, Alfred? As if it was her business to mind one way or another! She ought to be thankful that she is so well taken care of without troubling about her name. 'Jane Wood' is a very good name indeed, much better than that silly-sounding 'Cynthia'!"—and Mrs. Rumbold swept the child before her out of the room in a state of high indignation at the stupidity of all men.

So Cynthia Westwood—or Jenny Westwood, as the Beechfield people called her—was transformed into Jane Wood. She did not seem to object to the change. She was in a dazed, stunned state of mind, in which she understood only half of what was said to her, and when the scenes and faces around her made a very slight impression upon her memory. One or two things stood out clearly from the rest. One was Enid Vane's sweet childish face, as she thrust her

shilling with the hole in it into the little outcast's hand. Cynthia had carefully hidden the coin away; she was resolved never to spend it. She took it out and looked at it sometimes, feeling, though she could not have put her feelings into words, that it was an actual visible sign of some one's kindness of heart, of some one's love and pity for her. And the other thing was the dark melancholy face of the man who had brought her to the Rectory, and told her to be good for her father's sake. [Pg 52]

She liked to think of his face best of all. It was one that she was sure she would never forget. She brooded over it with silent adoration, with a simple faith and confidence in the goodness of its owner, which would have cut him to the heart if he had ever dreamed of it. He had been kind to her; that was all she knew. She rewarded him by the devotion of her whole being. It was surely a great reward for such a little act! She did not know that it was he who was to pay for her going to school, that it was he who had rescued her from the degradation of her outcast life.

Mrs. Rumbold kept her word to Hubert. She talked vaguely in Cynthia's presence of "kind friends" who were doing "so much" for her; but Cynthia associated the idea of "kind friends" with that of Mrs. Rumbold herself, and was not grateful. The child was not old enough, and had been too much stunned by the various experiences of her little life, to be very curious. She did not know Mr. Lepel by name, or why he should be at Beechfield at all. He did not often visit the Vanes, although he saw a good deal of his aunt Leonora in London. He was quite a stranger to half the people in the village.

Also, Cynthia's father, now in prison for the murder of Sydney Vane, had not lived long in Beechfield, and did not know the history and relationships of the Squire's family, as natives of Beechfield were supposed to do. He had been two years in the village, and had rented a tumbledown ruinous cottage by the side of a marshy pond, which no one else would occupy. Here he had lived a lonely life, gathering rushes from the pond and weaving baskets out of them, doing a day's work in the fields now and then, setting snares for rabbits, trapping foxes, and killing game—a man suspected by the authorities, shunned by the village respectabilities, avoided by even those wilder spirits who met at the "Blue Lion" to talk of bullocks and to drink small-beer. For he was not of a genial disposition. He was gruff and surly in speech, given neither to drink nor to conversation—just the sort of man, his neighbors said, to commit a terrible crime, to revenge himself upon a magistrate who had once sent him to gaol for poaching, and had threatened to turn him out of his wretched cottage by the pond. [Pg 53]

And his little girl too—the villagers were indignant at the way in which Cynthia was brought up. She was seldom seen in the village school, never at church or in Mrs. Rumbold's Sunday-classes. She was rough, wild, ignorant. Careful village mothers would not let their children play with her, and district-visitors went out of their way to avoid her—for she had been known to fling stones at boys who had come too near, and she laughed in the faces of people who tried to lecture her. Jenny Westwood was thus very little in the way of hearing Beechfield gossip, or she would have known all about Mr. Lepel and his sister, who acted as Miss Enid's governess, and concerning whose moonlit walks with Miss Enid's "papa" there had already been a good deal of conversation. She knew nothing of all this. There was a big house a mile from the village, and in this big house lived a wicked cruel man who had sent her father to prison—so much she knew. And her father was now in prison for killing that wicked man. Why should one not kill the person who injures one? It did not seem so very terrible to Cynthia. Before her father had brought her to Beechfield, she remembered, they had travelled a good deal from place to place; and while they were "on the tramp," as her father expressed it, she had seen much of the rougher side of life. She had seen blows given and returned—fighting, violence, bloodshed. She had a vague idea that, if her father had killed Mr. Vane, it was perhaps not the first time that he had taken the life of a fellow-man.

Mrs. Rumbold certainly showed much kindliness and charity in taking this forlorn little girl into her spotless well-regulated household, even for a week, until matters were settled with the authorities of the workhouse which she had quitted and the orphanage to which she was going. The Rectory servants were indignant at having the society of "a murderer's child" forced upon them. If she had stayed much longer, they would have given notice in a body. But fortunately Mrs. Rumbold was able to arrange matters with the Winstead Sisters very speedily, and the day following the funeral of Mrs. Sydney Vane—laid to rest beside her husband only three months after his untimely death—saw Cynthia's little box packed, and herself, arrayed in neat but very unbecoming garments, conveyed by Mrs. Rumbold to the charitable precincts of St. Elizabeth's Orphanage at Winstead, where she was introduced to the black-robed, white-capped Sisters and a crowd of blue-cloaked children like herself as Jane Wood, orphan, from the village of Beechfield, in Hants. [Pg 54]

However, Mrs. Rumbold told the whole of Cynthia's story to the Sister in charge of the Orphanage, a sweet-faced motherly woman, who looked as if children were dear to her. The one reservation made by the Rector's wife referred to the person or persons who were to pay the child's expenses. Their names, she said emphatically, were never to be mentioned. The good Sister smiled, and thought to herself that the very reservation told its own story. Of course it was the Vanes who were thus providing for Cynthia Westwood's continued absence from their village. It was natural perhaps.

She noticed that the child showed no sign of sorrow at parting from Mrs. Rumbold. She looked white, tired, almost stupefied. Sister Louisa took hold of the little hands, and found them cold and trembling.

When the Rector's wife was gone, the good woman—"the mother of the children," as she was

sometimes called—drew the little girl to her knee and kissed her tenderly. It needed very little real affection to call forth a response in Cynthia's yearning heart. She burst into tears and buried her face in the mother's ample bosom, won from that moment to all the claims of love and duty, and a religion of which she as yet had scarcely heard the name.

As time went on, Mrs. Rumbold received letters from Sister Louisa relative to Jane Wood's progress. Jane Wood was, on the whole, a very satisfactory pupil. She was a girl of strong will and strong passions, often in disgrace, and yet a universal favorite. She possessed more than usual ability, and soon caught up with the girls of her own age who had at first been far in advance of her in class; then she surpassed them, and began to attract attention; and at the end of two years Mrs. Rumbold received a letter which perplexed her so sorely, that she sent it at once to Mr. Hubert Lepel, who was still living a bachelor-life in London.

The letter, from Sister Louisa, was to the effect that Jane Wood, the girl from Beechfield, had [Pg 55] developed a great talent for music, and seemed very superior to the station of domestic service for which she had been designed. The Sister received twenty or thirty boarders—daughters of gentlemen for the most part, for whom ordinary terms were paid—in addition to the orphans; these girls of a superior class were educated by the Sisters, and often remained at St. Elizabeth's until they were eighteen or nineteen. If the amount paid for Jane Wood could be increased to forty pounds a year, the Sisters proposed to educate her as a governess; with her talent for music and other accomplishments, they were quite sure that the girl would turn out a credit to her kind patrons and patronesses, as well as to St. Elizabeth's.

Mr. Lepel sent back an answer by return of post. Jane Wood—he knew her by no other Christian name—was to have every advantage the good sisters could give her. If she had talents, they were to be cultivated. When she was old enough to be placed out in the world to earn her own living, his allowance would of course cease; till then, and while she wanted help, her friends would provide for her.

"So Westwood's child is to be made a lady of!" said Mrs. Rumbold, laying down the letter with a sense of virtuous indignation. "Well, I hope that Mr. Lepel won't repent it. I wonder what Miss Vane thinks of it?"

But Miss Vane had never even heard the name of Jane Wood.

Hubert Lepel was gradually achieving literary success. But the road to success is often stony and beset with thorns and briars. His name was becoming known as that of a writer of popular fiction; he had a play in hand of which people prognosticated great things. For all these reasons he was much too busy to give any special attention to the affairs of the child at St. Elizabeth's School. He agreed to Sister Louisa's proposition, and sent money for the girl's education—that was all that he could do. And so another year went by, and then another, and he heard nothing more about Jane Wood.

But at the close of a London season, when town was emptying fast and the air was becoming exhausted, and everybody who had a chance of going into the country was sighing to be off, it occurred to Hubert Lepel to wonder how the child that he had befriended was progressing. It [Pg 56] took little time for him to make up his mind that he would go down to Winstead and see the school, which was quite a show-place and had been a great deal talked about. A card and a line from a clerical friend would introduce him, and his literary work gave him an excuse for wishing to inspect the institution. It would be supposed that he meant to write an article upon it. He did not intend to say why he had come.

The building occupied by the Sisters of St. Elizabeth was certainly beautiful and picturesque. Hubert remembered with a half smile the enthusiastic praise that Mrs. Rumbold had bestowed upon it. The chapel, an exquisite little gem of Gothic architecture, stood in the centre, flanked by two long gray wings appropriated to the school-girls and their teachers, the Orphanage and the Sisterhood. St. Elizabeth's was becoming quite a noted school for girls, especially among persons of High Anglican proclivities; and in surveying the lovely buildings, the exquisitely-kept grounds, the smooth lawns and shrubberies which met his eyes. Hubert could not but acknowledge that the outer appearance of the place was all that could be desired. The school buildings were swathed in purple clematis and roses; there was a pleasant hum of voices, even of laughter, from some of the deep mullioned windows; and he saw a host of children sporting on the lawn in the distance. The scene was bright, peaceful, and joyous. Hubert Lepel felt a momentary thrill of relief; he had done well for Westwood's child—he need not reproach himself on that score.

A portress with a rosy smiling face admitted him into a visitors' room, a small but cosy place, with vases of flowers on the table, sacred pictures and a black-and-white crucifix on the yellow-washed walls. Here a Sister clad in conventual garb came to inquire his business. The stillness of the house, the unfamiliar aspect of the women's dresses, reminded Hubert of some French and Flemish Romanist convents which he had visited abroad. He was charmed with the likeness. It was something, he said to himself, to find such serenity, such sweet placidity of life, possible in the very midst of nineteenth-century England, with all her turmoil and bustle and distraction. He did not discuss with himself the question as to whether the life led by the inmates of these [Pg 57] retreats was wholesome or agreeable; it was simply on the æsthetic side that its aspect pleased him. He could fancy himself for a moment in the depths of a foreign land or far back in remote mediæval times.

Could he see the buildings, the church, the school, the orphanage? Oh, certainly! Sister Agnes,

who had come to him, would be pleased to show him everything.

She was very pleasant in manner, and he had no difficulty in obtaining from her any amount of information about the institution. It seemed that he had by chance come on a festival day, and every one was making holiday. The children were all out in the fields or the garden; he could see their schoolrooms and dormitories and refectory. They were all rather bare, exquisitely clean and airy, full of the most recent improvements as regarded educational appliances.

"This is the Orphanage building," Sister Agnes explained. "We do not generally show the class-rooms belonging to the other school; but, as all the ladies are out, you may see them if you like."

So Hubert peeped into the rooms, occupied by the girl-boarders, who were on a very different footing from the orphans, and whose surroundings, though simple, were almost elegant in their simplicity. The furniture was of good artistic design, the windows were emblazoned in jewel-like colors, the proportions of the rooms were stately as those of an Oxford college hall. Hubert smiled a little at the picture of Westwood's ragged daughter amidst all this magnificence.

Last of all he was shown the chapel, the most beautiful building of the place, and on this day in particular largely decorated with the choicest flowers.

As they were coming out, a bell began to ring, and presently they met a procession of school-girls, all dressed alike in white frocks and broad hats, on their way to some afternoon service of prayer and praise. Hubert scanned their faces heedfully as they passed by, but he could not find one amongst them that reminded him of the thin little countenance, the gipsy eyes of the convict Westwood's child.

He could not resist the temptation to ask a question.

"Have you not here," he said, "a girl called Jane Wood?"

Sister Agnes gazed at him in astonishment, and the tears suddenly rushed into her eyes. [Pg 58]

"Do you know anything of Jane Wood?" she cried excitedly. "Oh, you ask for her at a very critical time! She has been with us four years, and we loved her as our own child; but she ran away from us two days ago, and we have not seen her since!"

CHAPTER IX.

"What do you mean?" said Hubert, starting in his turn. "The girl gone?"

Sister Agnes was in tears already.

"Let me fetch Sister Louisa or the Reverend Mother to you?" she cried. "They know all about it—as far as anybody can know anything. You—you are one of her friends, perhaps? Oh, the dear child—and we loved her so dearly!"

Hubert was looking pale and stern. He had stopped short on the gravelled pathway, half-way between the chapel and the entrance to the school. The beauty, the interest of the place was lost upon him at once. He cared only to hear what had become of the child whom he had fondly imagined himself to be benefiting. If she had been unhappy, if she had run away into the wide world on account of ill-treatment by her teachers and fellow-pupils, was he not to blame? He ought to have come to the place before and made inquiries, not left her fate to the light words of Mrs. Rumbold or some unknown Sister Louisa. He had made himself responsible for her education; was he not in some sort responsible for her happiness as well?

These questionings made his face look very dark and grave as he stood once more in the visitors' room, awaiting the arrival of the lady whom Sister Agnes had called Sister Louisa, and whose letters to Mrs. Rumbold he remembered that he had read.

He felt himself prejudiced against her before she arrived; but, when he saw her, he was compelled to own that she had a very attractive countenance. The face itself, framed in its setting of white and black, was long and pale, but beautiful by reason of its sweetness of expression; the [Pg 59] gray eyes were full of tenderness, yet full of grief. There were marks of tears upon her face—the only one that the visitor had seen that was at all dolorous; and yet, noting her serene brow and gentle lips, Hubert, man of the world as he was, and more ready to cavil and despise than to admire, said to himself that, if any woman could make a young girl love her, surely this woman would not fail!

"You wish," she said, "to ask some questions about our pupil Jane Wood?"

"I do indeed. I am very much surprised to hear that she has left you."

"May I ask whether you have any authority from our friend Mrs. Rumbold to inquire?"

"Mrs. Rumbold takes her authority from me," said Hubert quietly.

Then, as the Sister looked at him with a little uncertainty in her mild gray eyes, he felt in his pocket and drew out a pocket-book.

"I think I have a letter here from Mrs. Rumbold which will establish my claim to make inquiries. It is a mere chance that I have not destroyed it, but it is here, and will serve as my credentials perhaps."

Sister Louisa took the letter from his hand and looked at it. It was the one which Mrs. Rumbold had written to Mr. Lepel when she had heard of Jane Wood's talent for music and other accomplishments from "the mother of the children" herself.

The good Sister smiled sadly as she gave it back.

"I see now who you are, Mr. Lepel. You are really this poor child's great friend and helper."

"I am acting for my family, of course," said Hubert, a little stiffly. "The girl has naturally no right to expect anything from us; but we were sorry for her desolate portion."

"Yes, poor child—she has a hard lot to bear."

If Hubert was stung by this asseveration, he did not show it.

"I always heard that she was very happy here," he said.

"And so she was—or so she seemed to be," said Sister Louisa, with energy. "She was a great favorite, always at the top of the classes, always full of life and spirit, always bright and engaging. Poor Janie! To think that she should have left us in this way!"

"Why did she leave you, and how?" [Pg 60]

"Mr. Lepel," said the Sister, "if I tell you that our Janie had a fault, you won't think hardly of her or of us? A girl of fifteen is not often perfect, and we are sometimes obliged to reprove, even to punish, those under our charge; and yet I assure you there was not a person in the house, woman or child, who did not love poor Janie."

"I am to understand, then, that she was under punishment?"

Sister Louisa shook her head slightly and sighed. She felt that it was difficult to make this young man of the world understand that girls of fifteen were sometimes exceedingly trying to their elders and superiors; but she would do her best.

"Janie was very affectionate," she said, "but passionate in temper, and obstinate when thwarted. She had a curious amount of pride—much more than one usually finds in so young a girl or one of her extraction. Her high spirits too were a snare to her. She was reproved three days ago for laughing aloud in a chapel; and, as she showed an unsubmissive spirit, she was sent into a room alone in order to meditate. Into this room one of our lay Sisters went by accident, not knowing that Jane Wood was there for seclusion, and began to talk to her. This young woman, Martha by name, came from the neighborhood of Beechfield, and happened to mention Mrs. Rumbold."

"Ah, I see!" Hubert exclaimed involuntarily.

"Jane questioned her about the place—questioned her particularly, I believe, about a gentleman that she remembered. I think, Mr. Lepel, that she must have been thinking of yourself, according to the description that Martha tells us she gave of him; but Martha could not tell her your name, which it seems the child did not know. It was natural perhaps that Martha should pass on to the subject of that tragedy at Beechfield—the murder of Mr. Sydney Vane and the fate of the murderer."

Sister Louisa paused for a moment—it seemed to her that the young man's dark handsome face had turned exceedingly pale. He was leaning against the wall, close to the window; he moved aside a little, as he did not wish her to see his face, and begged her to proceed with her story. She went on.

"Martha's tale at this point becomes confused; either she is not sure of what she said or is [Pg 61] reluctant to repeat it. Some slur, some imputation was no doubt thrown upon the name of Janie's father; and I believe that she thought that Martha knew her story and was insulting her. At any rate, the whole establishment was roused by the sound of screams proceeding from the room. We rushed thither, and found Martha crouching in a corner, shrieking hysterically, and declaring that Miss Wood was going to murder her; while Janie—poor Janie——"

"I can imagine it," said Hubert, in a low tone; while Sister Louisa paused for breath—and perhaps to recover the calmness that she had lost.

"Our poor Janie," proceeded the kind-hearted woman, "was like one who had gone mad. She was white as death, her eyes were flaming, her hands clenched; but all that she seemed able to say were the words, 'My father was innocent—innocent—innocent!' I should think that she repeated the words a hundred times. Greatly to our sorrow, Mr. Lepel, the whole story then came out. We could not silence either Martha or poor Janie—who, I really think, did not know what she was saying. In spite of our efforts to keep the matter quiet, in a very short time the whole house—Sisters, boarders, servants—all knew Jane Wood's sad history."

She noted the rigid lines about Mr. Lepel's mouth as he stepped forward from the window and spoke in a low stern tone.

"Was it impossible to prevent? It seems incredible to me. I hope"—almost savagely—"that you

have punished for her extraordinary folly the woman who did the mischief?"

"She has been sent away," said Sister Louisa sadly; "but her punishment has not mended matters, Mr. Lepel. The excitement in the school was immense—unprecedented. We felt that it would be incumbent upon us to send Janie away for a time—until the story was to some extent forgotten."

"And you told her so? Women have hearts of stone!" cried Hubert. He forgot that his conduct had not hitherto proved that his own was very soft.

"I hope that we were not unkind to her," said Sister Louisa, with gentle dignity. "It was to be for a time only. We wanted her to go down to Leicestershire with two of our Sisters for a few weeks; [Pg 62] we thought it advisable that she should have a change. The Reverend Mother herself mentioned the plan to her. I noticed that she changed color very much when it was proposed. She made one of her sharp speeches—quite in her old way, 'I see—I am not good enough to associate with the other girls,' she said. We told her that it was no such thing—that we loved her as much as ever—that it was only for her own good that she was to leave St. Elizabeth's for a time; but I am afraid that it was all of no avail. She listened to what we said with a face of stone. And in the morning—in the morning, Mr. Lepel, we found that she was gone."

"Gone! Without the knowledge of any of you?"

"Entirely. She must have stolen out in the middle of the night when every one was asleep. It is a wonder that no one heard her; but she is very light-footed and very nimble. She must have climbed the garden fence. She had left a folded piece of paper on her bed—it was a note for me."

"May I see it?" said Hubert eagerly.

Sifter Louisa drew it from among the folds of her long black robes. He turned away from her while he read the few blurred hastily-written lines in which Janie said good-bye to the woman whom she had loved. He did not want Sister Louisa to see his face. He was more touched by her story than he liked to show.

"Dearest Mother Louisa," Janie had written, in her unformed girlish hand—"Don't be more angry and grieved than you can help! If they had all been like you, I would have stayed. But everyone will despise me now. I shall go to some place where nobody knows me, and earn my own living. Please forgive me! I do love you and St. Elizabeth's very much; but I must go away—I must! I can't bear to stay now that everybody knows all about me. I shall change my name, so you need not look for me."

The letter was simply signed "Janie"—nothing more. Robert handed it back to its owner with a grave word of thanks.

"How is it," he said, "that I did not hear of her leaving you before I came to Winstead? Mrs. Rumbold is supposed to give me information of anything of importance respecting the girl. I have not had a word from her."

"Nor have we, although we wrote and telegraphed at once. I am afraid that she is away from [Pg 63] home. We did not know your address, or that you were interested in her."

"Of course not. I kept that matter to myself," said Hubert gloomily. "It seems that it was foolish of me to do so. May I ask what steps you have taken to discover the poor child?"

The Sisters, he found, had not been remiss in their endeavors. They had placed themselves in communication with a London detective; they had consulted the local police; they had made inquiries at railway stations and roadside inns. But as yet they had heard nothing of the fugitive. The girl was strong and active, a good walker and runner; it seemed pretty evident that she had not gone by train or by ordinary roads. She must have plunged into the fields and taken a cross-country route in some direction. Probably she had gone to London; and in London she was tolerably safe from pursuit.

"Had she money?" Hubert asked of Sister Louisa.

"Not a penny."

"She will be driven back to you by hunger."

"I am afraid not. She was too proud to return to us of her own free will."

"Is she good-looking?"

"No, I think not," said the Sister, a little doubtfully. "She was tall for her age, thin and unformed; she had a brown skin and hair cut short like a boy's. Her eyes were beautiful—large and dark; but she was too pale and awkward-looking to be pretty. When she had a color—oh, then it was a different matter!"

Hubert took away with him a full description of Jane Wood's clothes and probable appearance, and on reaching London went straight to the office of a private detective. To this man he told as much of Jane's story as was necessary, and declared himself ready to spend any reasonable amount of money so long as there was a possibility of finding the lost girl. The detective was not very hopeful of success; the runaway had already had two days' start—enough for a complete change of identity. Probably she had put on boy's clothes and was lurking about the streets of London.

"But she had no money!" Hubert urged.

"She'll get some somehow," the detective answered quietly.

For some days and weeks Hubert lived in a fever of suspense. He had set his heart on finding the [Pg 64]
girl and sending her back to St. Elizabeth's—or elsewhere. Some kind of home must be secured to her. For the sake of his own peace of mind, he must know that she was safe. He could not forgive Mrs. Rumbold for having been absent in Switzerland when Sister Louisa wrote to her of Jane Wood's flight, and thus being unable to inform him of it immediately. He had an unreasonable conviction that, if he had known at once of Janie's disappearance, he would have succeeded in tracking her. But for this opinion he really had no ground at all.

So days and weeks and months went on, and brought with them the conviction that the girl was lost for ever. Nothing was heard of her either at Winstead or at Beechfield, and Hubert Lepel was obliged at last to acknowledge that all his efforts had been in vain. The girl refused to be benefited any longer; the wild blood in her veins had asserted itself; she was probably leading the outcast life from which he thought that he had rescued her; she had gone down on the tide of poverty and vice and crime which floods the London streets. He shuddered sometimes when he thought of it. He haunted the doors of theatres, the courts and alleys of East London, looking sombrely for a face which he would not have known if he had seen it. He fancied that Andrew Westwood's daughter would bear her history in her eyes—the great dark eyes that he remembered as her sole beauty when she was a child.

It was a mad fancy, born of his desire to atone for a wrong that he had done to an innocent man. The wrong seemed greater than ever when it darkened the life of a weak young girl and tortured the heart of the innocent man's own child.

CHAPTER X.

Eight years had passed away since the tragedy that brought the little village of Beechfield into luckless notoriety. During those eight years what changes had taken place! Even at quiet rustic Beechfield many things had come to pass. Old Mr. Rumbold had been gathered to his fathers, and [Pg 65]
Mrs. Rumbold had gone to live with friends in London. The new Rector was young, energetic, good-looking, and unmarried. At the Hall there were changes too. Enid Vane had grown from a delicate child into a lovely girl of seventeen. The house was no longer chill and desolate—brightness seemed to have come back to it with her growth—a brightness which even the General, saddened as he had been by his brother's death, could not resist. He had taken his own way of contributing to the cheerfulness of the Hall. Six months after Mrs. Sydney Vane's death he had married Florence Lepel, as Miss Vane had predicted that he would, and a little boy of five years old was now running about the Hall gardens and calling the General "father." The old man positively adored this little lad, and believed him to be perfection. He was fond of Enid and of his wife, but he doated on the child. He seemed indeed to love him more than did the mother of the boy. Florence Lepel was not perhaps of a very loving disposition, but it was remarkable that she apparently almost disliked little Dick. She never petted or fondled the child—sometimes she rebuked him very angrily. And yet he was docile, sweet-tempered, and quick-witted, though not particularly handsome; but Florence had never liked children, and she made her own son no exception to the rule.

Eight years had changed Florence very little in outward appearance. She was still pale, slender, graceful—languid in manner, slow in speech, and given to the reading of French novels. But there were dark shades beneath her velvety brown eyes, as if she suffered from ill-health. She had taken to lying on a sofa a great deal; she did not visit much, and she seldom allowed any festivity at the Hall. She remained in her boudoir for the greater part of the day, with the rose-colored blinds down, and the doors carefully closed and curtained to exclude any sound of the outer world; and while she was up-stairs the General and his niece Enid and the boy had the house to themselves, and enjoyed their liberty extremely. In the afternoon Mrs. Vane would be found in her drawing-room, ready for visitors; but she generally returned to her boudoir for a rest before dinner, and steadily see her face against late hours in the evening. Nobody knew what was the matter with her; some people spoke vaguely of her "nerves," of the extreme delicacy and [Pg 66]
sensitiveness of her organisation—some said that Beechfield did not suit her, and others whispered that she had never been "quite right" since her baby was born. At any rate, she was a semi-invalid; and she did not seem to know what was the matter with her any more than did other people. She sat in her luxurious lounging-chair, or lay on the softest of sofas, day after day without complaint, always pale, silent, graceful—an habitual smile, sweet and weary, upon her pinched lips, but no smile in her eyes, where a fire sometimes glowed which seemed to be burning her very life away.

One balmy September afternoon she had established herself rather earlier than usual in the drawing-room. A bright little fire burned in the polished steel grate—for Florence was always chilly—but the windows were open; a faint breeze from the terrace swept into the room and moved the lace curtains gently to and fro. The blinds were half drawn down, so that the room was not very light; the shadowed perfumed atmosphere was grateful after the brightness of the autumn afternoon.

Florence Vane sat in a low arm-chair near the fire. She had a small table beside her, on which stood her dainty work-basket, half full of colored silks, her embroidery patterns, a novel, a gold vinaigrette, and a French fan. She had cushions at her back, a footstool for her feet, a soft white shawl on her shoulders. It was very plain that she liked to make herself comfortable. She wore a gown of pale blue silk embroidered in silver—a most artistic garment, which suited her to perfection, and which was as soft and luxurious as the rest of her surroundings. The white cat which lay curled up on the rug at her feet could not have looked more at her ease.

In a chair opposite to her sat a man of rather more than thirty, who looked thirty-five or even forty when the little light from the curtained windows fell upon his dark face, and showed the gray threads that were beginning to appear in his moustache. If he had been a woman, he would have sat with his back to the window, as Florence was doing now. But Hubert Lepel was not at all the man to think about his appearance, or to regret the fact, if he did think about it, that he looked more than his age. He had found it rather an advantage to him during the last few years.

Florence had not seen him for some time, and she commented silently and acutely on the change [Pg 67] in his appearance. He had a subtle face, she thought—keen, stern, sardonic—too deeply furrowed for a man of his years, too haggard to be exactly handsome, but certainly very interesting, especially to the mind of a woman who had seen little of the world. This was as it should be. She smiled to herself; she was a born plotter, and she had a scheme for Hubert's benefit now. It was only fair that he should partake of the good fortune that had fallen to her lot.

"It was kind of you to come," she was saying languidly, "for I know that you don't care for Beechfield."

"No," he said; "I prefer London on the whole."

"And foreign travel. It is quite extraordinary to think how little you have been in England for the last few years! I have not seen you for—how long, Hubert?"

"Three years, I believe."

"And then only for an hour or two in London, at intervals of six months! I hope that you are going to be a little more sociable now, and run down to see us occasionally."

The brother and sister looked at each other steadily for a moment without speaking. Each knew well enough what was in the other's mind.

"Yes," said Hubert at last, in a peculiarly light and careless voice, "I think I shall." He crossed his legs, and settled himself into an easier position in his chair. "Beechfield is not a bad place to stay at for a few days—or even a few weeks—now and then. And you seem very comfortable, Florence."

"Yes," she said, "I am comfortable. The General is very kind."

"And you have a fine boy—a nice little chap," said Hubert, still lightly.

"Yes; he is a healthy child," she answered, in the mechanical way in which she had spoken before.

Hubert gave her a keen glance. He looked at the long but not ungraceful lines of her slender figure, at the blue veins which showed themselves in the dead white of her hands, at the shade beneath her eyes, and knitted his brows a trifle impatiently. Then he spoke in lowered tones which betrayed some suppressed emotion.

"You have gained all that you wanted," he said—"you ought to be satisfied." [Pg 68]

She stirred a little in her chair, and allowed a faint smile to appear upon her lips.

"And you," she said, "are a very successful man. How many nights did your last play run? You are popular; you have made money; you ought to be satisfied too."

Each knew that the other was not satisfied at all, each knew the cause of that silent dissatisfaction with what life had to give.

"I am satisfied," said the man grimly.

It was the tone that said, "I will be satisfied in spite of fate! In spite of my own actions, my own sin, my own remorse, I will be satisfied!"

"You have changed your note," said Florence, regarding him curiously.

"And not too soon," he answered decisively. "There is nothing so useless as sorrowing over the past and regretting what cannot be undone. Let me recommend my philosophy of life to you. Make the best of what remains; we cannot bring back what we have cast away." There was a new hardness in his tone—not of recklessness, but of unflinching determination. He rose and stood on the hearthrug, with his hands behind him as he spoke. "I have taken a new departure. I have wasted many hours of the past. I am resolved to waste not one hour in future. 'Though much is taken, much remains,' as the poet says; and you and I, Florence, have all to look for in the future and nothing in the past."

"That is true," she said, in a very low tone. "Nothing in the past!" Then she sat up, as if stirred to movement by his attitude, and looked at him again. "What has caused this change of mind, Hubert? Have you fallen in love?"

He uttered a short laugh.

"Not I—I don't know the sensation."

"You knew it a few years ago, when I thought you would marry pretty Mary Marsden."

"She married a Jew money-lender," said Hubert drily. "I saw her the other day—she weighs fourteen stone, I should think!"

"Poor little Mary! It is not love then?"

"No, it is not." He was silent a minute or two, pulling his moustache with a quick nervous movement which betrayed some agitation of mind. Then he said quickly, "I had better tell you something and get it over, though I have no wish to rake up the memory of unpleasant subjects. I heard a few months ago that the man Westwood was dead." [Pg 69]

"Dead? At Portland?"

"Yes. An accident on the works where he was engaged. He died after a few hours' unconsciousness."

Florence meditated for a few moments and then said softly—

"I think that I now understand."

"It will be better that we do not speak of the matter again," said Hubert, in the masterful way which she was beginning to recognise as one of his characteristics. "It is all over and done with; nothing we can say or do will make any difference. The man is gone, and we are here. We can begin a new life if we choose."

His sister watched him with eyes which expressed a greater gloom than he was able to understand. Her hands began to tremble as he said the last few words.

"You can—you can!" she cried, almost with vehemence. "But for me—there is no new life for me!"—and covering her face with her hands, she began to weep, not violently, but so that he saw the tears oozing from between her slender fingers.

Hubert stood aghast. Was this trembling woman the cold imperturbable sister whom he had known of old? He had seldom seen Florence shed tears, even in her youthful days. Was it the consciousness of her past guilt that had changed her thus?

He reflected that, according to all tradition, a woman's nature was more sensitive and delicate than that of a man. Florence was weighed down perhaps by that sense of remorse which he had well-nigh forgotten. He had, as he had said, resolved to put the past behind him and to lead a new life. She, a woman, with all a woman's weakness, found it a difficult task to forgive herself the misery that she had caused; and he, the only person who could understand and sympathise with her, who might have strengthened her in her struggle against evil—for such he considered must be the cause of her distress—he had neglected her, and been perhaps a source of pain instead of encouragement. He should have remembered that her guilt was surely not greater than his own. [Pg 70]

Softened by these thoughts, he bent down to place his hand on her shoulder and to kiss her forehead.

"My poor Flossy," he said, using the old pet name as he had used it for many weary years, "you must not grieve now! Forget the past—we can but leave it to Heaven. There is nothing—absolutely nothing now—that we can do."

"No," she said, letting her hands fall upon her lap and wearily submitting to his kiss—"nothing for you—nothing at all for you—now."

There was a deep meaning in her words to which he had not the slightest clue.

CHAPTER XI.

Hubert Lepel had accepted his sister's invitation to Beechfield Hall for two nights only; but, as he had given her to understand, he was quite ready to come again, supposing of course that she made his visit agreeable to him. So far—an hour and a half after his first arrival—it had not been very agreeable. He had been obliged to allude to a matter which was highly unpleasant to him, and he had had to stand by while his sister burst into quite unnecessary and incomprehensible tears. He was not so soft-hearted a man as he had been eight years ago, and he told himself impatiently that he could not stand much more of this kind of thing.

For the last three years he had been, as Florence had said, almost always out of England. When his search for Jane Wood proved a failure, he had taken a strong dislike for a time to London life and London ways. He had been making money by his literary work, and was well able to afford himself a little recreation. He went to Egypt therefore, and to India, took a look at China and Japan, and came home by way of South America. He did not care to go too much in beaten tracks; and during his absence he wrote a book or two which were fairly successful, and a play which

made a great sensation. He had come back to London now, and was at work upon another play, on which great hopes had been founded. If it were as successful as the first, there was every likelihood of his becoming a rich man. He had got his head fairly above water, and meant to keep it there; he conceived that he had brooded too long over the past. [Pg 71]

He had seen little Dick Vane when he first arrived, and he had spent nearly two hours with Florence; but he had not yet encountered the General or the General's niece and adopted daughter, Enid Vane. The two had gone out riding, and did not return until after five o'clock.

"Just in time for tea!" said the General, in a tone of profound satisfaction. "I thought that we were later. And how do you find yourself, Hubert, my dear boy? Why, I declare I shouldn't have known you! Should you, Enid? He is as brown as a Hindoo."

"Would you have known me?" said Hubert, with a smile at the girl who had followed her uncle into the room, and now gave him her hand by way of greeting. The smile was forced in order to conceal a momentary twitch of his features, which he could not quite control at the first sight of Sydney Vane's daughter; but it looked natural enough.

The girl raised her eyes to his face with a shy sweet smile.

"I am afraid that I don't remember very well," she said; and Hubert thought that he had never seen anything much prettier than her smile.

She was seventeen, and looked so fair, so delicate, in her almost childish loveliness of outline and expression, that Florence's white skin became haggard and hard in comparison. Her slight figure was displayed to full advantage by a well-made riding-habit, and under her correct little high hat her golden hair shone like sunshine. There was a soft color in her cheeks, a freshness on her smiling lips, that made the observer long to kiss them, as if they belonged to some simple child. Her manner too was almost that of a child—frank, naive, direct, and unembarrassed; but in her eyes there lurked a shadow which contradicted the innocent simplicity of her expressive countenance. If was not a shadow of evil, but of sadness, of a subdued melancholy—the sadness of a girl whose life had been darkened in early life by some undeserved calamity. It was a look that redeemed her face from the charge of inanimateness that might otherwise have been brought against it, and gave it that faintly sombre touch which was especially fascinating to a man like Hubert Lepel. [Pg 72]

He continued to talk to the General, who had questions to ask him concerning his travels and his friends; but his eyes followed the movements of the girl as she stepped quietly about the room, pouring out tea for one, carrying cake and biscuits to another. Twice he sprang up to assist her, but was met with a smile and a shake of the head from her, and the assurance from her uncle that Enid liked waiting on people—he need not try to take her vocation from her. He had to sit down again, and thought, half against his will, of that other Enid—Tennyson's Enid, in her faded gown—and of Prince Geraint's desire to kiss the dainty thumb "that crossed the trencher as she set it down." He at least was no Geraint, he said to himself, to win this gentle maiden's heart. But he watched her nevertheless, with a growing admiration which was not a little dangerous.

With a faint cynical smile Florence noted the direction of his eyes. As soon as her husband and his niece entered the room, she had lapsed into the graceful indolent silence which seemed habitual to her. Enid brought her a cup of tea, and ministered to her wants with assiduity and gentleness of manner, though, as Hubert thought, with no great show of affection; and Florence accepted the girl's attentions with perfect equanimity and a caressing word of two of thanks. And yet Hubert fancied—he knew not why—that there was no look of love in Flossy's drooping eyes.

"Please may I come in?" said Master Dick's small treble at the door. He was a fair, blue-eyed little fellow, but not much like either his father or his mother, thought Hubert, as the child stood in the doorway and looked rather doubtfully into the room.

Florence's brow contracted for a moment.

"Why are you not having your nursery-tea?" she said. "We do not want you here unless we send for you."

"I want to see uncle Hubert," persisted the boy stolidly.

Hubert held out his hand to him with a smile that children still found winning.

"Come in, little man," he said. "I want to see you too."

Dick marched in at once, still, however, keeping an eye fixed upon his mother. There was something almost like fear in the look; and it was noticeable that neither the General nor Enid spoke to invite him into the room. [Pg 73]

"You may come in," Florence said at last, very coldly—almost as one might speak to a grown person whom one had strong reason to dislike—"but you cannot stay more than five minutes. You are not wanted here."

"Oh, come, I think we all want him!" said Hubert good-humoredly. "I wish to make my nephew's acquaintance, at any rate. I have something for him in my portmanteau up-stairs."

Florence made a sudden and, as it seemed, involuntary gesture, and knocked down a vase of flowers on the table at her right hand. There was some confusion in consequence, as the flowers

had to be gathered up and the fragments of the broken vase collected, so that Hubert had little opportunity of talking to his nephew. And, as soon as "the fuss," as he mentally called it, was over, Mrs. Vane said, in her coldest, slowest voice—

"Now, Dick, you may go to the nursery. Say good-night."

"Good-night?" questioned Hubert. "Why, he does not go to bed at this hour in the afternoon, does he?"

"He goes at half-past six or seven," replied Florence. "Pray do not interfere with nursery regulations, my dear Hubert."

"I shall see more of him to-morrow, I suppose," said Hubert, smiling at the child's wistful face as he went from one to another to say good-night.

Little Dick's eyes lit up at once, but the light in them died out when, on tip-toe, as if afraid of disturbing her, he approached his mother. Hubert thought that there was a touch of something odd in the manner of everyone present, and was glad to see that Enid's kisses and whispered words of endearment brought a flush of pleasure to the child's delicate cheeks before he turned away.

The General then took possession of the visitor and marched him off to look at the stables. The old man had recovered all his old cheeriness and heartiness of manner; there was a little more feebleness in his gait than there used to be, and he walked with a stick, but Hubert was pleased to see that his eyes were bright, and to find him loquaciously inclined. The shock of Sydney's [Pg 74] death had not seriously affected him, and Hubert was conscious of a thrill of relief at the sight of his evident health and happiness. Considering that Mr. Lepel believed himself to have closed his heart against the past, he was singularly open to attacks of painful memory. He was annoyed by his own readiness to be hurt, and almost wished that he had not come to Beechfield.

He saw neither of the ladies again till dinner time, when he thought that Enid looked even lovelier in her simple white frock than in her riding-habit. He observed her a good deal at dinner, and made up his mind that she was the very model of an ideal heroine—sweet, gentle, pure-minded, intelligent—all that a fresh young English girl should be. The type did not attract him greatly; but it was just as well to study so perfect a specimen when he had one at hand; he wanted to introduce a girl of this sort into his next novel, and he preferred portraiture to mere invention. He would keep the novel in mind when he talked to her; it would perhaps prevent any dwelling on unpleasant subjects—for, oh, how like the girl's eyes were to those of her dear father!

So he sat by the piano after dinner while Enid played dreamy melodies, that soothed the General into slumber, and then he persuaded her to walk with him in the moonlight on the terrace, and talked to her of his strange adventures in foreign lands until the child thought that she had never heard anything half so wonderful before. And, as they passed and repassed the windows, they were watched by Florence Vane with eyes that gleamed beneath her heavy eyelids, with the narrow intentness of the emerald orbs belonging to her favorite white cat. She had never looked more as if she were silently following some malevolent design, than when she watched the couple on the terrace on that moonlit night.

Enid very quickly made friends with Mr. Lepel—so quickly indeed that she was led to confide some of her most private opinions to him before he had been much more than twenty-four hours at Beechfield Hall. It was anent little Dick and his mother that the first confidence took place.

The whole party had been having tea under the great beech-tree on the lawn, and after a time Enid and Hubert were left alone by the others. They chatted gaily together, he answering her [Pg 75] eager questions about London and Paris and Berlin, she catechising him with an eagerness which amused and interested him. Presently they saw Dick running towards them across the lawn. A white figure at one of the windows on the terrace, a call to the boy, and Dick's wild career was arrested. He stood still for a moment, then turned slowly towards the house, breaking into a childish wail of grief as he did so. Hubert stopped short in the sentence that he was addressing to his young cousin, and looked after the boy.

"What is the matter with the poor little chap?" he asked.

Enid's eyes were fixed anxiously upon the window where the white figure had appeared.

"Florence called him," she said, in a very small voice.

"And why should the fact of his mother's calling him make him cry?"

"Florence thinks it best to be strict," said Enid, still with unnatural firmness of manner. "He is running away from his nurse now, I know; and I suppose he will be sent to bed directly after tea for doing so—as he was yesterday."

"Was he? Poor little beggar! Was that the reason why he looked so miserable and you were all so solemn? What had he done?"

"He came into the drawing-room without permission. He was let off very easily because you were there, but I have known his mother punish him severely for doing so."

"But, good heavens," said Hubert, rising from his seat, and leaning against the trunk of the

beech-tree, while he looked down at Enid with an expression of utter perplexity, "why on earth should the child have so little freedom; and why should Florence be so hard on him? She must be altered! She was never fond of children, but she was too indolent to be severe. Was not that your experience of her when you were a child?"

"Yes," said Enid, but too hesitatingly to give Hubert all the assurance that he wished for—"yes; she did not take much trouble about what I did. It is different with her own child."

"Surely she loves her own child better than she loved other children—better even than you!" said Hubert, with the soft intonation that turned the words into a compliment. "It is natural in a [Pg 76] mother."

"One would think so," said the girl. Then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, she spoke hurriedly, with her beautiful eyes full of tears. "Oh, cousin Hubert"—it was thus that she had addressed him ever since her babyhood—"do not think that I am unkind to Florence—I do not mean it unkindly—but it does seem sometimes as if she really hated her little boy! Poor little Dick has never known what it is to have a mother's love. I am so sorry for him! I know what it is to be motherless." Hubert averted his face, and gazed into the distance. "I have lived many years without either father or mother," said the girl, in a tone the simple pathos of which seemed to pierce her hearer's heart, "but at any rate I remember what it was to have their love."

She wondered why Hubert stood motionless and irresponsive; it was not like him to be so silent when an appeal was made to his sympathy. She colored rosy red, with the instinctive fear that she had gone too far, had said something of which he did not approve, and she tried, in her naive unconsciousness of ill, to put the matter straight.

"But I have been very happy," she said earnestly. "Florence has always been kind, and dear mamma herself could not have done more for me. It is only that she seems cold and severe with Dick——Dear cousin Hubert, I hope you are not angry with me for saying what I have said about your sister?"

He was obliged to look at her when she addressed him thus directly. She was surprised by the expression of pain—bitter humiliating pain—upon his face. Was it sympathy for her loss, she wondered, or grief for little Dick's position, or distress at her accusation of Florence that caused his face to wear that look of positive anguish? She could not tell.

"Angry?" he said, stretching out his hand and laying it tenderly on her own, while the pain in his eyes softened into a melancholy as inscrutable as the pain. "Could I ever be angry with you, Enid? Poor little lonely motherless child! Heaven knows, if I could protect you from sorrow or pain henceforth, I would do so at the cost of my life!"

He withdrew his hand and walked away somewhat abruptly, without once looking round. Enid [Pg 77] remained where he had left her, pale with emotion, overpowered by a feeling that was neither joy nor fear, but which partook of both.

CHAPTER XII.

Hubert felt that he had been betrayed into displaying an excess of emotion very foreign to the character of the cynic and the worldling which he was desirous to assume. Circumstances, he told himself, had been too strong for him. Even at the price of not making a study for a novel of poor little Enid's personality—and how could he ever seriously have thought of such a thing?—he must not risk close intercourse with her. Her innocent allusions to the past, her guileless confidence in himself, wrung his heart with shame and dismay. When he left her, he wandered away to the other side of the sheet of water in front of the house, until he came to a small fir plantation on the side of the hill which rose from the water's edge. He had not been there for years, and yet he had not forgotten a single turning in the narrow pathway that ran deviously between the fir-tree shrubs; the memory of the little open glade in the centre of the tiny wood had never lost its terrible distinctness. Sometimes, when he closed his eyes, he could see every detail of the scene, every branch of the fir-trees against the darkening sky, every rise or depression in the mossy ground. The very scent of the woods gave him a sickening sensation; the crunch of a broken twig made him turn pale with the horror of a quick remembrance. For it was in the fir-wood that Sydney Vane had been found murdered—it was in the fir-wood that Hubert Lepel had first felt that his hand was red with his cousin's blood.

He had not at first felt all the horror of his deed. He told himself again and again that he had been justified in what he did. He had punished a man for a base and craven act; he had challenged him and met him in fair fight. By all the laws of honor he considered himself justified. It was better that Marion Vane's heart should be broken by her husband's death than by the news [Pg 78] that he had deserted her. It was better that Enid should think of her father as a saint and martyr, than as a profligate whose hand no honest man or woman would care to hold. Hubert Lepel sternly told himself that he had done good and not evil in ridding the earth of a thoroughly bad man like Sydney Vane. If he might have avowed the deed and its motive, he felt that he could almost have gloried in it; but how to confess what he had done? At the first moment of all he had refrained, in terrible fear of implicating Florence, not knowing how far she would be mistress of herself; then, when he saw that she was well able to defend her own reputation and that he might

confess the truth without bringing in her name at all—why, then he hesitated, and found that his courage had deserted him. Florence entreated him to conceal his act. He remembered that Sydney Vane had almost forced him to use weapons—a course which Hubert himself would never have suggested; and it was fatally easy to let things take their course. He hoped, in his youthful ignorance of the laws of circumstantial evidence, that the jury would bring in a verdict of suicide. When this hope was destroyed, he still thought that the matter would be left a mystery—so many mysteries were never cleared up at all! He did not think that any one else could possibly be suspected. He was horrified when suspicion fell upon Andrew Westwood, a poacher who had been vowing vengeance on Sydney Vane for the past three months.

To the very end of the trial he hoped that Westwood would be acquitted. When he had been condemned, Hubert vowed to himself that at any rate no man should suffer death in his place. If no reprieve could be obtained, no commutation of the sentence, he would speak out and set Andrew Westwood free. The message of mercy came only just in time. He was on the very point of delivering himself up to justice when news arrived that Westwood's death sentence had been commuted to one of imprisonment for life. Did that make things any better? Hubert thought that it did. And his heart failed him—he could not bear the thought of public disgrace, condemnation, punishment. He knew himself to be a coward and a villain, and yet he could not bring himself to tell the truth. When Miss Vane accused him of heartlessness because he explained his pallor by [Pg 79] saying that he had spent the previous evening with friends, he was in reality suffering from the depression consequent on several nights of sleepless agony of mind. He was not silent for his own sake alone. He was afraid of implicating Flossy, the woman to whom Sydney Vane had proposed love, and about whom he had quarrelled with her brother. It was Flossy's share in the matter that sealed his lips; and from the moment of his conversation with Florence at the library window his mind was made up. He had gone too far to draw back—Andrew Westwood must bear his fate. Lifelong imprisonment scarcely seemed more terrible to Hubert Lepel just then than the life sentence of remorse which he had brought on his own head.

Since those days his heart had grown harder. He had resolved to forget—to fight down the secret consciousness of guilt which pursued him night and day—to live his own life, in spite of the haunting sense that he had sacrificed all that was good and noble in himself, all that really made life worth having. He was striving hard, as he said to Florence, to cast the past behind him, to live as if he were what he had been before he bore about with him the shadow of a crime.

But, in the very first endeavor which Hubert Lepel made to act as if the past were done away with, he was brought face to face with it again, and made to feel as he had seldom felt before, that he had wronged not only those who were dead, but those who were living—for he had let Florence become the wife of a man, the mother of a child, whom she did not love, and he had left the girl whom his own hand had made fatherless to Florence's care. As to Westwood's child, she was in a worse case than Enid Vane, for she was not only orphaned but homeless perhaps, and lost to all that was good and pure.

He thought of this as he stood in the fir-wood, surveying the scene where the suddenly-improvised duel had taken place; and, as the memory of it grew upon him, he cast himself down on the mossy ground and sobbed aloud. He had not shed a tear for years, and such as came now were few and painful and bitter as gall; but they would not be repressed. It was strange, even to himself, that he should be so beaten down by a little thing—a child's simple words about her mother, a moment's loneliness in the wood where her father had met his death. The world would [Pg 80] not have recognised him, the cold, subtle, polished, keen-witted *flâneur*, the witty man of letters, critic, traveller, playwright, novelist, all in one, in that crushed figure beneath the firs, with head bowed down, hands clutched in agony, muscular frame shaken by the violence of convulsive sobs. The convicted sinner, the penitent, had nothing in common with Hubert Lepel, as known to the world at large.

Presently he came to himself a little and sat up, with his hands clasped round his knees. Some strange thoughts visited him in those quiet moments. What if he gave up the attempt to brave life out? What if he acknowledged the truth and cleared poor Westwood's name? England would ring from end to end with horror at his baseness. What of that if, by confessing, he could lay to rest the terrors that at time took a hold of his guilty soul—terrors, not of death, nor of what comes after death—terrors of life and of the doom of baseness reserved for the soul that will be base, the gradual declension of heart and mind for the man who said, "Evil be thou my good?" He was not one who could bear as yet to think of moral death without a shiver. He had fallen, he had sinned; but, for his misery and his punishment, his soul was not yet dead. What then if he should give himself up to justice after all? It seemed to him, in that moment of solitude, that only by so doing could he regain the freedom of mind, the peace of conscience which he had now forfeited, perhaps for evermore.

He sat thinking of the possibilities of life opening out before him, and decided that he could give them up without a pang. But there were persons to be thought of beside himself. To his relatives, to the relatives of the murdered man, the discovery of the truth would be a terrible shock. There was no person—except that missing girl, of whom he dared scarcely think—who could benefit by the clearing of Andrew Westwood's name. The only gain that would accrue from his confession would be, he considered, a subjective gain to himself. Abstract justice would be done, no doubt, and Westwood's character would be cleared; but that was all. He ought to have spoken earlier if he meant to do good by speaking. Confession, he said to himself would be self-indulgence now.

Hubert Lepel was wonderfully well versed, in subtle turns of argument—in casuistry of the [Pg 81]

abstruser kind. It was long since he had looked truth full in the face or drawn a sharp boundary-line between right and wrong. Not easy to him was it to get back from the varying lights and shadows of self-deception to the radiant sunshine of truth. With bitter remorse in his heart and a strangely passionate wish to do—now at least—the right, he yet decided to bear the burden of silence until his dying day—to say no word, to do no act, that should ever revive in others' minds the memory of the Beechfield tragedy. He was not naturally callous, and he knew that concealment of the truth would be, as it had always been, an oppression, a weary weight upon him; but he had made up his mind that it must be so.

"Moralists tell us never to do evil that good may come," he murmured to himself, with head bowed upon his knees; "but surely in this case, when it is not—not altogether my own good that I seek, a little evil may be pardoned, a little wrong condoned! Heaven forgive me! If I have sinned, I think that I have suffered too!"

He lifted up his head at last, and saw the red light of sunset burning between the upright stems of the fir-trees, stealing with strange crimson tints amongst the yellowing bracken and umber drift of pine-needles, scarcely touching, however, the black shades of the foliage overhead. With a sudden shiver Hubert rose to his feet. It seemed to him that the red light looked like blood. He turned hastily to go; he had lingered too long, had excited his own emotions too keenly. He resolved that he would never visit the lonely fir-wood again. He wondered why it had stood so long. If he had been the General, he would have had the trees hewn down after the trial, and done away with every memento of the place.

When he escaped from the shadow of the wood, and saw the red sun setting behind the hills, sending long level beams over the tranquil meadows, and bathing field and grove and highway-road alike in ruddy golden light, he drew a long breath of relief. And yet he felt that he was not quite the same man that had entered the wood an hour before. The foundations of his soul had been shaken; he had made a resolve; he looked at life from a new standpoint. The half-defiant determination to make the best of the future which he had announced to his sister was purged of [Pg 82] its defiance. He would make the best of his future—yes. But for this purpose he would injure no man or woman henceforward; he would work with less selfishness of aim—for the good of the world at large as well as for himself. Something seemed broken in him by that lonely hour in the wood—some hardness, some coldness of temper was swept away. To him perhaps Tennyson's words respecting Lancelot were applicable still—

> "So groaned Sir Lancelot in remorseful pain,
> Not knowing he should die a holy man."

Far enough from anything like holiness was Hubert Lepel, but a nobler life was possible to him yet.

Florence commented that evening on his pale and wearied countenance, but he smiled at her questions, and would not allow that anything ailed him. He sat by her side for the greater part of the evening. It was as well, he thought, to be chary of Enid's companionship. She was so sweet, so frank, that she beguiled him into imprudent frankness in return. He would not sit beside her at the piano therefore, or walk with her upon the terrace, although she looked prettier than ever, with a new wistful light in her blue eyes, a rose-flush upon her delicate cheeks. He knew that she was disappointed when he did not come; no matter—the child must not look on him as anything but a casual acquaintance who had spoken a few rash words of compliment which it were idle to take too seriously; and he would stay with Florence.

"Enid looks well to-night," said his sister, in her soft careless tones. "She is a pretty little thing when in good health."

"Is she delicate?" Hubert asked, in some surprise.

"She has nervous attacks; she has had them at intervals ever since she was nine years old." Nine years old—the date of her father's death!—as Hubert knew. "At first we thought they were of an epileptic kind; but the doctors say that they are purely nervous, and will cease when she is older and stronger."

Hubert inquired no further. The subject was disagreeable to him, inasmuch as it connected Enid's health with her parent's fate and his sister's disastrous influence upon the family. It was always a matter of keen regret to him that he had not been able to hinder Florence's marriage, which she [Pg 83] had prudently made a matter of secrecy until it was too late for the General's friends to interfere. Her calm appropriation of the position which she had secured, and, above all, the pseudo-maternal way in which she spoke of Enid, irritated Hubert almost beyond endurance.

He went back to London on the following day, promising to return to Beechfield Hall before long. For some reason or other he felt eager to get away—the air of the place seemed to excite his sensibilities unduly, he told himself. It struck him afterwards that Enid looked very pale and downcast when she bade him good-bye. He took his leave of her hurriedly, feeling as if he did not like to look her full in the face. He was afraid, that if he looked, he would be only too sure of what he guessed—that her eyes were full of tears. He was almost glad that a speedy return to London was incumbent upon him. He had next day to superintend the rehearsal of his new play, which was shortly to be produced at one of the smaller theatres; and as soon as he reached his apartments he was immersed in business of every kind.

The next morning's rehearsal was followed by luncheon with friends, and attendance at a *matinée*

given for the benefit of the widow and children of an actor—a performance at which Hubert thought it well to be present, although he invariably bemoaned the loss of time. The piece was not over until six o'clock, and he amused himself afterwards by going behind the scenes, and chatting with some of his acquaintances among actors, actresses, managers, and critics. Thus it was nearly seven before he issued from the theatre, in a street off the Strand, and the day was already drawing to a close. The lamps were lighted and a fog was gathering, through which their beams assumed a yellow and unnatural intensity. Hubert stood on the edge of the pavement, leisurely drawing on his gloves and looking out for a hansom, contrasting meanwhile the glories of the Strand with those of the autumn woods in Hampshire, when his attention was arrested by the sound of a woman's voice.

"If you please, Mr. Lepel, may I speak to you?"

He turned round hastily, and, after a moment's hesitation, recognised the girl who had addressed him as a young actress whom he had lately come to know. She had been playing a very small part in the comedy which he had just seen. He vaguely remembered having heard her name—she was [Pg 84] known on the bills as Miss Cynthia West.

CHAPTER XIII.

Hubert raised his hat courteously.

"Good evening, Miss West. Of course you may speak to me!" he said. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes," answered the girl with a quickness which sounded abrupt, but which, as could easily be seen, was born of shyness and not of incivility. "You can get me an engagement if you like, Mr. Lepel; and I wish you would."

Hubert laughed, not thinking that she was in earnest, and surveyed her critically.

"You will not have much difficulty in getting one for yourself, I should think," he said.

Miss West colored and drew back rather haughtily. It was evident that she did not like remarks of a personal bearing, although Mr. Lepel had spoken only as he would have thought himself licensed to speak to girls of her profession, who are generally open to such compliments—and indeed she was not very likely to escape compliments. As he looked at her in the light of the gas-lamps before the theatre, Hubert Lepel became gradually aware that there stood before him one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

She was tall—nearly as tall as himself—but so finely proportioned that she gave the impression of less height than she really possessed. Every movement of her lithe limbs was full of grace; she was slender without being thin, and lissom as an untrained beautiful creature of the woods. In after-days, when Hubert knew her better, he used to compare her to a young panther for grace and freedom of motion. It was a pleasure to watch her walk, although her step was longer and freer than to Enid Vane's teachers would have seemed desirable. Her features were perfectly cut; the broad forehead, the straight nose, the curved lips and slightly-puckered chin were of the type [Pg 85] recognised as purely Greek, and the complexion and eyes accompanying these features were rich in the coloring that glows upon the canvases of Murillo and Velasquez. The skin was of a creamy brown, heightened by a carmine tint in the oval cheeks; the eyes were large, dark, and lustrous, with long black lashes and well-defined black brows. It seemed somehow to Hubert as if those eyes were familiar to him, but he could not recollect how or why. For the rest, Miss Cynthia West was a very well-dressed, stylish-looking young woman, neither fast nor shabby in her mode of attire; and the things that she wore served—intentionally or not—to set off her good looks to the best advantage. Hubert had seen her several times off and on the stage during the past few weeks since his return to England; she took none but minor parts, but was so remarkably handsome that she had begun to attract remark. He was a little surprised by her speech to him, and hardly thought she could be in earnest. In fact, he suspected her of a mere desire to attract his attention.

"I thought you were at the Frivolity?" he said.

"I have left the Frivolity," she answered abruptly. "This afternoon's engagement is the only one I have had for a fortnight; and I have nothing in prospect."

He gave her a keener look, and in spite of her brave bearing and her dainty clothes, he thought he perceived a slight pinching of the delicate features, a dark shade beneath the eyes which—if he remembered rightly—had not been there two months before. Was it possible that the girl was really in want? Could he put his hand into his pocket and offer her money? He might make the attempt at any rate.

"Can I be of any use to you—in this way?" he began, inserting two fingers into his waistcoat-pocket in a sufficiently significant manner.

He was aware of his mistake the next moment. An indignant flush spread over the girl's whole face; her eyes expressed such hurt surprise that Mr. Lepel felt rather ashamed of his suggestion.

"I did not ask you for money," said Miss West; "I asked if you could get me something to do."

Then she turned away with a gesture which Hubert took for one of mere petulance, though the feeling that actuated it bordered more nearly on despair. "Oh," she said with a quick nervous irritation audible in her tone, "I thought that you would understand!"—and her beautiful dark eyes swam in tears. [Pg 86]

They were still standing on the pavement, and at that moment two or three passers-by shouldered Hubert somewhat roughly, and stared at the girl to whom he was speaking. Hubert placed himself at her side.

"Come," he said—"Walk on a few paces with me, and make me understand what you want when we get to a quieter spot."

She bowed her head; it was evident that if she had spoken the tears would have fallen from her eyes. Hubert turned up the comparatively dark and quiet street in which stood the theatre that he had just visited; but for a few minutes he did not speak. At last he said in the soothing voice which was sometimes thought to be his greatest charm—

"Now will you make me understand? I beg your pardon for having offended you by my offer of help; I meant it in all kindness. You have not an engagement just now, you say?"

"It is not easy to get one," said the girl, with a quiver in her proud young voice. "It is not a good time, you know. I had two or three offers of engagements with provincial companies this autumn, but I refused them all because I had this one at the Frivolity. They were to give me two pounds a week; and it was considered a very good engagement. Besides, it was a London engagement, which I thought it better to take while I had the chance. But I have lost it now, and I don't know what to do."

"You know the first question one naturally feels inclined to put to you, Miss West, is, why did you leave the Frivolity?"

"I can't tell you the real reason," said the girl sharply. The color in her face seemed now to be concentrated in two flaming spots in her cheeks; her mouth was set, and her brow contracted over the brilliant eyes. "I quarrelled with the manager—that was all."

"Let me see—the manager is Ferguson, is he not? I know him."

"But he is not a friend of yours?" said Cynthia, turning towards him with a look of sudden dismay.

"Certainly not! He is the most confirmed liar I ever met," Hubert answered without a smile. [Pg 87]

But he was a little curious in his own mind. From what he knew of Ferguson, he supposed it likely that the man had been making love to the young actress, that she had refused to listen to him, and that he had therefore dismissed her from the troupe. Such things had happened before, he knew, during Mr. Ferguson's reign; and the Frivolity did not bear the very best character in the world. With a girl of Cynthia West's remarkable beauty, it was pretty easy to guess the story, although the girl in her innocence thought that she was concealing it completely.

"He said that I was careless," Cynthia went on rapidly. "He changed the hour for rehearsal twice, and let everybody know but me; then I was fined, of course; and I complained, and then he said I had better go."

"What made you come to me?" said Hubert. "I am not a manager, you know."

"You have a great deal of influence," she said, rather more shyly than she had spoken hitherto.

"Very little indeed. Other people have much more. Why did you not try Gurney or Thomson or Macalister?"—mentioning names well known in the theatrical world.

"Oh, Mr. Lepel," said the girl, almost in a whisper, "you will think me so foolish if I tell you!"

"No, I sha'n't. Do tell me why!"

"Well"—still in a whisper—"it was because I read a story, that you had written—a tale about a girl called Amy Maitland—do you remember?"

"I ought to remember," said Hubert thoughtfully, "because I know I wrote it; but an author does not always recall his old stories very accurately, Miss West. It was a short tale for a Christmas number, I know. What was there in it that could cause you to honor me in this way, I wonder?"

"Ah, don't laugh at me, please, Mr. Lepel!" Cynthia's voice was so sweet in its entreating tones that Hubert thought he had never heard anything more musical. "It was all about a girl who was poor like me, and whose parents were dead, and about her adventures, you know—particularly about her not being able to get any work to do, and nearly throwing herself into the river. I have had the thought more than once lately that it would end with me in that way—the river looks so deep and silent and mysterious—doesn't it? But that's all nonsense, I suppose! However, when I read about Amy in the old Christmas number, that my landlady lent me the other night, it came to my mind that I had seen you behind the scenes, and that, if you could write in that way, you might be more ready—ready to help——" She stopped short, a little breathless after her long and tremulous speech. [Pg 88]

"My poor child," said Hubert, with the tender accent that showed that he was moved, "I am afraid it does not always follow. However, let us take the most cheerful view possible of all things, even

of novelists, and try to believe that they practise what they preach. It would be hard if I did not prove worthy of your confidence, Miss West. I am sure I don't know whether I will be able to do anything for you or not, but I will see."

"Thank you, Mr. Lepel."

She said the words very low, and drew a quick breath of relief as she said them. By the light of a gas-lamp under which they were passing at the moment Hubert saw that she had turned very pale. He halted suddenly.

"I am very thoughtless," he said, "not to recollect that you must be tired, and that I am perhaps taking you out of your way."

"No," said Cynthia simply; "I always go this way. I lodge at a boarding-house in the Euston Road."

"Then let us to business at once!" exclaimed Mr. Lepel, in a cheerful tone. "What sort of engagement do you want, Miss West?"

She was silent for a minute or two. Then she said, with some unusual timidity of manner—

"I should very much like to have an engagement at a place where I could sing."

"Sing!" repeated Hubert, arching his brows a little. "Can you sing? Have you a voice?"

"Yes," said Cynthia.

The audacity of the assertion took away Hubert's breath. He looked at her pityingly.

"My dear Miss West, are you aware that singing is a profession in itself, and requires a professional training, like other things?"

"Yes. But I can sing," said the girl decidedly.

"Where did you learn?"

"At school, and then of an old music-master in the boarding-house where I am living." [Pg 89]

If he had not been afraid of wounding her feelings, Hubert would have shrugged his shoulders. They were again standing on the pavement, face to face, and he refrained from the scornful gesture.

"Well," he said, after a short pause, "if you think so, there is nothing to do but to try you. I must hear you sing, Miss West, before I can say anything about a musical engagement. Shall I come and see you to-morrow?"

"Oh, no!" said Cynthia, with such transparent horror at the suggestion that Mr. Lepel was very much amused. "We have no piano, and I am sure that Mrs. Wadsley would not like it."

"Then will you come to my rooms at twelve o'clock to-morrow morning?"

"Thank you. Oh, Mr. Lepel, I am so very, very much obliged to you!"

"I have done nothing yet to merit thanks, Miss West. I shall be only glad if I can be the means of assisting a fellow-artist out of a difficulty." He saw that the words brought a bright glow of gratified feeling to the girl's face. "Here is my card; my rooms are not very far off, you see—in Russell square."

Cynthia took the card and thanked him again so warmly that Hubert assured her that he was already overpaid. They had reached the broad torrent of life that rolls down New Oxford street, and further conversation became almost impossible. Hubert bent his head to say—

"Shall I put you into a cab now, or may I see you home?"

"Neither, thank you," she said, shaking her head. "I am quite well used to going about alone; and it is a very little way. Good night; and I am so much obliged to you!"

"Let me see you over this crossing, at any rate," said Hubert.

She was too quick for him; she had already plunged into the tide, and he saw her the next moment halting on the central resting-place of the broad thoroughfare. He attempted to follow, but was too late, and had to wait a moment or two for a couple of heavy carts. When the road was clear again, he saw that she had safely reached the other side; and, as soon as he had crossed, he [Pg 90] dimly perceived her graceful figure some distance ahead on the sombre pavements of Bedford square. His impulse was to overtake her, but after a few rapid strides he abandoned the intention. The girl was safe enough at that early hour; no doubt she was accustomed, as she said, to take care of herself. No need to launch into a romantic episode—to walk behind her, keeping watch and ward, as if she were likely to encounter terrible danger on the way. And yet, for some reason or another, he continued to walk—slowly now—in the direction which Cynthia West had taken.

It was quite out of his own way to go all along Gower street and eastward down the Euston Road, yet that was what he did. He saw the tall slight figure stop at an iron gate, push it open, and walk up the flagged pavement to the door of a dingy but highly respectable-looking house. The Euston Road is a neighborhood not greatly affected by people of fastidious taste; and Hubert wondered,

with a shrug of the shoulders, why Miss West had found a lodging in the very midst of its ceaseless maddening roar. He passed the house with a slow step, and as he did so he read an inscription on the brass plate which adorned the gate by which Cynthia had entered—

"Mrs. Wadsley.
"Select Boarding-House for Ladies and Gentlemen.
"Moderate Terms."

"Very moderate and very select, no doubt," thought Hubert cynically. "Now is that girl making a fool of me, or is she not? All those pretty airs might so easily be put on by a clever actress. I shall find her out to-morrow. She can act a little—I know that; but, if she can't sing, after what she has said, she may go to Jericho for me! And, if she does not come at all, why, then I shall know that she is an arrant little impostor, and that I am a confounded fool!"

"He stopped to light a cigar under a lamp-post, and a slight smile played over his features as he struck the match.

"She's a beautiful girl," he said to himself; "if she does turn out an impostor, I shall be rather sorry. But, by Jove, I don't believe she will!"

CHAPTER XIV.

[Pg 91]

"Shall I take off my hat before I sing?" said Miss West calmly.

She was in Hubert's sitting-room. Mr. Lepel had the drawing-room floor of a large and fine old house in Russell square—a floor which contained two drawing-rooms opening out of each other, a bed and bath-room, and a small den, generally called a smoking-room, although its master's pipes and cigars were to be found in all corners of the apartments. Hubert had partially furnished the rooms for himself, and thus done away with the bare and ungarnished appearance usually characteristic of a London lodging.

Miss West glanced around the room on her first entry with some astonishment largely commingled with admiration. The mixture of luxury and disorder which met her eyes might have surprised even persons more conversant with the world than Cynthia West. The golden-brown plush curtains between the rooms were half pushed back, and showed that the back-room had been turned into a library. Shelves crowded with books, tables heaped with them, a great writing-table and a *secrétaire* showed that Mr. Lepel used the room for what might be called "professional" purposes. But in the front drawing-room there had been attempts—and not unsuccessful attempts—at more artistic decoration. The curtains were of exquisite brocade, some charming etchings adorned the walls, great porcelain bowls of flowers had been placed on the oddly-shaped little tables that stood about the room. A pianette had been pulled out from the wall, and an Algerian shawl glistening with gold was loosely thrown over its back. Other articles of decoration were suggestive of foreign travel. A collection of murderous-looking weapons had been fastened on the wall between the two windows, some Eastern embroideries were thrown here and there over the furniture, and an inlaid mother-o'-pearl stool, an enormous narghileh, and some Japanese kakemonos gave the room quite an outlandish air. In spite of its oddness, there was a brightness and pleasantness about the place, due to the gay tints of the Oriental stuffs, and the hue and fragrance of the flowers with which pots and bowls and vases were plentifully filled.

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"Yes, take off your hat and cloak, please," said Hubert, "if you do not mind the trouble."

"It is no trouble at all; I can sing much better without my outdoor things," replied the girl promptly.

She took off her little black-and-white hat and her neat little jacket, and displayed herself in a closely-fitting black gown which suited her admirably, in spite of its plainness. There was no touch of color or sign of ornament; a rim of white collar around the neck and white cuffs at her wrists gave the only relief to the gown's sombre hue. And yet, with the vivid beauty of her face above the plain dark garment, it seemed as if she could not have found a garb that was more absolutely becoming. She stood beside the little piano for a moment with a roll of music in her hand, and looked at Hubert questioningly.

"Shall I play my own accompaniment?" she asked.

"I never thought of that; I could have judged better of your voice if we had had an accompanist," said her host. "I could play for you myself if you liked."

"No; I will do it," said Cynthia decidedly, "Go to the other end of the room, will you, please, Mr. Lepel? You will hear me better there."

There was a pretty air of command about her which amused Mr. Lepel. This young woman, he reflected, as he took up the position which she had recommended, was not one who would be contented with a secondary position anywhere. She evidently considered herself born to rule. Well, he would do her bidding; he had no objection to the rule of a pretty woman! He was not disposed to take Miss Cynthia West and her singing very seriously—as yet.

Cynthia seated herself at the piano, while Hubert flung himself into an easy-chair at the farther end of the room, and crossed his arms behind his head in an attitude of attention and endurance, which showed that he was not expecting much and was prepared to bear the worst. For the singing of an average girl of eighteen or nineteen, with an ambition to appear on a public stage, is apt to be trying to the sensibilities of the true music-lover; and Hubert Lepel was no mean critic of the art.

Cynthia played a few opening bars, and then began to sing a popular ballad of the day. When she [Pg 93] had finished it, she did not look round, but went on fingering the notes, gliding gradually into another key. Then suddenly she broke out into a fine old Italian aria, which she sang with much fire and expression, availing herself of every opportunity of *fioriture* and *cadenza* afforded by the song. And thence, with only a few bars of symphony between, she launched herself upon one of Schubert's most passionate love-songs, and sang it in a style which brought the listener to his feet at its close in a musical rapture that almost defied expression.

"Why, good heavens," cried Hubert, with something not unlike a gasp, "who on earth taught you to sing like that? And your voice—do you know, Miss West, that your voice is simply magnificent?"

Cynthia kept her head down, and continued to finger the notes—mutely this time.

"I have been told that I might be able to sing at private concerts," she said demurely.

"Private concerts! You might sing at Her Majesty's or Covent Garden—with a little more training perhaps," said Hubert, trying to be cautious, but failing to hide the satisfaction which shone out of his eyes as he approached the piano. "Why have you never sung to any manager? At least you may have done so, but I never heard a word of it; and a voice like yours would be talked about; you know."

"I suppose it was old Lalli's fault," said Cynthia carelessly. "He always impressed upon me that I could not sing a bit, and that I must wait for years and years before I dare open my mouth in public."

"And who is old Lalli?" asked Hubert, gathering up her music and beginning to turn it over.

Cynthia crossed her white hands and looked down, a shadow flitting across her mobile face.

"He is dead," she said softly. "He was a very kind old friend. He lodged in the house where I am lodging now. As long as he lived I always had somebody to advise me—somebody to depend on."

Her voice faltered a little. Some moisture was visible on the long dark eyelashes as they hung over the fresh young cheeks. Hubert thought again that he had never seen a woman half so [Pg 94] beautiful. The touch of emotion softened her loveliness—made it more human, more appealing. His tone was less light, but more simply friendly, when he addressed her again.

"Was he a musician?"

"He was a violinist in the Frivolity orchestra. He had been a singer once, I believe; at any rate, he knew a great deal about singing, and he used to give me lessons. He used to tear his hair, and frown and stamp a great deal," said Cynthia, smiling tenderly; "but he was kind, and I loved him very much."

"You met with him at the boarding-house where you live, I suppose?" said Hubert carelessly.

Cynthia gave him a sudden glance. The color came into her face.

"No," she said slowly; "he took me there." She raised her right hand and struck a few soft notes with it before she resumed her speech. "You would like to know how it was perhaps?" She made long pauses between her sentences, as if she were considering what to say and what to leave unsaid. "I came to London about four years ago, in great trouble. I had lost all my friends—not because I had done anything wrong, because of—other things. I wanted to get something to do in a shop or as a servant-girl—I did not care what. I tried all day, but nobody would give me work. I slept in the Park at night. Next day I began to search all over again, and again it was of no use. I had no money; I was very hungry and tired. I sat down on a step and cried, and at last some one said to me, 'What is the matter, my poor child?' And I looked up, frightened, and saw an old man with a long gray beard and very dark eyes and a kind face stooping over me. That was Signor Guido Lalli, of the Frivolity."

"I remember him in the band quite well," said Hubert. "He had a good face."

"Had he not?" exclaimed the girl, with sudden passion. "He was the kindest, wisest, best man I ever knew! I could not help trusting him, he looked so good. He made me tell him all about myself, and then he took me with him to the boarding-house in Euston Road where he lived, and said that he would be responsible to the landlady for me until I got something to do. And Mrs. Wadsley was so fond of him that she took me on trust for his sake. I don't believe she ever [Pg 95] suspected how little he really knew about me. And next day he took me to some friends of his, and between them they got me a little engagement at a theatre; and then I had a small speaking part, and so on—you know as well as I do how young actresses go from step to step—so that I was able to support myself after a time, and be no longer a burden upon him."

"And would he not let you sing?"

"No; he gave me lessons every day, and made me practise a long time; but I had to promise him that I would not sing to anybody but himself unless—unless I were obliged. I used to be angry about it; but he was so good to me that I always gave in to him in the end. I fancy now that he had a purpose in it all. When I was sufficiently trained, he wanted to take me to Mapleson or some other great *impresario*, and get him to bring me out in opera."

"Very likely. But you say he died?"

"Yes," said the girl, with a sigh, "he died—suddenly too, so that he did not even say good-bye. He was found dead one morning in his bed. Since then I have been all alone in the world; and I think Mr. Ferguson knew it, and wanted to take advantage of my position."

"No doubt of it."

"So then, as I had no engagement at the theatre, I thought I would see whether my voice would do anything for me. And, as I told you last night, I made up my mind to speak to you."

Hubert had stood with his arms on the piano, looking gravely down on the girl's bent face as she told her story. As she paused, she raised her head, and her great dark eyes looked straight into his with an expression of mute appeal which stirred his feelings strangely. It moved him so much that he was forced to take down his arms and turn aside from the piano for a moment or two; he scarcely wanted her to see how deeply he was touched. He soon came back to her side, however, and said—

"If I had refused to listen to you, what would you have done?"

"I don't know," she answered meditatively.

"You would have gone to some manager—some celebrated *impresario*?"

"And been snubbed and repulsed by one and all!" said, Cynthia, with sudden passion.

She rose from the music-stool and stood facing him; he saw her bosom rise and fall, he marked [Pg 96] the varying color in her cheeks, the light and shadow in her troubled eyes, as she poured out the impetuous words with which her heart was charged.

"I could not have borne it! I do not know how to put up with insult and contempt. I feel that I hate all the world when it treats me in that way. I never could be meek and good like other girls. I don't mean that I want to be wicked—I hope I am not wicked—but, if you had failed me, I think that I should have gone straight away to London Bridge and thrown myself into the river—for I should have had no hope left."

"My dear girl," said Hubert, rather gravely, "with that voice of yours you would have been very wrong to feel so easily discouraged."

"Oh, what would the voice matter if I could get nobody to listen to it?" cried Cynthia, with fiery scorn. "I may have a fortune in my voice, but how will the fortune benefit me if I can't have it for the next five or ten years, and am starving in the meantime? I could not have stayed more than a few days at Mrs. Wadsley's, as I had no money, and was not likely to earn any. If I was turned out, where was I to go? It is winter now, not summer, as it was when I slept in the Park four years ago, and dear old Lalli found me crying on the steps. A night out of doors in this weather would not leave me much voice to sing with, I fancy! No; I had made up my mind, Mr. Lepel—if you would not listen to me, I would go to London Bridge. If you think me wicked, I can't help it; it was my last resource."

With her cheeks flaming, her eyes gleaming beneath her black brows, it was plain that she was dominated by passion of no common strength, by will and pride which made it well-nigh impossible for her to lead an ordinary woman's life. Hubert looked at her, stupefied, fascinated by her beauty; he was penetrated by an admiration that he had never felt for a woman in all his life before. And she was a mere girl yet! He knew that she would be ten times more beautiful in a few years' time.

"You were right to come to me," he murmured, scarcely knowing what he said as he gazed into the depths of the lustrous dark eyes. "You need have no fear—you will succeed."

Cynthia drew a long breath. Her attitude changed a little; limbs and features seemed to relax, the [Pg 97] color died slowly out of her flushed cheeks.

"You mean," she said, in a lower voice, "that you do not think, after all, that I was very wrong—bold, unwomanly, I mean—to speak to you, when I did not know you, in the street last night?"

"Certainly not."

"I had no claim on you, I know," proceeded the girl, the light of excitement fading out of her face, and the perfect mouth beginning to quiver as she spoke. "It was only a fancy of mine that, as you had seemed to understand so well how dreadful it was to be alone—alone in this great terrible London—you would hold out a helping hand to a girl who only wanted work—just enough to gain her daily bread." She sobbed a little, and put her hand over her eyes.

"Miss West," said Hubert seriously, with a desperate effort to retain a composure which was very hard to keep, "I can only assure you that I shall consider it an honor to be allowed to help in bringing you to the notice of men, who will do far more for you than I can hope to do."

She withdrew her hand from her eyes and looked at him with a brilliant smile, though the tears were still wet on her eyelashes.

"You think I am worth helping?" she said. "And you will help me—you yourself?"

"I will not rest," answered Hubert. "I will work night and day, and give body and soul, and I'll see you a *prima donna* yet!"

They both laughed, and then, obeying an impulse which stirred their hearts alike, held out their hands to each other and exchanged a friendly grasp.

CHAPTER XV.

The little village of Beechfield, like all other villages, had its dark corners where vice and misery reigned supreme. In old times Mr. and Mrs. Rumbold—good people as they were in their own fashion—had been content to leave these darker places to themselves; the decent religious poor of the parish gave them enough to do. But under the new Rector's rule a new system had begun. [Pg 98] The Reverend Maurice Evandale thought that his duty lay amongst the lost sheep as well as amongst those already in the fold. If he had been at Beechfield in the days before Sydney Vane's death, he would never have let poor Andrew Westwood and his child remain outcasts from the interests of religious life. He would have visited them, talked to them, persuaded the child to go to school, perhaps even induced the poacher to give up his vagrant ways; at any rate, he would not have let them alone, but would have grappled fearlessly with the difficulties of their position, and with that hostility which seemed to exist between Westwood and the rest of the village. Whether he would have been successful or not it were indeed hard to say, but that he would have made a great effort to be so there can be no manner of doubt.

Mr. Evandale's new system produced a great sensation in the parish—not altogether a favorable sensation either; for the villagers, who had gone on so long in quiet, comfortable, self-complacent ways, did not regard with a favorable eye the changes which the Rector introduced. All the old abuses which had slumbered peacefully in darkness for so many years were exposed relentlessly by this too energetic young man. He swept away the village band of stringed instruments from the church gallery; he erected an organ in the chancel, and set the schoolmistress to play it; he introduced new tunes into the choir, new doctrines into the pulpit; he played havoc amongst all that was fusty and musty and venerable in the villagers' eyes. He talked about drainage, and had an inspector down to investigate the state of the village water-supply; he waged war upon the publicans, set up an institute and a library for the village youths, taught the boys, played with them—thrashed them too occasionally—and made himself a terror to evil-doers and the idol of the young ladies of the place. Naturally much was said against him, especially behind his back. To his face, people did not venture to say much. The young Rector had such a fearless way of looking straight into people's eyes, of saying what he meant and expecting other people to do the same, that he inspired something like fear in the shiftier and less trustworthy part of the community. On the other hand, the weak, the sick, the very young, instinctively loved and trusted [Pg 99] him. "He is beautiful in a sick-room," averred the elder women. Perhaps his words seemed beautiful to them because they felt that by some mysterious law of sympathy he understood their sorrows without having been a partaker in them, that he had an infinite pity for the erring and the suffering, and that he never felt himself less of a brother to his flock because so many of that flock were sinful and ignorant and degraded.

So, parson though he was, he became the friend and confidant of half the village; and strange tales were poured into his ear sometimes—tales which the tellers would formerly have laughed at the idea of relating to the Rector of the parish so long as Mr. Rumbold reigned supreme. But to Maurice Evandale nothing seemed to come amiss; he had interest and sympathy for all. Stern to impenitent sinners he certainly was—brutal men and idle lads cowered under the lash of his rebuke; but there was not a soul in the village who did not also know that a word of repentance, an act that showed a yearning after better things, was sufficient to melt the Rector's wrath and turn him from a judge and censor into a friend. Judging from the progress that Maurice Evandale had already made in the hearts of his people, there was a fair likelihood that if he stayed much longer he would be master of their affections and their intellects, in a way which was unprecedented indeed at Beechfield.

He was not often at Beechfield Hall. The General liked his society extremely, but Mrs. Vane declared that it fatigued her.

"The man is so oppressively blunt and downright," she said, "that one never knows what to expect from him next. He is a perfect bear."

"But, my dear Flossy, he comes of a very good family, and I have heard him praised on all sides for his distinguished manners," expostulated the General. "I never knew a young man so courteous, so polished!"

"I am spoiled for young men, General," said Flossy, extending her hand very graciously to her white-haired husband.

It was not often that she showed herself so actively amiable towards him. She was usually

somewhat passive, receiving his attentions with a languid indifference which would have disconcerted some men, but which did not disconcert the unsuspicious old General. He was delighted with her little compliment, kissed her hand gallantly, and avowed that nobody should come near the house whom she disliked. So Maurice Evandale was not invited a second time to dinner. [Pg 100]

Naturally Enid was not consulted in the matter. She never expressed any opinion at all concerning the new Rector. She had always been a regular church-goer, and, wet or fine, never failed to be present at the class over which she presided every Sunday afternoon. She was not a whit more regular in her attendance at church and school than she had been before, whereas giddy girls like the doctor's daughter and the lawyer's bevy of fair damsels, and even the members of a neighboring Squire's large family of girls, had all taken to attending Mr. Evandale's services and schools with unexampled regularity. Flossy, who seldom went to church herself, but always inquired diligently after the worshippers, and exacted an account of their names and number from her young kinswoman, used to utter sarcastic little jibs anent these young women's clearly-manifested preference for Mr. Evandale, and was heard to say rather sharply that, if Enid followed their example, it would be worth while to have the horses out on a Sunday and drive over to the cathedral of Whitminster, six miles away. But Enid never gave any sign of liking the new Rector any better than she had liked Mr. Rumbold; and, as to take the General away from the church in which he had knelt almost every Sunday since he came home from active service in India, after his old father's death, would have been to uproot one of the most deeply-rooted instincts in his life. Florence was wise enough to let the matter pass, and to content herself with wishing that the patron of the living had given it to an older man—or at least to a married man. There was always danger when a bachelor of eight-and-twenty, good-looking—indeed very handsome—and with a comfortable income, came into close contact with young and romantic girls. And Florence did not intend Enid to marry Mr. Evandale—she had other views for her.

It was strange to see how this white, silent, languid woman, whose only occupations in life seemed to be eating, sleeping, driving, and dressing, was able to mould the natures and ambitions of others to her liking. Behind the mask of Flossy's pensive beauty lay a brain as subtle, a will as inflexible, a heart as cold as ever daring criminal possessed. Nothing daunted or repelled her, and in other circumstances and other times her genius might have made her a mark for the execration of all succeeding ages. But her sphere was not large; she had but indifferent material to work upon in the seclusion of a country home and the company of an old country gentleman and his niece; and she could but do her best to gain her ends, even though the path of them lay across bleeding hearts and lives laid waste by her cruelty. [Pg 101]

Mr. Evandale had felt the same distaste for her society that she had expressed for his visits, and troubled himself not a little about the want of charity that he discovered in himself. To his clear and penetrating eyes there was a vein of falseness apparent in Mrs. Vane's most honeyed speeches; her narrowed eyes were too subtle for his taste; there were lines about her mouth which he had seen on faces of women whom he did not love. For the life of him he could not repress a certain honest gravity and even sternness of manner in addressing her; something in her revolted him—he did not know how or why. He almost pitied the General—the hearty, good old man who seemed so fond of his fair wife. And he was sorry for Enid too, not only on account of her sad story, but because she lived with this woman whom he distrusted, because she was ruled by her fancies and educated according to her desires. And he was even sorry—still without knowing why—for little Dick, whose quaint childish face always expanded into a broad smile at the sight of him, and whom he often met in the village, clinging fondly to Enid's hand.

When he dined at the Hall, he had scarcely seen Enid, for, on some plea of illness or fatigue, Mrs. Vane had kept her away from dinner, and her presence in the drawing-room for the last half hour of Evandale's stay had been a very silent one. But he often saw her in church. The Vanes' pew was just in front of the pulpit, and the Rector could not preach without noticing the steady attention given to him by the girl in the Squire's pew, could not fail to be struck by the sweetness of the fair uplifted face, the beauty of the pathetic eyes, in which there always lurked the shadow of some past or future pain. The Rector fell into the habit of preaching to that fair young face. [Pg 102] But, strangely enough, he did not preach as men usually preach to the young and innocent—his words were often of consolation for bitter grief, tender counsel for the afflicted, even of future hope and amendment for the guilty. Nothing less peculiarly appropriate to a young girl of seventeen than some of his sermons could be imagined—and yet they were all addressed to Enid Vane. It was as if he were trying to strengthen her for some dread conflict, some warfare of life and death, which his foreseeing eye discerned for her in days to come.

Enid was allowed to do a little district-visiting in the parish, and Mr. Evandale had often heard reports of her gentleness and goodness; but he had never personally encountered her on any of her errands of mercy. An exception to this rule, however, took place on a certain afternoon in November, a few weeks after Hubert Lepel's visit to Beechwood.

Mr. Evandale had on that day received information that one of his parishioners—a Mrs. Meldreth—was seriously ill and would like to see him. The informant added that she brought the Rector word of this, because Mrs. Meldreth's daughter Sabina was now at home, and seemed anxious to keep the clergyman away. The Rector's fighting instincts were at once aroused by this communication. He knew Sabina Meldreth by name only, and had not derived a very pleasant impression of her from all that he had heard. She had once been an under-housemaid at the Hall, but had been dismissed for misconduct—of what sort nobody could exactly say, although much was hinted at which the gossips did not put into words—and had left the village soon afterwards.

Since that time she had been seen at Beechfield only at intervals; she came occasionally to see her mother, and stated that she was "engaged in a millinery business at Whitminster, and doing well." Certainly her airs and graces, her plumes and jewelry, seemed to betoken that her finances were in a flourishing condition. But she never came to church, and was reported to talk in an irreverent manner, which made the Rector long to get hold of her for five minutes. With his strong convictions, Maurice Evandale could not bear to hear without protest of the insolent and almost profane sallies of wit by which, to his mind, Sabina Meldreth dishonored her Creator. He had long resolved to speak to her on the subject when next she visited Beechfield. Perhaps her mother's illness would have softened her and would make the Rector's task less difficult—for it was not his nature to love the administration of rebuke, although he held it to be one of his essential duties, when occasion required. [Pg 103]

Mrs. Meldreth was a respectable elderly woman, who kept a small shop for cheap groceries and haberdashery in the village. She did not do much business, but she lived in apparent comfort—probably, the neighbors said, because she was helped by her daughter's earnings. And then Mrs. Vane was unusually kind to her. Flossy did not interest herself much in the welfare of her poorer neighbors, but to Mrs. Meldreth she certainly showed peculiar favor. Many a gift of food and wine went from the Hall across Mrs. Meldreth's threshold; and it was noticed that Mrs. Meldreth was occasionally admitted to Mrs. Vane's own room for a private conference with the lady of Beechfield Hall herself. But those who commented wonderingly on that fact were reminded that Mrs. Meldreth added to her occupations that of sick-nurse, and that she had been in attendance on Mrs. Vane at the time of the young Squire's birth. It was natural that Mrs. Vane should be on more intimate terms with her than with any other of the village women.

Mrs. Meldreth was not an interesting person in the eyes of the world at large. She was a sad, silent, dull-faced individual, with blank looking eyes and a dreary mouth. There were anxious lines on her forehead and hollows in her pale cheeks, such as her easy circumstances did not account for. That she "enjoyed very poor health," according to the dictum of her neighbors, was considered by them to be a sufficient reason for Mrs. Meldreth's evident lack of peace of mind.

Mr. Evandale set off for his visit to the sick woman early in the afternoon. He was hindered on his way to her house by meeting with various of his friends of the humbler sort, whom he did not like to pass without a word, and it was after three o'clock before he reached Mrs. Meldreth's cottage. He entered the shop, which looked duller and more uninviting than ever, and found that it was tenanted only by a girl of thirteen—a girl whom he knew to be the stupidest in the whole of the village school.

"Well, Polly Moss," he said good-naturedly, "are you taking care of the shop?" [Pg 104]

Polly Moss, a girl whose mouth looked as if it would never close, beamed at him with radiant satisfaction, and replied—

"Yes, sir—I'm minding the shop, sir. Did you want any groceries to-day, please, sir?"

"No, thank you," said the Rector, smiling. "I have come to see Mrs. Meldreth, who, I hear, is ill."

"Yes, sir," said Polly, in a tone of resigned affliction. "I thought p'r'aps you was going to buy something, sir. I hain't sold anythink the 'ole afternoon."

"Polly," said Mr. Evandale, "how often am I to tell you to say the 'whole' afternoon, not the ''ole'?" The unlucky man had even made war on the natives' practice of leaving out their "h's"! "'Whole,' with an 'h,' remember! Well, I will buy something—what shall it be?—a pound of tea perhaps. Ah, yes! Two shillings a pound, isn't it? Pack it up and send it to the Rectory to-night, Polly; and here are the two shillings to put into the till. Now will you ask if I can see Mrs. Meldreth?"

Polly's shining face suddenly fell.

"I daren't leave the shop, sir," she said. "I left it this morning just for a minute or two, and Miss Meldreth said she'd skin me alive if ever I did so again. Would you mind, sir"—insinuatingly—"just a-going up the stairs and knocking at the door atop o' them? They'll be glad to see you, I'm sure, sir; and I daren't leave the shop for a single minute."

"All right," said the Rector. He was used to entering sick-rooms, and did not find Polly Moss' request very much out of the way. "I'll go up."

He passed through the shop and ascended the stairs, with every step of which he was familiar, as he had already visited Mrs. Meldreth during one or two previous attacks of illness, and was heard to knock at the sick woman's bed-room door.

"Oh, my," exclaimed Polly, as soon as he was out of reach, "and if I didn't go for to forget to tell him as 'ow Miss Enid was up there! Oh, my! But I don't suppose he'll mind! He's only the parson, after all."

CHAPTER XVI. [Pg 105]

When Mr. Evandale knocked at Mrs. Meldreth's door, he was aware of a slight bustle within, followed by the sound of voices in low-toned conference; then came a rather sharply-toned "Come

in!". As, however, the Rector still hesitated, the door was flung open by a young woman, whose very gestures seemed to show that she acted under protest, and would not have admitted him at all if she had had her own way. She was a fair-complexioned woman of perhaps thirty years of age, tall, well made, robust, and generally considered handsome; she had prominent light-blue eyes, and features which, without being badly cut, were indefinably common and even coarse-looking. In her cheeks a patch of exceptionally vivid red had so artificial an appearance, that the Rector could not believe it to be genuine; but later he gained an impression that it proceeded from excitement, and not from any adventitious source. The eyes of this woman were sparkling with anger; there was defiance in her every movement, even in the way in which her fingers were clenched at her sides or clutched the iron rail of the bed on which her mother lay. The Rector wondered at her evident disturbance; it must have proceeded from something, that had occurred before his entrance, he concluded, and he looked towards the bed as if to discover whether the cause of Sabina Meldreth's anger could be found there.

But no—surely not there! The Rector thought that he had seldom seen a fairer picture than the one which met his eyes. Goodness, gentleness, youth supporting age, beauty unabashed by feebleness and ugliness—these were the characteristics of the scene on which he looked. Poor Mrs. Meldreth lay back upon her pillows, her face wan and worn, her eyes wandering, her gray hair escaping from her close cap and straying over her forehead. But beside her knelt Enid Vane. The girl's arm was beneath the old woman's bowed shoulders; it was evident that in this position the invalid could breathe better and was more at ease. The sweet fair face, with its slight [Pg 106] indefinable shadow deepened at this moment into a look of perfect pity, was bent over the wrinkled, withered countenance of the sick woman. Never, the Rector thought, had he seen a lovelier picture of youth ministering to the wants of age.

But a sense of incongruity also struck him, and he turned rather quickly to Miss Meldreth, whose defiant eyes had been fixed upon him from the first moment of his entrance into the room.

"You are Mrs. Meldreth's daughter?" he said, in a quick but not unkindly undertone. "Why do you let the young lady there wait upon your mother? Can you not nurse her yourself, my good girl?"

Sabina Meldreth curtseyed, but in evident mockery, for the color in her cheeks grew higher, and her tone was anything but respectful when she spoke.

"Of course I can nurse my mother, sir, and of course a young lady like Miss Vane didn't ought to put her finger to anything menial," she said, with a sharpness which took the Rector a little by surprise. "I'm quite well aware of the difference between us. And"—anger now evidently gaining the upper hand—"if you'd tell Miss Vane to go, sir, I'd be obliged to you, for she is only exciting mother, and doing her no good."

"Your mother shows no symptoms of excitement," said the Rector quietly; "and I must say, Miss Meldreth, that your words do not evince the gratitude that I should have expected you to feel for the young lady's kindness."

"Kindness! Oh, kindness is all very well!" said Miss Meldreth, with an angry toss of her fair head. "But I don't know what kindness there is in disturbing my poor mother—reading hymns and psalms, and all that sort of thing!"

Mr. Evandale had hitherto wondered whether or no Miss Vane heard a word of Sabina Meldreth's acid utterances, but he had henceforward no room for doubt. The girl raised her head a little and spoke in a low but penetrating tone.

"Miss Meldreth," she said, "excuse me, but you yourself are disturbing your mother far more than I have done. See—she is beginning to be restless again; she cannot bear loud talking or altercation."

The Rector was astonished by the firmness of her tone. She was so graceful, so slight, so fragile-looking, that he had not credited her with any great strength of character, in spite of his admiration for her beauty. But what she said was perfectly true, and he hastened to lend her his support. [Pg 107]

"Quite so," he said approvingly. "Mrs. Meldreth should be kept quiet, I can see"—for the old woman had begun to moan and to move her head restlessly from side to side when she heard her daughter's rasping voice. "Perhaps you would step into another room with me, Miss Meldreth, and tell me how this attack came on—if, at least, Miss Vane does not mind being left with Mrs. Meldreth for a few minutes, or if she is not tired."

Enid answered with a faint sweet smile.

"I am not tired," she said. "And poor nurse wants to speak to me when she is able. She sent to tell me so. I can stay with her quite well."

But the proposition seemed to excite Sabina Meldreth almost to fury.

"If you think," she said, "that I am going to leave my mother alone with anybody—gentleman or lady—you are mistaken. If you want her to be quiet, leave her alone yourselves—she'll stay quiet enough if she's left to me."

"Sabina," said Enid, with a gentle dignity of tone which commanded the Rector's admiration and respect, "you know that your mother wanted me to come."

"I know that she's off her head!" said Sabina angrily. "She doesn't know what she says or what she wants. It's nonsense, all of it! And meaning no disrespect to you, Miss Vane"—in a lower but sulkier tone—"if you would but go away and leave her to me, she'd be all the better for it in the end."

"Hush!" said Enid, raising her hand—the serenity of her face was quite undisturbed by Sabina's expostulation. "She is coming to herself again—she is going to speak."

There was a moment's silence in the room. The sick woman was lying still; her eyes wandered and her lips moved, but as yet no articulate sound issued from them. In apparently uncontrollable passion, Sabina stamped violently and shook the rail of the iron bedstead with her hands.

"She ain't going to speak; she is off her head, I tell you! She ain't got anything to say."

The Rector looked at her steadily. For the first time it occurred to him that the younger woman had some unworthy motive in her desire to silence her mother and to get the listeners out of the room. Dislike of interference, jealousy, and bad temper would not entirely account, he thought, for her intense and angry agitation. Had Mrs. Meldreth and her daughter some secret which the mother would gladly confess and the girl was fain to hide? [Pg 108]

A feeble voice sounded from the bed.

"Is it Miss Enid?" said Mrs. Meldreth. "Has she come?"

"No," said Sabina boldly and loudly. "You go to sleep, mother, and don't you bother about Miss Enid."

"Miss Meldreth, how dare you try to deceive a dying woman?" said the Rector, so sternly that even Sabina quailed a little before the deep low tones of his voice. "Yes, Mrs. Meldreth, Miss Enid Vane is here, and you can say all that you wish to say to her."

"I am here, nurse," said Enid gently—she had always been in the habit of addressing Mrs. Meldreth by that title. "Do you want me?"

"Oh, my dearie," said the old woman dreamily, "and have you come to me after all? Sabina there, she tried to keep you away; but I had my will at last. Polly told you that I wanted you, didn't she, Miss Enid dear?"

"Yes, nurse, she told me."

"I'll pay Polly Moss out for that!" Sabina was heard to mutter between her closed teeth. But Enid took no notice of the words.

"I'd something to say to you, my dearie," said Mrs. Meldreth, whose voice, though feeble, was now perfectly distinct; "and 'dearie' I must call you, although I haven't the right to do it now. I held you in my arms, my dear, five minutes after you came into this here wicked world, and I've allus looked on you as one o' my own babies, so to speak."

The delicate color had flushed Enid's cheeks a little, but she answered simply, "Yes, dear nurse;" and, leaning down, she kissed the old woman's forehead.

The caress moved the Rector strangely. His heart gave an odd bound, the blood began to course more rapidly through his veins. He was a clergyman, and he was in the presence of a dying woman; but he was a man for all that, and at the moment when Enid's pure lips were pressed to her old nurse's brow, his whole being was stirred by a new emotion, which as yet he did not suspect was known amongst men by the name of love. [Pg 109]

Sabina Meldreth had withdrawn from her station at the foot of the bed; she had moved softly to the side, and now stood by her mother's pillow, opposite to Enid, with her eyes fixed watchfully, balefully, upon her mother's face. But Mrs. Meldreth seemed unconscious of her daughter's gaze.

"I've something to say to you, my pretty," she said, with long pauses between the sentences—longer and longer as the laboring breath became more difficult and the task of speech more painful. "Sabina would nigh kill me if she knew. But I can't die with this thing on my mind. If I've wronged you and yours, and my own flesh and blood as well, I want to make amends."

"Is she—does she know what she is saying?" said Enid, raising her eyes to the Rector's face, with a touch of doubt and alarm in their pensive depths.

Before Mr. Evandale could answer Sabina broke in wildly.

"No, she don't—she don't know what she's saying; I told you so before! She's got her head full of mad fancies; she's not responsible, and you've no business to listen to her ravings. It ain't fair—it ain't fair—it ain't fair!" She concluded with a sob of passion that broke, in spite of her efforts to control herself, from her whitening lips, but which brought no tears with it to her eyes.

"Control yourself," said the Rector gravely. "We shall make all allowance for your mother's state of mind. But, if there is anything that she ought to confess, any act of dishonesty or unfaithfulness while she served Miss Vane's parents or uncle, then let her speak and humble herself in the sight of God, in whose very presence she, like all of us, will shortly stand."

The Rector's solemn tones awed Sabina into momentary quiescence, and reached even the dying woman's dulled ears.

"It is the parson," she said feebly. "Yes, I'm glad he's here, and Miss Enid too. I can't go into the Almighty's presence with a lie on my lips—can I, parson? It would weigh me down—down—down to hell. I must confess!"

"You've nothing to confess," said Sabina, almost fiercely; "lie still and hold your tongue, mother! You'll only bring shame on us both; and it's not true—not true!" [Pg 110]

"You know then that your mother has something on her mind? In God's name be silent and let her speak!" said Mr. Evandale.

Enid looked up at her with wondering pity. Indeed Sabina Meldreth presented at that moment a strange and even tragic appearance. The hot unnatural color had left her cheeks, her ashy lips were strained back from her clenched teeth, her eyes were wide with an unspoken fear. Whatever she might say or leave unsaid, neither of those two persons who looked at her could doubt for another moment that Sabina Meldreth had a secret—a guilty secret—weighing heavily upon her mind.

Mrs. Meldreth's weak voice once more broke the silence.

"I never thought of its harming you, my dear," she said. "I thought you was rich and would not want houses and lands. And, when Mrs. Vane that now is came to me and said——"

She did not achieve her sentence. Sabina Meldreth had flown like a tigress at her mother's throat.

But, fortunately for Mrs. Meldreth, a strong and resolute man was in the room. He had already drawn nearer to Sabina, with a feeling that she was not altogether to be trusted, and, as soon as she made her first savage movement—so like that of a wild beast leaping on its prey—his hands were upon her, his strong arms holding her back. For a minute there was a frightful struggle. The Rector pinioned her arms; but she, with the ferocity of an undisciplined nature, flung her head sideways and fastened her teeth in his arm. Her strength and her agility were so great that the Rector could not easily disengage himself; and, although the cloth of his coat-sleeve prevented her attempt to bite from doing any great injury, the assault was sufficiently painful and sufficiently unexpected to protract the struggle longer than might have been anticipated. For, as she was a woman, Maurice Evandale did not like to resort to active violence, and it was with some difficulty that he at last mastered her and placed her in a chair, where for a few minutes he had to hold her until her struggles ceased and were succeeded by a burst of convulsive sobs. Then he felt that he might relax his hold, she ceased to be dangerous when she began to cry.

Enid had involuntarily withdrawn her arm from Mrs. Meldreth's shoulders, and sprung to her feet with a low cry when she saw the struggle that was taking place; but in a second or two she conquered her impulse to fly to the Rector's aid, and with rare self-control bent once more over the dying woman, who needed her help more than Mr. Evandale could. Poor Mrs. Meldreth was almost unconscious of the disturbance. Her eyes were glazing, her sight was growing feeble, the words that fell from her lips were broken and disconnected. But still she spoke—still she went on pouring her story into Enid's listening ears. [Pg 111]

When the Rector at last looked round, he saw an expression on Enid's face which chilled him to the bone. It was a look of unutterable woe, of grief, shame, agony, and profound astonishment. But there was no incredulity. Whatever Mrs. Meldreth had told her Enid had believed. The Rector made one step towards the bed.

"If you have anything to confess, Mrs. Meldreth," he began; but Enid interrupted him.

"She has confessed," said the girl, turning her face to him with a strange look of mingled humiliation and compassion—"she has confessed—and I—I have forgiven. Nurse, do you hear? God will forgive you, and I forgive you too."

"God will forgive," murmured the woman.

A smile flickered over her pale face. Then a change came; the light in her eyes went out, her jaw fell. A slight convulsion passed through her whole frame, and she lay still—very still. The confession, great or small, that she had made had been heard only by Enid and her God.

CHAPTER XVII.

"It is all over," said Maurice Evandale, looking gravely at the dead woman's face. "It is all over, and may God have mercy upon her soul!"

He left Sabina, who was sobbing hysterically as she sat huddled up in the chair on which he had placed her, and came to Enid's side. She turned to him with sorrowful appeal.

"Is she dead? Can nothing be done?" [Pg 112]

"Nothing. Come away, Miss Vane; this is no place for you. One moment! Have you anything to say to this woman? Have you any charge to bring?"

He pointed to Sabina as he spoke, and she, roused for an instant, raised a mute terrified face

from her hands, and seemed to shrink still lower in her chair, as if she would willingly have hidden herself and her secret, whatever it might be, out of sight of all the world. She waited—waited—evidently with dread—for the accusation that she expected from Enid's lips. The Rector waited also, but the accusation did not come. There was a moment's utter silence in the chamber of death.

"Have you anything to say?" asked Maurice Evandale at last.

Then Enid spoke.

"No," she answered, with quivering lips; "I can say nothing. I—I forgave her—before she died;" and then she turned away and went swiftly out of the room, leaving the others to follow or linger as they pleased.

Sabina rose from her chair and stood as if dazed, stupefied by her position. All her fierceness and defiance had left her; her face was white, her eyes were downcast, her hands hung listlessly at her sides. The Rector paused and spoke.

"You hear what Miss Vane said?"

She made no answer.

"I do not know what you or your mother may have done. Some secret guilt evidently weighed upon her soul. Whatever it may be, she confessed her guilt and received forgiveness. Sabina Meldreth, in the presence of your dead mother and of your living God, I call upon you to do the same. If you would find mercy in the hour of your own death, confess your sin, whatever it may be, and you shall be forgiven."

Still she stood silent and almost motionless, but her teeth gnawed at her white lips as if to bite them through.

"You will have no better time than the present," said the Rector. "If there is anything that you feel should be confessed, confess it now. It is God's voice calling to you, not mine. Your mother cleared her conscience before she died, do you the same. I bid you in God's name."

Maurice Evandale did not often speak after this fashion; he was no fanatic, no bigot, but he [Pg 113] believed intensely in the great eternal truths which he preached, and in the presence of death—in the presence also, as he believed, of mortal sin—he could not do less than appeal to what was highest and best in the nature of the woman before him. What she had to accuse herself of he could not possibly imagine; but he knew that there was something. By the dead woman's incoherent words, by Sabina Meldreth's violence, by Enid's stricken look of perplexity and pain, he knew that something lay hidden which ought to be brought to light.

The winter's day was drawing to a close. Through the uncurtained window the light stole dimly, and the reddened coals in the tiny grate threw but a feeble gleam into the room. In every corner shadows seemed to cluster, and the dead woman's face looked horribly pale and ghastly in the surrounding gloom. The Rector waited with a feeling that the moment was unutterably solemn; that it was fraught with the destiny of a suffering, sinning human being—for aught he knew, with the destinies of more than one. Suddenly the woman before him threw up her hands as if to shut out the sight of her dead mother's face.

"I have nothing to tell you—nothing!" she cried. "What business have you here? You teased my mother out of her last few minutes of life, and now you want to get the mastery over me! It's my house now, my room—not my mother's—and you may go out of it."

"Is that all you have to say," asked the Rector gravely—"even in her presence, Sabina Meldreth?"

"Yes, that's all," she answered, the old fierceness creeping back into her tones. "What else should I have to say? I suppose you can have me taken up for assault; Miss Vane will bear witness in your favor fast enough, no doubt. I don't care!"

"Do you not care even when you think what I kept you back from?" said Mr. Evandale. "Your mother was old, weak, dying, and you threw yourself upon her with violence. You will remember that some day, and will bless me perhaps because I withheld your hand. Your attack upon me matters nothing. I am willing to believe that you did not know what you were doing. I will leave you know—it is not seemly that we should discuss this matter any further. But, if ever you want help or counsel—and the day may come, my poor woman, when you may want both—then come [Pg 114] to me."

He opened the door, went out, and closed it behind him, leaving Sabina Meldreth alone with the dead.

He found two or three women down-stairs already; Enid Vane must have told Polly, as she passed through the shop, that Mrs. Meldreth's end had come. As soon as he had gone, two of them went up-stairs to perform the necessary offices in the chamber of death. They found Sabina stretched on the floor in a swoon, from which it was long before she recovered.

"You wouldn't ha' thought she had so much feeling in her," said one of the women to the other, as they ministered to her wants.

Meanwhile the Rector strode down the village street, straining his eyes in the twilight, and glancing eagerly from side to side, in his endeavor to discover what had become of Miss Vane. He

knew that she had probably never been out so late unattended in her life before; lonely as her existence seemed to be, she was well cared for, anxiously guarded, and surrounded by every possible protection. He had been surprised to find her in Mrs. Meldreth's cottage so late in the afternoon. Only the exigencies of the situation had prevented him from following her at once when she left the house—only the stern conviction that he must not, for the sake of Miss Vane's bodily safety and comfort, neglect Sabina Meldreth's soul. But, when he felt that his duty in the cottage was over, he sallied forth in search of Enid Vane. She had been wearing a long fur-lined cloak, he remembered, and on her head a little fur toque to match. The colors of both were dark; at a distance she could not be easily distinguished by her dress. And she had at least three-quarters of a mile to walk—through the village, down-hill by the lane, past the fir plantation where her father had been found murdered, and a little way along the high-road—before she would reach her own park gate. The Rector, like all strong men, was very tender and pitiful to the weak. The thought of her feeling nervous and frightened in the darkness of the lane was terrible to him; he felt as if she ought to be guarded and guided throughout life by the fearless and the strong.

He walked down the street—it was a long straggling street such as often forms the main thoroughfare of a country village—but he saw nothing of Enid. At the end of the street were some [Pg 115] better-built houses, with gardens; then came the Rectory and the church. He paused instinctively at the churchyard gate. Surely he saw something moving amongst the tombs over there by the railed-in plot of ground that marked the vault, in which lay the mortal remains of Sydney and Marion Vane? Had she gone there? Was it Enid's slender form that crouched beside the railings in the attitude of helpless sorrow and despair?

The Rector did not lose a moment in finding out. He threw open the gate, dashed down the pathway, and was scarcely astonished to discover that his fancy was correct. It was Enid Vane who had found her way to her parents' grave, and had slipped down upon the frosted grass, half kneeling, half lying against the iron rails.

One glance, and Evandale's heart gave a leap of terror. Had she fainted, or was she dead? It was no warm, conscious, breathing woman whom he had found—it was a rigid image of death, as stiff, as sightless, as inanimate as the corpse that he had left behind. He bent down over her, felt her pulse, and examined the pupils of her eyes. He had had some medical training before he came to Beechfield, and his knowledge of physiological details told him that this was no common faint—that the girl was suffering from some strange cataleptic or nervous seizure, for which ordinary remedies would be of no avail.

The Rectory garden opened into the churchyard. Maurice Evandale had not a moment's hesitation in deciding what to do. He lifted the strangely rigid, strangely heavy figure in his arms, and made his way along the shadowy churchyard pathway to the garden gate. The great black yews looked grim and ghostly as he left them behind and strode into his own domain, where the flowers were all dead, and the leafless branches of the fruit-trees waved their spectral arms above him as he passed. There was something indefinably unhomelike and weird in the aspect of the most familiar places in the winter twilight. But Maurice Evandale, by an effort of his strong will, banished the fancies that came into his mind, and fixed his thoughts entirely upon the girl he was carrying. How best to restore her, what to do for her comfort and her welfare when she awoke—these were the thoughts that engrossed his attention now.

He did not go to the front-door. He went to a long window which opened upon the garden, and [Pg 116] walked straight into his own study. A bright fire burned in the grate; a lamp was placed on the table, where books and papers were heaped in true bachelor confusion. A low broad sofa occupied one side of the room; the Rector deposited his burden upon it, and then devoted himself seriously to the consideration of the case before him.

Enid lay white, motionless, rigid, where he had placed her; her eyelids were not quite closed, and the eyes were visible between the lids; her lips were open, but the teeth were tightly closed; a slight froth showed itself about her mouth.

"It is no faint," the Rector said to himself. "It is a fit, a nervous seizure of some sort. If she does not revive in a minute or two, I shall send for Ingledew"—Ingledew was the village doctor—"and in the meantime I'll act on my own responsibility."

Certain reviving measures were tried by him, and apparently with success. The bluish whiteness of the girl's face changed to a more natural color, her teeth relaxed, her eyelids drooped. Evandale drew a quick breath of relief when he saw the change. He was able to pour a few drops of brandy down her throat, to chafe the unresisting hands, to bathe the cold forehead with some hope of affording relief. He did all as carefully and tenderly as if he had been a woman, and he did not seem to wish for any other aid. Indeed he had locked the door when he first came in, as if to guard against the chance of interruption.

Presently he heard her sigh; then tears appeared on her lashes and stole down her cheeks. Her limbs fell into their natural position, and she put up her hand at last with a feeble, uncertain movement, as if to wipe away her tears. Evandale drew back a little—almost out of her sight. He did not want to startle her.

"Where am I?" she said, in a tremulous voice.

"You are at the Rectory, Miss Vane," said Maurice Evandale quietly. "You need not be at all alarmed; you may have heard that I am something of a doctor, and, as I found that you did not

seem well, I took the liberty of bringing you here."

"I don't remember," she said softly, opening her blue eyes and looking at him—without shyness, as he noticed, but with a kind of wistful trust which appealed to all the tenderness of his nature. [Pg 117] "Did I faint?" There was a slight emphasis on the last word.

"You were unconscious for a time," said the Rector. "But I hope that you feel better now."

She gave him a curious look—whether of shame or of reproach he could not tell—then buried her face in the pillows and began to cry quietly, with her fingers before her eyes.

"My dear Miss Vane, can I not do anything for you? I will call the housekeeper," said the Rector, driven almost to desperation by the sight of her tears. It was always very painful to him to see a woman cry.

"No, no!" she said, raising her head for a moment. "No—don't call any one, please; I shall be better directly. I know what was the matter now."

She dried her eyes and tried to calm herself, while the Rector stood by the table in the middle of the room, nervously turning over books and pamphlets, and pretending not to see that she was crying still.

"Mr. Evandale," she said at length, "I don't know how to thank you for being so kind. I must tell you——"

"Don't tell me anything that is painful to you, Miss Vane."

"It will not be painful to tell you after your great kindness to me. I—I am subject to these attacks. The doctors say that they do not exactly understand the case, but they think that I shall outgrow them in course of time. I have not had one for six months till to-night." She burst into tears again.

"But, my dear child,"—he could not help saying it—the words slipped from his lips against his will —"there is nothing to be so troubled about; a little faintness now and then—many people suffer from it."

"Ah, you do not understand!" she said quickly. "It is not faintness at all. I am often quite conscious all the time. I remember now how you found me and brought me here. I was not insensible all the time, but I cannot move or speak when I am like that. It has been so ever since —ever since my father died." She lowered her voice, as if she were telling something that was terrible to her.

"I see," said Mr. Evandale kindly—"it is an affection of the nerves, which you will get over when you are stronger. I hope that you do not make a trouble of that?" His eyes looked steadily into [Pg 118] hers, and he noted with pain the strange shadow that crossed them as he gazed.

"My uncle and his wife," she murmured, "will not let anybody know. They are—they are ashamed of it, and of me. If I do not get better, they say that I shall some day go out of my mind. Oh, it is terrible—terrible to feel a doom of this sort hanging over one, and to know that nothing can avert it! I had hoped that it was all over—that I should not have another attack; but you see—you see that I hoped in vain! It is like a black shadow always hanging over me, and nothing—nothing will ever take it away!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

For a moment even the stout-hearted Rector was appalled. But Enid, although she was watching him intently, could not read anything but unfaltering sympathy and ready cheer in the glance that he gave her and the words that rose almost immediately to his tongue.

"Courage! Doctors are very often wrong," he said. "Besides, I do not see why such an ending should be feared, even if there were any constitutional tendency of the kind in your family, which there is not."

"No," said Enid, less timidly than before; "I believe there is not. I have asked."

"Your attacks are only nervous, my dear Miss Vane. The very fact of your having—foolishly, I think—been, told the doctor's theories has made it less possible for you to strive against the malady; and yet you say that it has not made progress lately. You have not been ill in this way for six months?"

"No, not for six months."

"Don't you see that the excitement and fatigue of to-day's expedition, and the sad scene which we have just witnessed, would be likely to increase any ailment of the nervous system? You must not argue anything from what has happened to-day. Forgive me," the Rector broke off to say, with a smile—"I am talking like a doctor to you, and my medical skill is small indeed. It is only large [Pg 119] enough to enable me to assure you, Miss Vane, of my conviction that your fears are ungrounded, and that you are tormenting yourself to no purpose. Will you try to take my advice and turn your thoughts away from this unhappy subject?"

"I will try," answered Enid, with rather a bewildered look. "But," she added a moment later, "I thought that I ought to be always on my guard; and one cannot be on one's guard without thinking about the matter."

"Who told you that you ought to be always on your guard?"

"Flossy—I mean Mrs. Vane. She is very kind, and watches me constantly. Oh, I forgot," said the girl, starting to her feet, and clasping her hands before her with a look of wretched nervous terror which went to the Rector's heart—"I forgot—I forgot——"

"What did you forget?" said Evandale, wondering for a moment whether her mind was not unhinged by all that she had passed through that afternoon. Then, touched by her evident distress, he went on more lightly, "I have been forgetting that you will be missed from the Hall by this time, and that the whole country-side will be out after you if we do not go back at once. I will send for a carriage and drive down with you, if you will allow me."

Enid sank back on the sofa and assented listlessly. Mr. Evandale left the room, and sent in his absence a comfortable-looking old housekeeper with wine and biscuits, offers of tea and coffee, and all sorts of medicaments suitable to a young lady who had been faint and unwell—as was only to be expected after witnessing the death of Mrs. Meldreth, that troublesome old person having expired quite suddenly that afternoon when Miss Vane and Mr. Evandale were both at her bedside. Enid was not inclined to accept any of Mrs. Heale's attentions, but, out of sheer dislike to hurting her feelings, she at last accepted a cup of tea, and was glad of the reviving warmth which it brought to her cold and tired limbs. And then Mr. Evandale returned.

"There is no carriage at the inn," he said; "and I am sorry to say, Miss Vane, that I do not possess one that would suit you—I have only a high dog-cart and a kicking mare; so I have taken the liberty of sending down to the Hall and telling Mrs. Vane that you are here; and she will no doubt [Pg 120] send a carriage for you. I wrote a little note to her—it was the best thing, I thought, that I could do."

"Yes," said Enid, almost inaudibly. Then she leaned back and closed her eyes, looking as if she felt sick and faint.

Mrs. Heale glided away, in obedience to a nod from her master, and the Rector was once more alone with Enid Vane.

"I hope," he said, with a slight hesitation, which was rather graceful in a man of his commanding stature and singular loftiness of bearing—"I hope, Miss Vane, you will not think that I have been intrusive when I tell you that I entreated Sabina Meldreth to confess anything that might weigh upon her conscience, as her mother had confessed to you."

A great wave of crimson suddenly passed over Enid's pallid cheeks and brow. She raised a pair of startled eyes to the Rector's' face, and then said quickly—

"Did she tell you?"

"No, Miss Vane, she did not."

"Then will you promise me," said Enid, with sudden earnestness, "never to ask her again?"

"How can I do that? It may be my duty to ask her for her soul's sake; you would be the last to counsel me to be silent then."

"Oh, but you do not understand! I know now—I know what is weighing on Sabina Meldreth's mind; and I have forgiven her."

"It was a wrong done to you?"

"Yes—to me."

"And to no one else?" Enid's head drooped.

"I don't know—I can't tell. I must think it over."

"Yes—think and pray," said the Rector gravely but tenderly; "and remember that truth should always prevail."

"I know—I believe it; but it would do more harm than good."

"Miss Vane, if I am indiscreet, I trust you will pardon me. If by any chance this confession has reference to the death of your father, Mr. Sydney Vane, it is your duty to make it known, at any cost to your own feelings."

The girl looked up with an expression of relief.

"It does not bear on that subject at all, Mr. Evandale." [Pg 121]

"I am glad. You will forgive me for alluding to it? A wild fancy crossed my mind that it had something to do with that."

"I shall never forget your kindness," said Enid gratefully.

"And if you are in perplexity—in any trouble—will you trust me to do all for you that is in my

power? If you ever want help, you will remember that I am ready—ready for all—all that you might require——"

He never finished his speech, which was perhaps fortunate for him. With Enid's soft eyes, slightly distressed and appealing in expression, looking straight into his own, with the sight before him of her pale, wistful face, the lovely lips which had fallen into so pathetic a curve of weariness and sorrow, how could the Rector be expected to preserve his self-possession? His thoughts and his words became confused; he did not quite know what he was saying, nor whether she heard and understood him aright. He was glad to remember afterwards that the expression of her countenance did not change; he brought neither alarm nor astonishment into her eyes; there were only gentle gratitude and a kind of hopelessness, the meaning of which he could not fathom, in the girl's still raised listening face. But at that very moment a knock came to the door; and half to the Rector's relief, half to his embarrassment, the General himself walked in.

"Ah, thank Heaven, she is here!" were the old man's first words. "We thought she was lost, Mr. Evandale—we did indeed. I met your messenger on the way to the Hall, and sent him on for the carriage. A pretty time you've given us, young lady!" he said, smiling at Enid and pinching her chin, and then grasping the Rector's hand with a look of relief and gratitude which told its own story.

"Miss Vane has been a good deal distressed and upset," said Mr. Evandale. "She was at Mrs. Meldreth's bedside when the old woman died this afternoon, and the scene was naturally very painful. I brought her here that she might rest and recover herself a little before going home."

He wanted to explain and simplify matters for Enid's benefit; he had grasped the fact that her uncle's entrance was making her exceedingly nervous. He put it down to fear of the General's [Pg 122] anger, but it afterwards occurred to him that Mrs. Meldreth's confession might, for some reason or other, be the cause of her agitation. Certainly her distress and confusion were at that moment very marked. She had risen from her seat at his entrance, her color changing to crimson and then to dead white more than once during the Rector's speech. It settled at last into a painful pallor, which so impressed the General that he did not even administer the gentle rebuke which he had intended Enid to receive for her infringement of the rules on which her life was based. He could not scold her when she stood before him, pale to the very lips, her eyelids cast down, her hands joined together and nervously trembling, a very embodiment of conscious guilt and shame.

"Bless my soul, she does look upset, and no mistake!" he exclaimed, in his hearty and impulsive way. "Come, my dear—don't be so miserable about it! I daresay you did not know how late it was, and the poor woman could not be left. Yes, I quite understand; and I will explain it all to your aunt. Sit down and rest until the carriage comes, as the Rector does not mind our invasion of his study."

Mr. Evandale made some polite but slightly incoherent rejoinder, to which nobody listened, for the General's attention was at that moment completely monopolised by Enid, who on feeling his arm around her, suddenly hid her white face on his shoulder and burst into tears.

"Oh, uncle," she sobbed, "you are so kind—so good! Forgive me!"

"Forgive you, my dear? There is nothing to forgive!" said the astonished General, in a slightly reproving tone. "Of course I do not like your staying out so late on a winter afternoon, but you need not make such a fuss about it, my child. You must control yourself, control yourself, you know. There, there—don't cry! What will Mr. Evandale think of you? Why, bless me, Evandale has gone! Well, well, you need not cry—I am not angry at all—only stop crying—there's a good girl!"

"Say you forgive me, uncle!" moaned Enid, heedless of his rather disconnected remarks, which certainly had no bearing at all on the dilemma forced upon her by the nature of Mrs. Meldreth's confession.

"Forgive you, my dear? Why, of course I do! You're a little upset, are you not? But you must not [Pg 123] give way like this—it'll never do—never do," said the General, patting her on the back benevolently. "There now—dry your eyes, like a good girl; and I think I hear the carriage in the lane, so we must be going. You've no idea how anxious about you poor dear Flossy has been all the afternoon."

He was pleased to see that her tears were checked. She raised herself from his shoulder and brushed away the salt drops with which her cheeks were wet; but she sobbed no longer, and she stood perfectly still and calm. He was not a man of keen observation; and, if the cold white look which suddenly overspread her countenance had any meaning, it was not one that he was likely to read aright.

A servant brought the intelligence that the carriage was at the door, and shortly afterwards the Rector appeared. He had slipped away when Enid burst into tears, hoping that she might confide to the General what she had refused to confide to him; but a glance at the faces of the two told him that his hopes had not been realised. The kindly complacency which characterised the General's countenance was undisturbed, while Enid's face bore the impress of mingled perplexity and despair. It seemed to Maurice Evandale that each expression would have been changed if Enid had bared her heart to her uncle. He did not know—he could not even guess—what her secret was; but he instinctively detected the presence of trouble, perhaps of danger.

The two men parted very cordially; for the General was deterred from seeing much of the Rector

only by Mrs. Vane's dislike of him, and his kindly feeling was all the more effusive because he had so few opportunities of expressing it. Enid took leave of the Rector with a look, a wan little smile which touched him inexpressibly.

"You have part of my secret," it seemed to say. "Help me to bear the burden; I am weak and need your aid." He vowed to himself that he would do all that a man could do—all that she might ever ask. But Enid was quite unconscious of having made that mute appeal.

She lay back in a corner of the carriage, saying she was too tired to talk. The General left her in peace, but took one of her little hands and held it tenderly between his own. He could not [Pg 124] imagine why it trembled and fluttered so much, why once it seemed to try to drag itself away. The poor girl must be quite overdone, he thought to himself; she was far too kind, too tender-hearted to go about amongst the village people and witness all their woes; she was not strong enough to do such work—he must speak to Flossy about it. And, while he was thus thinking, the carriage turned in at the park gates and presently halted at the great front-door. The servants came forward to assist the General, who was a little stiff in his joints now and then; and he, in his turn, gave an arm to Enid as she alighted. The old butler looked at her curiously as she entered and stood for a moment, dazed and bewildered, in the hall. Miss Enid was always pale, but he had never seen her look so white and scared. She must be ill, he decided, and especially when she shrank so oddly as he deferentially mentioned his mistress' name.

"My mistress hoped that you would come to her sitting room as soon as you arrived, ma'am," he said.

She made a strange answer.

"No, no—I cannot—I cannot see her to-night!"

The General was instantly at her side.

"Enid, my dear, what do you mean? Your aunt wants to see you. She won't be vexed with you—I'll make it all right with her," he added, in a lower tone. "She has been terribly anxious about you. Come—I will take you to her room."

"Not just now, uncle—not to-night," said the girl, in a tone of mingled pain and dread. "I—I can't bear it—I am ill—I must be alone now!"

"My dear child, you must go to bed and rest. I'll explain it all to Flossy. She will come to see you."

"No, no—I can't see any one! Forgive me, uncle; I hardly know what I am saying or doing. I shall be better to-morrow. Till then—till then at least I must be left in peace!"

She broke from his detaining hand with something so like violence, that the General looked after her in wonder as she ran up-stairs.

"She must be ill indeed!" he murmured thoughtfully to himself, as he wended his way to his wife's boudoir, to make his report to Flossy.

Meanwhile Enid's progress up-stairs was barred for a moment by her little playmate and scholar, [Pg 125] Dick, who ran out of his nursery to greet her with a cry of joy. To his surprise and mortification, cousin Enid did not stop to kiss him—did not even give him a pleasant word or smile. With a stifled cry she disengaged her frock from his hand, breaking from him as she had broken from the General just before, and sped away to her own room. He heard her turn the key in her door, and, for the first time realising the enormity of the woe that had come upon him—the unprecedented fact that cousin Enid had been unkind—he lifted up his voice and bursted into a storm of sobs, which would at any ordinary time have brought her instantly to his side to comfort and caress.

But this time Enid either did not hear or did not heed. She was crouching down by the side of her bed, with her face hidden in the coverlet, and her hands pressed over her ears, as if to exclude all sound of the world without; and between the difficult passionate sobs by which her whole frame was shaken, one phrase escaped from her lips from time to time—a phrase which would have been unintelligible enough to an ordinary hearer, but would have recalled a long and shameful story to the minds of Florence Vane and one other woman in the world.

"Sabina Meldreth's child!" she muttered to herself not knowing what she said. "How can I bear it? Oh, my poor uncle! Sabina Meldreth's child!"

CHAPTER XIX.

Hubert Lepel had promised to spend Christmas Day at Beechfield, but for some unexplained reason he stayed away, sending at the last moment a telegram which his sister felt to be unsatisfactory. Flossy did not often exert herself to obtain a guest; but on this occasion she wrote a rather reproachful letter to her brother, and begged him not to fail to visit them on New Year's eve. "The General was disappointed," she wrote, "and so was someone else." Hubert thought that she meant herself, felt a thrill of wondering compassion, and duly presented himself at the Hall on the thirty-first of December.

He saw Flossy alone in her luxurious boudoir before anyone else knew of his arrival. He thought her looking ill and haggard, and asked after her health. To his surprise, the question made her angry. [Pg 126]

"Of course I am not well—I am never well," she answered; "but I am no worse than usual. There is someone else in the house whose appearance you had better enquire after."

"You are fond of talking in riddles. Do you mean the General?" said Hubert drily.

"No, not the General," Florence answered, setting her lips.

Hubert shrugged his shoulders and changed the subject. He had not an idea of what she meant; but when, shortly before dinner, he first saw Enid, a light flashed across his mind—Flossy meant that the girl was ill. He had certainly been rather dense and rather unkind, he thought to himself, not to ask after her. And how delicate she was looking! What was the matter with her? It was not merely that she was thinner and paler, but that an indefinable change had come over her countenance. The shadow that had always lurked in her sweet eyes seemed to have fallen at last over her whole face, darkening its innocent candor, obscuring its tranquil beauty; the look of truthfulness and of ignorance of evil had gone. No child-face was it now—rather that of a woman who had been forced to look evil in the face, and was repelled and sickened at the sight. There was no joy in the eyes with which Enid now looked upon the world.

Hubert watched her steadily through the long and elaborate meal which the General thought appropriate to New Year's eve, noting her weariness, her languor, her want of interest in anything that went on, and could not understand the change. Was this girl—sick apparently in body and mind—the guileless maiden who had listened with such flattering attention to the stories of his wanderings in foreign lands, when he last came down to Beechfield Hall? He tried her with similar tales—they had no interest for her now. She was silent, *distraite*, preoccupied. Still gentle and sweet to every one, she was no longer bright; smiles seemed to be banished for ever from her lips.

She and Florence scarcely spoke to each other. The General did not seem to notice this fact; but Hubert had not been half an hour in their company before he recognised its force. They must have quarrelled, he said to himself rather angrily—Flossy had probably tried to tyrannise, and the girl had resented her interference. Flossy was a fool; he would speak to her about it as soon as he had the opportunity, and get the truth from her—forgetting for the moment that, if ever a man set himself an impossible task, it was this one of getting the truth from Flossy. [Pg 127]

Before dinner was ended, the sound of footsteps, the tuning of instruments; the clearing of voices could be distinguished in the hall. Hubert glanced at his host for explanation, which was speedily given.

"It is the village choir," he said confidentially. "They come on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, and sing in the hall. When they have finished, they all have a glass of wine and drink our healths before they go down to supper in the kitchen. It's an old custom."

"And a very disagreeable one," said Mrs. Vane calmly. "Your ears will be tortured, Hubert, by the atrocious noise they make. With your permission, Enid and I will go to the drawing-room;" and, glancing at Enid, she rose from her chair.

"My dear Flossy, I entreat of you to stay!" said the General. "You have never gone away before—it would hurt their feelings immensely. I have sent word for Dick to be brought down; I mean them to drink his health too, bless the little man! It will be quite a slight to us all if you go away."

Flossy smiled ironically, but she looked at Enid in what Hubert thought a rather peculiar way. He knew his sister's face very well, and he could not but fancy that there was some apprehension in the glance. Enid sat still, looking at the tablecloth before her. Her face had grown perceptibly paler, but she did not move. A little spot of red suddenly showed itself on each of Mrs. Vane's delicate cheeks.

"Well, Enid, what do you say?" she asked, with less languor of utterance than usual. "Do you wish to suffer a purgatory of discord? Come—let us go to the drawing-room; nobody will notice whether we are here or not."

"My dear, I said I wished you to stay," began the General anxiously; but Florence only laughed a little wildly, and beat her fan once or twice upon the table.

"Come, Enid. We have had music enough, surely! You are coming?" [Pg 128]

"No, I am going to stay here," said the girl, without raising her eyes. Her tone was exceedingly cold.

Flossy bit her lip, laughed again, and sank back into her chair with an air of would-be indifference.

"If you stay, I suppose I must," she said lightly; but there was a strange glitter in her narrowed eyes, and she bit her lip with her little white teeth so strongly and so sharply as to draw the blood.

"Here comes Dick," said the General, whose placidity was quite restored by his wife's consent to stay—"here he comes! There, my boy—seen Uncle Hubert yet? Go and kiss him, and then come

back to me and I'll give you some dessert."

The fair-haired little fellow looked smaller and shyer than Hubert remembered him. He had very little color in his face, but his eyes lighted up joyfully when he saw the visitor, and he put his arms around Hubert's neck with such evident satisfaction that his uncle felt quite flattered. But, when Dick was perched upon his father's knee, and the singers had struck up their first florid chant, he was surprised to find that Enid had raised her blue eyes and was steadily regarding him with a searching yet sorrowful look, which seemed as if it would explore the inmost recesses of his soul. For various reasons Hubert felt that he could not long endure that gaze. The best way of stopping it was to return it, and therefore, although with an effort which was almost agonising, he suddenly looked back into her eyes with a composure and resolute boldness which caused her own very speedily to sink. The color rose to her face, she gave a slight quickly-suppressed sigh, and she did not look up again. Puzzled, troubled, vaguely suspicious, Hubert wondered whether his calm reception of her gaze had silenced the doubt of him, which he was nearly sure that he read in those sad blue eyes. He knew that Flossy was watching him and watching her, and he envied the General his guileless enjoyment of all that was going on, and little Dick's innocent pleasure in what was to him a great and unwonted treat.

When two songs had been sung, with much growling of the bass and a general misconception of the functions of a tenor, with great scraping of violin strings and much want of harmony amongst [Pg 129] the 'cellos, the General called the butler and told him to open the door. The dining-room had two wide folding-doors opening into the hall, and, when they were flung open, a motley crowd of village faces could be seen. A row of shrill-voiced chorister boys, much muffled up in red comforters, stood foremost; behind them came the singing men and the performers on instruments—a diverse little crowd of men and youths. In the background, some six or eight singing women and girls presented a half-bold, half-shy appearance, as knowing that they were there on sufferance only, and that the Rector had been doing his best to prevent their going out at nights to sing with the village choir. But the General had "backed them up;" he did not like the discontinuance of old customs, and was inclined to think the Rector unduly strict. Accordingly they stood in their accustomed places, but, as most of them felt, probably for the last time on New Year's Eve.

The faces of men and women and children, with one exception, were wreathed in smiles; but that one exception was notable indeed. Hubert, with his trained powers of keen observation, observed a lowering face directly. It was that of tall young woman neatly dressed in black—a young woman with fair hair curled over her forehead and rather prominent blue eyes—a coarse-looking girl, he thought, in spite of her pale coloring and sombre garments. Her brows were drawn together over her eyes in an angry frown; she was biting her lip, much as Flossy had been doing, and there was not a gleam of good humor or pleasure in her eyes. Hubert wondered idly why she had come, when she seemed to enjoy her occupation so very little.

The opening of the doors was the signal for a volley of clapping, stamping, and shouting. When this was over, the butler and his helpers appeared with trays of well-filled glasses, which were taken by the members of the choir, down to the smallest child present, with great alacrity. The fair woman in the background was once more an exception—she took no wine.

The General filled his own glass and signed for Hubert to do the same for the ladies. He then stood up and prepared to make his usual New Year's Eve speech. But this time he did what he had never done before—he lifted his little son on to the chair on which he had been sitting, and [Pg 130] made his oration with one arm round little Dick's slender shoulders. To Hubert it seemed a pretty sight. Why did it give no pleasure to Florence and to Enid? Florence's eyes glittered, and a spot of blood was painfully conspicuous on her white lips; but Enid, sitting silent with downcast eyes, was now unusually flushed. A student of character might have said that, while Flossy seemed merely excited, Enid—the timid, delicate, pure-minded Enid—looked ashamed.

"My dear friends," the General began, "I'm very much obliged to you for coming, you know—very much obliged. So are my wife and my niece, and my little boy here—so far as he understands anything about it—very much obliged to you all. You know I ain't much of a speech-maker —'actions speak louder than words' was always my maxim"—great cheering—"and I take leave to say that I think it is a very good maxim too"—tremendous applause. "My friends, it's the end of one year, and it will soon be the beginning of another. Let's hope that the new year will be better than the last. I don't suppose I shall have many more to spend amongst you, and that is why I wish to introduce—so to speak—my little boy to you. As my son and heir, my friends, he will one day stand in the place which I now occupy, and speak to you perhaps as I am speaking now. I can only ask you to behave as well to him as you have always behaved to me. I trust that he will prove himself worthy of his name and of his race, and that generations yet unborn will bless the day when Beechfield Hall came into the hands of a younger Richard Vane. My friends, if you drink my health to-night, I shall ask you also to drink the health of my boy—to wish him happiness, and that he may prove a better landlord, a better magistrate, and a better man than ever I have been."

There was a tumult of applause, mingled with cries of "No, no!"—"Can't be better than you have been, sir!" and "Hurrah for the General!"

Hubert, smiling with pleasure at his host's genial tone, was amazed at the gloom which sat upon the brows of three persons in the room—Florence, Enid, and the woman in black. There was no other likeness between them, but that air of reserve and gravity made them look as if some incommunicable bond, some similarity of feeling or experience, held them back from the general [Pg 131]

hilarity which surrounded them.

"A happy New Year to you all, my friends!" said the General, in his hearty voice. "Here's to your good healths! There, Dick, my man—drink too, and say, 'A happy New Year to all of you!'"

Little Dick took a sip from his father's glass, and gravely uplifted his childish treble.

"A happy New Year to all of you!" he said; and men and women alike broke out into delighted response.

"Same to you, sir, and many of them!" "Bless his little heart," one of the women was heard to murmur, "he's just the image of his mamma!" But, if she thought to give pleasure by this remark, she was far from successful. Mrs. Vane threw so angry a glance in her direction that the woman shrank back aghast; and the girl in black, who stood in the background, laughed between her teeth.

The function was over at last. The choir trooped away to the servants' premises, where a substantial supper awaited them; the General kissed little Dick, and strode away with him to his nurse; and Mrs. Vane rose from the table with an air of studied weariness and disgust.

"Thank Heaven, that is over!" she said. "I am tired to death of this senseless old practice! If we have it another year, I shall say I am ill and go to bed. Come, Enid—let us go to the drawing-room and have some music."

The girl rose and followed obediently; but she vouchsafed no answer to Mrs. Vane's remarks. As the General had disappeared, Hubert thought that he too might as well accompany the ladies to the drawing-room, especially if Enid were about to play. But it did not seem that she was inclined to do so. She sat down in the darkest corner of the room, and leaned her head upon her hand. Flossy established herself in a luxurious lounging-chair, and took up a novel. Hubert hesitated for a moment or two, then went over to Enid's side.

"Are we not to have any music to-night?"

"Have you not had plenty?" she asked wearily.

"Music! You call that music?"

She did not answer; something in her voice, her attitude, seemed to show that she was shedding tears. He was intensely sorry for her trouble, whatever it might be; but he scarcely knew how to comfort her.

"It would be good for us all if you would play," he said softly. "We want consoling—strengthening —uplifting." [Pg 132]

"Ah, but music does not always do that!" she answered, with a new note of passion in her voice. "When we are happy, music helps us—but not when we are sad."

"Why not?" said Hubert, more from the desire to make her talk than from any wish to hear her views on that particular subject.

But she spoke eagerly in reply, yet softly, so that her words should not reach the ears of the silent, graceful, languid woman by the fire.

"I can't tell why," she said; "but everything is different. Once music delighted me, even when I was a little sad; but now it seems to harrow my very soul. It brings thoughts into my mind of all the misery of the world. If I hear music, I shed tears—I don't know why. Everything is changed."

"My dear child," said Hubert, "you are unhappy!"

"Yes," she said slowly, with a pathetic tremor of the voice—"yes, I am very—very unhappy."

"Can I do nothing at all to make you happier?" he said.

The question was left unanswered.

CHAPTER XX.

"My dear Hubert," said Mrs. Vane, "if you cannot see what is the matter with Enid, you must be blind indeed!"

"Why should I see what is the matter with her more than anybody else?" asked Hubert, who was moving restlessly from place to place, now halting before the window of his sister's sitting-room, now plucking a leaf from one of the flowering plants in a gilded *étagère*, now teasing the white cockatoo in its fine cage, or stirring up the spaniel with the tip of his boot. All the teasing was good-naturedly done, and provoked no rancour in the mind of bird or beast; but it showed an unwonted excitement of feeling on his part, and was observed by his sister with a slightly ironical smile.

"If you will sit still for a little while, I will tell you perhaps," she said; "but, so long as you stray round the room in that aimless manner, I shall keep my communications to myself." [Pg 133]

"I beg your pardon; I did not know that I was disturbing you. Well," said Hubert, seating himself resolutely in a chair near her own, and devoting his attention apparently to the dissection of a spray of scented geranium-leaf, "tell me what is the matter, and I will listen discreetly. I am really concerned about Enid; she is neither well nor happy."

"Did she tell you so?"

"It is easy to be seen that she is not well," said Hubert, a very slight smile curving his lips under the heavy dark moustache as he looked down at the leaf which he was twisting in his hand; "and I think her unhappiness is quite as obvious. What is it, Flossy? You ought to know. You are the girl's chaperon, adviser, friend, or whatever you like to call it; you stand in the place——"

He stopped abruptly. He forgot sometimes that ghastly story of his sister's earlier life; sometimes it came back to him with hideous distinctness. At that moment he did not like to say to Flossy, "You stand in her mother's place." And yet it was the truth. Had it been for Enid's good or harm, he suddenly wondered, that Florence had become the General's wife?

"I understand what you mean," said Flossy quite sweetly, though there was no very amiable look in her velvety-brown eyes. "I assure you that I should be very glad to make more of a friend of Enid if she would allow me; but she does not like me."

"Instinct!" thought Hubert involuntarily, but he did not say it aloud. With the extraordinary quickness, however, which Florence occasionally showed, she divined the purport of his reflection almost at once.

"You think, no doubt, that it is natural," she said; "but I do not agree with you. Enid has no great penetration; she has never been able to read my character—which, after all, is not so bad as you imagine."

"I do not imagine anything about it; I do not think it bad," Hubert interposed rather hurriedly. "You have changed very much. But have we not agreed to let old histories alone?"

"I did not intend to revive them. I meant only to assure you that Enid has met with the tenderest care and guidance from me—as far, at least, as it lay in me to give it to her, and whenever she would accept it." [Pg 134]

"You make two very important reservations."

"I know I do, but I cannot help it. I was never devotedly fond of children, and I was once Enid's governess. I do not think that she ever forgets that fact."

"Well, come to the point," said Hubert, rather impatiently. "What is the matter with her now?"

Florence laughed softly, and eyed him over her fan. She always used a fan, even in the depth of winter—and indeed her boudoir was so luxuriously warm and fragrant that it did not there seem out of place. She was wearing a loose tea-gown of peacock-blue plush over a satin petticoat of the palest rose-color—a daring combination which she had managed to harmonise extremely well—and the fan which she now held to her mouth was of pale rose-colored feathers. As Hubert looked at her and waited for his answer, he was struck by two things—first by the choiceness and beauty of her surroundings, and secondly by the fatigued expression of her eyes, which were set in hollows of purple shadows, and almost veiled by lids which had the faintly reddened tint which comes of wakefulness at night.

"I shall next ask what is the matter with you," he said. "You really do not look well, Florence!"

"Do I not?" She laid down her fan, took up a hand-glass set in silver from a table at her side, and studied her face in the mirror for a few seconds with some intentness. "You are right," she said, when she put it down; "I am growing hatefully old and haggard and ugly. What can one do? Would a winter in the South give me back my good looks, do you think? Perhaps I had better consult a doctor when I go up to town. I am not so old yet that I need lose all my 'beauty,' as people used to call it, am I?"

"Why do you care so much?" Hubert asked. He fancied that there was something deeper in her anxiety than the mere vanity of a pretty woman whose youth was fast fleeting away.

"Why does every woman care? For my husband's sake, of course," she answered, with a slight laugh, but a look of carking care and pain in her haggard eyes. "If I leave off looking pretty and bright, how am I to know that he will care for me any longer? And, if not——"

"If not! You are a mystery to me, Florence; you never professed before to trouble yourself about your husband's love." [Pg 135]

"If I am a mystery, you are a perfect baby, my dear boy—I might almost say a perfect fool—in some respects. If he ceases to love me, he—don't you know that he may still leave me penniless? I had no settlements."

Her voice sank almost to a whisper as she said the words.

"Is that it?" said Hubert coldly. "I did not give you credit for so much worldly wisdom, Flossy. If that is your view of the case, I wonder that you do not pay a little more attention to the General's wishes sometimes. I have seen you treat him with very little consideration."

"He is so wearisome! One cannot always be on one's good behavior," Flossy murmured; "and, as long as one looks nice and gives him a word or two now and then, just to keep him in good-humor ——"

"So long, you think, he will be kind to you? Florence, you do not understand the General's really noble nature. He is incapable of unkindness to any living soul—least of all capable of it to you, whom he loves so dearly. Do try to appreciate him a little more! He is devoted to you, both as his wife and as the mother of his child." He could not tell why she turned her head aside with a sharp gesture of annoyance.

"The child—always the child!" she exclaimed. "I wish I had never had a child at all!"

"We are straying from the point," said her brother coldly; "and we can do no good by discussing your relations with your husband. I want to know—as you say you can tell me—why Enid looks so ill."

Flossy took up her fan and began to examine the tips of the feathers.

"There is only one reason," she said slowly, "why a girl ever looks like that. Only one thing turns a girl of seventeen into a drooping, die-away, lackadaisical creature, such as Enid is just now."

"Speak kindly of her, at any rate," said Hubert. "She is a woman like yourself, and there is only one interpretation to be put upon your words."

"Naturally. You, as a novelist, dramatist, and poet, must know it well enough," said his sister calmly. "Well, remember that you have insisted on my telling you. Enid is in love. That is all. [Pg 136] Nothing to make such a fuss about it, is it?"

Hubert was silent for a minute or two. His brow was contracted, as if with vexation or deep thought. Then he said abruptly—

"I suppose it's that good-looking parson in the village. There's no other man whom she seems to know so well. I cannot say that you have taken very great care of her, Florence."

"Are you really blind, or are you pretending?" said Mrs. Vane, looking at him with calm curiosity, "You are not quite such a fool as you make yourself out to be, are you? My dear Hubert, are you not aware that you are a singularly handsome and attractive man, and that you have laid siege to the poor child's heart ever since your first arrival here last autumn?"

Hubert started from his seat as if he had been stung.

"Impossible!" he cried.

"Not at all impossible. She has seen few men in her short life—she has been very carefully guarded, in spite of your sneer at my want of caution—and the attentions of a man like yourself were quite new to her. What could you expect?"

"Attentions!" groaned Hubert. "I never paid her any attentions, save as a cousin and a friend."

"Exactly; but she did not understand."

There was a short silence. He stood with his arm on the mantelpiece, looking through the window at the snow-covered landscape outside. His face had turned pale, and his lips were firmly set. Presently he said, in a low tone—

"You must be mistaken. Surely she can never have let you know what her feelings are on such a point? You say that she does not confide in you. How can you know?"

"There are other ways of reading a girl's heart as well as a man's coarse way of having everything in black and white," said Flossy composedly. "I am sure of it. She is in love with you, and that is why she looks so ill."

"It must not be! You must let her know—gently, but decidedly—that I am not the man for her—that there is an unsurmountable barrier between us."

"What is it? Are you married already?"

"Florence"—there was a sound of anguish in his voice, "how could I marry a girl whose father I [Pg 137] ——"

"Hush, hush! For mercy's sake, be quiet! You should never say such things—never think them even. Walls have ears sometimes, and spoken words cannot be recalled. Never say that, even to me. At the same time, I do not see the obstacle."

"Florence! Well, I might expect it from you. You have married Sydney Vane's brother!"

She did not wince. She sat steadily regarding him over the tips of her rose-colored feather fan.

"And you," she said, "will marry Sydney Vane's daughter."

"God keep me from committing such a sin!"

"Hubert, this is mere sentimental folly," said his sister, with some earnestness.

"We have both made up our minds that the past is dead—why do you at every moment rake up its

ashes?"

"It is in some ways unfortunate that Enid should have chosen to love you; but, as the matter stands, I cannot see that you have any other choice than to marry her."

"What on earth makes you say so?"

"I thought that you would go through a good deal of unpleasantness for the sake of saving her from trouble. You have said as much."

"I have no right to save her from anything. She must forget me."

"That is sheer nonsense—cowardly nonsense too!" said Mrs. Vane. "If Enid were on the brink of a precipice, would you hesitate to draw her back? I tell you that she is breaking her heart for you, and that, if you are free to marry, and not inordinately selfish, your only way out of the difficulty is to marry her."

"She would get over it."

"No; she would die as her mother died—of a broken heart."

"You can speak so calmly, remembering who killed her mother—for what you and I are responsible!"

"Look, Hubert—if you cannot speak calmly yourself, you had better not speak at all. You seem to think that I am cold and callous. I suppose I am; and yet I am more anxious in this matter to keep Enid from grief and pain than you seem to be. I do not like to see her looking pale and sad. I [Pg 138] would do anything within my power to help her, and I thought—I thought that you would do the same. It seems that you shrink from the task."

"It is so horrible—so unnatural! How can I ask her to be mine—I, with my hands stained——"

"Hush! I will not have you say those words! We both know—if we are to speak of the past—that it was an honorable contest enough—a fair fight—a meeting such as no man of honor could refuse. You would have fallen if he had not. It is purely morbid, this brooding over the consequences of your actions. Everybody who knew the circumstances would have said that you were in the right. I say it myself, although at my own cost. To marry Enid now because she loves you will be the only way you can take to repair the harm that was done in the past and to shield her for the future."

It was not often that Florence spoke so long or so energetically; and Hubert, in spite of his revolt of feeling at the prospect held out to him, was impressed by her words. After a few moments' silence, he sat down again and began to argue the matter with her from every possible point of view. He told her it was probable that Enid did not know her own mind; that she would be miserable if she married a man who could not love her; that the whole world would cry shame on him if it ever learned the circumstances of her father's death; that Enid herself would be the first to reproach him, and would indeed bitterly hate him if she ever knew.

"If she ever knew—if the world ever knew!" said Florence scornfully. Hitherto she had been very quiet and let her brother say his say. "As if she or the world were ever going to know! There is no way in which the truth can be known unless one of us tells it; and I ask you, is that a thing that either of us is very likely to do? It would mean social ruin for us—utter and irretrievable ruin! If we only hold our tongues, Enid and the world will never know."

"That is true," he answered moodily; and then he sat so long in one position, with his arms crossed on his breast; and his eyes fixed on vacancy, that Florence asked him with some curiosity of what he was thinking.

"I was wondering," he said, "whether that poor wretch Westwood found his undeserved punishment more galling than I sometimes find the bonds of secrecy and falsehood and dishonor [Pg 139] that bind me now. He at any rate has gained his freedom; but I am in bondage still. I have my sentence—a life sentence—to work out."

"He is free now, certainly," Florence answered, with an odd intonation of her voice; "so I do not think that you need trouble yourself about him. Think of Enid rather, and of her needs."

"Free? Yes—he is dead," said Hubert quickly, replying to something in her tone rather than to her words. "He died as I told you—some time ago."

"You read it in the newspaper?"

"Yes."

"And you never saw that next day the report of his death was contradicted?"

"Florence, what do you mean?"

"You went away from England just then with a mind at ease, did you not? But I was here, with nothing to do but to think and brood and read; and I read more than that. There were two men named Westwood at Portland, and the one who died—as was stated in next day's paper—was not the one we knew."

"And he is in prison all this time? Don't you see that that makes my guilt the worse—brings back

all the intolerable burden, renders it simply impossible that I should ever make an innocent girl happy?" His voice was hoarse, and the veins upon his forehead stood out like knotted cords.

"Sit down," said Flossy calmly, "and listen to me. I have an odd story to tell you. The man of whom we speak managed to do what scarcely another convict has done in recent times—he escaped. He nearly killed the warder in his flight, but not quite—so that counts for nothing. It is rumored that he reached America, where he is living contentedly in the backwoods. I can show you the newspaper account of his escape. I thought," she added a little cynically, "that it might relieve your mind to hear of it; but it does not seem to do so. I fancied that you would be glad. Would you rather that he were dead?"

"No, no; Heaven knows that I rejoice in his escape!" cried her brother, sitting down again with his forehead bowed upon his clasped hands and his elbows on his knees. "I have blood-guiltiness enough already upon my soul. Glad? I am so glad, Florence, that I can almost dare to thank God that Westwood is alive and has escaped. I—I shall never escape!"

CHAPTER XXI.

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Enid had the look of a veritable snow-queen thought Hubert, as he came upon her a day or two later in a little *salon* opening out of the drawing-room, and found her gazing out upon a landscape of which all the lines were blurred in falling snow. She was dressed in a white woollen gown, which was confined at her waist by a simple white ribbon, and had white fur at the throat and wrists.

The dead-white suited her delicate complexion and golden hair; she had the soft and stainless look of a newly fallen snowflake, which to touch were to destroy. Hubert almost felt as if he ought not to speak to one so far removed from him—one set so high above him by her innocence and purity. And yet he was bound to speak.

"You like the snow?" he began.

"Yes—as much as I like anything."

"At your age," said Hubert slowly, "you should like everything."

"You think I am so very young!"

"Well—seventeen."

"Oh, but I don't feel young at all!" the girl said half wearily, half bitterly. "I seem to have lived centuries! You know, cousin Hubert, there are very few girls of my age who have had all the trouble that I have had."

"You have had a great deal—you have been the victim of a tragedy," said Hubert gloomily, not able to deny the truth of her remark, even while he was forced to remember that many other girls of Enid's age had far more real and tangible sorrows than she. The vision of a girl pleading with him to find her work flashed suddenly across his mind; her words about London Bridge—"her last resource"—occurred to him; and his common sense told him that after all Enid's position, sad and lonely though it was, could scarcely be called so pitiable as that of Cynthia West. But it was not his part to tell her so; his own share in producing Enid's misfortunes sealed his lips.

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What he said however was almost too direct an allusion to the past to be thought sympathetic by Enid. A very natural habit had grown up at Beechfield Hall of never mentioning her father's fate; and this silence had had the bad result of making her brood over the matter without daring to reveal her thoughts. The word "tragedy" seemed to her almost like a profanation. It sent the hot blood rushing into her face at once. Enid's organisation was peculiarly delicate and sensitive; her knowledge of the publicity given to the details of her father's death was torture to her. She was glad of the seclusion in which the General lived, because when she went into Whitminster, she would hear sometimes a rumor, a whispered word—"Look—that is the daughter of Sydney Vane who was murdered a few years ago! Extraordinary case—don't you remember it?"—and the consciousness that these words might be spoken was unbearable to her. Hubert had touched an open wound somewhat too roughly.

He saw his mistake.

"Forgive me for speaking of it," he said. "I fancied that you were thinking of the past."

"Oh, no, no—not of that!" cried Enid, scarcely knowing what she said.

"Of other troubles?" Hubert queried very softly. It was natural that he should think of what Flossy had said to him quite recently.

"Yes—of other things."

"Can you not tell me what they are?" he said gently, taking one of her slight hands in his own.

"Oh, no—not you!"

She was thinking of him as Florence's brother, possibly even as Florence's accomplice in a crime;

but he attributed her refusal to a very different motive. Tell him her troubles? Of course she could not do so, poor child, when her troubles came from love of him. He was not a coxcomb, but he believed what Flossy had said.

"Not me? You cannot tell me?" he said, drawing her away from the cold uncurtained windows with his hand still on hers. "And can I do nothing to lighten your trouble, dear?"

She looked at him doubtfully.

"I—don't—know."

"Enid, tell me."

"Oh, no!" she cried. "I can't tell you—I can't tell any one—I must bear it all alone!"—and then she burst into tears, not into noisy sobs, but into a nearly silent passion of grief which went to the very heart of the man who stood at her side. She drew her hand away from his and laid it upon the mantelpiece, which she crept to and leaned against, sobbing miserably meanwhile, as if she needed the support that solid stone could give. [Pg 142]

Her slender figure, in its closely-fitting white gown, shook from head to foot. It was as much as Hubert could do to restrain himself from putting his arm round it, drawing it closely to him, and silencing the sobs with kisses. But his feeling was that of a grown-up person to a child whom he wanted to comfort and protect, not that of a man to the woman whom he loved. He waited therefore silently, with a fixed look of mingled pain and determination upon his face, until she had grown a little calmer. When at last her figure ceased to vibrate with sobs, he came closer and put his hand caressingly upon her shoulder.

"Enid," he said, "I have asked you before if I could make you happier; you never answered the question. Will you tell me now?"

She raised herself from her drooping attitude, and stood with averted face; but still she did not speak.

"Perhaps you hardly know what I mean. I am willing—anxious—to give my whole life to you, Enid, my child. If you can trust yourself to my hands, I will take such care of you that you shall never know trouble or sorrow again, if care can avert it. Give me the right to do this for you, dear. You shall not have cause to repent your trust. Look at me, Enid, and tell me that you trust me."

Why that insistence on the word "trust"? Was it—strange contradiction—because he felt himself so utterly unworthy of her confidence? He said not a word of love.

Enid looked round at him at last. Her gentle face was pale, her lashes were wet with tears, but the traces of emotion were not unbecoming to her. Even to Hubert's cold eyes, cold and critical in spite of himself, she was lovelier than ever.

"I want to trust you—I do trust you," she said; but there were trouble and perplexity in her voice. "I don't know what to do. You would not let me be deceived, Hubert? You would not let dear uncle be tricked and cheated into thinking—thinking—by Flossy, I mean——Oh, I can't tell you! If you knew what I know, you would understand." [Pg 143]

Hubert had never been in greater danger of betraying his own secret. Knowing of no other, his first instinctive thought was that Enid had learnt the true story of her father's death and Flossy's share in bringing it about; but a second thought, quickly following the first, showed him that in that case she would never have said that she wanted to trust him, or that he would not let her and her uncle be deceived. No, it could not be that. But what was it?

By a terrible effort he kept himself from visibly blenching at her words. He stood still holding her hands, feeling himself a villain to the very lowest depths of his soul, but looking quietly down at her, with even a slight smile on the lips that—do what he would—had turned pale—the ruddy firelight glancing on his face prevented this change of color from being seen.

"But how can I understand," he said, "when I have not the slightest notion of what you mean?"

"You have not?"

"Not the least in the world."

She crept a little closer to him.

"You are not sheltering Flossy from punishment?"

It was what he had been doing for the past eight years.

"Good heavens, Enid," he cried, losing his self-possession a little for the first time, "what on earth can you possibly mean?"

She thought that he was indignant, and she hastened tremblingly to appease his apparent wrath.

"I don't mean to accuse you or her," she said; "I have said a great deal too much. I can trust you, Hubert—oh, I am sure I can! Forgive me for the moment's doubt."

"If you have not accused me, you have accused my sister. I must know what you mean."

"Forgive me, cousin Hubert! I can't tell you—even you."

"But, my dear Enid, if you said so much, you must say more."

"I will never say anything again!" she said, her face quivering all over like that of a troubled child.

He loosed her hands and looked at her steadily for a moment; he had more confidence in his power over her now. [Pg 144]

"I think you should make me understand what you mean, dear. Do you accuse my sister of anything?"

She looked frightened.

"No, indeed I do not. I don't know what I am saying, Hubert. Tell me one thing. Do you think we should ever do wrong—or what seems to be wrong—for the sake of other people's happiness? Clergymen and good people say we should not; but I do not know."

"Enid, you have not been consulting that parson at Beechfield about it?"

"Not exactly. At least"—the ingenuous face changed a little—"we talked on that subject, because he knew that I was in trouble, but I did not tell him anything. He said one should always tell the truth at any cost."

"And theoretically one should do so," said Hubert, trying to soothe her, yet feeling himself a corrupter of her innocent candor of mind as he went on; "but practically it would not be always wise or right. When you marry, Enid"—he drew her towards him—"you can confess to your husband, and he will absolve you."

"Perhaps that is what would be best," she answered softly.

"To no man but your husband, Enid."

She drew a quick little sigh.

"You can trust me?" he said, in a still lower voice.

"Oh, yes," she said—"I am sure I can trust you! It was only for a moment—you must not mind what I said. You will it set all right when you know."

He was silent, seeing that she had grasped his meaning more quickly than he had anticipated, and had, in fact, accepted him, quite simply and confidently, as her husband that was to be. Her child-like trust was at that moment very bitter to him. He bent his head and kissed her forehead as a father might have done.

"My dear Enid," he said, "we must remember that you are very young. I feel that I may be taking advantage of your inexperience—as if some day you might reproach me for it."

"I told you I did not feel young," she said gently; "but perhaps I cannot judge. Do what you please."

The listlessness in her voice almost angered Hubert. [Pg 145]

"Do you not love me then?" he asked.

"Oh, yes—I always loved you!" said the girl. But there was no look of a woman's love in her grave eyes. "You were always so kind to me, dear cousin Hubert; and indeed I feel as if I could trust you absolutely. You shall decide for me in everything."

There was certainly relief in her tone; but Hubert had looked for something more.

"I have been wanting to speak to you for several days," he said, "but I have never had the opportunity before; and I must tell you, dear, that I spoke to the General before I spoke to you."

"Oh," Enid's fair face flushed a little. "I thought—I did not know that you intended—when you began to speak to me first, I mean——"

Hubert could not help smiling.

"I understand; you thought I spoke on a sudden impulse of affection, longing to comfort and help you. So I did. But that is not incompatible with previous thought and preparation, is it? Surely my care for you—my love for you—would be worth less as a sudden growth than as a plant of long and hardy growth?" He groaned inwardly at the subterfuge contained in the last few words, but he felt that it was unavoidable.

Enid looked up and gave him an answering smile.

"Oh, yes, I see!" she said hurriedly; but there was some little dissatisfaction in her mind, she did not quite know why.

Even her innocent heart dimly discerned the fact that Hubert was not her ideal lover. His wooing had scarcely been ardent in tone; and to find that it had all been discussed, mapped out, as it were, and formally permitted by the General, and perhaps by his wife, gave her a sudden chill. For Flossy's interpretation of Enid's melancholy was by no means a true one. She had dreamed a little of Hubert in a vague romantic way, as young girls are apt to do when a new-comer strikes their fancy; but she had not set her heart upon him at all in the way which Florence had led her

brother to believe. There was certainly danger lest she should do so now.

"The General says," Hubert went on more lightly, "that you cannot be expected to know your own mind for a couple of years. What do you say to that?"

"I think that uncle Richard might know me better," said the girl, smiling. She was still standing on the hearthrug, and Hubert put his arm round her as he spoke. [Pg 146]

"And he will not consent even to an engagement until you are eighteen, Enid. But he did not forbid me to speak to you and ask you whether you cared for me, and if you would wait two years."

"Oh, why should it be so long?" the girl cried out; and then she turned crimson, seeing the meaning that Hubert attached to her words. "I only mean," she said, "that I wanted to tell you everything that was in my mind just now."

"And can't you do it now, little darling?"

"No, not now."

"I must wait for that, must I? We must see if we can soften the General's obdurate heart, my dear. But you are not unhappy now?"

To his surprise, the shadow rose again in her beautiful eyes, the lips fell into their old mournful lines.

"I don't know," she said sadly. "I ought not to be; but after all perhaps this does not make things any better. Oh, I wish I could forget what I know—what I have heard!"

"It is about Flossy?" said Hubert, in a whisper.

She hid her face, upon his shoulder without a word.

"My poor child, I am half inclined to think that I can guess. I know that Flossy's life has not been all that it should have been. No, don't tell me—I will not ask you again unless you wish to confide in me."

"You said you did not know."

"I do not know—exactly; but I suspect; and, my dear Enid, we can do nothing. Make your mind easy on that point. Our highest duty now is to hold our tongues."

He thought, naturally enough, that she had heard of Florence's secret interviews with Sydney Vane—so much, he was certain, even the village-people knew—that in her visits to the cottages she had heard some story of this kind, and had been distressed—that was all.

"Do you really think so?" said Enid, clinging to him. She was only too thankful to get rid of the responsibility of judging for herself. "You do not think that uncle Richard ought to know?"

"My dear girl, what an idea! Certainly not! Do you want to break the old man's heart?" [Pg 147]

"He is very fond of little Dick," murmured Enid, rather to herself than to him.

He did not lay hold of the clue that her words might have given him if he had attended to them more closely. He went on encouragingly—

"And of his wife too. No, dear, we cannot wreck his happiness by scruples of that kind. We must endure our knowledge—or our suspicions—in silence. Besides, what you have heard may not be true."

"Do you think so, Hubert?" she said wistfully.

"It is better surely to take a charitable view, is it not?"

"Oh, thank you! That is just what I wanted!" she said, a new brightness stealing into her eyes and cheeks. "Yes, I am sure that I must have been hard and uncharitable. I will try to think better things. And, oh, Hubert, you have really made me happy now!"

"That is what I wanted," said Hubert, with a sigh, as for the first time he pressed his lips to hers. "Your happiness, Enid, is all that I wish to secure."

He was in earnest; and it did not seem hard to him that in trying to secure her happiness he had perhaps lost his own.

CHAPTER XXII.

"A Grand Morning Concert will be given on Thursday, June 25th, at Ebury's Rooms, by the pupils of Madame della Scala. By kind permission of Mr. Mapleson, the following *artistes* will appear." Then followed a list of well known operatic vocalists, also Miss This, That, and the other—"and Miss Cynthia West." The last half-dozen names were not as yet famous.

The above intimation, together with much detail concerning time, place, and performers, was printed on a very large gilt-edged card; and two such cards, enclosed in a thick square envelope, lay upon Hubert Lepel's breakfast-table some months after the New Year's holiday which he had spent at Beechfield Hall.

He looked at them with an amused, interested smile, and read the words more than once—then, with equal interest, perused a programme of the concert, which had also been enclosed. [Pg 148]

"So it is to-day, is it?" he said to himself, as he finished his cup of coffee. "She is late in sending me a ticket; I shall scarcely be able to nail any of the critics for her now. I would have got Gurney to write her a notice if I had known earlier. Probably that is the very reason why she did not let me know—independent young woman that she is! I'll go and see what I can do for her even at the eleventh hour. She shall have a good big bouquet for her *début*, at any rate!"

He sallied forth, making his way to his club, where he found occasion to remark to more than one of his friends that Madame della Scala's concert would be worth going to, and that a young lady who had formerly been known in the theatrical world—Miss Cynthia West—would make her *début* as a public singer that afternoon. Meeting Marcus Gurney, the well-known musical critic of an influential paper, soon afterwards, he pressed upon him his spare ticket for the concert, and gave him to understand that it would be a really good-natured thing if he could turn in at Ebury's Rooms between three and four, and write something for the *Scourge* that would not injure that very promising *débutante*, Miss West. Marcus Gurney laughed and consented, and Hubert went off well pleased; he had at least stopped the mouth of the bitterest critic in London, he reflected—for, though Gurney was personally one of the most amiable of men, he could be very virulent in print. Then he went off to Covent Garden, and selected two of the loveliest bouquets he could find—one, of course, for Cynthia, and one for her teacher, Madame della Scala. For Hubert was wise in his generation.

He had seen very little of Cynthia West during the last few months, and had not heard her sing at all. Shortly after his second interview with her, he had sent her to Italy for the winter, so that she might have a course of lessons from the most celebrated teacher in Milan. He was gratified to hear that there had been at least nothing to unlearn. Old Lalli had done his work very thoroughly; he had trained her voice as only a skilled musician could have done; and, on hearing who had been her teacher, the great Italian *maestro* had thrown up his hands and asked her why she came to him.

"You will have no need of me," he had said to her. "Lalli—did you not know?—he was once our *primo tenore* in opera! He would have been great—ah, great—if he had not lost his voice in an expedition to your terrible England! So he stayed there and played the violon, did he? And he taught you to sing with your mouth round and close like that—my own method! La, la, la, la! We shall see you at La Scala before we have done!" [Pg 149]

But, when the spring came, and he himself was about to fulfil an engagement in Berlin, he handed Cynthia over to the care of Madame della Scala, who was then going to England, and advised her to sing in public—even to take a professional engagement—if she had the chance, and, if not, to spend another winter under his tuition in Milan. So Cynthia came back to London in May, and lived with Madame della Scala, and was heard by nobody until the day of the annual semi-private concert, which Madame della Scala loved to give for the benefit of herself and her best pupils.

Hubert reached the rooms at three precisely. He might easily have sent in his name and obtained a little chat with Cynthia beforehand in the artists' room; but he did not care to do that. He wanted to see her first; he was curious to know whether her new experiences had taken effect upon her, and how she would bear herself before her judges. He had seen her once only since her return from Italy, and then but for a few minutes in the society of other people. He could not tell whether she was changed or not; and he was curious to know.

She had written to him from Italy several times—letters like herself, vivacious, sparkling, full of spirit and humor. He knew her very well from these letters, and he was inclined to wish that he knew her better. He would see how she looked before she knew that he was present; it would be amusing to note whether she found him out or not.

Thus he argued to himself; and then, with perverse want of logic, after saying that he did not wish her to know that he was there, he sent his bouquets to the green-room for teacher and pupil alike, and compromised matters by attaching his card to Madame's bouquet only, and not to that which he sent to Cynthia West—a feeble compromise certainly, and entirely ineffectual.

He seated himself on a green-colored bench on the right-hand side of the room, and looked around him at the audience. It consisted largely of mothers and other relatives of the pupils, some of whom came from the most aristocratic houses in England—largely also of critics, and of musical persons with flowing hair and note-books. Hubert knew Madame della Scala's reputation; it was here that the *impresario* on the watch for new talent always came—it was here that the career of more than one famous English singer had been successfully begun. It was of some importance therefore that Cynthia should sing her best and do her utmost to impress her audience. [Pg 150]

Having looked about him and consulted his programme, Hubert glanced at the platform, and was aware that a little comedy was being enacted for the benefit of all persons present.

Madame della Scala was first led forward by a bevy of admiring pupils, Cynthia not being one, and made her bow to the audience with an air of gracious humility that was very effective indeed. She was a dark, thin little woman who had once been handsome, and was still striking in appearance. She had been an operatic singer in days gone by, and had taken up the profession of a teacher only when her vocal powers began to fail. In demi-toilette, with ribbons and medals adorning her square-cut bodice, long gloves on her hands, and a fan between her fingers, the little lady curtseyed, smiled, gesticulated, in a charmingly foreign way, which procured for her the warmest plaudits of the audience. One felt that, though she herself was not about to perform in person, she considered herself responsible for the efforts of her pupils, and made herself fascinating on their behalf.

A large screen was placed on one side of the platform, and a grand piano nearly filled the other side, leaving a central space for the performers. At first Hubert had wondered why the screen was there. Now he saw its use. Madame della Scala seated herself in a chair behind it, with her face to the singers—evidently under the delusion that her figure was completely hidden from the audience, and that she could, unseen, direct, stimulate, or reprove the singers by movement of head, hands, handkerchief, and fan. The man[oe]uvre would have been successful enough, but for the fact that the back of the platform was entirely filled with a sheet of looking-glass, and that in [Pg 151] this mirror her gestures and facial contortions were all distinctly visible to the greater number of the listeners. Hubert found great satisfaction in watching the different expressions of her countenance; he told himself that Madame's face was the most interesting part of the performance. How sweetly she smiled at her favorite pupils from the shadow of the screen! How she nodded her head and beat time with her fingers to the songs they sang! How, in moments of uncontrollable excitement, she waved her hands and swayed her body and gesticulated with her fan! It was a comedy in dumb show. And, as each girl-singer, after performing her part and curtseying to the audience, passed her teacher on the way to the artists' room, Madame seized her impulsively by both hands, and drew her down to impress a kiss of satisfaction on the performer's forehead. The woman's old charm as an actress, the Southern grace and excitability and warmth, were never more evident than when reflected in Madame's movements behind the screen that afternoon, and visible to the audience—did she know it after all?—only in a looking-glass.

The humor of the situation impressed Hubert, and made him glad that he had come. The whole scene had something foreign, something half theatrical about it. An English teacher of music would have effaced herself—would have shaken with nervousness and scowled at her pupils. Madame had no idea of effacing herself at all. She was benignity, composure, affability incarnate. The girls were all her "dear angels," who were helping to make her concert a success. When, at a preconcerted signal in the middle of the afternoon, she was led forward by one of her most distinguished pupils, and presented by a group of adoring girls with a great basket of flowers, her whole face beamed with satisfaction, her medals and orders and brooches twinkled responsively as she curtseyed, waved her fan, spread out her lace and silken draperies, and slipped gracefully back into the screen's obscurity once more. Only one little *contretemps* occurred to mar the harmony of the scene. Just as Madame had returned to her seat, the screen, displaced a little by her movement, fell over, dragging down flower-pots and ferns, and almost upsetting Madame herself. The bevy of girls rushed to pick her up, gentlemen and attendants came to the rescue, [Pg 152] and in a few moments Madame was reinstated, a little shaken and flustered, but amiable as ever, the screen was replaced more securely, and the concert proceeded with decorum.

But where all this time was Cynthia? She had not joined the cluster of girls who presented the flowers to Madame, or run to pick her up when the screen fell down. Madame was reserving Cynthia for a great effect. She did not appear until nearly the end of the first part of the concert, when she came on to sing an Italian aria.

"More beautiful than ever!" was Hubert's first reflection. "More beautiful than I remembered her! Is she nervous? No, I think not. Her face will take the town if her voice does not." And then he settled himself to listen. He was far more nervous than Cynthia herself or than Madame della Scala, who was keeping time to the music with her fan behind the screen.

Cynthia's beauty, of an unusually striking order, was heightened by an excitement which lent new color to her cheeks, new fire to her eyes. She was dressed in very pale yellow—white had been rejected as not so becoming to her dark skin as a more decided tint—and she wore a cluster of scarlet flowers on her left shoulder. She looked like some brilliant tropical bird or butterfly—a thing of light and color, to whom sunlight was as essential as food. Hubert felt vain of his *protégée* as he heard the little murmur of applause that greeted her appearance.

But the applause that followed her singing swamped every other manifestation of approval. Cynthia surpassed herself. Her voice and her method of singing were infinitely improved; the sweet high notes were sweeter than ever, and were full of an exquisite thrill of feeling which struck Hubert as something new in her musical development. There was no doubt about her success. No other singer had roused the audience to such a pitch of excitement and admiration.

Hubert glanced at Madame della Scala. She was sitting with her hands folded, a placid smile of achievement upon her lips; she had produced all the impression that she wished to make, and for once was completely satisfied. Hubert read it in her look.

Cynthia was curtseying to the audience, when, for the first time, Hubert caught her eye—or rather it was for the first time only that she allowed him to see that she observed him; as a [Pg 153] matter of fact, she had been conscious of his presence ever since she entered the concert-room.

She flashed a quick smile at him, bowed openly in his direction, and—as if by accident—touched the belt of her dress. He was quick enough to see what she meant; some flowers from his bouquet were fastened at her waist. He half rose from his seat, involuntarily, and almost as if he wanted to join her on the platform, then sat down again, vexed at his own movement, and blushing like a schoolboy. He did not know what had come to him, he told himself; for a moment he had been quite embarrassed and overwhelmed by this girl's bright glance and smile. She was certainly very handsome; and it was embarrassing—yes, it was decidedly a little embarrassing—to be recognised by her so publicly at the very moment of her first success.

"Know her?" said a voice at his shoulder—it was the voice of a critic. "Why, she's first-rate! Isn't she the girl that used to play small parts at the Frivolity? Who discovered that she had a voice?"

"Old Lalli, I believe—first-violin in the orchestra," said Hubert.

"Ah! Did he teach her, then? How did she get to della Scala? That woman's charges are enormous—as big as Lamperti's!"

"Couldn't say, I'm sure," returned Hubert, with perfect coolness.

"Well, della Scala made a big hit this time, at any rate. Old Mitcham's prowling about—from Covent Garden, do you see him? That girl will have an engagement before the day's out—mark my words! There hasn't been such a brilliant success for the last ten years."

And then the second part of the concert began, and Hubert was left in peace.

Cynthia's second song was a greater success even than the first. There could be no doubt that she would attain a great height in her profession if she wished to do so; she had a splendid organ, she had been well taught, and she was remarkably handsome. Her stage-training prevented nervousness; and that she had dramatic talent was evidenced by her singing of the two airs put down for her in the programme. But she took everybody by surprise when she was *encored*. [Pg 154] Instead of repeating her last aria, she said a word in the accompanist's ear, and launched at once into the song of Schubert's which she had sung in Hubert's rooms. It was a complete change from the Italian music that constituted the staple of Madame della Scala's concerts; but it revealed new capacities of passion in the singer's voice, and was not unwelcome, even to Madame herself, as showing the girl's talent and versatility. As she passed off the platform, Madame caught the girl in her arms and kissed her enthusiastically. The pupil's success was the teacher's success—and Madame was delighted accordingly.

Hubert was leaving the room at the conclusion of the concert, when an attendant accosted him.

"Beg pardon, sir! Mr. Lepel, sir?"

"Yes; what is it?"

"Miss West told me to give you this, sir;" and he put a twisted slip of paper into Hubert's hand.

Hubert turned aside and opened the note. He could have smiled at its abruptness—so like what he already knew of Cynthia West.

"Why didn't you come round in the interval and let me thank you? If I have been successful, it is all owing to you. Please come to see us this evening if you can; I want very much to consult you. You know my address. Madame won't let me stay now. "C. W."

"Impetuous little creature!" Hubert smiled to himself—although Cynthia was not little.

He thrust the note into his pocket, and went home to dine and dress. He knew Madame della Scala's ways. This old lady, with whom Cynthia was now staying, loved to hold a little reception on the evening of the day of her yearly concert, and she would be delighted to see Mr. Lepel, although she had not sent him any formal invitation. For Cynthia's sake he made up his mind to go.

"For Cynthia's sake." How lightly he said the words! In after-days no words were fraught with deeper and sadder suggestion for him; none bowed him down more heavily with a sense of obligation and shame and passionate remorse than these—"For Cynthia's sake."

He went that night to Madame della Scala's house and sat for a full hour, in a little conservatory lighted with Chinese lanterns, alone with Cynthia West.

CHAPTER XXIII. [Pg 155]

"I don't know how it is," grumbled the General, "but Enid looks scarcely any better than she did before this precious engagement of hers. You made me think that she would be perfectly happy if she had her own way; but I must say, Flossy, that I see no improvement."

Flossy, lying on a sofa and holding a fan over her eyes, as though to shut out the sight of her husband's bowed shoulders and venerable white head, answered languidly—

"You forget that you did only half of what you were expected to do. You would not consent to a definite engagement until she should be eighteen years old; she is eighteen now, and yet you are

holding back. Suspense of such a sort is very trying to a girl."

The General, who had been standing beside her, sat down in a large arm-chair and looked very vexed.

"I don't care," he said obstinately—"I'm not going to have my little girl disposed of in such a hurry! She shall not be engaged to anybody just yet; and until she is twenty or twenty-one she sha'nt be married. Why, she's had no girlhood at all! She's only just out of the schoolroom now. Eighteen is nothing!"

"Waiting and uncertainty are bad for a girl's spirits," said Mrs. Vane. "You can do as you please, of course, about her engagement; but you must not expect her to look delighted over the delay."

The General put his hands on his knees and leaned forward mysteriously.

"Flossy," he said, "I don't wish to make you anxious, dear; but do you think Hubert really cares for her?"

Flossy lowered her fan; there was a touch of angry color in her face.

"What are you going to say next, General? Why should Hubert have asked Enid to marry him if he were not in love with her? He had, no doubt, plenty of opportunities of asking other people."

"Yes—yes; but Enid is very sweet and very lovely, my dear. You don't often see a more beautiful girl. I should not like her to marry a man who was not attached to her." [Pg 156]

Flossy controlled her anger, and spoke in a careless tone.

"What makes you take such fancies into your head, dear?"

"Well—more than one thing. To begin with, I found Enid wandering up and down the conservatory just now, looking as pale as a ghost, with tears in her eyes. I railed her a little, and asked her to tell me what was the matter; but she would not say. And then I asked if it had anything to do with Hubert, and whether she had heard from him lately; and, do you know, Flossy, she has had no letter from him for a fortnight! Now, in my day, although postage was dearer than it is now, we wouldn't have waited a fortnight before writing to the woman that we loved."

"Hubert is a very busy man; he has not time for the writing of love-letters," said Flossy slightly.

"He ought not to be too busy to make her happy."

"You forget too," said Mrs. Vane, "that Hubert has no private fortune. He is working harder than ever just now—toiling with all his might and main to gain a competency—not for his own, but for Enid's sake. Poor boy, he is often harassed on all sides!" She drew a little sigh as if she were sorrowing for him.

"I'm sure Enid does not harass him," said the General, getting up and pacing about the room in a hurry; "she is sweetness itself! And, as to money, why did he propose to her if he hadn't enough to keep her on? Of course Enid will have a nice little fortune—he needn't doubt that; but I shall tie it up pretty tightly when she marries, and settle it all upon herself. You may tell him that from me if you like, with my compliments!" The General was excited—he was hot and breathing hard. "He must have an income to put against—that's all; he's not going to live on his wife's fortune."

"Poor Hubert—I don't suppose he ever thought of such a thing!" said Flossy, affecting to laugh at her husband's vehemence, but weighing every word she uttered with scrupulous care. "Indeed, if he had known that she would have money, I don't suppose he would even have asked her to marry him. He believed her to be all but penniless." [Pg 157]

"And what right had he to believe that?" shouted the General, looking more apoplectic than ever.

At which Flossy softly sighed, and said, "My nerves, dear!" closed her eyes, and held a vinaigrette to her nose.

The General was quieted at once.

"I beg your pardon, my dear—I forgot that I must not talk so loudly in your room," he said apologetically. "But my feelings get the better of me when I think of my poor little Enid looking so white and mournful. And so Hubert's working hard for her, is he? Poor lad! Of course I shall not forget him either in my will—you can tell him so if you like—and Enid's future is assured; but he must not neglect her—mustn't let her shed tears and make those pretty blue eyes of hers dim, you know—you must tell him that."

"The General grows more and more foolish every day," said Flossy to herself, with disgust—"a garrulous old dotard!" But she spoke very sweetly.

"I will talk to him if you like, dear; but I do not think that he means to hurt or neglect poor Enid. He is coming down to-morrow to spend Easter with us; that will please her, will it not? I have been keeping it a secret from her; I wanted to give her a surprise. It will bring the color back to her pale cheeks—will it not, you kind, sympathetic old dear!"

Flossy's white hand was laid caressingly on the General's arm. The old soldier rose to the bait. He raised it at once to his mouth, and kissed it as devoutly as ever he had saluted the hand of his

Queen.

"My dear," he said, "you are always right; you are a wonderful woman—so clever, so beautiful, so good!" Did she not shiver as she heard the words? "I will leave it in your hands—you know how to manage every one!"

"Dear Richard," said Flossy, with a faint smile, "all that I do is for your sake."

And with these words she dismissed him radiantly happy.

Left to her own meditations, the expression of her face changed at once; it grew stern, hard, and cold; there was an unyielding look about the lines of her features which reminded one of the fixity of a mask or a marble statue. She lay perfectly motionless for a time, her eyes fixed on the wall before her; then she put out her hand and touched a bell at her side. [Pg 158]

Almost immediately the door opened to admit her maid—a thin, upright woman with dark eyes, and curly dark hair, disposed so as to hide the tell-tale wrinkles on her brow and the crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes. She wore pink bows and a smart little cap and apron of youthful style; but it would have been evident to the eye of a keen observer that she was no longer young. She closed the door behind her and came to her mistress' side.

Florence paused for a minute or two, then spoke in a voice of so harsh and metallic a quality that her husband would scarcely have recognised it as hers.

"You have been neglecting your duty. You have not made any report to me for nearly a week."

"You have not asked me for one, ma'am."

"I do not expect to have to ask you. You are to come to me whenever there is anything to say."

The woman stood silent; but there was a protest in her very bearing, in the pose of her hands, the expression of her mouth and eyebrows. Flossy looked at her once, then turned her head away and said—

"Go on."

"There is nothing of importance to tell you, ma'am."

"How do you know what is important and what is not? For instance, Miss Enid was found by the General crying in the conservatory this morning. I want to know why she cried."

The maid—whose name was Parker—sniffed significantly as she replied—

"It's not easy to tell why young ladies cry, ma'am. The wind's in the east—perhaps that has something to do with it."

"Oh, very well!" said Mrs. Vane coldly. "If the wind is in the east, and that is all, Parker, you had better find some position in the world in which your talents will be of more use to you than they are to me. I will give you a month's pay instead of the usual notice, and you can leave Beechfield to-night."

The maid's face turned a little pale.

"I'm sure I beg pardon, ma'am," she said rather hurriedly; "I didn't mean that I had nothing to say. I—I've served you as well as I could, ma'am, ever since I came." There was something not unlike a tear in her beady black eyes. [Pg 159]

"Have you?" said her mistress indifferently. "Then let me hear what you have been doing during the last few days. If your notes are not worth hearing"—she made a long pause, which Parker felt to be ominous, and then continued calmly—"there is a train to London to-night, and no doubt your mother will be glad to see you, character or no character."

"Oh, ma'am, you wouldn't go for to be so cruel, would you?" cried Parker the unwise, evidently on the verge of a flood of tears. "Without a character, ma'am, I'm sure I couldn't get a good place; and you know my mother has only what I earn to live upon. You wouldn't turn me off at a moment's notice for——"

"You are wasting a great deal of time," said Flossy coldly. "Say what you have to say, and I will be the judge as to whether you have or have not obeyed my orders. Where are your notes?"

Smothering a sob, Parker drew from her pocket a little black book, from which she proceeded to read aloud. But her voice was so thick, her articulation so indistinct by reason of her half-suppressed emotion, that presently, with an exclamation of impatience, Mrs. Vane turned and took the book straight out of her hands.

"You read abominably, Parker?" she said. "Where is it? Let me see. 'Sunday'—oh, yes, I know all about Sunday!—'Church, Sunday-school, church'—as usual. What's this? 'Mr. Evandale walked home with Miss E. from afternoon school.' I never heard of that! Where were you?"

"Walking behind them, ma'am."

"Could you hear anything? What do your notes say? H'm!" They walked very slow and spoke soft—could not hear a word. At the Park gates Mr. E. took her hand and held it while he talked. Miss E. seemed to be crying. The last thing he said was, "You know you may always trust me." Then he

went down the road again, and Miss E. came home. Monday.—Miss E. very pale and down-like. Indoors all morning teaching Master D. Walked up to the village with him after his dinner; went to the schools; saw Mr. E. and walked along the lane with him. Mr. E. seemed more cheerful, and [Pg 160] made her laugh several times. The rest of the day Miss E. spent indoors. Tuesday.—Miss E. teaching Master Dick till twelve. Riding with the master till two. Lunch and needlework till four. Mr. Evandale came to call. "Why was I never told that Mr. Evandale came to call?" said Flossy, starting up a little, and fixing her eyes, bright with a wrathful red gleam in their brown depths, upon the shrinking maid.

"I don't know, ma'am. I thought that you had been told."

Flossy sank back amongst her cushions, biting her lip; but she resumed her reading without further comment.

"'Stayed an hour, part of the time with Miss E. alone, then with the master. Little Master Dick in and out most of the time. Nothing special, as far as I could tell. Wednesday.—Miss E. walked with Master Dick to the village after lessons. Went into Miss Meldreth's shop to buy sweets, but did not stay more than a few minutes. Passed the Rectory gate; Mr. E. came running after them with a book. I was near enough to see Miss E. color up beautiful at the sight of him. They did not talk much together. In the afternoon Miss E. rode over to Whitminster with the General. After tea——' Yes, I see," said Mrs. Vane, suddenly stopping short—"there is nothing more of any importance."

She lay silent for a time, with her finger between the pages of the note-book. Parker waited, trembling, not daring to speak until she was spoken to.

"Take your book," said Mrs. Vane at last, "and be careful. No, you need, not go into ecstasies"—seeing from Parker's clasped hands that she was about to utter a word of gratitude. "I shall keep you no longer than you are useful to me—do you understand? Go on following Miss Vane; I want to know whom she sees, where she goes, what she does—if possible, what she talks about. Does she get letters—letters, I mean beside those that come in the post-bag?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Make it your business to know, then. You can go;" and Flossy turned away her face, so as not to see Parker's rather blundering exit.

"The woman is a fool," she said to herself contemptuously, when Parker had gone; "but I think [Pg 161] she is—so far—a faithful fool. These women who have made a muddle of their lives are admirable tools; they are always so afraid of being found out;" and Flossy smiled cynically, although at the same moment she was conscious that she shared the peculiarity of the woman of whom she spoke —she also was afraid of being found out.

She had come across Parker before her marriage, when she was in Scotland. The woman had then been detected in theft and in an intrigue with one of the grooms, and had been ignominiously dismissed from service; but Flossy had chosen to seek her out and befriend her—not from any charitable motive, but because she saw in the discarded maid a person whom it might be useful to have at beck and call. Parker's bedridden mother was dependent upon her; and her one fear in life was that this mother should get to know her true story and be deprived of support. Upon this fear Mrs. Vane traded very skilfully; and, having installed Parker in the place of lady's-maid to herself and her husband's niece, she obtained accurate information concerning Enid's movements and actions, supplied from a source which Enid never even suspected.

Such knowledge was generally very useful to Flossy, but at present she was puzzled by certain items of news brought to her by Parker. "What does this constant meeting with Mr. Evandale mean?" she asked herself. Then her thoughts went back to the day of Mrs. Meldreth's death—a day which she never remembered without a shudder. She knew very well that the poor old woman had bitterly repented of her share in a deed to which her daughter Sabina and Mrs. Vane had urged her; it had been as much as Mrs. Vane and Sabina, by their united efforts, could do to make her hold her tongue. No fear of the General's vengeance, of Sabina's disgrace, of punishment of any kind, would have ensured her silence very much longer. The old woman had said again and again that she could not bear—in her own words—"to see Miss Enid kep' out of her own." She used to come to Flossy's boudoir and sit there, crying and entreating that she might be allowed to tell the General the truth. She did not seem to care when she was reminded that she herself would probably be punished, and that Sabina and Mrs. Vane had nothing but ruin [Pg 162] before them if the truth were known. She had the fear of death on her soul—the fear that her sin would bring her eternal misery.

"You are a wickedly selfish woman!" Flossy once said to her, with as near an approach to passion as her temperament would allow. "You think of nothing but your own salvation. Our ruin, body and soul, does not matter to you."

And indeed this was true. The terrors of the law had gotten hold of Mrs. Meldreth's conscience. The avenging sword, carried by a religion in which she believed, had pierced her heart. She would have given everything she had in the world to be able to follow the advice given in her Prayer-book, to go to a "discreet and learned minister of God's Word"—Mr. Evandale, for instance —and quiet her conscience by opening her grief to him. But both Sabina and Mrs. Vane were prepared to go to almost any length before they would give her the chance of doing this.

Mrs. Vane was of course the leading spirit of the three. Where Sabina only raved and stormed,

Mrs. Vane mocked and persuaded. She argued, threatened, coaxed, bribed, in turns; she gave Mrs. Meldreth as much money as she could spare, and promised more for the future; but the poor woman—at first open to persuasion—grew more and more difficult to restrain, and became at last almost imbecile from the pressure of her secret upon her mind. Flossy had begun seriously to consider the expediency of inducing Sabina to consign her mother to a lunatic asylum, or even to employ violent means for the shortening of her days on earth—there was nothing at which her soul would have revolted if her own prosperity could have been secured by it; but Mrs. Meldreth's natural illness and death removed all necessity for extreme measures.

Nothing indeed would have been more fortunate for Flossy and her accomplice than Mrs. Meldreth's death, had it not been for the circumstance that the dying woman had seen both Enid Vane and Mr. Evandale during her last moments. Flossy wondered angrily why Sabina had been so foolish as to admit them. She had heard nothing from Enid, who had kept her room for a couple of days after her return from Mrs. Meldreth's death-bed; but she was certain that [Pg 163] something was now known to the girl which had not been known before. Flossy had tried to question her, to reprove her even for going into the houses of the sick poor; but there had been a look in the girl's eyes, a frozen defiance and horror in her face, which made Mrs. Vane shrink back aghast. Though silent and not very demonstrative in manner, Enid had hitherto never shown any dislike to Flossy, and had been as scrupulously attentive to her wishes as if she were still a child; but these days of passive obedience were past. Enid now quietly did what she chose. She seldom spoke to Florence at all; and on several occasions she had maintained her own purpose and choice with a calmness and steadfastness which had almost terrified Mrs. Vane. Who would have thought that Enid had a character? The girl had emancipated herself from all control, without words, without open rebellion; she had looked Flossy straight in the face once or twice, and Flossy had been compelled to yield.

Yes, Enid knew something—she was sure of that; how much she could not tell. She had never questioned Sabina Meldreth in person about the scene at her mother's death-bed—on principle, Flossy spared herself all painful and exciting interviews; but she had had a few lines from Sabina—sent to Beechfield Hall on the day of her mother's funeral.

"Miss Vane knows something—I don't know how much," Sabina had written. "The parson wanted to know, but couldn't get to hear. Maybe Miss Vane has told him. If she has, the parish won't hold you nor me."

"Abominably brusque and rude!" Flossy said to herself, as she drew the scrap of paper from its hiding-place. "But one cannot mould clay without soiling one's fingers, I suppose. It is months since Mrs. Meldreth died; and evidently Enid knows less than I supposed, or has made up her mind to keep the secret. But what do these meetings with Mr. Evandale mean? Is she confiding her troubles to him then? The little fool! I must see Sabina Meldreth, and Hubert too. What a good thing I had written to him to come—though not for the sake of pleasing Miss Enid, as the General fondly supposes! I must send for Sabina."

But the wish seemed to have brought about its own fulfilment. At that very moment Parker [Pg 164] knocked at her mistress' door.

"Will you see Miss Meldreth, ma'am? She says she would like a few words with you, if you can see her. She's down-stairs."

"Bring Sabina Meldreth to me," said Mrs. Vane.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Flossy's first instinctive desire was to rise from her sofa and receive Sabina Meldreth standing—not at all by way of politeness, but as an intimation that the interview was not intended to be a long one. On second thoughts, she lay still. A show of languor and indifference was more likely to produce an impression on Sabina than excitement. Mrs. Vane closed her heavy white eyelids, and did not raise them until the fair-haired woman in black, whom Hubert had noticed with the singers on New Year's Eve, was standing beside her couch.

"I thought you was asleep," said Miss Meldreth, with a slightly insolent air. "Some people can sleep through anything."

"All the better for them," answered Mrs. Vane dryly. "Why have you come?" She was not going to admit that she had been longing to see her visitor.

"I've come for the usual thing," said Sabina doggedly—"I want some money."

"You had some last month."

"Yes, and had to write three times for it—and me bothered about my rent. You're not carrying on business on fair terms, Mrs. Vane. I want to have a clear understanding. Mother managed all the money matters before; but she's gone now, and I should like something definite."

"What do you mean by 'definite'?"

"Either money down or regular quarterly payments, ma'am. You owe me that when you think of

all I've done for you."

"Have I done nothing for you then," said Flossy, with a red gleam in her brown eyes, "in saving you from disgrace, ridding you of a permanent burden, pensioning your mother till her death, and giving you money whenever you have asked for it? Is that nothing at all, Sabina Meldreth?" [Pg 165]

"It's something, of course," said Sabina stolidly; "but it ain't enough. I want fifty pounds a quarter, paid regular. If you give me that, I'm thinking of going back to Whitminster, where there won't be so many people poking and prying about and asking questions."

Going back to Whitminster! That would be worth paying for indeed! But Flossy showed no sign of gratification.

"What people have been asking questions?"

"The parson, for one."

"And who else?"

"Well," said Sabina, rather reluctantly, "I won't say that there's any one else. But the parson's been at me more than once, and he keeps his eye upon me and preaches at me in church—and I won't stand it!"

"Why do you go to church?" said Mrs. Vane with a faint sneer.

"Because, if I don't, people would say I wasn't respectable," snapped Miss Meldreth; "and it's no good flying in their faces that way."

"Oh! Then you wish to be thought respectable?"

"Yes, I do; and, what's more, so do you, Mrs. Vane, in your own way. You're too high and mighty, and pretend to be too ill to have to go to church; but, if you was me, and heard what folks say of them that stop away, you'd go yourself."

"Possibly," said Flossy; "we are in different circumstances. Now tell me—why has Mr. Evandale questioned you?"

"Because of what he heard when mother lay dying, of course. I wrote and warned you at the time."

"You should have said more then. You should have come and told me the whole story. Tell it me now."

It was a proof of Flossy's curious power over certain natures that Sabina Meldreth, wild and undisciplined as she was, seldom thought of resisting her will when in her very presence. She sat down on a chair that Mrs. Vane pointed out to her, and recounted, in rapid and not ill-chosen words, what had passed in her mother's room in the presence of the Rector and of Enid Vane. Flossy listened silently, tapping her lips from time to time with her fan.

When the story was ended, she turned on her visitor with a terrible flash of her usually sleepy eyes. [Pg 166]

"You fool," she said; without however raising her voice—"you fool! You have known this all these months, and have never made your way to me to tell it! How was I to know that the matter was so important? How was I to suspect? I guessed something, of course; but not this! Why, Sabina Meldreth, we are at the mercy of that child's discretion! She has us in her hands—she can crush us when she pleases! Heavens and earth—and to think that I did not know!"

"You might have known," said Sabina sullenly. "I've been to the house more than once. I've written and said that I wanted to see you. I don't think it's me that's been the fool." But the last sentence was uttered almost in a whisper.

"No, I have been careless—I have been to blame!" said Flossy, a feverish spot of color showing itself in her white cheeks. "So she knows—she knows! That is why she looks at me so strangely; that is why she avoids me and will hardly speak to me. I understand her now."

"Maybe," said Sabina, "she thought mother was raving, or didn't understand her aright."

"No, no; she understood—she believes it. But why has she kept silence? She hates me, and she might have ruined me—she might have secured Beechfield for herself by this time! What a little idiot she must be!"

Mrs. Vane was thinking aloud rather than addressing Sabina; but that young woman generally had an answer ready, and was not disposed to be ignored.

"Miss Vane's fond of her uncle," she said drily, "and did not want perhaps to vex him. Besides"—her voice dropped suddenly—"they tell me she's fond of the child."

Flossy did not seem to hear; she was revolving other matters in her mind.

"Do you think," she said presently; "that Miss Enid has told the Rector? She has seen a good deal of him lately."

"No, I don't; I should have heard of it before now if she had," replied Sabina bluntly. "He don't

mince matters; and he's got it into his head that I ought to be reformed, and that I've something on my mind. That's why I want to get to Whitminster."

"Go farther away than Whitminster," said Mrs. Vane suddenly; "go to London, and I'll give you the money you ask—two hundred pounds a year." [Pg 167]

"Will you? Well, I'm not ill-disposed to go to London. One could live there very comfortable, I dare say, on two hundred a year. But how am I to know if you'll pay it? Give me a bit of writing——"

"Not a word—not a line! You need not be afraid. I'll keep my promise if I have to sell my jewels to do it; and the General does not ask me what I do with my allowance. By-and-by, Sabina, I may have an income of my own; and then—then it shall be better for you as well as for me."

Her tone and manner had grown silky and caressing. Miss Meldreth looked hard at her, as if suspecting that this sugary sweetness covered some ill design; but she read nothing but thoughtful serenity in Mrs. Vane's fair face.

"When the General's dead, you mean? Well, that's as it may be. But I can't wait for that, you know, ma'am. He's strong and well, and may live for twenty years to come. I want my affairs settled now."

"Very well. Go to London, send me your address, and you shall have the fifty pounds as soon as you are settled there."

"That won't quite do, Mrs. Vane. I want something down for travelling and moving expenses. I have some bills to settle before I can leave the village."

"You must be terribly extravagant!" said Flossy bitterly. "I gave you thirty pounds at Christmas. Will ten pounds do?"

"Twenty would be better."

"I haven't twenty. I do not know where to get them. You must be content with ten."

"Ten won't do," said Sabina obstinately.

Mrs. Vane made a gesture of impatience.

"Reach me that jewel-box over there," she said. "Yes; bring it close—I have the key. Here are two five-pound notes. And here—take this ring, this bracelet—they are worth far more than ten pounds—get what you can for them."

"I'd rather have the money," said Sabina; "but, if I must put up with this, I must. I'll be off in a couple of days."

"You had better not tell anyone before hand that you are going. Some people might—think it their duty to interfere." [Pg 168]

"All right—I'll keep quiet, don't you fear, ma'am! Well, then, that's settled. If I go to London, you'll send me the fifty pound a quarter. And it must be regular, if you please—else I'll have to come down here after it."

"You will not have to do that," said Mrs. Vane coldly.

"Very well. Then I'll say good-bye to you, ma'am. Hope you'll get safely through your troubles; but it seems to me that you're in an uncommon risky position."

"And, if I am," said Flossy, with sudden anger, "whose fault is it but yours?"

Sabina shrugged her shoulders, and did not seem to think it worth while to reply. She walked to the door, and let herself out without another look or word.

She knew her way about Beechfield Hall perfectly well; and it was perhaps of set purpose that she turned down a passage that led past the nursery door. The door was open, and Master Dick was drawing a horse-and-cart up and down the smooth boards of the corridor. It was his favorite playing-place on a summer evening. He stopped short when he saw Sabina, and looked at her with observant eyes.

"This isn't your way, you know," he said, facing her gravely. "This passage leads to my room, and Enid's room, not to the kitchens; and you belong to the kitchens, don't you?"

Sabina stopped and eyed him strangely. She looked at his delicate sharp-featured little face, at his fair hair and blue eyes, at the dainty neatness of his apparel, and the costly toy which he held in his hands. Her own bold eyes softened as she looked. She half knelt down and held out her arms.

"Will you kiss me once, dearie, before I go away?"

Dick looked at her wonderingly. Then he came and put his little arms around her neck and kissed her once, twice, thrice.

"Don't cry," he said; "I didn't know you were so nice and kind. But, you see, I've only seen you in the shop."

"You won't see me in the shop any more. I'm going away," said Sabina, utterly forgetful of her

promise to Mrs. Vane.

"Are you?" said Dick. "Oh, then, won't there be any more sweeties in your windows? Or will some one else sell them?" [Pg 169]

"Some one else, I expect. That's all that children care for!" cried Sabina, springing to her feet. "He's got no heart!"

Turning her face suddenly, she saw that there had been a spectator of the little scene—a spectator at the sight of whom Sabina Meldreth turned deadly white. Miss Vane stood at the nursery door. She had been sitting there, and had heard Sabina's words and poor little Dick's innocent reply.

"You are wrong," she said gravely, with her eyes intent on Sabina's pale distorted face. "He has a heart—he is very loving and gentle. But you cannot expect him to love you when he does not know you. If ever he knew you better, he would—perhaps—love you more."

This speech, uttered quite gently and even pitifully, had a curious effect upon Sabina. She burst into tears, and turned away, hiding her face and sobbing as she went.

Enid stood for a moment in the doorway, holding the door-post by one hand, and sadly watching the retreating figure until it disappeared. Then Dick pulled at her dress.

"Cousin Enid, why does that woman cry? And why did she want to kiss me? Was she angry or sorry, or what?"

"Sorry, I think, dear," said Enid, as she went back to her seat.

She drew Dick upon her knee and caressed him tenderly for a few moments; but Dick felt, to his surprise, that the kisses she bestowed on him were mingled with tears.

"Cousin Enid, why do you cry too?"

But all she answered was—

"Oh, Dick, Dick—my poor little Dick—I hope you will never—never know!" Which poor little Dick could not understand.

Hubert Lepel arrived on the following day. He had not been to Beechfield Hall for some weeks, and he seemed to feel it incumbent upon him to make up to Enid for his long absence by presents and compliments; for he had brought her a beautiful bracelet, and was unusually profuse in his expressions of regard and admiration. And yet Enid seemed scarcely so pleased as a young girl in [Pg 170] similar circumstances ought to have seemed. Indeed she shrank a little from private conversation with him, and looked harassed and troubled.

It was perhaps in consequence of this fact that three days after his arrival Hubert sought a private interview with his sister. Flossy had meanwhile not spoken a word; she had been watching and waiting for those three days.

"Florence, I am inclined to think that you were mistaken."

"So am I," thought Flossy to herself; but aloud she only asked, "Why, dear?" with perfect tranquility.

"About Enid. I—I am beginning to think that she doesn't much care." He said the last words slowly, with his eyes on the tip of his boot.

"I am sure you are mistaken," said Flossy quietly. "But she is not demonstrative, and—well, I may as well say it to you—she has taken some idea into her head—something about me—about the past——"

She faltered skilfully; but she kept her eyes on Hubert's face, and saw that it wore a guilty look.

"Well, Flossy, you are right," he said. "She has heard something—village talk, I suppose—and I cannot get her to tell me what it is."

"She means perhaps to tell some one else?" said Mrs. Vane, with bitterness.

"No, I believe not. She has no wish to harm you, poor child, although she thinks that the General ought not to be deceived. However, I persuaded her to abandon that idea, showing her that it was not her duty to tell a thing that would so utterly destroy his happiness." Florence turned away her head. "I felt myself a villain," Hubert continued gravely, "in counseling her to stifle her conscientious scruples, Florence; but, for your sake and your husband's sake, I pleaded with her, and prevailed on her to keep silence—she will tell no one but myself after our marriage."

"You had better not let her open the subject with you at all. It will only be productive of unhappiness." Flossy discerned the entanglement at once—she saw that Hubert meant one thing and Enid another; but out of their cross-purposes she divined a way of keeping the girl silent. "For my sake Hubert, don't discuss my terrible past between you. What good would it do? [Pg 171] Promise me that, when you are married, you will not let her speak of it—even to you." She shed a

tear or two as she spoke.

"Poor Flossy!" said Hubert, laying his hand on her arm. "Don't grieve, dear! I have no right to say anything, have I? Yes, I promise you I will not let her say a word about the matter, either now or afterwards, if I can help it, and certainly to no one beside myself."

And with this promise Flossy feigned contentment. But, when Hubert had left her, she paced up and down the room with cheeks that flamed with excitement, and eyes that glowed with the dull red light of rage.

"What was I thinking about to bring this engagement to pass?" she said to herself. "Yet, after all, it is better so. Hubert has a reason for silencing her; with any other man, she would have the matter out in a trice, and ruin me. Now what is the next move? To delay the marriage, of course. I will come round prettily to the General's view, and uphold him in his determination not to allow the marriage for at least two years. So Enid says that she will not betray me until she is married, does she? Then she will never have the chance; for a great deal may happen—to a delicate girl like Enid Vane—in two long years."

CHAPTER XXV.

Hubert had been worried and overworked of late; it had appeared to him a good thing that he should spend a few of the spring days at Beechfield, and try to recover in the society of his sister and his betrothed the serenity that he had lost. But this seemed after all no easy thing to do. He was annoyed to find himself irritated by small matters; his equanimity, usually perfect, was soon ruffled; and, although he did not always show any outward sign of vexation, he felt that his temper was not quite under his own control. And it was Enid, curiously enough, who irritated him most.

"Who is this new singer," she asked one day, "about whom people are talking so much?"

"My dear Enid, how am I to know which singer you mean?" he said, letting the newspaper drop from his hand, and clasping his hands leisurely behind his head. "There are so many new singers!" [Pg 172]

They had been having tea under the beech-tree, and, as usual, had been left alone to do their love-making, undisturbed. Their love-making was of a very undemonstrative character. Enid sat in one comfortable basket-chair, Hubert in another, at a yard's distance. Their conversation went on in fragments, interspersed by long pauses filled up by an orchestra of birds in the branches overhead.

"I do not remember her name exactly," said Enid. "The Tollemaches were talking about her yesterday; they heard her in town last week. 'Cynthia' something—'Cynthia,' I remember that, because it is such an uncommon name."

"I suppose you mean Miss Cynthia West," said Hubert, after a very long pause.

"Yes, 'Cynthia West'—that was the name. Have you heard her?"

"Yes."

"And do you think her very wonderful?"

"She is a remarkably fine singer."

"Oh, I hope we shall hear her when we next go up to London! Aunt Leo wants me to stay with her."

"That will be very nice," said Hubert, bestirring himself a little. "Then you will hear all the novelties. But I would not go just yet if I were you, London has not begun to wake up again after its winter sleep."

"What a horrible place it must be!" said Enid, with a little shiver.

"You think so? It is my home."

There was an accent in his voice which impressed Enid painfully. She clasped her hands rather tightly together in her lap, and said, after another pause, in a lower tone—

"I dare say I should grow fond of it if I lived there."

"As you will do, in time," said Hubert, with a smile. "You must try to believe that you will soon be as absorbed in town-life as every other woman; that concerts and theatres and balls will make up for green fields and the songs of birds; that men are more interesting than brooks and flowers; that to shop and to gossip are livelier occupations than visiting the poor and teaching little Dick. Don't you think you can imagine it?"

She shook her head. [Pg 173]

"I can't imagine it; but, if I had to do it, I would try. I don't think your picture is very attractive, if

I may say so, Hubert."

"Don't you, dear? Why not?"

"It sounds so unreal. Do women pass their lives in that frivolous, vapid way?"

"Not all of them, of course. There are women who have work to do," said Hubert, looking idly into the distance, as if he were thinking of some one or something that he could not see.

"Oh, yes, I know—working women—professional women—women," said Enid, with an innocent smile, "like Cynthia West."

Hubert gave a slight start; then, to cover it, he changed his position, bringing his arms down and crossing them on his breast.

"You might tell me what she is like," continued Enid, with more playfulness of manner than she generally showed. "You tell me so little about London people! Is she handsome?"

"Yes, very."

"Dark or fair?"

"Very dark."

"Is she an Englishwoman?" pursued Enid.

"I am sure I don't know. I never asked."

"You know her then?"

"What makes you ask all these questions?" said Hubert, as if he had not heard the last. "Who has put Miss West into your head in this way?" He looked annoyed.

Enid at once put out a caressing hand.

"I did not mean to be too inquisitive, Hubert dear. But the Tollemaches are very musical, and they were talking a great deal about her. They said they saw you at the concert when she came out—some Italian teacher's semi-private concert—and they seemed to think that you knew the whole set of people who were there."

Mentally Hubert made some uncharitable remarks on the future destiny of the Tollemaches; but he controlled himself so far as to answer coolly—

"I know several of that set, certainly. I know Miss West a little."

"How delightful," cried Enid. "I should like to meet some of these great artists. Will you ever be able to introduce me to her, do you think, Hubert?" [Pg 174]

"I think not," said Hubert, knitting his brows. He did not find himself able to turn the subject quite as easily as he could have wished.

"Oh, isn't she nice?" hazarded Enid doubtfully. "I always fancy that the people who sing and act in public can't be quite as nice as the people who stay in their own home-circle. I know that you will think me very narrow-minded to say so, but I can't help it."

"I am afraid that I do think it rather narrow-minded," said Hubert quietly, but with a dangerous lighting of his eyes. "You must surely know that some of these singers are as good, as noble, as womanly as any of your sheltered young ladies in their home-circles, who have not genius enough to make themselves talked of by the world!"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so!" said Enid, quite unconscious of the storm that she was exciting in Hubert's breast. "But it is difficult to understand why they prefer a public life to a private one. Do you think they really like appearing on the stage?"

"I am sure they do," said Hubert, with a short laugh. "You cannot understand it as yet, I suppose; you will understand it by-and-by. It would be a very poor lookout for a novelist and playwright like myself, Enid, if every one thought as you do."

And then he got up and walked to meet the General, who was approaching the tea-table, and, as the two were soon deep in political matters, Enid presently slipped away unobserved.

She felt vaguely that she had vexed or disappointed her lover; she knew the tones of his voice well enough to feel sure that in some way she had said what he did not approve. And yet, on reflection, she could not see that she had given him legitimate cause of offence. She knew that he did not agree with her in preferring country to town; or in thinking that women who sang in public were not quite of her class; but she did not think that he ought to be angry with her for expressing her views. He perplexed her very much by his moments of irritation, of coldness, of absence of mind. At times he was certainly very different. He could be most tender, though always with the tenderness of a grown man to a child, of a strong person towards a weak one— [Pg 175] and this was a kind of tenderness which did not satisfy Enid's heart. Sometimes indeed she was thankful that it was so, feeling as if any great display of affection on his part would be overwhelming, out of place; but at other times she felt that his calm kindness was almost an insult to the woman whom he had asked to be his wife. A little while back she would not have thought so—she would have been well content with his behavior; but a new factor had come into

her life since her engagement to Hubert Lepel, some new and agitating consciousness of power had dawned upon her, with a revelation of faculties and influences to which she had hitherto been a stranger; and, in presence of these novel emotions and discoveries, Hubert was weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Meanwhile Hubert was as uncomfortable as a man could well be. He had always meant to be faithful and tender to Enid—for whom, as he had said, he would do anything in his power to save her from unhappiness; on the other hand, he found the task more difficult than he had dreamed. He had seen her first as a sweet, docile, pliable creature, ready to be led, ready to be taught, and he had meant to mould her to his will. But, lo and behold, the girl was not really pliable at all! She had a distinct character, an individuality of her own, as different from any ideal of Hubert's as ice from fire. Her inability to appreciate the artistic side of life—as he put it to himself—her dislike to the great town where all his interests lay—these were traits which troubled him out of proportion to their intrinsic worth. How could he be happy with a woman who differed from him so entirely in habits, taste, and training? He forgot for a moment that he had asked her to marry him in order that she might be made happy—that he had solemnly put aside from himself all thought of personal joy. But human nature is weak, and renunciation not always pleasant. It occurred to his mind that Enid herself might not be very happy if married to a man with whom she was not in sympathy.

It was half with relief, half with regret, that he listened to a monologue from the General on the subject of Enid's marriage.

"I always disapproved of early marriages," he said sapiently; "they never turn out well. And Enid [Pg 176] is delicate; she must not take the cares of a household upon her until she is older and stronger. Don't ask me for her until she is twenty-one, Hubert! She shall not marry till then with my consent." He had never spoken so strongly before; but he was reinforced by Flossy's recently-bestowed approval. Till within the last few days, Flossy had been all for a speedy marriage. She said now that she was convinced that her "dear Richard" was perfectly right, and the General was "cock-a-hoop" accordingly. "I need not threaten; you know very well that I have the whole control of the money that would go to her dowry—I need say nothing more. I will have no marriage talked about—no engagement even—for the present. Mind you, Enid is not engaged to you, Hubert. If she thinks fit to change her mind, she may do so."

"Certainly, sir."

"And, if you think fit to change your mind, you may do so too. Nobody wants either of you to marry where you do not love; the worst thing in the world!"

"When is this prohibition to be removed?" asked Hubert. "It seems to me a little hard upon—upon us both."

"If Enid is stronger, I will allow her to be engaged in a year's time," said the General, "but not before; and I shall tell her so."

The first time that Hubert found himself alone with Enid he said—

"The General seems to have changed his mind about our engagement, Enid."

"Yes; he told me so," she answered meekly.

"He says we are not to consider ourselves engaged."

"Yes."

"I am very sorry that he should take that view——"

"Don't be sorry, please!" she said, quickly interrupting him. "I think that it is better so."

"Better, Enid?"

"Yes. He says that I am not strong—and it is true. I feel very weak sometimes, not strong enough to bear much, I am afraid. If I were to become an invalid, I should not marry." She spoke gently, but with great resolution.

"That is all a morbid fancy of yours," said Hubert. "You will be better soon. After this summer, the General talks of winter in the Riviera. That will do you all the good in the world." [Pg 177]

"I think not," she answered quietly. "I am afraid that I am not so likely to recover as you think. And, if not, nothing on earth will induce me to marry any man. Remember that, Hubert—if I am not better, I will not marry you. I intend to join the sisters at East Winstead."

"It is that meddling parson who is at the bottom of this, I'll swear!" said Hubert angrily, quitting her side and pacing about the room. He noticed that at his words the color rose in the girl's pale cheeks.

"If you mean Mr. Evandale," she said, "I can assure you that he has never said a word to me about East Winstead. It is entirely my own wish."

"My dear child," said Hubert, halting in front of her, "the last thing we want is to force your wishes in any direction. If, for instance, you wish to throw me over and be a nun, do so by all means. I only ask you to be true to yourself, and to see that you do not act on impulse, or so as to

blight the higher impulses of your nature. I can say no more."

Enid looked at him wistfully, and seemed inclined to speak; but the entrance of her uncle at that moment put a stop to further conversation, and the subject was not reopened before Hubert's return to town.

"No engagement—free to do as I please." The words hummed themselves in Hubert's mind to the accompaniment of the throbs of the steam-engine all the way back to London. What did it mean? What did Enid herself mean? Was it not a humiliating position for a man to be in? Was it fair either to him or to the girl? Did it not mean, as a matter of fact, that Flossy had been mistaken, and that Enid was not in the least in love with him? He could not say that she had been especially affectionate of late. Passively gentle, sweet, amiable, she always was, but not emotional, not demonstrative. At that moment Hubert would have given ten years of his life to know what was in her heart—what she really meant, and wanted him to do.

Arrived at Charing Cross Station, he seemed uncertain as to his movements. He hesitated when the porter asked him what he should do with his luggage, and gave an order which he afterwards contradicted.

"No," he said, "I won't do that. Put my things on a cab. All right! Drive to No.—Russell Square." [Pg 178]

This was his home-address; but, when there, he did not go up-stairs. He told his landlady to send his things to his room, and not to expect him back to dinner, as he meant to dine at his club.

He did so; but after dinner his fitful hesitancy seemed to revive. He smoked a cigarette, talked a little to one of his friends, then went out slowly and, as it seemed, indecisively into the street, and called a hansom-cab. Then his indecision seemed to leave him. He jumped in, shouted an address to the driver, and was driven on to a quiet square in Kensington, where he knocked at the door of a tall narrow house, only noticeable in the daytime by reason of the masses of flowers in the balcony, and at night by the rose-colored blinds, illuminated by the light of a lamp, in the drawing-room windows.

The servant who opened the door welcomed him with a smile, as if his face was well known to her. He passed her with a word of explanation, and marched up-stairs to the first-floor, where he tapped lightly at the drawing-room door, and then, without waiting, walked into the room.

A girl in a red dress, who had been kneeling on the rug before the fire, rose to her feet as he came in and uttered a blithesome greeting.

"At last!" she said. "So here you are, monsieur! I was wondering what had become of you, and thought you had deserted me altogether!"

"Could I do that?" said Hubert, in a tone in which mock gallantry was strangely mingled with a tenderness which was altogether passionate and earnest. "Do you really think that I ever could do that?"

The girl he spoke to was Cynthia West.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Cynthia West made a delightful picture as she stood in the glow of the firelight and the rose-shaded lamps. Her dress, of deep red Indian silk, partly covered with puffings of soft-looking net of the same shade, was cut low, to show her beautiful neck and throat; the sleeves were very [Pg 179] narrow, so that the whole length of her finely-shaped arm could be seen. Her dusky hair gave her all the stateliness of a coronet; swept away from her neck to the top of her head, it left only a few stray curls to shadow with bewitching lightness and vagueness the smooth surface of the exquisite nape. What was even more remarkable in Cynthia than the beauty of her face was the perfection of every line and contour of her body; the supple, swelling, lissom figure was full of absolute grace; she could not have been awkward if she had tried. It was the characteristic that chiefly earned her the admiration of men; women looked more often at her face.

"Are you alone?" said Hubert, smiling, and holding out both his hands, in which she impulsively placed her own.

"Quite alone. Madame has gone out; only the servants are in the house. How charming! We can have a good long chat about everything!"

"Everything!" said Hubert, sinking with a sigh of relief into the low chair that she drew forward. "I shall be only too happy. I have stagnated since I saw you last—which was in March, I believe—an age ago! It is now April, and I am absolutely ignorant as to what has been going on during the last few weeks."

"You have been in the country?" laughed Cynthia. "How I pity you!"

"You do not like the country?"

"Not one little bit. I had enough of it when I was a child."

"You were brought up in the country, were you?" said Hubert carelessly. "I should never have taken you for a country-bred girl—although your physique does not speak of town-life, after all."

"Is that meant for a compliment?" said Cynthia, the clear color suddenly rising in her cheeks. "Bah—I do not like compliments—from some people! I should like to forget all about my early life—dull tiresome days! I began to live only when I came to London."

"Which was when you were about fifteen, was it not? You have never told me where you lived before that."

Cynthia made a little *moue* of disgust.

"You have always been much too polite hitherto to ask unpleasant questions. I tell you I want to forget those earlier years. If you must know, I was at school." [Pg 180]

"I beg your pardon," said Hubert; "I had no idea that the subject was so unpleasant to you, or I would not have alluded to it, of course."

Cynthia gave him a quick look.

"You have a right to ask," she said, in a lower voice. "I suppose I ought to tell you the whole story; but——"

There was strong reluctance in her voice.

"You need do nothing of the kind. I have no right at all; don't talk nonsense, Cynthia. After all, what is the use of raking up old reminiscences? I have always held that it is better to put the past behind us—to live for the present and the future. All of us have memories that we would gladly forget. Why not make it a business of life to do so?"

"'Forgetting those things which are behind,'" Cynthia murmured.

She was sitting on a very low chair, her hands loosely clasped before her, her eyes searching the embers of the fire. Hubert looked at her curiously.

"I never heard you quote Scripture before," he said, half laughing.

"Why not? There are plenty of things in the Bible worth thinking about and quoting too," said Cynthia briskly, but with a sudden change of attitude. "It would be better for us both, I have no doubt, if we knew it a little better, Mr. Lepel. Aren't you going to smoke? It does not seem at all natural to see you without a cigar in your mouth."

"What a character to give me! Smoke in this rose-tinted room?"

"Madame's friends all smoke here. You need not be an exception. She herself condescends at times to the luxury of a cigarette."

"You call it a luxury?"

"Certainly. Madame has initiated me. But you will understand that I don't display my accomplishment to every one."

"No—don't," said Hubert, a trifle gravely.

She looked round at him with a pretty defiance in her eyes and a laugh upon her face.

"Don't you approve?" she said mockingly. "Ah, you have yet something to learn! It is quite evident that you have been spending Easter in the country, and its gentle dulness hangs about you still." [Pg 181]

"Gentle dulness!" Hubert thought involuntarily of Enid. Yes, the term fitted her very well. Timid, gentle, dull—thus unjustly he thought of her; while, as to Cynthia—whatever Cynthia's faults might be, she was not dull—a great virtue in Hubert's eyes.

"I think you could make me approve of anything you do," he said, as he rose in obedience to her invitation to light his cigar. "Some people have the grace of becomingness; they adorn all they touch."

"What a magnificent compliment! I will immediately put it to the test," said Cynthia lightly. She had also risen, and was examining a little silver box on the mantelpiece. "Here Madame keeps her Russian cigarettes," she said. "I have not set up a stock of my own, you see. Now give me a light. There—I can do it quite skilfully!" she said, as she placed one of the tiny *papelitos* between her lips and gave one or two dainty puffs. "Now does it become me?"

"Excellent well!" said Hubert, who was leaning back in an enormous chair, so long and deep that one lay rather than sat in it, and regarding her with amusement. "'All what you do, fair creature, still betters what is done.'"

"Then I'm content," said Cynthia, seating herself and holding the cigarette lightly between her fingers.

She still kept it alight by an occasional little puff; but Hubert smiled to see that her enjoyment of it was, as a humorist has said of his first cigar, "purely of an intellectual kind." She enjoyed doing what was unusual and *bizarre*—that was all. He wondered whence she sprang, this brilliant creature of earth with instincts so keen, desires so ardent, mind and imagination so much more

fully developed than was usual with girls of her age. Cynthia's beauty was undeniable; but even without beauty, save that of youth, she would have been striking and remarkable.

She was not conscious of his continued gaze at her; she seemed to be lost in thought—perhaps of her earlier years, for presently she said in a reflective tone—

"You were surprised at my quoting Scripture. I wonder why? I do not seem such a bad person that I must not quote the Bible, do I?" [Pg 182]

"Certainly not."

"I used to be at the head of the Bible-class always when I was at St. Elizabeth's," she said dreamily. She did not notice that Hubert gave a little start when he heard the name.

"Your school was called St. Elizabeth's?"

"Yes."

"At East Winstead?"

"Yes"—this time rather hesitatingly. "Why?"

"Did you happen to know a girl called Jane Wood?"

The two looked at each other steadily for a minute or two. Hubert had spoken with resolute quietness; he thought that Cynthia's expression hardened, and that her color failed a little as she replied—

"I remember her quite well. She ran away."

"Before you left?"

"Before I left," said the girl, looking down at the cigarette she had taken from her lips and held between her fingers. Suddenly she threw it into the fire, and sitting erect, while a hot flush crossed her face, went on, "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, nothing! What sort of a girl she was, for instance."

"A wild little creature—a horrid, ungrateful, bad-tempered girl! They—we were all glad when she went."

"Why, the old woman—what's her name?—Sister Louisa—said that she was a general favorite!"

"I'm sure she wasn't. When were you there?"

"The day after her departure, I think."

"And what took you there, Mr. Lepel?" There was a touch of bewilderment in Cynthia's voice.

"Curiosity, for the most part."

"No one was at the school whom you knew, I suppose?"

"No," said Hubert, reflecting that Jane Wood had gone before he paid his visit.

Perhaps Cynthia did not understand this point. At any rate, she looked relieved.

"I was glad when my time came to leave," she said more freely.

"Did you not like the place?"

"Pretty well. It was frightfully, awfully dull!"

"And yet you had never known anything more exciting? Were you really conscious at the time that it was dull, or did you realise its dulness only afterwards?" [Pg 183]

"Oh, I must have had it in my blood to know the difference between dulness and enjoyment," she said lightly; "otherwise——"

"Well—otherwise?"

"Otherwise," she said smiling at him, "how should I know it now? There is a vast difference between dulness and enjoyment—as vast as that between happiness and misery; and I know them both."

"Cynthia," he said, rising and leaning towards her—"Cynthia, child, you do enjoy your present life—you are happy, are you not?"

She looked at him silently. The smile faded; he noticed that her bosom rose and fell more quickly than before.

"You think I ought to be?" she said. "But why? Because I have been in Italy—because I have had a little success or two—because people say that I am handsome and that I have a voice? That is not my idea of happiness, Mr. Lepel, if it is yours; but you know as well as I do that it is not happiness at all. It is excitement if you like, but nothing else—not even enjoyment."

"What would you call enjoyment then, Cynthia? What is your idea of happiness?" Her hurried

breathing seemed to have infected him with like shortness of respiration; there was a fire in his eyes.

"Oh," she said looking away from him and holding her hands tightly clasped upon her knee, "it is not different from other women's ideas of happiness—it is quite commonplace! It means a safe happy home of my own, with no reasonable fear that distrust or poverty or sin should invade it—congenial work—a companion that I could love and trust and work for and care for——" she stopped short.

"A husband," said Hubert slowly, "and children to kiss your lips and call you 'Mother,' and a man's love to soften and sweeten all the days of your life." She nodded, but did not speak. "And I," he said, with an irrepressible sigh—"I want a woman's love—I want a home too, and all the sweet charities of home about me. Yes, that is happiness."

"It will be yours by-and-by, I suppose," said Cynthia, in a rather choked voice—he told her that he was engaged to be married. [Pg 184]

"I see no probability," he answered drily. "She—her guardian will not allow an engagement."

"But—she loves you?"

"I do not think so; I am sure indeed that she does not!"

"And you—you care for her?"

"No; by Heaven, I do not!"

"Then by-and-by you will meet somebody whom you love."

"I have met somebody now," said Hubert, in a curiously dogged tone; "but, as I am sure that she does not care a pin for me, there is no harm in letting the secret out."

"Who is she?"—in a startled tone.

"She is a singer. She used to be an actress; but she has a magnificent voice and is in training for the operatic stage. She will be a great star one day, and I shall worship her from afar. But I have never met anybody in the world who will ever be to me what that woman might have been."

"How do you know," said Cynthia, in a scarcely audible voice, "that you are not so much to her as she is—you say—to you?"

"How do I know? I am certain of it—certain that she regards me as a useful, pleasant friend who is anxious to do his best for her in the musical world, and nothing more. If I dreamed for a moment that I was nearer and dearer to her than that, I should hold my tongue. But, as it is, knowing that I am not worthy to kiss the hem of her garment, and that if she knew all my unworthiness she would be the first to bid me begone, I do not fear—now, once and once only—to tell her that I love her with all my heart and mind and body and soul, and that I ask nothing from her but permission to love on until the last day of my life."

"Now, once and once only?" repeated Cynthia.

She looked up and saw that he stood ready for departure. His face was pale, his lips were tightly set, and his eyes sent forth a strange defiant gleam which she had never seen before. He made three strides towards the door before she collected herself sufficiently to start up and speak.

"No—no—you must not go! One moment! And what if—if"—she could hardly get out the words —"what if the woman that you loved had loved you too, ever since you saved her from poverty and disgrace and worse than death in the London streets?" [Pg 185]

She held out her arms to him, as if praying him to save her once again. He stood motionless, breathing heavily, swaying a little, as if impelled at one moment to turn away and at another to meet her extended hands.

"Then," he said at last—"then I should be of all men most miserable!"

It was illogical, it was weak, it was base, after those words, to yield to the tide of passion which for the first time in his life surged up in his soul with its full strength and power. And yet he did yield—why, let those who have loved like him explain. As soon as he had uttered his protest, and it seemed as if the battle should be over and these two divided from each other for evermore, the two leapt together, and were clasped in each other's arms.

She lay upon his breast; his arms were around her, his lips pressed passionately to hers. In the ecstacy of that moment conscience was forgotten, the past was obliterated; nothing but the fire and energy of love remained. And then—quite suddenly—came a revulsion of feeling in the mind of the man whose guilt had, after all, not left him utterly without remorse. To Cynthia's terror and dismay, he sank upon his knees before her, and, with his arms clasped round her waist, and his face pressed close to her slight form, burst into a passion, an agony of sobs. She did not know what to do or say! she could but entreat him to be calm, repeating that she loved him—that she would love him to the last day of her life. It was of no use, the agony would have its way.

He did not try to explain his singular conduct. When he rose at last, he kissed her on the forehead, and, murmuring, somewhat inarticulately, that he would see her on the morrow, he left the room. She heard the street door close, and knew, with a strange mixture of fear and joy, that

he had gone, and that he loved her. In the consciousness of this latter fact she had no fear of the morrow.

He might perhaps have kept his lips from an avowal of love, which was afterwards bitter to him as death if he had known that at St. Elizabeth's Cynthia West had once been known as the convict's daughter, Jane Wood.

CHAPTER XXVII.

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"Look here, Cynthia," he said abruptly, when he met her the next morning—"this won't do! I was to blame; I made a fool of myself last night."

"What—in saying that you loved me?" she inquired.

"Yes—in saying that I loved you. You know very well that I did not intend to say it."

"Does that matter?" she asked, in a low voice. She had taken his hand, and was caressing his strong white fingers tenderly.

"I did it against my conscience."

"Because of that other girl?"

He considered a moment and then said "Yes." But he was not prepared for the steadily penetrating gaze which she immediately turned upon him.

"I don't quite believe that," she said slowly.

"You doubt my word?"

"Yes," said Cynthia, in a dry matter-of-fact way; "I doubt everybody's word. Nobody tells the whole truth in this agreeable world. You forget that I am not a baby—that I have knocked about a good deal and seen the seamy side of life. Perhaps you would like me better if I had not? You would like me to have lived in the country all my life, and to be gentle and innocent and dull?"

"I could not like you better than as you are," he said, passing one arm round her.

"That's right. You do love me?"

"Yes, Cynthia."

"That is not a very warm assurance. Do you feel so coldly towards me this morning?"

"My dearest—no!"

"That's better. Dear Hubert——may I call you Hubert?"—he answered with a little pressure of his arm—"if you really care for me, I can say what I was going to say; but, if you don't—if that was how you made a fool of yourself by saying so when you did not mean it—then tell me, and I shall know whether to speak or to hold my tongue."

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She spoke forcibly, with a directness and simplicity which enchanted Hubert in spite of himself. He assured her that he loved her from the bottom of his heart, that she might speak freely, and that he would be guided, if possible, by what she said—he knew that she was good and wise and generous. And then he kissed her once more on the lips, and she believed his words. She began to speak, blushing a little as she did so.

"I only want to understand. You are not married, Hubert?"

"My darling—no!"

"And you said last night that you were not engaged?"

"I am not engaged," he said more slowly.

"You have—some other engagement—entanglement—of which I do not know?"

"No, Cynthia."

"Then," she, said, facing him with a boldness which he thoroughly admired, "why do you want to draw back from what you said to me last night?"

Hubert looked more than serious—he looked unhappy.

"Draw back," he said slowly—"that is a hard expression!"

"It is a hard thing," she rejoined.

"Cynthia, if I had suspected—if you had ever given me any reason to suppose—that you were willing to think of me as more than a friend, I would not have spoken. I am not worthy of you; I can but drag you back from a brilliant career; it is not fair to you."

The girl stood regarding him meditatively; there was neither fear nor sign of yielding in her eyes.

"That does not sound natural," she said; "it does not sound quite real. Excuse me, but you would not, merely as a novelist, make your hero try to back out of an engagement for that reason. If he gave it, the reader would know at once there was something else—something in the background. I believe that the amiable heroine would accept the explanation and go away broken-hearted. But I," said Cynthia, with a little stamp of impatience—"I am not amiable, and I mean neither to believe in your explanation nor to break my heart; and so, Mr. Hubert Lepel, you had better tell me what this is really all about."

"Ah, Cynthia, I had better let you think me a fool or a brute than lead you into this!" cried Hubert.

"But I should never think you a fool or a brute, whatever you did." [Pg 188]

"You do not know what you might think of me—in other circumstances."

"Try," she said, almost in a whisper, slipping her hand into his.

But he shook his head and looked down, knitting his brows uneasily.

"What will satisfy you?" she asked at length, evidently convinced from his manner that something was more seriously amiss than she had thought. "Do you not know that where I give my love I give my whole trust and confidence. More than that, I shall never take it away, even if all the world told me—even if I had some reason to believe—that you were not worthy of my trust. Oh, what does the world know of you? I understand you much better. Can't you see that a woman loves a man for what he is, and not for what he does?"

"What he does proceeds from what he is, Cynthia, I am afraid," said Hubert sadly.

"Not always. People are often betrayed into doing things that do not show their real nature at all," said the girl eagerly. "A man gives way to a sudden temptation—he strikes a blow—and the world calls him a ruffian and a murderer; or he takes what belongs to another because he is starving, and the world calls him a common thief. We cannot judge."

He had drawn away from her, and was resting his arm on the mantelpiece, and his head upon his arm. A strange vibration passed through his frame as he listened to her words.

"Do you think, then," he said at last, speaking with difficulty, and without raising his head, "that you could love a man that the world condemned, or would condemn, if they knew all—could you love a man who was an outcast, a felon, a—a murderer?"

"I am sure that I could," said Cynthia fervently. For the moment she was not thinking of Hubert, however, but of another man whom she had loved, and whom she had seen condemned to death for the murder of Sydney Vane.

Hubert put out his left hand and drew her close to him. Even now there was one thing that he dared not say; he did not dare ask her whether she could love a man who had allowed another to [Pg 189] bear the punishment which he had deserved, although he had hidden his guilt from a desire to save another rather than himself. He remained for a few moments in the same posture, with his face hidden on his right arm and his left encircling Cynthia; but, after a time, he stood up, drew her closer to his breast and kissed her forehead. Then he put her away from him and crossed his arms across his chest. His face was pale and drawn, there were beads of perspiration on his forehead, and his lip was bitten underneath his thick moustache.

"Cynthia," he said hoarsely, "to you, at least, I will try to be an honest man. I never knew a woman as brave, as true as you are; I'll do my best, at any rate, to be not altogether unworthy of you, my darling. I would give all I have in the world if I could ask you to marry me, Cynthia; but I can't. There is an obstacle; you were right—I am not free."

"I thought there was some real reason," she said quietly. "I knew you would not have spoken as you did without a reason."

"I am not engaged; or perhaps I should say that I am engaged, and that she is free. If at the end of two years she is stronger in health, and her uncle withdraws his opposition, and she cares to accept me, I have promised to be ready. The last thing I ever meant was to ask any other woman to be my wife. But I was weak enough not to deny myself the bitter-sweet solace of telling you that I loved you; and thus I have drawn down punishment on myself. Cynthia, can you ever forgive me?"

She did not answer; she seemed to be thinking deeply. After a few minutes' silence, she looked at him wistfully, and asked another question.

"You said she did not love you. Was that true?"

"I believe so."

"Then why does she want to marry you?" There was something child-like in Cynthia's tone.

"I don't think she does, Cynthia; I think it is only her uncle's wife who has been trying to bring about a marriage between us; and perhaps it was my conviction that this marriage would never come about which made me less careful than I might have been. Assuredly I never intended to tell you what I told you last night."

"But I am glad you did," said Cynthia, almost inaudibly. Then she put her hand on Hubert's arm,

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and looked at him with a soft and beautiful expression in her large dark eyes. "I am glad, because it will make life easier for me to know that you care for me. Now I want you to listen to me for a few moments. From what you say, I think that this girl is weak in health, an orphan, and not perhaps very happy in her home? Yes, that is so—is it not? Do you think then that I would for a moment rob her of what might make all her happiness? You say that she does not care for you. But you may be mistaken; you know you thought that—that I did not care either. You must wait for her, and see what will happen at the end of the two years. If she claims you then—well, it will be for you to decide whether you will marry her; but I shall not marry you unless she gives you up of her own free will. And, if she does—and if you care for me still——"

"Then you will be my wife?"

Cynthia paused.

"Then," she said slowly—"then you may, if you like, ask me again. But then you will perhaps remember that I am a nobody—that I was born in a cottage and educated at a charity-school—that I—that I——No, I can't tell you my history now—don't ask me; if you love me at all, don't ask me that! I will tell you—I promise you—before I marry you, if ever—at the end of two years—at the end of half a century—you ask me again."

She was weeping in his arms—she, the brilliant, joyous, successful woman, with a life of distinction opening out before her, with spirits and courage that never failed, with beauty and gifts that were capable of charming all the world—weeping like a child, and in need of comfort like a child. What could he do?

"My darling, my own darling," he said, "I cannot bear to hear you speak so! Do you doubt my love for you, Cynthia? Tell me nothing but what you please; I shall never ask you a question—never desire to know more than what you choose to tell. And in two years——Oh, what can I say? Marry me to-morrow, Cynthia, my dearest, and let everything else go by!"

"And despise you ever after for yielding to my weakness?" she said, checking her tears. "Do you think I could bear you to lower yourself for my sake? No; you shall keep your word to her—to the woman, whoever she may be, who has your word. But I—I have your heart."

She sent him away from her then with proud but gentle words, caressing him, flattering him, [Pg 191] after the fashion of women with those they love, but inexorably determined that he should keep his word. For she had a strong sense of honor and honesty, and she could not bear to think that he could be false to anyone who trusted him. It was weighing heavily on her own conscience that she had deceived him once.

Hubert left her with his senses in a whirl. He knew, as he said, that he had been weak; but Cynthia's beauty intoxicated him. But for her determination, her courage, he would have failed to keep up even the appearance of faith with Enid—he would have been utterly careless of Enid's trust in him. But this declension Cynthia was resolved not to permit. It was strange to see what nobleness of mind and generosity of feeling existed beneath her light and careless demeanor; and while these characteristics humiliated her lover, they filled him with genuine pride and admiration. She was not a woman to be lightly wooed and lightly won; she was worthy of respect, even of reverence. And, as he thought of her, his heart burned with anger against the innocent girl at Beechfield who had dared to speak of this noble woman with something very like contempt.

Cynthia was glad that she had no public engagement for that evening. She was invited to go with Madame della Scala to a large party; but she pleaded a headache, and begged to be allowed to stay at home. Madame scolded her playfully, but did not oppose her whim; she was sufficiently proud of her pupil and housemate to let her take her own way—a practical compliment for which Cynthia was grateful.

When the old lady had gone, Cynthia returned to her favorite rose-lighted sitting-room, and sank somewhat languidly into a lounging-chair. She had forbidden Hubert to return to her that night—she had said that she wanted to be alone; and now she was half inclined to repent her own peremptoriness. "I might have let him come just once," she said to herself. "I shall not allow him to come often, or to be anything but a friend to me; but I feel lonely to-night. It is foolish of me to be depressed. A month ago I should have thought myself happy indeed if I could have known that he loved me; and now I am more miserable than ever. I suppose it is the thought of that other girl —mean, jealous, miserable wretch that I am! But I will not be mean or jealous any longer. He has [Pg 192] promised himself to her, and he shall keep his word."

She was startled from these reflections by the sound of a tap at the door, followed by the entrance of a maid whose office it was especially to attend on Miss West.

"If you please, miss," she said, in a low and rather confidential tone—"if you please, there's a—a person at the door that asks to see you."

"It is late for visitors," said Cynthia. "A lady, Mary?"

"No, miss."

"A gentleman? I do not see gentlemen, when Madame is out, at this hour of the night. It is ten o'clock. Tell him to come to-morrow."

"I did, miss. He said to-morrow wouldn't do. He asked me to mention 'Beechfield' to you, miss, and to say that he came from America."

"Old or young, Mary?" The color was leaving Cynthia's face.

"Old, miss. He has white hair and black eyes, and looks like a sort of superior working-man."

Cynthia deliberated. Mary watched her in silence, and then made a low-voiced suggestion.

"There's cook's young man in the kitchen, miss, and he's a policeman. Shall I ask him to step up to the front and tell the man to move on?"

"Oh, no, no!" said Cynthia, suddenly shrinking. "I will see the man, Mary. I think that perhaps he knows a place—some people that I used to know."

There was a sort of terror in her face. Mary turned rather reluctantly to the door.

"Shall I come in too, miss, or shall I stand in the passage?"

"Neither," said Cynthia, with a little laugh. "Go down to your supper, Mary, and I will manage the visitor. Show him in here."

She seemed so composed once more that Mary was reassured. The girl went back to the hall door, and Cynthia rose to her feet with the look of one who was nerving herself for some terrible ordeal. She kept her eyes upon the door; but, when the visitor appeared, they were so dim with agitation that she could hardly see the face or the features of the man whom Mary decorously announced as—

"Mr. Reuben Dare."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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Cynthia looked round at her visitor with a sort of timidity which she did not often exhibit. He was apparently about sixty years of age, broad-shouldered, and muscularly built, but with a stiffness of gait which seemed to be either the result of chronic rheumatism or of an accident which had partially disabled him. His face was brown, his eyes were dark and bright; but his hair and beard were almost white, although his eyebrows had not a grizzled tint. He was roughly but respectably dressed, and looked like a prosperous yeoman or an artisan of the better class. Cynthia glanced at him keenly, then seemed to gain confidence, and asked him to sit down. The visitor obeyed; but Cynthia continued standing, with her hands on the back of a heavy chair.

"Mr. Reuben Dare?" she said at length, as the old man did not speak.

"Come straight from Ameriky," said he—he sat bolt-upright on his chair, and looked at the girl with a steady interest and curiosity which almost embarrassed her—"and promised to look you up as soon as I got over here. Can you guess who 'twas I promised, missy?"

Cynthia grew first red and then white.

"No," she said; "I am not sure that I can."

"Is there nobody belonging to you that you haven't heard of for years and years?"

"Yes," said Cynthia; "I think perhaps there is."

"A man," said Mr. Reuben Dare, leaning forward with his hands on his knees, and trying to subdue his rather harsh voice to quietness—"a man as was related to you, maybe?"

"If you will say what you mean, I think I can answer you better," said Cynthia.

"Do you think I am going to say what I mean until I know what sort of a young woman you are, and how you'll take the news I bring you?" said the man.

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With a somewhat savage and truculent air he drew his eyebrows down over his eyes as he spoke; but there was a touch of something else as well—of stirred emotion, of doubt, of troubled feeling—which dissipated Cynthia's fears at once. She left the chair which she had been grasping with one hand, and came closer to her visitor.

"I see that you are afraid to trust me," she said quickly. "You think that perhaps I am hard and worldly, and do not want to have anything to do with my relatives? That is not true. You are thinking—speaking—of my poor father perhaps. As long as I was a child—a mere girl—I did not think much about him, I was content to believe what people told me—not that he was guilty—I never believed that!—but that I could do nothing for him, and that I had better not interfere. When I was independent and beginning to think for myself—about six months ago—I found out what I might have done. Shall I go on to tell you what I did?"

"Yes, yes—go on!" The man's voice was husky; his wrinkled hand trembled as it lay upon his knee. He watched the girl's face with hungry eyes.

"I wrote to the Governor of the prison," said Cynthia, "and told him that I had only just discovered

—having been such a child—that I could write to my father or see him at regular intervals, and that I should like to do so from time to time. He asked me in return how it was that an intimation —which had been forwarded, I believe, to certain persons interested in my welfare—of my father's fate had not been given to me. My father had, by a desperate effort, succeeded in escaping from Portland; he had never been recaptured; and, from certain information received, the authorities believed that he was dead. He added however that he had a shrewd suspicion that Andrew Westwood had thrown dust into the eyes of the police, had left the country, and was not dead at all."

"And begged you to communicate with the authorities if you heard from him, I suppose?"

"No; he did not go so far as that to the man's own daughter," said Cynthia calmly. "And it would, of course, have been useless if he had."

"Why—why?"

"Because," said the girl, her lips suddenly trembling and her eyes filling with tears—"because I love my father, and would do anything in the world for him—if he would let me. Can you not tell [Pg 195] me where he is? I would give all I have to see him once again!"

Reuben Dare fidgeted in his chair, and half turned his face away. Then, without meeting her eager tearful eyes, he replied half sullenly—

"The Governor was right. He got away—away to America."

"Oh, then he is living still? He is well?"

"Oh, yes—he's living, and well enough! He hasn't done so badly neither. He got some land and 'struck ile,' as they say in America; and living under another name, and nobody knowing anything about him—he—well, he's had fair luck."

"And you come from him—you are a friend of his? Did he want to hear of me?"

"Yes, missy, he did. But he would scarce ha' known you if he'd met you in the street—you, grown so tall and handsome and dressed so fine. It was your name as gave him the clue —'Cynthia'—'Cynthia West'; for he read in the papers as you were singing at concerts, and he says to himself, 'Why, that's my gal, sure enough; and she hain't forgotten her mother's name!'"

"Go on!" said Cynthia quickly.

"Go on? What do you mean?" asked Reuben Dare, a little suspiciously. "There's nothing more to say, is there? And he asked me to make inquiries while I was in England—that was all."

"Oh, no, that was not all!" said Cynthia, drawing nearer, and holding out her hands a little, like one under hypnotic influence, fascinated by a power over which she had no control. "I can tell you the rest. The more he thought of his child, and the more he remembered how she used to love him and trust in him, the more he felt that he could not stay away from her; and so, although the risk was great—terrible—he determined to come back to England and see with his own eyes whether she was safe and well. And when he saw her"—there was a sob in her voice—"he said to himself that perhaps after all she was a hard, unfeeling creature who had forgotten him, or a wicked, treacherous woman who would betray her own father, and that he would go away back to America and never see her again, forgetting to ask whether she had not a heart and a memory too, and whether it might not be that she had loved him all her life, and whether she was not [Pg 196] longing to fall upon his neck and kiss his dear face, and tell him that she wanted a father for many, many dreary years, and that she trusts him, believes in him, loves him with all her heart! Oh, father, father!"—and Cynthia lay sobbing on his breast.

She had thrown herself impulsively on her knees beside him; her arms were round his neck, and he was covering her face with kisses. He did not attempt to deny that she had spoken the truth—that he was indeed her father—the man who had been condemned to death, and whom she had believed until this moment to be in America, if still indeed alive; but neither did he try to prove the fact. He sat still, with his arms round her, and—to her surprise—the tears running down his cheeks as freely as they were running down her own. She looked up at him at last and smiled rather piteously in his face.

"Dear father," she said, "and have you come all this way and run into so much danger just to see me?"

"Yes, I have, Cynthy," said the man who called himself Reuben Dare. "I said to myself, I can't get on any longer without seeing her, any way. If that's my girl that sings—as her mother did before her—I shall know her in a trice. But, bless you, my girl, I didn't—not till you began to speak! And then t'was just like your mother."

"Am I so much altered?" said Cynthia wistfully.

"As much as you ought to be, my beauty, and no more. You ain't like the skinny little bit of a thing that ran wild round Beechfield lanes; but then you don't want to be. You're a good deal like your mother; but she wasn't as dark as you. And, being so different, you see, I thought you might be different in yourself—not ready to acknowledge your father as belonging to you at all, maybe; and so I'd try you with a message first and see what you said to that."

"You are altered too, father."

"Yes, my deary, I'm altered too. Hain't I had enough to alter me? Injustice and oppression have almost broke my heart, and ague and fever's taken the strength out o' my limbs, and a knock I got in the States three years ago has nigh crippled me. I'm a broken-down man, with only strength left for one thing—and that's to curse the hard-hearted ruffian, whoever he was, that spoiled my life for me, and thought to hang me by the neck or shut me up in prison for the rest of my days. If ever I could come across him, I'd do my best to make him suffer as I have suffered. I pray God night and day that He'll let me see that rascal on his knees to me yet before I die!" [Pg 197]

His voice had grown loud and fierce, his eyes shone beneath the shaggy eyebrows, his hand shook as he raised it to call down vengeance on the man who had left him to his fate. Cynthia trembled in spite of her love for him—the tones, the look, brought back memories which made her feel that her father was in a great many ways unchanged, and that the wild, lawless nature of the man might be suppressed but never utterly subdued. She did not feel the slightest abatement of her love for him on this account; but it suddenly made her aware of the dangers and difficulties of his position, and aroused her fears for his safety, even in that house.

"Father," she said "are you sure that nobody will remember you?"

Westwood laughed harshly.

"They're not likely to know me," he said. "I've taken care to change my looks since then;" and, by a sudden movement of his hand, he showed her that hair, beard, and moustache were all fictitious, and that beneath the silvery exterior there grew a scantier crop of sparse gray hair and whiskers, which recalled his former appearance much more clearly to his daughter's mind.

"Oh, don't take them off!" she cried. "Somebody may come in—the door is not locked! At another time, dear father, you will show me your real face, will you not?"

He looked at her with a mingling of pride and sorrow in his glance.

"And you ain't wanting me to be found out then—you don't want to give me up to the police?"

"Father, how can you think of such a thing?"

"Some women-folks would think of it, my girl. But you—you're fond of your father still, Cynthy?"

She answered by taking his rough hand in her own and kissing it tenderly.

"And you don't believe I killed Mr. Vane down at Beechfield—eh, Cynthy? Because if you believe it, you know, you and me had better part without more words about it. Least said, soonest mended."

"I do not believe it—I never did!" said Cynthia proudly. [Pg 198]

"On your word and honor and Bible-oath, Cynthia?"

"On my word and honor and on my Bible-oath, father," she said, repeating the words, because she saw that he attached especial importance to the formula. "I never believed and never will believe that you were guilty of Sydney Vane's murder! My father"—she said it as proudly as if he had been a Royal Prince—"was never capable of a base and wicked deed!"

"It's her mother's voice," murmured the man, raising his hand to his eyes, as if to shut out the sight of the young girl's face, and to abstract himself from everything but the sound, "and it's her mother's trust in me! Cynthia, my dear, what do you know o' your father to make you so ready to stand by him?" There was a great and an unaccustomed tenderness in his tone. "I'm a common man, and I've spent years of my life in gaol, and I was a tramp and a poacher—I won't deny it—in the olden days; and before that—well, before that, I was a gamekeeper on a big estate—turned away in disgrace, my dear, because my master's daughter fell in love with me. You never heard that before, did you?—though any one would guess that you didn't come of a common stock! Wetheral was her name—Cynthia Wetheral of Bingley Park, in Gloucestershire. There are relatives of hers living there still; but they don't acknowledge us—they won't have anything to do with you, Cynthia, my girl. I married her and took her away wi' me; and for twelve blessed months we were as happy as the day was long; and then she died." He paused a little, and caressed Cynthia's head with his hand.

"You're like her, my dear. But I'm only a low common sort o' man that sunk lower and lower since the day she died; and you've no call to trust me unless you feel inclined—no call in the very least. If you say you don't quite believe my word, my pretty, I'll not cut up rough—I'll just go away quiet, and never trouble you any more."

"Father," said Cynthia, "listen to me one moment. We were separated when I was only eleven years old; but don't you think that in eleven years I could learn something of your real disposition—your true nature? I remember how you used to care for me, how tender and kind you were to me, although you might perhaps seem gloomy and morose to all the world beside. I remember your bringing home a dog with a broken leg, and nursing it till it was cured. You had pets of all kinds—birds, beasts, flowers. You never did a cruel thing in your life; and how could I think then, that you would lie in wait to kill a man out of mere spite and revenge—a man, too, with a wife and a child—a little girl like me? I knew you better, father, all the time!" [Pg 199]

Westwood shook his head doubtfully.

"Maybe you're right," he said, "and maybe wrong. I've seen rough deeds done in my day, and

never lifted a hand to interfere. I won't deny but what I did lie in wait for Mr. Vane that very afternoon—but with no thought of murder in my mind. I meant to tell him what my opinion was of him and of his doings; for there was carryings-on that I didn't approve of, and it's my belief that in those very carryings-on lies the key of the mystery. I've thought it all out in prison, slow-like—at nights when I lay in bed, and days when I was hewing stone. I won't tell you the story, my pretty; it ain't fit for the likes of you. But there was a woman mixed up in it; and, if there was any man who had rights over the woman—sweetheart or husband, brother or father, or such-like—it's in that quarter that you and me should look for the real murderer of Sydney Vane."

"Can't we do anything, father? Won't you tell me the whole story?"

"Not now, my girl; I must be going."

"Where are you going, father? Will you be in a safe place?"

"Quite safe, my dear—quite safe! Nobody would know me in this guise, would they? I'm at No. 119 Isabella Street, Camden Town—quite a little out-o'-the-way place—just the sort to suit a quiet respectable-looking man like me." He gave vent to a grim little chuckle as he went on. "They don't know who they've got hold of, do they? Maybe they wouldn't be quite so pleased if they did."

"May I come and see you there, father?"

"Well, my girl, I think not. Such a—a splendid-looking sort of a party as you've turned out coming to visit me would make people talk. And we don't want people to talk, do we? Isn't there any quiet spot where you and me could meet and walk about a bit? Kensington Gardens; maybe, or Regent's Park?"

Cynthia thought that Kensington Gardens would be quiet enough in the morning for their purpose, and it was agreed that they should meet there the next day at noon. Westwood's disguise was so perfect that he did not attempt to seclude himself during the day. [Pg 200]

"And then," he said, "we can talk about you coming over to Ameriky, and living happy and quiet somewhere with me."

"Oh, I can't leave England!" said Cynthia, with a sudden little gasp. "Don't ask me, father; I can't possibly go away."

He looked at her keenly and scrutinisingly for a moment, and then he said—

"That means that you've got a reason for wanting to stop in England. That means that you've got a sweetheart—a lover, my pretty—and that you won't leave him. I know the ways of women well enough. I don't want to force you, my girl; but I hope that he's worthy of the woman you've grown to be. Tell me his name."

CHAPTER XXIX.

Cynthia's father did not get his question answered, because at that moment a thundering knock at the front-door announced the return of Madame, and there was rather a hasty struggle to get him away from the house without encountering that lady's sharp eyes and vivacious questioning, which Cynthia was not at all sure that he could meet with equanimity. For herself she felt at that moment equal to any struggle involving either cunning or courage. She could combat to death for one she loved.

"Who was that man, *carissima*? Why was he here at this hour of the night? You are a little imprudent, are you not, to receive such visitors without me?" said Madame, having caught a glimpse of the intruder's retiring figure.

Cynthia laughed.

"He is venerable, Madame—white-bearded, old, and a relative—an uncle from America whom I have not seen since I was a child. I believe that he has made a fortune and wants to endow me with it. We shall see!"

"Ah, my angel, if he would do that," cried Madame cheerfully, "we would welcome him at any hour of the day or night, would not we? Bid him to dinner with thee, little one, or to tea, after thy English fashion—as thou wilt. The uncle with money is always a desired visitor." [Pg 201]

And thus Cynthia escaped further questioning, although at the cost of an untruth which she did not consider it her duty to repent. "For surely," she said to herself, "it is right for a daughter to sacrifice anything and everything to her father's safety! I was ashamed of having to tell Hubert what was not true just for my own benefit; but I am not ashamed of deceiving Madame for my father's sake. I am sorry—ah, yes, I am sorry! But what can I do?" And in the solitude of her own room Cynthia wrung her hands together, and shed a few bitter tears over the hardness and strangeness of her fate.

To one who knew all the facts of her story and her father's story, it might indeed have been a matter for meditation that "wrong-doing never ends"—that, because Sydney Vane had been an

unprincipled man and Florence Lepel a woman without a conscience, therefore a child of whom they never heard had grown up without the presence of a father's love, or the innate reverence for truth that prevailed in the heart of a Jeanie Deans. Cynthia was no Jeanie Deans; she was a faulty but noble-hearted woman, with a nature that had suffered some slight warping from the effect of adverse circumstance.

Cynthia and her father met the next morning under the spreading branches of the trees in Kensington Gardens; and there, as they walked up and down together, Westwood unfolded his plans. From what he let slip—although he tried not to be too definite—it was evident that he had made considerable sums of money, or what he thought such; and he wanted Cynthia to give up working, and "go West" with him. He assured her that she should have every comfort, every luxury; that he was likely to make more and more money as time went on, and that he might even become a millionaire. Would she not partake of the magnificence that was in store for her? But Cynthia shook her head. And then he spoke of his loneliness, of his long absence from his only child, and his desire to have a home of his own; now that he began to feel the infirmities of age, he not only wanted a daughter as an ornament to his house, but as the prop of his declining [Pg 202] years. And at this Cynthia shed tears and began to waver. Ought she not to go with her father? she asked herself. It might be better for Hubert, as well as for her, if she went away; and, even if at the end of two years she became Hubert's wife, she would at any rate have had two years with her father. And, if Hubert married "the other girl," she would stay with her father until his life's end—or hers. But the fact remained at the end of all arguments—she did not want to go.

"What do you want to stay in England for?" Westwood said at length. "Is it to make money? I've got enough for both of us. Is it to sing in public? You'll get bigger audiences over there, my girl. If you love your old father as you say you do, why won't you come along with him?" He paused, and added, almost in a whisper, "Unless there's somebody you like better, I don't see why you want to stay."

Cynthia's face turned crimson immediately. Her father's words made her feel very guilty. She loved him—true; but she loved Hubert better, and she had not known it until that moment. She knew it thoroughly now.

"Well," said Westwood, in a peculiarly dogged tone, "I see what's up. Who is he?"

"He is a very clever man, father," said Cynthia, keeping her hot face away from him as much as possible—"a literary man; he writes plays and novels and poetry. He is thought a great deal of in London."

"As poor as a rat, and wants you to keep him. Is that it?"

"Oh, no, indeed, father! He makes a great deal of money. It was he who sent me to Italy to study music; he paid for me to live where I do, with Madame della Scala."

They were in a quiet part of the Gardens, and her father suddenly laid an iron grip upon her wrist.

"Look at me," he burst out—"tell me the truth! You—you ain't—you ain't bound to him in any way?" He dare not, after all, put his sudden suspicion into plainer words. "It's all fair and square? He's asked you to be his wife, and not——"

Cynthia wrenched away her arm.

"I did not think that my own father would insult me!" she said, in a voice which, though low, [Pg 203] vibrated with anger. "I am quite well able to take care of my own honor and dignity; and Mr. Lepel would never dream of assailing either."

Then she broke down a little, and a few tears made their way over the scarlet of her cheeks; but of these signs of distress her father took no notice. He stood still in the middle of the path down which they had been walking, and repeated the name incredulously.

"'Lepel'! 'Lepel'! Is that your sweetheart's name?"

"'Hubert Lepel.' It is a well-known name," said Cynthia, with head erect.

"Hubert Lepel! Not the man at Beechfield, the cousin of those Vanes?" He spoke in a whisper, with his eyes fixed on his daughter's face.

Cynthia turned very pale.

"I do not know. Oh, it can't be the same," she said.

"It's not likely that there are two men of the same name. He was a cousin of the man who was killed, I tell you; and he was the brother—the brother——" Suddenly Westwood stopped short; his eyes fell to the ground, his breathing quickened; he thrust his hands into his pockets and frowned heavily as he reflected. "Have I got a clue?" he said, more to himself than to Cynthia. "He's the brother of that woman—the woman that Sydney Vane used to meet in the wood so often, and thought that nobody knew. Did he—did he——" But, raising his eyes suddenly, he saw the whiteness of Cynthia's face, and did not finish his question. "Listen to me!" he said, with sudden sternness. "This man belongs to them that put me in prison and believe me to have murdered Sydney Vane. Do you understand that, girl?"

"Father, he would trust you—he would believe in you—if once he saw you and talked to you."

"So you mean to betray me to him, do you?"

"Father—dear father!"

"If you say a word to him about my being in England, Cynthia, you may just as well put a rope round my neck or give me a dose of poison. For buried alive at Portland I never will be again!"

"He would no more betray you, father, than——"

"Promise me that you'll not breathe a word to him about me!"

"I promise." [Pg 204]

"And swear?"

"I swear, father—not until you give me leave."

"I shall never give you leave. Do you want to kill me, Cynthia? I'd never have thought it of you after all you said! Come, my girl, you needn't cry; I did not mean to suspect you; but I'm so used to being on my guard. Does he know whose daughter you are?"

"No, father."

"You haven't dared to tell him, and yet you wanted to put my safety in his hands!"

"I am sure he is too kind, too noble, to think of betraying any one!" Cynthia pleaded; but her father would not hear.

"Tut! If he thinks I murdered his cousin, he wouldn't feel any particular call to be kind to me, I guess. I should like to understand all about this affair, Cynthia. Come, sit down on this bench here under the trees, and tell me about it. Don't vex yourself over what I said; I was but carried away by the heat of the moment. Now are you promised to this Mr. Lepel—engaged to him, as you young folk call it?"

"I don't know whether I can tell you anything, father," murmured Cynthia.

"You'd better," said Westwood quietly, "because it hangs on a thread whether I ain't going to denounce Mr. Lepel as the man that killed Mr. Sydney Vane. I never thought of him before, although I did see him at the trial and knew that he'd been hanging round the place. He was her brother, sure enough—he had a motive. Well, Cynthia?"

"Father, if you are thinking such terrible things of Hubert, how can I tell you anything? You know I—I love him; if you accuse him of a crime, I shall cling to him still—and love him still—and save him if I can."

"At your father's expense, girl?"

She writhed at the question, and twisted her fingers nervously together, but did not speak. Westwood waited for a minute or two, and then resumed—this time very bitterly.

"It's always so! The lover always drives the parent out of the young folks' hearts. For this man—that you haven't known more than a few months, I suppose—you'd give up your father to worse [Pg 205] than the gallows—to the misery of a life sentence—and be glad, maybe, to see the last of him! If it was him or me, you would save him—and perhaps you're in the right of it. I wish," said the man, turning away his face—"I wish to God that I'd never come back to England, nor seen the face of my girl again!"

Cynthia had been physically incapable hitherto of stemming the flow of his words; but now, although she was trembling with excitement and sorrow and indignation, she answered her father's accusation resolutely.

"You are wrong, father. I will not sacrifice you to him. But you must not expect me to sacrifice him to you either. My heart is large enough to hold you both."

There was a pathos in the tone of her last few words which impressed even Westwood's not very plastic nature. He turned towards her, noting with half-unconscious anxiety the whiteness of the girl's lips, the shadow that seemed to have descended upon her eyes. He put out his rough hand and touched her daintily gloved fingers.

"Don't be put out by what I say, my girl! If I speak sharp, it's because I feel deep. I won't be hard on any one you care for, I give you my word; but it'll be the best thing for you to be fair and square with me and tell me all about him. Are you going to marry him?"

"He wishes to marry me," said Cynthia, yielding, with a sigh; "but there has been an arrangement—a sort of family arrangement, I understand—by which he must—ought to marry a young lady in two years, when she is twenty or twenty-one, if she consents and if she is strong enough. She is ill now, and she does not seem to care for him. That is all I know. I have promised to marry him if he is free at the end of the two years."

It sounded a lame story—worse, when she told it, than when she had discussed it with Hubert Lepel or wept over it in her own room. Westwood uttered a growl of anger.

"And you're at his beck and call like that! He is to take you or leave you as he pleases! Pretty state of matters for a girl like you! Why, with your face and your pretty voice and your education,

I should think that you could have half Lunnon if you chose!"

"Not I," said Cynthia, laughing with a little of her old spirit—"or, if I had, it would be the wrong half, father. Besides, Mr. Lepel is not to blame. He—he would marry me to-morrow, I believe, if I would allow it; it was I that arranged to wait. I would rather wait. Why should I marry anybody before I have seen the world?" [Pg 206]

"Where does Mr. Lepel live, Cynthy?" said Westwood slowly, as if he had not been attending very much to what she said.

Cynthia hesitated; then she gave him Hubert's address. She knew that her father could easily get it elsewhere, and that it would only irritate him if she refused. Besides, she had too much confidence in her lover to think that harm could come of her father's knowledge of the place in which he lived. But she was a little surprised when her father at once stood, up and said, with his former placidity of tone—

"Well, then, my dear, I'm a-going round to look at Mr. Lepel. I'm not going to harm him, nor even maybe to speak to him; but I want to have a little look at him before I see you again. And then I shall maybe go out of town for a bit. There are one or two places I want to look at again. So you needn't be surprised if you don't hear from me again just yet a while. I'll write when I come back."

"Oh, father, you will not run into any danger, will you?"

"Not a bit, my dear. There's not a soul on earth would know me as I am now. Don't you be afraid! I'll walk back with you to the gate, and, then we'd better say good-bye. If you want anything special, write to me—Reuben Dare, you know—at the address I gave you; but even then, my girl, don't you mention names. It's a dangerous thing to do on paper."

"I'll remember," said Cynthia, with unwonted submissiveness.

They parted at the gate, and Westwood, without looking round, went some paces in the easterly direction which he had chosen to take. But all at once he heard a light footstep behind him, and a small gloved hand was laid upon his arm. It was Cynthia, slightly flushed and panting a little, her eyes unusually bright. She ran after him with a last word to say.

"Father," she said, "you will remember, will you not, that, although I love him, I love you too?"

"Do you, Cynthia?" said the man, rather sadly. "Well, maybe—maybe."

"And that you are to take care of yourself for my sake?" [Pg 207]

"Eh? For your sake? Yes, my dear—yes."

"Good-bye, dear father!"

He nodded simply in reply; but, as he pursued his way eastward, his heart grew softer towards his child's lover than it would otherwise have been. How beautiful she had looked with those flushed cheeks and shining eyes! What was he that he should interfere with her happiness? If the man that she loved was good and true why should he not marry her, although he was a kinsman of the Vanes and the brother of a woman whom Westwood held in peculiar abhorrence? For accident had revealed to him many years before the relation between Sydney Vane and Florence Lepel, and she had seemed to him then and ever since to be less of a woman than a fiend. Yet, being somewhat slow in drawing conclusions, he had never associated her or her brother with Mr. Vane's death, until, in the solitude of his cell, he had laboriously "put two and two together" in a way which had not suggested itself either to himself or to his defenders at the time of the trial. He himself, from a strange mixture of delicate feeling and gruff reserve, had not chosen to tell what he knew about Miss Lepel and Sydney Vane; and only when it was too late did it occur to him that his silence had cost him his freedom, and might have cost him his life. He saw it all clearly now. It was quite plain to him that in some way or other Mr. Vane's death had been caused through his unfaithfulness to his wife. Some one had wished to punish him—some friend of hers, some friend of Miss Lepel's. Right enough he deserved to be killed, said Westwood to himself, as he elaborated his theory. If only the slayer, the avenger, had not refused to take the responsibility of his act upon his own shoulders! "If only he hadn't been cur enough;" Westwood muttered to himself, as he went along the London streets, "to leave me—a poor man, a common man, that only Cynthia loved—to bear the blame!"

CHAPTER XXX. [Pg 208]

When Hubert Lepel quitted Beechfield, a sudden calm, almost a stagnation of interest, seemed to fall upon the place. Mrs. Vane was said to be "less strong" than usual; the spring weather tried her; she must be kept quiet, the doctor said, and, if possible, tranquil in mind.

"God bless my soul, isn't she tranquil in mind?" the General had almost shouted, when Mr. Ingledew gave this opinion. "What else can she be? She hasn't a single thing to worry her; or, if she has, she has only to mention it and it will be set right at once."

The village doctor smiled amiably. He was a pale, thin, dark little man, with insight rather in advance of his actual knowledge. He would have been puzzled to say why he had jumped to the conclusion that Mrs. Vane's mind was not quite tranquil; but he was sure that it was not. Possibly, he was influenced by the conviction that it ought not to be tranquil; for, in the course of his visits among the villagers, he had heard some of the ugly rumors about Flossy's past, which were more prevalent than Mrs. Vane herself suspected and than the General ever had it in his power to conceive.

"Well, sir," he said—for Mr. Ingledew was always very deferential to the Squire of the parish—"what I meant was more perhaps that Mrs. Vane requires perfect freedom from all anxiety for the future than that she is suffering from uneasiness of mind at present. Possibly Mrs. Vane is a little anxious from time to time about Master Dick, who is not of a particularly robust constitution, or perhaps about Miss Vane, who does not strike me as looking exactly what I should call 'the thing.'"

"No—does she, Ingledew?" said the General, diverted at once from the consideration of his wife's health to that of his niece. "She's pale and peaky, is she not? Have you seen her to-day?"

"H'm—not professionally," replied Mr. Ingledew, rubbing his chin. "In point of fact, Mrs. Vane intimated to me that Miss Vane refused to see me—to see a doctor at all. I am sorry, for Miss [Pg 209] Vane's own sake, as I think that she is not looking well at present—not at all well."

"There she goes!" cried the General. "We'll have her in, and hear what all this is about. Enid, Enid—come here!"

He had seen her in the conservatory, which ran along one side of the house. He and Mr. Ingledew were sitting in the library, and through its half-open glass door he had caught sight of the girl's white gown amongst the flowers. She turned instantly at his call.

"Did you want me, uncle?"

"Yes, dear. You are not looking well, Enid; we are concerned about you," said the General, going up to her and taking her by the hand. "Why do you refuse to see a doctor, my dear child?"

"But I have not refused, uncle."

"Oh—er—Mr. Ingledew——"

"I understood from Mrs. Vane," said the doctor, "that you did not wish for medical advice, Miss Vane."

Enid colored a little, and was silent for a moment; then she answered, in her usual gentle way—

"I had some disinclination a few days ago to consult a doctor, and perhaps Mrs. Vane has accidentally laid more stress upon my saying so than I intended. But I am quite willing—now—to consult Mr. Ingledew a little."

She sank into a chair as if she were very tired, and for a moment closed her eyes. Her face was almost colorless, and there were violet tints on her eyelids and her lips. Mr. Ingledew looked at her gravely and knit his brows. He knew well that her explanation of Mrs. Vane's words was quite insufficient. Mrs. Vane had sweetly and solemnly assured him that she had begged "dear Enid" to see a doctor—Mr. Ingledew or another—and that she had firmly refused to do so, saying that she felt quite well. Enid's words did not tally with Mrs. Vane's report at all. The doctor knew which of the two women he would rather believe.

The General walked away, leaving the patient and the medical man together. At the close of the interview, which did not last more than a few minutes, Enid rose with a weary little smile and left the room. The General came back to Ingledew.

"Well, Ingledew?"—Mr. Ingledew looked grave.

"I should not say that there was anything very serious," he said; "but Miss Vane certainly requires [Pg 210] care. She suffers from palpitation of the heart and faintness; her pulse is intermittent; she complains of nausea and dizziness. Without stethoscopic examination I cannot of course be sure whether there is anything organically wrong; but I should conclude—judging as well as I can without the aid of auscultation—that there was some disturbance—functional disturbance—of the heart."

"Heart! Dear, dear—that's very serious, is it not?"

"Oh, not necessarily so! It may be a mere passing derangement produced by indigestion," said the doctor prosaically. "I will come in again to-morrow and sound her. I hope it is nothing more than a temporary indisposition." And so Mr. Ingledew took his leave.

"Mrs. Vane didn't want me to see her!" he said, as he left the house. "I wonder why?"

Meanwhile Enid, passing out into the hall, had been obliged to stand still once or twice by reason of the dizziness that threatened to overcome her. She leaned against the wall until the feeling had gone off, and then dragged herself slowly up the stairs. She had suffered in this way only for the last week or two—since Hubert went away. At first she had thought that the warm spring weather was making her feel weak and ill; but she did not remember that it had ever done so before. She had generally revived with the spring, and been stronger and better in the warmth

and sunshine of summer. She could not understand why this spring should make her feel so ill. She went into her own room and lay down flat on the bed. She had the sensation of wishing to sink deeper and deeper down, as if she could not sink too low. Her heart seemed to beat more and more slowly; each breath that she drew was an effort to her. She wondered a little if she was going to die.

Presently she heard somebody enter the room. She was not strong enough to turn her head; but she opened her eyes and saw her maid Parker standing beside her bed and regarding her with alarm.

"Law, miss, you do look bad!" she said.

Enid's white lips moved and tears trembled on her eyelashes; but she did not speak. Parker, seriously alarmed, hastened to procure smelling-salts, brandy, and eau-de-Cologne, and, with a [Pg 211] few minutes' care, these applications produced the desired result. Enid looked a little less death-like; she smiled as she took a dose of brandy and sal-volatile, and moved her fingers towards the woman at her side. Parker did not at first know what she wanted, but discovered at last that the girl wanted to hold her hand. Contact with something human seemed to help to bring her back from the shadowy borderland where she had been wandering. Parker, astonished and confused, wanted to draw away her hand; but the small cold fingers closed over it resistlessly. Then the woman stood motionless, holding a vinaigrette in her free hand, and looking at the pale face on the pillow, at the pathetic blue eyes which sought her own from time to time as if in want of pity. Something made Parker's heart beat fast and the hot tears came into her hard, dark eyes. She had never felt any particular fondness for Miss Enid before; but somehow that mute appeal, that silent claiming of sympathy and help, made the woman who had spent the last few weeks in dogging her footsteps and spying out her secrets bitterly regret the bondage in which her past life had placed her.

"Do you feel better now, miss?" she asked, in an unusually soft tone, presently.

"Yes, thank you, Parker; but don't go just yet."

Parker stood immovable. Secretly she began to long to get away. She was afraid that she should cry if she stayed there much longer holding Enid's soft little white hand in hers.

"Parker," said Enid presently, "were you in your room last night soon after I went to bed?" The maid slept in the next room to that of her young mistress.

"Yes, miss—at least, I don't know what time it was."

"It was between nine and ten o'clock when I went to bed. Did you see anybody—any one all in white—come into my room after I was in bed? If your door was open, you might have seen any one pass."

"Good gracious, miss, one would think that you was speaking of a ghost! No, I didn't see anybody pass."

"I thought, perhaps," said Enid rather faintly, "that it might be Mrs. Vane coming to see how I was, you know. She has a loose white wrapper, and she often throws a white lace shawl over her head when she goes down the passages."

"You must have been dreaming, miss," said Parker. She found it easier to withdraw her hand now [Pg 212] that the conversation had taken this turn.

"I suppose I must," said Enid, in a scarcely audible tone. Then she turned away her face and said, "You can go now, Parker; I feel better. I think that I shall go to sleep."

But she did not sleep even when Parker had departed. She lay thinking, with the tears gathering and falling one by one, until they made a great wet spot on the pillow beneath her head. The shadow that hung over her young life was growing very dark.

Parker had hurried into her own room, where she first shut and locked the door, as if afraid to think even while it was open, and then wrung her hands in a sort of agony.

"To think of it—to think of it!" she said, bursting into sudden sobs. "And Miss Enid so sweet and innocent and gentle! What has she done? What has she got to be put out of the way for? Just for the sake of the money, I suppose, that it may all go to that wretched little Master Dick! Oh, she's a wicked woman—a wicked woman; and I'd give my life never to have set eyes upon her, for she'll be the ruin of me body and soul!"

But "she" in this case did not mean Enid Vane.

Parker was aroused from her meditations by the sharp tinkle of a bell, which she knew that Mrs. Vane must have rung. She started when she heard it, and a look of disgust crossed her face; but, as she hesitated, the bell rang again, more imperiously than ever. Parker dashed the tears from her eyes, and sped down the long corridor to Mrs. Vane's dressing-room. Her hands were trembling still.

"Why do you keep me in this way when I ring for you, Parker?" said Mrs. Vane, in her coldest tone. "I rang twice."

"Miss Vane wanted me, ma'am. I have been with her."

There was an odd tremor in the woman's voice. Mrs. Vane surveyed her critically.

"You look very strange, Parker. What is the matter with you? Are you ill?"

"No, ma'am; but Miss Vane is."

Flossy grew a shade paler and looked up. She was still in her dressing-gown—white, edged everywhere with costly lace—and her fair hair was hanging loose over her shoulders. [Pg 213]

"Ill? What is the matter with her?"

"I—I thought perhaps you would know, ma'am," said Parker desperately. Then, afraid of what she had said, she turned to a drawer, pulled it open, and began ransacking it diligently. From the momentary silence in the room she felt as if her shaft had gone home; but she dared not look round to see.

"What on earth do you mean, Parker?" said Mrs. Vane, after that one dead pause, which said so much to her maid's suspicious ears; the chill disdain in her voice was inimitable. "How can I tell you what is the matter with Miss Vane when I have not seen her since dinner-time yesterday? She was well enough then—at least, as well as she has been since this trying weather began."

"Didn't you see her last night, ma'am, when you went to her room about eleven o'clock?" said Parker, trying to assume a bolder tone, but failing to hide her nervousness.

Again a short but unmistakable pause.

"No, I did not," said Mrs. Vane drily. "I listened at the door to see if she was asleep, but I did not go in."

"She seems to have been dreaming that you did, ma'am."

"What nonsense!" said Mrs. Vane, a little hurriedly. "You should not attend to all her fancies, Parker. You know that she has very odd fancies indeed sometimes. The shock of her father's death when she was a child had a very injurious effect upon her nerves, and I should never be surprised at anything that she chose to do or say. Pray don't get into the way of repeating her words, or of imagining that they must necessarily be true!"

"No, ma'am," said Parker submissively.

Evidently there was nothing more for her to say. Well, perhaps she had put her mistress on her guard.

"Oh, by-the-bye, Parker! There are two dresses of mine in the wardrobe—the brown one and the silk—that you can do what you like with. And I was thinking of sending a little present to your mother. You may take this purse—there are seven pounds in it; send it to her from me, if you like, as a little acknowledgment of your faithful service. And, if—if there is anything else that I can do for her, you need only mention it."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Parker, but without enthusiasm. "I don't know as there's anything that she wants at present." [Pg 214]

"Take the purse," said Flossy impatiently; "and then go away and come back when I ring. I won't have my hair brushed just now. Is Miss Vane better?"

"Yes, ma'am—she's better now." And Parker went away, knowing very well that she had been bribed to hold her tongue.

But after that interview she noticed that Enid seemed to recover tone and strength, that for a few succeeding days she was more like herself than she had been of late, and that the symptoms of faintness and palpitation which she had mentioned to Mr. Ingledew disappeared. Parker nodded mysteriously as she remarked on these facts to herself, and thought that for once her interference had had a good effect.

She had lately found less to report concerning Miss Vane's movements than before Mr. Lepel's visit; for Enid's ministrations amongst the poor had been almost entirely brought to a close, on the ground that close cottages and the sight of suffering must necessarily be bad for her health. Accordingly she had gone less and less to the village, and had seen almost nothing of Mr. Evandale. Parker, being thus less often "on duty," found more time than usual for her own various scraps of business, and took occasion one evening to run out to the post-office when all the family were at dinner; and while at the post-office she noticed a stranger in the village street—a highly respectable, venerable-looking old man with picturesque white hair and beard.

"That's Mr. Dare, who's a-stayin' at the inn," said the postmistress to Parker, who was a person of considerable importance in village eyes. "Such a nice old gentleman! He comes from America, where they say he's made a fortune, and he's very liberal with his money."

So good a character interested Parker at once in Mr. Dare. She felt quite flattered when, in passing down the lane, she was accosted by the gentleman in question, who pulled off his hat to her politely, and asked her whether she could tell him if Mr. Lepel was likely to visit Beechfield Hall in the course of a week or two.

"Let me see," said Parker. "Why, yes, sir—I heard yesterday that he was coming down next Saturday, just for a day or two, you know."

"I used to know a Mr. Lepel once," said the stranger, "and he did me a kindness. If this is the same, I'd like to thank him before I go. I heard him mentioned up at the 'Crown' yonder and wondered whether I could find out." [Pg 215]

"I dare say it's the same—he's always a very kind gentleman," quoth Parker, remembering the half-crowns that Hubert had many a time bestowed on her.

"Fair, isn't he?" said Mr. Dare. "That was my Mr. Lepel—fair and short and stout and a nice little wife and family——"

"Oh, dear, no—that isn't our Mr. Lepel!" said Parker, with disdain. "He's tall and very dark and thin; and, as to being married, he's engaged to Miss Vane of Beechfield Hall, or as good as engaged, I know; and they're to be married when she's out of her teens, because the General, her uncle, won't consent to it before."

"Ah," said the stranger, "you're right; that's not the gentleman I know. Engaged, is he? And very fond of the young lady, I suppose?"

"Worships the very ground she treads upon!" said Parker. She would have thought it *infra dig.* to allow for one moment that Miss Enid did not meet with her deserts in the way of adoration. "He's always coming down here to see her. And she the same! I don't think they could be happy apart. He's just devoted!"

"And that," said Reuben Dare to himself, "is the man who makes my girl believe that he is fond of her!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

Hubert was sadly puzzled by Cynthia's manner to him at this time. She seemed to have lost her bright spirits; she was grave and even depressed; now and then she manifested a sort of coldness which he felt that he did not understand. Was this the effect of his confession to her that he had pledged his faith before he lost his heart? She had shown no such coldness when he told her first; but perhaps reflection had changed her tone. He began by trying to treat her ceremoniously in return; but he found it a difficult task. He had never been on very ceremonious terms at all with her, and to begin them now, when she had acknowledged that she loved him and he had kissed her ripe red lips—he said to himself that it was absurd. [Pg 216]

He did not cease his visits to Madame della Scala's house, nor try to set up an artificial barrier between himself and his love. Why then should she? He would not have this coldness, this conventionality of demeanor, he told himself; and yet he hardly knew how to beat it down. For he certainly had no right to demand that she should treat him as her lover when he was engaged—or half engaged—to marry Enid Vane.

He came one evening in May, and found her on the point of starting for a *soirée* where she was to sing. She was *en grande tenue* for the occasion, dressed, after an old Venetian picture, in dull red brocade, point-lace, and gold ornaments. He had given her the ornaments himself—golden serpents with ruby eyes—which she had admired in a jeweller's window. But for the rest of her dress she was in no wise indebted to him; she had been making money lately, and could afford herself a pretty gown.

She received him, he thought, a little coolly—perhaps only because Madame della Scala was sitting by—gave him the tips of her fingers, and declared that she must go almost immediately. It turned out that he was bound for the same place; and Madame at once asked him to escort them thither—the carriage would be at the door at half-past nine o'clock.

"I shall be only too happy," said Mr. Lepel, "if you will allow me such an honor. And, in the meantime, it is not yet nine o'clock, Cynthia; so, in spite of your impatience, you cannot start quite 'immediately.' What is there so attractive at the Gores' this evening that you wish to set off so early?"

"Oh, nothing—I did not know the time!" said Cynthia.

She did not reply jestingly, after her usual fashion; she sat down languidly, and spread her heavy skirts around her so as to make a sort of silken barrier between herself and Hubert. He bit his lip a little as he looked at her.

"Our little bird is not quite herself," said Madame, with a side grimace at Hubert which she did not want Cynthia to see. "She has what our neighbors call '*la migraine*,' monsieur. She has never been well since the return of her old uncle from America, whose fortune—if he has a fortune—does not seem likely to do any of us any good—her least of all." [Pg 217]

Cynthia lowered her head a little and darted a sudden and fierce glance at her teacher and chaperon—a glance of which Hubert guessed the meaning. She had never mentioned this "uncle from America" to him; probably she had told Madame not to do so either, and the little Italian lady had broken her compact.

Madame della Scala laughed and spread out her hands deprecatingly.

"*Chè, chè*—what is it I have done to make you look so fierce at me? I will leave her to you, Mr. Lepel, and trust you to make her tractable before we reach the house where we are to sing. For the last few days I have not known how to content *la signorina* at all; she has twice refused to sing when refusal meant—well, two things—loss of money and offence of friends. Those are two things which I do not like at all."

So saying, Madame, with a fan outstretched before her like a palm-leaf, moved towards the door; but Cynthia intercepted her.

"Madame, do not go!" she cried. "Indeed I am sorry! Do not make Mr. Lepel think that I have been behaving so like a petted child. I will do what you wish henceforward—I will indeed! Do not go, or I shall think that you are angry with me!"

"Angry with you, *carissima*? Not one bit!" said Madame, touching the girl's hot cheek with the end of her dainty fan. "Not angry, only a little—little tiny bit disappointed! But what of that? I forgive you! Genius must have its moods, its freaks, its passions. But calm yourself now, for Heaven's sake, or we shall be in bad voice to-night! I am just going to my room to get my scent-bottle; I will return immediately;" and Madame escaped.

Hubert was delighted with the little lady's man[oe]uvre, designed, as he knew, to leave him alone with Cynthia. As for Cynthia, she gave one scared look round, as if she dreaded to meet his eyes, then dropped into the nearest chair and placed one hand over her face. He thought that she was crying.

"Cynthia, my darling, what is all this?" he said approaching her. "My dearest, you are not happy! What can I do?" [Pg 218]

"Nothing," she answered, dashing away a tear and letting her hand fall into her lap—"nothing indeed!"

"But you are not—as Madame says—quite like yourself."

"I know; I am very cross and disagreeable," said Cynthia, with a resolute assumption of gaiety. "I always had a bad temper; and it is well perhaps that you should find it out."

Without speaking, he bent his head to kiss her; but she drew back.

"No!" she said, with decision. "No, Hubert—Mr. Lepel, I mean—that will not do!"

"What, Cynthia?"

"We are not engaged. We are really nothing to each other; I was wrong to forget that before."

"This is surely a new view on the subject, Cynthia!"

"Yes; it is the view I have taken ever since I thought it over. We will be friends, if you like—I will always be your friend"—and there came over her face an indescribable expression of yearning and passionate regret—"but we must remember that I shall be nothing more."

"Nothing more? Why, my darling, do you forget what you promised me—that at the end of two years——"

"If you were free—yes," she interrupted him. "But it was a foolish promise. You know that you are not likely to be free. You—you knew that when you told me that you loved me!" She set her teeth and gave him a look of bitter reproach.

"What does this mean?" said Hubert, flushing up to the roots of his hair. "I told you everything the next morning, Cynthia; and I acknowledged to you that I loved you only because I thought that I was too miserable a wretch for you to cast a sigh upon. You have changed since then—not I."

Cynthia suddenly rose from her chair.

"I hear the carriage," she said abruptly; "Madame is at the door. There is no use in continuing this conversation."

"No use at all," said Hubert, who by this time was not in the best of tempers. "Perhaps you would rather that I did not accompany you to-night, Miss West?" "Oh, pray come!" said Cynthia, with a heartless little laugh. "Madame will never forgive me if I deprive her of a cavalier! It does not matter to me." [Pg 219]

Hubert turned at once to Madame della Scala, and offered her his arm with the courtesy of manner which she always averred she found in so few Englishmen, but which he displayed to perfection. Cynthia followed, not waiting for him to lead her to the carriage. He was about to hand her to her seat, but she had so elaborately encumbered herself with gloves, fan, bouquet, and sweeping silken train, that it seemed as if she could not possibly disentangle her hands in time to receive his help. She took her seat beside Madame with her usual smiling nonchalance, and the two ladies waited for Mr. Lepel to take the opposite seat. He took off his hat and made a sweeping bow.

"Madame," he said, "I am unfeignedly sorry, but I find that circumstances will not allow me to accompany you this evening. Will you pardon me therefore if I decline the honor of the seat you have offered me?"

This stately mode of speech was intended to pacify Madame della Scala, who liked to be addressed as if she were a princess; he knew that she would be angry enough at his defection. Before she had recovered herself so far as to speak, he fell back and signed to the coachman to drive on. They had left him far behind before Madame ceased to vent her exclamations of wrath, despair, and disappointment.

"What can he mean by 'circumstances'?" This was the phrase that rose most frequently to her tongue. "'Circumstances will not allow me'! But that is nonsense—absolutely nonsense!"

"I think by 'circumstances' he meant me," said Cynthia at last—by which remark she diverted all Madame's wrath upon her own unlucky head.

She did not seem to mind however. She looked brilliant that evening, and she sang her best. There was a royal personage amongst her hearers, and the royal personage begged to be presented to her, and complimented her upon her singing. As Cynthia made her little curtsey and smiled her bright little smile, she wondered what the royal personage would say if he knew that she was "Westwood, the murderer's daughter." She had been called so too often in her earliest years ever to forget the title.

In spite of her waywardness that night, she was woman enough to wish that Hubert had been there to witness her triumph. She had never offended him before. She thought that perhaps he would come back, and darted hasty glances at the throng of smart folk around her, longing to see his dark face in some corner of the room. But she was disappointed; he did not come. [Pg 220]

"Oh, Miss West," said her hostess to her, in the course of the evening, "do come here one moment! I hope you won't be very much bored; you young people always like other young people best, I know. But there is a lady here—an old lady—who is very much impressed by your voice—your charming voice—and wants to know you; and she is really worth knowing, I assure you—gives delightful parties now and then."

"I shall be most happy!" said Cynthia brightly. "I like old ladies very much; they generally have something to say."

"Which young men do not, do they? Oh, fie, you naughty girl! I saw you with young Lord Frederick over there——Dear Miss Vane, this is our sweet songstress, Miss Cynthia West—Miss Vane. I have just been telling her how much you admire her lovely singing;" and then the hostess hurried away.

Something like an electric shock seemed to pass through Cynthia's frame. She did not show any trace of emotion, the smile did not waver on her lips; but suddenly, as she bowed gracefully to the handsome, keen-eyed old lady to whom she had just been introduced, she saw herself a ragged, unkempt, savage little waif and stray, fresh from the workhouse, standing on a summer day upon a dusty road, the centre of a little group of persons whose faces came back to her one by one with painful distinctness. There was the old lady—not so wrinkled as this old lady, but still with the same clearly-cut features, the same sharp eyes, the same inflexible mouth; there was the child with delicate limbs and dainty movements, with sweet sympathetic eyes and lovely golden hair, which Cynthia had passionately admired as she had never admired any other hair and eyes in the world before; and there was a young man. His face had hitherto been the one that she thought she remembered best; she was suddenly aware that she had so idealised and glorified it that its very features had become unreal, and that when she met it in the flesh in later years it remained unrecognisable. Never once till now had it been borne in upon her that this hero of her childish dreams and her present lover were one and the same. It was a terrible shock to her—and greater even then she knew. [Pg 221]

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Miss West," said Miss Leonora Vane, holding out her hand so cordially that Cynthia could not in common politeness refuse to take it. "Your singing has delighted everybody—and myself, I am sure I may say, not least. You have been some time in Italy, I suppose? Do sit down here and tell me where you studied."

Cynthia fancied that she heard the same voice telling her what a wicked girl she was, and that she deserved to be whipped for running away from the workhouse. She repressed a little shudder, and answered smilingly—

"You are very kind. Yes, I have studied in Italy."

"Under Lamperti, I hear. Do you think of coming out in opera next season? You may always count me among your audience."

Cynthia remembered how this courteous gentlewoman had once put her hand over her eyes and declared that the sight of Westwood's daughter made her ill. The burning sense of injustice that had then taken possession of the child's soul rose up as strong as ever in the woman. She wished, in her bitterness, that she were free to rise from her seat and cry aloud—

"Yes, look at me—listen to me—for I am Westwood's daughter! I am the child of a felon and escaped convict, a man whom you call a murderer—and I am proud of my name!"

Curiously enough, Miss Vane touched closely upon this subject before long. She was anxious to know whether Cynthia's name was her own or only assumed for stage purposes, and managed to put her question in such a way that it sounded less like impertinence than a manifestation of kindly interest—which was very clever of Miss Vane.

"No," said Cynthia coldly, "'West' is not my name exactly; but I prefer to be known by it at present."

She had never said as much before; and Miss Vane felt herself a little bit snubbed, and decided that the new singer had not at all good manners; but she meant to secure her for her next party nevertheless. She rather prided herself upon her parties. [Pg 222]

To her utter surprise and bewilderment, Miss Cynthia West absolutely declined to come. She gave no reason except that she thought that she should before long give up singing in drawing-rooms at all; and she was not to be moved by any consideration of payment. Miss Vane ventured to intimate that she did not mind what she paid; but she was met by so frigid a glance that she was really obliged, in self-defence, to be silent. She carried away an unpleasant impression of Cynthia West, and was heard to say afterwards that she could believe anything of that young woman.

Cynthia was, however, acknowledged to have made in every other way a great success. Madame della Scala was delighted with her pupil, and quite forgot all the little disagreeables of the evening; while Cynthia, during their drive home, was as charming and as lively as she had ever been. When the carriage stopped at the quiet little house in Kensington, the weather had changed, and rain was falling rapidly. One of the servants was in waiting with an umbrella, ready to give an arm to Madame, who alighted first. Cynthia followed, scarcely noticing the man who stepped forward to assist her, until something prompted her suddenly to look at his face. Then she uttered an inarticulate exclamation.

"Yes, it is I," said Hubert. "I have been waiting to help you out. I don't know how I have offended you; but, whatever it is, forgive me, Cynthia—I can't bear your displeasure!"

"Nor I yours," she said, with a sob; and, under the umbrella that he was holding, she actually held up her face to be kissed.

Nobody saw the little ceremony of reconciliation. The next moment Cynthia was in the hall, having her dress shaken out and let down by a yawning maid's attentive hands, and the coachman had driven off, and the hall door was shut, and Hubert Lepel was out in the street, with a wall between him and his love. There were tears in Cynthia's eyes as she went wearily, her gaiety all departed, up to her room. Nobody suspected that the charming singer whose gaiety and audacity, as well as her beauty, had won all hearts that evening passed half the night in weeping on the hard floor—weeping over the fate that divided her from her lover. For ever since the day that she had learned from her father that Hubert Lepel was a cousin of the Vanes—more than ever now she knew that he was the man who had befriended her in her childhood—she felt it to be utterly impossible that she should marry him until he knew the truth; and the truth—that she was Westwood's daughter—would, she felt sure, part him from her for ever. [Pg 223]

CHAPTER XXXII.

Early in the sweet June morning—sweet and fair although it brooded over London, the smokiest city in the world—Cynthia was again walking in Kensington Gardens. She had not gone far before she met her father, with whom she had made an appointment for that hour.

"Well, Cynthia, my girl?"

"I have come, you see, father."

"I hardly thought you'd get here so soon after your party-going last night," said her father. "You look pretty tired too. Well, my girl, I told you I'd been staying down at Beechfield."

"Yes; and I was terribly anxious about you all the time, father. It was such a daring thing to do! Suppose any one had suspected you?"

"Not much fear o' that!" said Westwood, a little scornfully. "Why, look at me! Am I like the man I was at Beechfield ten years ago? I was a sort of outcast then, having sunk from bad to worse through my despair when I lost your mother, Cynthia; but, now that I have a new coat on my back and money in my pocket, all through my luck in the States, not to speak of this white hair, which I shall keep to until I'm back in the West again, I'm a different man, and nobody ever thinks of suspecting me."

He was different, Cynthia noticed, in more than one respect—he was far less silent and morose than he used to be. Life in the West had brought out some unexpected reserves of decision and readiness of speech, and his success—his luck, as he sometimes called it—had cheered his spirits. He was defiant and he was often bitter still; but he was no longer downcast.

"They'd not have much chance if they did suspect me," he said, after a little pause; "if they thought that they'd got me again, they'd find their mistake. I'd put a bullet through my head afore ever I went back to Portland!" [Pg 224]

"Oh, father, don't speak so!"

"Come, Cynthy, don't you pretend! You're a brave girl and a spirited one. Now wouldn't you

yourself sooner die than be cooped up in a gaol, or set to work in a quarry with an armed warder watching you all day long—wouldn't you put an end to it, I ask you—being a brave girl and not a namby-pamby creature as hasn't got a will of her own, and don't know better than to stay where she's put—eh, Cynthia?"

"Don't speak quite so loud, father dear," said Cynthia—"there are people turning round to look at us. I don't know what I should do in those circumstances; perhaps, as you say, I should think it better to end it all." She looked aside as she spoke, for her dark eyes had filled with heavy tears. How she wished at that moment that she could "end it all" as easily as she said the words! "Sit down for a little time, will you, father?" she asked. "It is a warm morning, and I am rather tired."

She had another reason for wishing to sit down. She had observed that for some time a tall woman in black had been apparently regarding them with interest, following them at a little distance, slackening and quickening her pace in accordance with their own. The stranger was thickly veiled; and, when she saw that Cynthia and her father were walking towards a vacant seat, she turned in the same direction. There was nothing to prevent her from sitting down on the same bench, and either putting a stop to all private conversation or listening to what they had to say; but Cynthia was equal to the emergency. She turned her head and gave the woman a long look, half of inquiry, half of disdain, which seemed to overawe the intruder, who stood by the bench for a moment rather uncertainly. Then Cynthia touched her father's arm.

"Do you know this person?" she asked in a low voice, but one so clear that it must have reached the woman's ears.

"Know her?" said Westwood, starting and looking suspiciously at the black figure. "No, I don't know her, unless she's——She's very much like a person staying with my landlady just now—a [Pg 225] Miss Meldreth. I wonder——Shall I speak to her, Cynthia?"

But the woman had already moved from her standing position by the bench, and was walking away as fast as she could conveniently go. She had fair hair and a fine figure, but her face could not be seen.

"It is very like," said Westwood, standing up and staring after her. "She's been very friendly with me since I came; and I've had tea with her and Mrs. Gunn more than once. Strange to relate; she comes from Beechfield too. She's the daughter of old Mrs. Meldreth, who used to keep the sweetie-shop; don't you remember her?"

"Then she was watching you—following you! Oh, father, do be careful!"

"What should she be watching me for?" said Westwood, but with rather a troubled look upon his face. "I've never had aught to do with her."

"Did you hear of her at all at Beechfield?"

"There was a bit of gossip about her and her mother; they said that Mrs. Vane at Beechfield Hall knew them and was kind to them. Some said that she paid them; but nobody knew what for."

"And she is lodging in the same house with you and following you about? Then I'll tell you what she is, father—she is a spy of the Vanes. She suspects you and wants to put you in prison again. Oh, father, do change your lodgings, or go straight back to America! You have been in England a month, and it is very dangerous. You have nothing to stay for—nothing; and, if you like"—her voice sank almost to a whisper—"I will go back with you."

"Will you, Cynthy? There's my own good girl!" said her father, an unwonted sense of pleasure beaming in his eyes. "You're one of the right sort, you are, and you sha'n't regret it. But, as to danger, I don't see it. There's nobody can recognise me, as you are well aware; and what else have I to fear?" Cynthia had noted before that he was almost childishly vain of his disguise. She herself was not disposed to rely upon it with half so blind a confidence, for she knew how easily the secrets of "making-up" can be read by an experienced eye. "Besides, Miss Meldreth was lodging at Mrs. Gunn's before ever I went there—so that's a pure coincidence. If she'd come after [Pg 226] I went down to Beechfield, there might be something in it. But it's an accidental thing."

"It may be accidental, and yet a source of danger," said Cynthia anxiously. "I wish you would go back to the States at once, father. I am quite ready to go. There is nothing to keep me in England now."

"Why, have you broken off with that young man?" said Westwood sharply.

"Not altogether." The remembrance of the previous night's kiss under the umbrella made Cynthia's cheeks burn red as she replied. "But since I know what you have told me—that he is a relative of the Vanes of Beechfield—I have determined that it cannot go on. He and his family would hate me if they knew. I cannot forget the past; I cannot forget what they did and said; and I do not see how I can marry a man who unjustly believes that my father was his kinsman's murderer." The fire came back to her eyes, the firmness to her voice, as she spoke.

Westwood watched her admiringly.

"Well spoke, my little girl—well spoke! I didn't think you had it in you—I didn't indeed! Let him go his way, and let us go ourn. I didn't tell you all that I might ha' done when I came back from Beechfield the other day, because I didn't rightly know whether you was with me or against me."

"With you—always with you, dear father!"

"And I was a little doubtful, so to speak, seeing as how you had taken up, although by accident, with a fellow belonging to the camp of my enemies. But now I'll tell you a little more. Has Mr. Lepel ever told you that he had a sister?"

"No."

"Well, he has; and, what's more, she's married to the old General—you remember him at Beechfield?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you remember her too—a very fair lady, as used to walk out with the little girl—Mr. Sydney Vane's little girl?"

Cynthia was silent for a moment.

"Yes," she said, at length—"I think I remember her."

"You've seen the child too?"

"Yes"—Cynthia's eyes softened; "I am sure I remember her."

"I'll tell you about her presently. I've got a notion in my head about these Lepels. Miss Lepel, as [Pg 227]
was, and Mr. Sydney Vane was in love with one another and about to run away from England when he was killed. I know that for a fact, so you needn't look so scared. They was on the point of an elopement when he died—I knew that all along; but, stupid-like, I never thought of putting two and two together and connecting it with his death. It just seemed a pity to throw shame and blame on the dead, seeing as how there was his wife and child to bear all the disgrace; and so I held my tongue."

"But how did you know, father?"

"By using my eyes and my ears," said Westwood briefly—"that's how I knew. They used to meet in that little plantation often enough. I've lain low in a dry ditch more than once when they were close by and heard their goings-on. They were going off next day, when Mr. Vane met with his deserts. And what I say is that somebody related to Miss Lepel found out the truth and shot him like a dog."

"Why did you not think of all this at the right time? Oh, father, it is too late now!"

"I'm not so sure of that. And, as for the gun—well, that often puzzled me; for I hadn't fired it myself that afternoon, Cynthy, and yet it had been fired—and that's what made part of the evidence against me. I'd been out that afternoon, and, coming home, who should I see in the distance but two or three gentlemen strolling along the road—Mr. Vane and the General and one or two strangers? Quick as thought, I laid my gun down and walked on as careless as you please. They met me—you know, that was a bit of the General's evidence, I looked back when I'd passed them, and I saw Mr. Sydney Vane separate himself from the other gentlemen and walk into the plantation. I did not like to go back just then; and so I waited. There was two or three ways of getting into the fir plantation, so I don't know who came into it across the fields, as anybody might have done either from the village or from the Hall. But presently I heard the report of a gun—two reports, as far as I remember; and then I saw Miss Lepel flying along the road—and I knew that she'd been in the plantation, any way. So, after watching a little while longer, I went back to the wood; and I found my gun pretty near where I had left it—only it had been moved and [Pg 228]
fired. So I took it up and walked away home."

"Without stopping to see whether any one was hurt?"

"Yes, my girl—and that was my mistake. If I'd gone on and found Mr. Vane and given the alarm and all that, I dare say I should have got off. But that was my misfortune, and also my hatred to Mr. Vane and his wicked ways. I says to myself, 'This is no business of yours. Let them settle it between themselves. I'll not interfere.' So I sort of hardened my heart and went on my way."

"Father, perhaps you might have saved a life!"

"No," said Westwood calmly, "I couldn't have done that. He was shot clean through the heart. And I'm not sure that I would if I could. He was a bad man, and deserved his punishment. The only thing I can't understand is why the man as did it hadn't the pluck to say what he had done, instead of leaving a poor common man like me to bear the blame."

"Did you not tell all this to the jury and the counsel?"

"Yes, my dear, I did—every word. But who was there to believe me? It didn't sound likely, you know. And who else was there, as the lawyers said, that had reason to hate Mr. Vane? Why, if they'd known all I knew, they would have seen that every honest man would have hated him! But, by never telling what I knew previous about Miss Lepel, I didn't put 'em on the right track, you see. I own that now."

"Father, I see to whom your suspicions point—you said as much to me before. But I feel sure that Mr. Hubert Lepel is incapable of such a deed—not only of the murder—for which one could forgive him—but of letting another bear the blame."

"Well, perhaps so, Cynthy. I don't think you would ha' given your heart to an out-an-out scoundrel—I don't indeed. And Mr. Lepel has a good sort o' face. I've seen him, and I like him. He looks as if he'd had a good bit o' trouble somehow; and I daresay it's likely, with a sister like that on his hands. It's my belief, Cynthia, not that Mr. Lepel, but his sister, Miss Florence Lepel, as she was then, did the deed and put the blame on me. And I'm inclined to think as how Mr. Lepel knows it and wouldn't tell."

"A woman! Could a woman manage a heavy gun like that?"

"If she was desperate, she could, my dear. It's wonderful what strength a woman will have when she's in a temper. And maybe Mr. Vane failed her at the last moment—wouldn't go with her away from England, or something o' that kind—and she thought she would be revenged on him." [Pg 229]

The theory did credit to Reuben Westwood's imagination; but it was a mistaken one. At present, however, it seemed sufficiently credible to give Cynthia much cause for reflection. She did not speak. Westwood gave his knee a sudden stroke with one hand, expressive of growing amazement, as he also meditated on the matter.

"And then for her to go and marry the old man—Sydney Vane's brother! It beats all that I ever heard of! She must have got nerves of steel and muscles of iron; she must be the boldest, hardest liar that ever trod this earth. If I thought that all women was like her, Cynthia, I would go to the devil at once! But I've known two good ones in my time, I reckon—your mother and you—and that should p'r'aps be enough for any man. Yes, she's married and got a child—a little lad that'll have the estate and prevent the girl from coming to her own—at least, what would have been her own if there had been no boy."

"You mean Miss Enid Vane?" said Cynthia, again with a curious softening of the eyes.

"Yes, some outlandish name of that sort—'Enid,' is it? Well, you know better than I. I'm glad you're breaking it off with that man Lepel, Cynthia, for more reasons than one."

Cynthia hardly noticed the significance of his tone or the conjunction of the two names in his remarks. She had something else in her mind which she was anxious to have said.

"Father, I am to see Mr. Lepel this afternoon."

"Yes, my girl?"

"And I want to say good-bye to him for ever."

Westwood nodded; he was well pleased with her decision.

"And then I will go to America with you whenever you please. But one thing I want you to allow me to do."

"Well, Cynthy?"

"I must tell Mr. Lepel who I am. I will not of course let him think that I know anything of you now. He shall not know that you are alive. But I must do as I please about telling him my own name." [Pg 230]

"Very well, Cynthia," said her father; "do as you like in that matter. I can trust you with a good deal, and I trust you so far; but don't let out that you know anything about me now—that I'm alive, and that you have seen me, or anything of that sort."

"No, father."

"I see what you're after," said he, after a pause. "You think he'll give you up more ready when he knows that you are my daughter—isn't that it? You may say so open-like; it doesn't hurt me, you know. Of course I can understand what he will feel. And what's always been hardest to me was the feelin' that I had injured you so much, my dear—you, the only thing left to me in the world to love."

"You could not help it, father dear."

"Well, I don't know. I might have done many things different—I see that now. But there's one thing to be said—if you feel inclined to break off with Mr. Lepel without telling him your name, I think it would be easy enough to do it."

"How? What do you mean?"

"You think he's fond of you—don't you, my dear?"

"I thought so, father."

"He's tried to make you believe so for his own ends, no doubt. But he means to marry the other girl, my dear—they told me so at Beechfield. They say he worships the very ground she treads upon; and she the same with him. Being fond of you was only a blind to lead you to your destruction, I'm afraid, my poor pretty dear!"

Cynthia shrank a little as she heard. Could this be true?

"The girl lives down there then, does she?" she asked, in a strange hard voice not like her own.

"Yes, my dear. He would not be able to break off there without a tremendous to-do, I'll warrant

you; for the girl is the General's niece, the daughter of Mr. Sydney Vane—the Miss Enid you spoke about just now."

As he got no answer, he turned to look at her, and found that she was deadly white; but, when she noticed that he was looking at her, she smiled and passed her hand reassuringly within his arm.

"You make my task all the easier for me, father," she said; "I shall know what to do now. And I think that it is about time for me to go home." [Pg 231]

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Cynthia had already despatched a little note to Hubert asking him to visit her at a certain hour that afternoon—hence the certainty with which she spoke of his visit to her father. After what had passed between them, she did not think that he would fail to come.

She wanted him at half-past five precisely, because at that hour Madame had promised to go for a drive in the Park with one of her most fashionable pupils and her friends, and Cynthia knew that she could then see him alone. And she was right in thinking that he would come. Just as the half-hour struck, Hubert knocked at Madame della Scala's door, and was immediately ushered into a tiny little room on the ground-floor which was always called "Miss West's parlor," and which contained little furniture except a piano and table and a couple of chairs. It was here that Cynthia practised and studied, and sat when she wanted to be alone. Two or three photographs of the heads of great singers and musicians were the sole decorations of the walls; a pile of music and some books lay on the table. The place had a severely business-like air; and yet its very simplicity and the sombreness of its tints had hitherto always given Hubert, who knew the room, a sense of pleasure. But he knitted his brows when he was taken to it on this occasion. It seemed to him that Cynthia wanted to give her interview with him also a business-like character. But perhaps, he reflected, it was only that she wanted a peculiarly confidential talk.

He looked at her a little anxiously when she came in, and was rather puzzled by her face. She was pale, and she had been crying, for her eyelids were red; but she gave him a peculiarly sweet and winning smile, and there was a pleading softness in the lovely eyes under the wet lashes which melted his heart to her at once, although she offered him her hand only and would not allow him to kiss her cheek.

"What—not one kiss for me this afternoon? I thought I was forgiven!" he said reproachfully. [Pg 232]

"It is I who want forgiveness," she answered, "for being so bad-tempered and cross and rude last night."

"Take my forgiveness then," said Hubert almost gaily in his relief at hearing the sweetness of her voice—"and take it in this form."

He would not be denied; and Cynthia had no heart to struggle. She let him enfold her in his arms for a moment, and press a dozen kisses on her lips and cheek; then she drew herself away. He felt the movement; although he did not let her go.

"My dearest, you do not speak naturally—and you want to get away from me. What does this mean?"

"I don't know that I exactly want to get away from you," said Cynthia, smiling; "but I think that perhaps I must."

The smile was a very woeful little affair after all.

"Must! I don't think I shall ever let you go again!"

He tightened his clasp. She looked up into his face with beseeching eyes.

"Do take away your arm, please, Hubert! I want to talk to you, and I cannot if it is there."

"Then we will leave it there. I don't think I want to talk, darling. I am very tired—I think I must have walked miles last night before I came back to this door to hand my lady out of her carriage, and I want to be petted and spoken to kindly."

Cynthia's fingers twitched and she turned her head aside, but not before Hubert had noticed the peculiar expression that crossed her face. Being a play-writer and constant theatre-goer, his mind was full of theatrical reminiscences. He remembered at that moment to have noticed that peculiar twitch, that odd expression of countenance, in Sarah Bernhardt when she was acting the part of a profoundly jealous woman. It had then meant, "Go to my rival, to her whom you love, and be comforted—do not come to me!" But there was no likeness between the great tragic actress and Cynthia West either of character or of circumstance; and Cynthia had no cause to be jealous. But he thought of the momentary impression afterwards.

She turned her face back again with as sweet a smile as ever.

"You think you must always have your own way; but I want to be considered too. I have [Pg 233]

something to tell you, and I shall not be happy until it is said. If you are tired, you shall sit down in this chair—it is much more comfortable than it looks—and have some tea, and then we can talk. But Madame may be in by half-past six, and I want to get it all over before she comes."

"'Getting it all over' sounds as if something disagreeable were to follow!" said Hubert, releasing her and taking the chair she proffered. "No tea, thank you; I had some at my club before I came. Now what is it, dear? But sit down; I can't sit, you know, if you stand."

"I must stand," said Cynthia, with a touch of imperiousness. "I am the criminal, and you are the judge. The criminal always stands."

"It is a very innocent criminal and a very unworthy judge in this instance. 'Sit, Jessica.'"

She laughed and drew a chair forward. Sitting down, he saw that her figure fell at once into a weary, languid attitude, and that the smile faded suddenly from her face. He put his hand on hers.

"What is it, my dearest?" he said, seriously this time.

She raised her eyes, and they were full of tears.

"It is of no use trying to speak lightly about it," she said. "I may as well tell you that it is a very important matter, Hubert. I sent for you to-day to tell you that we must part."

"Nonsense, Cynthia!"

"We must indeed! The worst is that we might have avoided all this trouble—this misery—if I had been candid and open with you from the first. If I had told you all about myself, you would perhaps never have helped me—or at least—for I won't say that exactly—you would have helped me from a distance, and never cared to see me or speak to me at all."

"Of course you know that you are talking riddles, Cynthia."

"Yes, I know. But you will understand in a minute or two. I only want to say, first, that I had no idea who—who you were."

"Who I am, dear? Myself, Hubert Lepel, and nobody else."

"And cousin"—she brought the words out with difficulty—"cousin to the Vanes of Beechfield." [Pg 234]

"Well, what objection have you to the Vanes of Beechfield?"

"They have the right to object to me; and so have you. Do you remember the evening when I spoke to you in the street outside the theatre? Did it never cross your mind that you had seen and spoken to me before? You asked me once if I knew a girl called Jane Wood. Now don't you remember me? Now don't you know my name?"

Hubert had risen to his feet. His face was ghastly pale; but there was a horror in it which even Cynthia could not interpret aright.

"You—you, Jane Wood!" he gasped. "Don't trifle with me, Cynthia! You are Cynthia West!"

"Cynthia Janet Westwood, known at St. Elizabeth's as Janie Wood."

"You—you are Westwood's child?"

She silently bowed her head.

"Oh, Cynthia, Cynthia, if you had but told me before!"

He sank down into his chair again, burying his face in his hands with his elbows on his knees. There was a look of self-abasement, of shame and sorrow in his attitude inexplicable to Cynthia. Finding that he did not speak, she took up her tale again in low, uneven tones.

"I knew that I ought to tell you. I said that I would tell you everything before—before we were married, if ever it came to that. I ought to have done so at once; but it was so difficult. They had changed my name when I went to school so that nobody should know; they told me that it would be a disgrace to have it known. I ran away from St. Elizabeth's because I had been fool enough to let it out. I could not face the girls when they knew that—that my father was called a murderer."

Hubert drew his breath hard. She tried to answer what she thought was the meaning of that strange sound, half moan, half sigh.

"I never called him so," she said. "You will not believe it, of course; but I know that my father would never have done the deed that you attribute to him. He was kind, good, tender-hearted, although he lived in rebellion against some of the ordinary laws of society. There was nothing [Pg 235] base or mean about him. If he had killed a man, he would not have told lies about it; he would have said that he had done it and borne the punishment. He was a brave man; he was not a murderer."

Still Hubert did not answer. He dared not let her see his face; she must not know the torture her words inflicted on him. She went on.

"Lately I have thought that it would be better for me to face the whole thing out, and not act as if I were ashamed of my father, who is no murderer, but a martyr and an innocent man. I took my

first step last night by telling your aunt Miss Vane that 'West' was only an assumed name. I had never said that before. Do you remember how she looked at me—how she hated me—when we stood outside the gates of Beechfield Park that afternoon? The sight of me made her ill; and, if she knew me by my right name, it would make her ill again. If I had known that you were their cousin, I would never have let you see my face!"

"Cynthia, have a little mercy!" cried Hubert, suddenly starting up, and dashing his hair back from his discolored, distorted face. "Do you think I am such a brute? What does it matter to me about your father? Was I so unkind, so cruel to you when you were a child that you cannot trust me now?"

"No," she said, looking at him gently, but with a sort of aloofness which he had never seen in her before; "you were very good to me then. You saved me from the workhouse; you would not even let me go to the charity-school that Mrs. Rumbold recommended. You told me to be a good girl, and said that some day I should see my father again." She put her hand to her throat, as if choked by some hysteric symptom, but at once controlled herself and went on. "I see it all now. It was through you, I suppose, that I was sent to St. Elizabeth's, where I was made into something like a civilised being. It was you to whom they applied as to whether I should be removed from the lower to the upper school; and you—out of your charity to the murderer's daughter—you paid for me forty pounds a year. I did not know that I had so much to be grateful for to you. I have taken gifts from you since, not knowing; but this is the last of it—I will never take another now!"

"Are you so proud, Cynthia, that you cannot bear me to have helped you a little? My love, I did not know, I never guessed that you were Westwood's daughter. But can you never forgive me for having done my best for you. Do you think I love you one whit the less?" [Pg 236]

"Oh, I see—you think that I am ungenerous," cried Cynthia, "and that it is my pride which stands in your way! Well, so it is—this kind of pride—that I will not accept gifts from those who believe my father to be a guilty man when I believe in his innocence. They did well never to tell me who was my benefactor—for whom I was taught to pray when I was at St. Elizabeth's. If I had known, the place would not have held me for a day when I was old enough to understand! At first I was too ignorant, too much stupefied by the whole thing to understand that the Vanes were keeping me at school and supporting me. It is horrible—it is sickening—to send my father to prison, to the gallows, and his child to school! Much better have let me go to the workhouse! Do you think I wish to be indebted to people who think my father a murderer?"

"You mistake!" said Hubert quickly. "The Vanes knew nothing about it. If Mrs. Rumbold ever said so, it was my fault. I did not like her to think that I was doing it alone. And, as for me, Cynthia, I never thought your father guilty—never!"

He trembled beneath the burning gaze she turned on him, and his color changed from white to red, and then to white again. He felt as if he had been guilty of the meanest subterfuge of his whole life.

"You never thought so?" she said, with a terrible gasp. "Then who was guilty? Who did that murder, Hubert? Do—you—know?"

She could not say, "Was your sister guilty, and are you shielding her?"

He looked at her helplessly. His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth; he could not speak. With a bitter cry she fell upon her knees before him and seized his hands.

"You know—you know! Oh, Hubert, clear my father's name! Never mind whom you sacrifice! Let the punishment fall on the head of the wrong-doer not on my dear, dear father's! I will forgive you for having been silent so long, if now you will only speak. I will love you always, I will give you my life, if you will but let the truth be known!"

He gathered his forces together by an almost superhuman effort, and managed to speak at last; but the sweat stood in great drops on his brow. [Pg 237]

"Cynthia, don't—don't speak so, for God's sake! I know nothing, I have nothing to say!"

Clinging to his knees, she looked up at him, her eyes full of supplication.

"Is the cost too great?" she cried. "Will you not tell the truth for my sake—for Cynthia's sake?"

Scarcely knowing what he did, he pushed back his chair, and wrenched himself free from her entreating hands.

"I cannot bear this, Cynthia! If I could——But it is of no use; I have nothing—nothing to tell."

He had moved away from her; but he came back when he saw that she had fallen forward with her face on the chair where he had been sitting. He leaned over her. At first he thought that she had fainted; but presently the movement of her shoulders showed him that she was but vainly endeavoring to suppress a burst of agonising sobs.

"Cynthia," he said, "believe in my love, darling! If you believe in nothing else, you may be sure of that."

He laid his hand gently round her neck, and, finding that she did not repulse him, knelt beside her and tried to draw her to his breast. For a few minutes she let her head rest on his shoulder, and clung to him as if she could not let him go. When she grew calmer, he began to whisper

tender words into her ear.

"Cynthia, I will give up all the world for your dear sake! Let us go away from England together, and live only for each other, darling! We could be happy somewhere, away from the toil and strife of London, could we not? I love you only, dearest—only you! If you like, we would go to America and see whether we could not find your poor father, who, I have heard, is living there; and we could cheer his last days together. Will you not make me happy in this way, Cynthia? Be my wife, and let us forget all the world beside."

She shook her head. She had wept so violently that at first she could not speak.

"Why do you shake your head? You do not doubt my love? My darling, I count the world well lost for you. Do not distrust me again! Do you think I mind what the world says, or what my relatives say? You are Cynthia and my love to me, and whose daughter you are matters nothing—nothing at all!" [Pg 238]

"But it matters to me," she whispered brokenly—"and I cannot consent."

"Dearest, don't say that! You must consent! Your only chance of happiness lies with me, and mine with you."

"But you have promised yourself," she murmured, "to Enid Vane."

"Conditionally; and I am certain—certain that she does not care for me."

"I am not certain," she whispered.

Then there was a little pause; during which he felt that she was bracing herself to say something which was hard for her to say.

"I have made up my mind," she said at length, "to take nothing away from Enid Vane that is dear to her. Do you remember how she pleaded with you for me? Do you remember how good she was—how kind? She gave me her shilling because I had had no food that day. I never spent it—I have that shilling still. I have worn it ever since, as a sort of talisman against evil." She felt in her bosom and brought out the coin attached by a little string around her neck. "It has been my greatest treasure! I have had so few treasures in my life. And do you think I am going to be ungrateful? If it broke my heart to give you up, I would not hesitate one moment, when I had reason to think that you were plighted to Enid Vane."

She drew herself away from him as she spoke, and rose to her full height. Hubert stood before her, his eyes on the floor, his lips white and tremulous. What could he say? He had nothing but his love to plead—and his love looked a poor and common thing beside that purity of motive, that height of purpose, that intensity of noble passion which at that moment made Cynthia's face beautiful indeed.

"I will see you no more," she said. "You must go back to Enid Vane, and you must make her happy. For me, I have another work to do. In my own way I—I shall be happy too. There is a double barrier between us, and we must never meet again."

"Is it a barrier that can never be broken down, Cynthia?"

"No," she said—"not unless my father is shown to be innocent to the world and the stain removed from his name—not unless we are sure—sure that Enid Vane has no affection for you save that of a cousin and a friend. And those things are impossibilities; so we must say good-bye." [Pg 239]

It seemed as if he had not understood her words. He muttered something, and clutched at the table behind him as if to keep himself from falling.

"Impossibilities indeed!" he said hoarsely, after a moment's pause. "Good-bye, Cynthia!"

Struck with pity for his haggard face and hollow eyes, Cynthia came up to him, put her hands on his shoulders, and kissed his cheek.

"I was mad just now! I said more than I think I meant, Hubert. Forgive me before you go; but never come here again."

Their eyes met, and then some instinct prompted her to whisper very low—"Could you not, even now, save my father if you tried?"

Surely his good angel pleaded with him in Cynthia's guise, and, looking into her face, he answered as he had never thought to answer in this world—

"Yes, Cynthia; if I took his place, I could."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Westwood had scouted Cynthia's notion that the woman in black who seemed to be following them could possibly be a spy; nevertheless he meditated upon it with some anxiety, and resolved, on his arrival at his lodgings, to be wary and circumspect—also to show that he was on his guard.

He relapsed therefore into the very uncommunicative "single gentleman" whom Mrs. Gunn, his landlady, had at first found him to be, and refused rather gruffly her invitation that afternoon to take tea with her in her own parlor in the company of herself and her niece.

"He's grumpier than ever," she said to this niece, who was no other than Sabina Meldreth, now paying a visit—on business principles—of indefinite duration to her aunt's abode in Camden Town; "and I did think that you'd melted him a bit last week, Sabina! But he's as close as wax! [Pg 240] Let's sit down to our tea before it gets black and bitter, as he won't come."

"He must have seen me in the Gardens," said Sabina, who was dressed in the brightest of blue gowns, with red ribbons at her throat and wrists, "though I should never have thought that he would recognise me, being in black and having that thick black veil over my face."

"I don't see what you wanted to foller him for!" said Mrs. Gunn. "What business o' yours was it where he went and what he did? I don't think you'll ever make anything of him"—for Miss Meldreth had begun to harbor matrimonial designs on the unconscious Mr. Reuben Dare.

"I'm not so sure," said Sabina. "Once get a man by himself, and you can do a' most anything with him, so long as there's no other woman in the way."

"And is there another woman in the way?"

"Yes, aunt Eliza, there is."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mrs. Gunn, emptying the water-jug into the tea-pot in pure absence of mind. "You saw him with one, did you?"

"Yes, aunt Eliza, I did."

"And what was she like, Sabina?"

"Well, some folks would call her handsome," said Sabina dubiously; "and she was dressed like a lady—I'll say that for her. But what's odd is that I'm nearly sure I heard her call him 'father.' She's young enough to be his daughter, anyway."

"Did he call her anything?"

"I couldn't hear. But I'll tell you what I did afterwards, aunt Eliza; I followed her when she came out at the gate—and she didn't see me then. She went straight to a house in Norton Square; and I managed to make some inquiries about her at a confectioner's shop in the neighborhood. The house belongs to a music-mistress; and this girl is a singer. 'Cynthia West,' they call her—I've seen her name in the newspapers. Well, I thought I would wait round a bit, and presently I saw a man go to the house to deliver a note; and thinks I to myself, 'I know that face.' And so I did. It was Mr. Lepel's man, Jenkins, as used to come down with him to Beechfield."

"You don't say so!" cried Mrs. Gunn, raising her hands in amazement.

"He knew me," Sabina proceeded tranquilly; "and so we had a little chat together. I says to him, [Pg 241] 'Who is it you take notes to at number five—the old lady or the young one?' 'Oh,' says he, 'the young one, to be sure. Scrumptious, isn't she?' 'Cynthia West?' says I. 'Yes,' he says—'and Mrs. Hubert Lepel before very long, if I've got eyes to see! He's always after her.' 'That ain't very likely,' I said, 'because he's got a young lady already in the country.' 'One in the country and one in the town,' he says, with a wink—'that's the usual style, isn't it?' And, seeing that he was disposed to be familiar, I said good-day to him and came away."

"What will you do now then, Sabina?"

"Well," said Sabina reflectively, "I think I shall let Mrs. Vane know. She'd be glad to have a sort of handle against her brother, I'm thinking. And these people—Mr. Dare and Miss West—seem to have got something to do with Beechfield, for I'm certain it was to Beechfield he went when he left here for that fortnight. He gave no address—that was natural maybe—but he'd got the Whitminster label on his bag when he came back. And, if Miss West was being courted by Mr. Lepel, and her father wanted to know who Mr. Lepel was and all about him, he might easily gather that Beechfield was the place to go to. I suppose he wanted to find out whether Mr. Lepel was engaged to Miss Vane or not. And I've a sort of idea too that there's something mysterious about it all. Why shouldn't he have said straight out where he was going, especially when I had already told him that I knew Whitminster so well and belonged to Beechfield? It seems to me that Mr. Dare has got something to conceal; and I'd like to know what it is before I go any farther."

"Any farther!" said her aunt contemptuously. "It don't seem to me that you've got very far!"

"Farther than you think," was Miss Meldreth's reply. "He's afraid of me, or else he would have come to tea this afternoon. And a woman can always manage a man that's afraid of her."

Fortified by this conviction, Sabina sat down after tea to indite a letter to Mrs. Vane. She was not a very deft scribe, and the spelling of certain words was a mystery to her. But, with the faults of its orthography corrected the letter finally stood thus— [Pg 242]

"MADAM—I thought you might like to know as how there is a gentleman, named Reuben Dare, lodging here at my aunt's, as seems to have a secret interest in Beechfield. I think, but I am not quite sure, that he spent a few days at the Beechfield inn not long ago. He is tall and thin and brown, with white hair and beard and very black eyes. He will not talk much about Beechfield,

and yet seems to know it well. Says he comes from America. He was walking for a long time in Kensington Garden this morning with a young woman that goes by the name of Cynthia West and is a singer. She calls; him 'Father.' Madam, I take the liberty of informing you that Mr. H. Lepel visits her constant, and is said to be going to marry her. She is what gentlemen call good-looking, though too dark for my taste. It does not seem to be generally known that she has a parent living.

"Yours respectfully,
"SABINA MELDRETH."

Mrs. Vane read this letter with considerable surprise. She meditated upon it for some time with closed lips and knitted brows; then she rang the bell for Parker.

"Parker," she said, "can you tell me whether any strangers have been visiting Beechfield lately?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am! There was an old gentleman at the 'Crown' a few days ago. The post-office woman told me that he came from America."

"Do you know his name?"

"Yes, ma'am—'Mr. Dare.'"

"The woman at the post-office told you that? Did you ever see him?"

"Yes, ma'am. He spoke to me one evening when I'd run out with a letter, and asked me the way to the Hall."

"And then?"

"He said he'd heard of a Mr. Lepel at Beechfield, ma'am," said Parker, rather reluctantly, "and that he knew a Mr. Lepel and wondered, whether it was the same. But it wasn't. The Mr. Lepel he knew was short and fair and was married; the Mr. Lepel that came here, as I told him, was dark and tall and engaged to Miss Vane."

"You had no right to tell him that, Parker; it is not public property."

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure, ma'am! I'd heard it so often that I thought everybody knew."

"What else did this Mr. Dare say?" [Pg 243]

"I don't remember, ma'am."

"Did he ask no other questions? Did he ask, for instance, whether Mr. Lepel was not very fond of Miss Vane?"

"Well, yes, ma'am; now you mention it I think he did—though how you came to guess it——"

"Never mind how I came to guess it. What did you say?"

"I said that he worshipped the ground she trod upon, and that she was just the same with him."

"And pray how did you know that?"—Parker shuffled.

"Well, ma'am, I couldn't rightly say; but it's what is general with young ladies and young gentlemen, and it wouldn't have looked well, I thought, to ha' said anythink else."

"Oh, I see! The remark was purely conventional," said Flossy cynically. "I congratulate you, Parker, on always doing as much harm as you can whenever you take anything in hand. Did he seem pleased by what you said?"

"Not exactly pleased, ma'am—nor displeased; I think, if anything, he was more pleased than not."

"That will do," Mrs. Vane said shortly; and Parker retired, much relieved in her mind by having come off, as she considered, so well.

Mrs. Vane proceeded to electrify the household the next morning by declaring that she must at once go up to London in order to see her dentist. She announced her intention at a time when the General, much to his annoyance, could not possibly accompany her. She said to him very sweetly that she had chosen that hour on purpose because she did not want to put him to needless inconvenience, and that she preferred to go with Parker only as her companion. She hated to be seen, she said, when she was in pain.

The General fumed and fretted; but, as he had an important meeting to attend at Whitminster that day, he could but put his wife into the train and give Parker endless injunctions to be careful of her mistress. Parker promised fervently to do all that lay in her power; and with a serene smile Flossy listened to the General's orders and her maid's asseverations with equal tranquility. They had the carriage to themselves; and not until the train was nearly to London did Mrs. Vane rouse [Pg 244] herself from the restful semi-slumber in which she seemed to have passed the journey. Then she sat up suddenly, with a curiously wide-awake and resolute air, and addressed herself to her maid.

"I shall not require you at all to-day, Parker. I brought you only because the General would never have allowed me to come alone; but I dislike being attended by any one when I go to the dentist's or to the doctor's. You may wait at the railway-station until I come back. I may be only an hour, or I may be gone all day."

"The General's orders, ma'am," began Parker, with a gasp; but her mistress cut the sentence

short at once.

"I suppose you understand that you are my servant and not the General's?" she said. "You will obey my orders, if you please."

She gave the maid some money, and instructions to spend as much as she pleased at buffet and book-stalls until her return.

"Enjoy yourself as much as you like and as much as you can," said Mrs. Vane carelessly—"only don't stir from the station, for when I come back I shall want you at once."

She installed the faithful Parker safely in the waiting-room, and then went out and got into a cab—not a hansom cab; Mrs. Vane did not wish to be seen in her drive through the London streets. The address which she gave to the cabman was not that of her dentist, but of the lodgings at present tenanted by her brother.

Parker remained at the station in a state of tearful collapse. She was terribly afraid of being questioned and stormed at by the General when she got back for neglect of her trust. She was certainly what Flossy had called her—"a faithful fool." She wanted to do all that her mistress required; but it had not as yet even occurred to her that Mrs. Vane was quite certain to require utter silence, towards the General and everybody else, on the question of her disposition of the day. And, if silence was impossible, a good bold lie would do as well. Parker had not yet grasped the full amount of devotion that was expected of her.

Hubert had seldom been more surprised in his life than when the elegantly-dressed lady who was ushered into his sitting-room proved to be his sister Florence. She had never visited him before. [Pg 245] He sprang up from his writing-table, which was piled high with books and manuscripts, flung a half-smoked cigar into the grate, and greeted her with a mixture of doubt and astonishment, which amused if it did not flatter the astute Mrs. Vane.

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure! I hope you are not the bearer of ill news, Flossy! Is anything wrong at Beechfield?"

"Oh, dear, no! I came up to see my dentist," said Flossy carelessly, "and I thought that I would give you a call *en passant*. So these are your rooms? Not at all bad for a bachelor!"

"That is high praise from you, I suppose," said Hubert, smiling faintly.

"But you do not look at all well, Hubert. What is the matter with you? You look terribly fagged!"

Her remark was justified by his appearance. His face had a drawn look which added ten years to his age; his eyes seemed almost to have sunk into his head. He made an impatient gesture, and looked away.

"I have not been very well," he said; "but there is no need to speak about it. I am very busy, and I want rest—change of scene and air."

"Why not come down to Beechfield?"

He gave a slight but perceptible shudder.

"No," he said briefly, and then stood leaning against his writing-table, and was silent.

"Hubert," said his sister, a little more quickly than usual, "I said that I wanted to see my dentist, but I had another reason for coming to town. Can you tell me where I can find a file of the *Times* newspaper for the early months of the year 187-?"—she mentioned the year of Sydney Vane's death and the trial of Andrew Westwood.

"You want—the trial?" said her brother, with an evident effort. She bowed her head.

"Why?"

"I have forgotten one or two points in the evidence. I want to recall them to my mind."

He stood looking at her silently.

"It doesn't matter," she said, feigning indifference, and rising as if to take her leave; "I can see the papers in a public library, no doubt. The General would not have a copy left in the house. [Pg 246] I will go elsewhere."

"It is needless," Hubert answered, in a gloomy tone. "I have kept copies myself. Wait a moment, and I will bring them to you."

"I thought that you would probably possess them," said Flossy softly, as she settled herself once more in her comfortable chair.

He went into another room, and soon returned bearing in his arms a little pile of papers, yellow indeed with age, but, as Mrs. Vane noticed, completely free from dust. It was evident that some one else had been very lately perusing them; but she made no comment on the subject.

"Go on with your writing," she said, beginning to take off her gray gloves with admirable coolness. "I can find what I want without your aid."

He gave her a long look, then set the papers on a little table beside her and returned to his own

seat. He did not however begin to write again. He turned the chair almost with its back to Mrs. Vane, and clasped his hands behind his fine dark head. In this position he remained perfectly motionless until she had finished her examination of the newspapers. In a quarter of an hour she declared herself satisfied.

"Have you found all that you wanted?"

"Oh; yes, thank you!" One important item she had certainly secured—the fact that Westwood's daughter had been named "Cynthia Janet." "Cynthia Janet Westwood"—"Cynthia West"—it was plain enough to her quick intelligence that the two were one and the same. Hubert had never thought of looking for the name of Westwood's little daughter in the *Times*.

"By-the-bye," said Flossy lightly, "I hear sad tales of you in town. How often is it that you go to see the new singer—Miss West? Has poor Enid a rival?"

He did not look round; but she saw that her question sent a shock through his nerves.

"I do not know what you mean," he answered coldly.

"Oh, do you not? You may as well speak the truth—to me, Hubert. Are you going to marry Miss West or Miss Vane—which?"

"Neither, I think."

"Don't be absurd. Are you going to marry Miss West?"

"No." [Pg 247]

"Shall you marry Enid Vane?"

"It is not very likely that she will marry me."

Something in the intense dreariness of his tone struck painfully on Florence's ear. She rose and put her hand on Hubert's shoulder.

"What is the matter with you, Hubert?"

He shook off her hand as if it had been a noxious reptile of which he desired to rid himself, and rose to his feet.

"You must not mind what I say to-day, Florence. I am not well. I—I shall see you another time."

"Of course you will—plenty of times, I hope!" A look of dismay began to show itself in Flossy's velvet-brown eyes. "You are not contemplating any new step, I hope? I——"

"Don't be alarmed!" he said, with a hoarse unnatural laugh. "Before I take any new step I will come to you. I will not leave you without a warning." Then he seemed to recover his self-possession and spoke in more measured tones. "Nonsense, Florence—don't concern yourself about me! I have a bad headache—that is all. If I am left alone, I shall soon be better."

"I hope you will," said Flossy, rather gravely, "for you look alarmingly ill to-day. You should send for the doctor, Hubert. And now I will say good-bye, for I have two or three other things to do to-day, besides going to my dentist's. The cab is at the door; you need not come down."

He rose, as she really expected him to do, to see her to her cab; but a sensation of dizziness and faintness made him sit down again and bury his head in his hands. Considerably alarmed, Florence rang for Jenkins, his man, and gave strict orders that the doctor should be sent for at once. Then, feeling that she had for the present at least done her duty, she took her leave, promising to call again before she left town that afternoon.

Jenkins went for the doctor, as Mrs. Vane had told him to do. When that gentleman arrived, he found Mr. Lepel stretched on a sofa in a half-unconscious state, and declared him to be in one of the incipient stages of brain-fever.

CHAPTER XXXV. [Pg 248]

Mrs. Vane, on leaving her brother's lodgings, drove straight to Camden Town. She had reasons for wishing to see Sabina Meldreth. The house was a little difficult to find, because the street had recently been renamed and renumbered, and Mrs. Vane was forced, to her great disgust, to descend from the cab and make inquiries in her own person of various frowsy-looking women standing at their own doors. "I wish I had brought Parker," she said to herself more than once; "she would have been useful in this kind of work. Surely Sabina has given me the right address!"

"There goes the gentleman that lodges at Mrs. Gunn's!" said one of the frowsy-looking women at last. "I've heard tell that he was there, though I didn't know the number. Will you tell this lady, please, sir, what number Mrs. Gunn's is?"

The white-bearded old man who was just then passing along the street turned to Mrs. Vane.

"I shall be very happy to show the lady the house," he said half raising his felt hat from his white

head with something like foreign politeness. And then he and Flossy exchanged glances which were hard and keen as steel.

He knew her well by sight; but she did not recognise him. She had seen Westwood only once or twice in her life, and this apparently gentle old man with the silvery hair did not harmonise with Flossy's impressions of the Beechfield poacher. Nevertheless she was suspicious enough to remember that all things were possible; and she made a mental note of his dark eyes and eyebrows, the latter being a little out of keeping with his very white hair. As a matter of fact, Westwood had gone too far in selecting his disguise; a more ordinary slightly-grizzled wig would have suited his general appearance better. The *perruquier*—an artist in his way—to whom he had applied considered picturesque effect an object not to be overlooked; and Mr. Reuben Dare was accordingly a rather too strikingly picturesque individual to be anything but theatrical in air. [Pg 249]

He showed Mrs. Vane the house, bowed politely, and then passed down the street.

"She's come to enquire about me—I am sure of that," he said. "I'd better change my lodgings as quick as possible. I'll leave them to-morrow—to-night would look suspicious, maybe: or should I leave them now, and never go back?"

He was half inclined to adopt this course; but he was deterred by the remembrance of a pocket-book containing money which he had left locked up in his portmanteau. He could not well dispense with it; and neither Mrs. Vane nor anybody else could do him any harm, he thought, if he stayed for twenty-four hours longer at Mrs. Gunn's. But he trusted a little too much to the uncertainties of fate.

"Well, Sabina," said Mrs. Vane coolly, as, with a general air of bewilderment, that young person appeared before her in Mrs. Gunn's best parlor, "I suppose that you hardly expected to see me here?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't. I thought you was quite too much of an invalid to leave home."

"It is rather an effort," said Flossy drily, "especially considering the neighborhood in which you live."

"It ain't country certainly," returned Sabina; "but it's respectable."

"Ah, like yourself!" said Mrs. Vane. "That was the reason you came to it, I suppose. Don't look angry, Sabina—I was only meaning to make a little joke. But jokes are a mistake with most people. I came to answer your letter in person and to have a talk with you."

"Won't you have anything to eat, ma'am? We've just finished dinner; but, if there's anything we can get"—Sabina was evidently inclined to be obsequious—"an egg, or a chop, or a cup of tea ——"

"No, I don't want anything. Who is this Mr. Reuben Dare?"

"That's what I want to know, ma'am!"

"And who is this Miss West?"—Sabina shook her head.

"She calls him her father—I'm sure of that."

"Where does she come from? Where was she brought up?"

"Couldn't say, ma'am. Jenkins says that Miss West used to act at the Frivolity Theatre—he's seen her there about two years ago. Mr. Lepel took her up, as far as he can make out, about a year and a half ago—soon after he settled in London again." [Pg 250]

"Do you think that the man Dare has any connection with Beechfield beside that of his recent visit?"

"Yes, I do. He caught himself up like once or twice when I began to talk of it; and once he put me right—accidental like—about the name of somebody at Beechfield."

"Whose name?"

"I'm not sure as I can remember. Yes, I do, though! It was Mr. Rumbold's first name. I called him 'The Reverend Edward,' and he says 'Alfred'—quick, as if he wasn't thinking. So he must have known the place in years gone by."

Flossy sat thinking.

"Sabina," she said at length, in her smoothest tones, "I will take you into my confidence—I know you can be trusted. Of course it would be a great blow to me if my brother married an actress—a girl whom one knows nothing at all about; besides, he is almost engaged to my husband's niece, Miss Vane." She did not add that she had been subtly opposing this engagement by all the means in her power for the last few weeks. "We must try to break off the connection as soon as we can. The more we know about this Miss West's past life the better. I will go to the Frivolity myself, and see whether I can learn anything about it there. And, Sabina——"

"Yes, ma'am," said the woman, as Mrs. Vane paused.

"That mass of white hair, Sabina—do you think it looks quite natural?"

"Mr. Dare, you mean, ma'am? No, I don't; I believe it's a wig. I've seen it quite on one side."

"Couldn't you find out, Sabina?"

"Well, I don't see how," said Sabina slowly. "I've never seen him without it. One night there was an alarm of fire, and everybody rushed to their doors, and Mr. Dare came too; but his hair and his beard and everything was just the same as usual. Still I'm sure I've seen it a little on one side."

"You provide his food here, do you not? Do you ever help your aunt?"

"Sometimes, ma'am. I take in his tea and all that, you know. We're by way of being very friendly, Mr. Dare and me." [Pg 251]

"Sabina, if you had the stuff, could you not quietly put something into his tea which would make him sleep for an hour or two? And, when he was asleep, could you not find out what I want to know?"

Sabina was silent for a moment.

"What should I get for it?" she said at last. "It's always a risk to run."

"Twenty pounds," said Flossy promptly. "There is very little risk."

"And where should I get the stuff?"

"I—I have it with me," said Mrs. Vane.

Sabina, who had been standing, suddenly sat down and burst out laughing.

"Well, you are a deep one," she said, when her laughter was ended, and she observed that Mrs. Vane was regarding her rather angrily; "if you'll excuse me for saying so, ma'am, but you are the very deepest one I ever came across! And you don't look it one bit!"

"I suppose you mean both of these assertions for compliments," said Flossy. "If so you need not trouble to make them again. This is a business matter. Will you undertake it, or will you not?"

"When?"

"To-night."

"To-night! When he comes in to tea? Well, is it safe?"

"You mean the drug? Perfectly safe. He will never know that he has had it. It will keep him sound asleep for a couple of hours at least. During that time I do not think that thunder itself would wake him."

"You've tried it before, I'll warrant?" said Sabina half questioningly, half admiringly.

"Yes," said Flossy placidly, "I have tried it before." She took a little bottle of greenish glass from the small morocco bag which she carried in her hand, and held it up to the light. "There are two doses in it," she said. "Don't use it all at once. A drop or two more or less does not matter; you need not be afraid of making it a little too strong. It is colorless and tasteless. Can you manage it?"

Sabina considered.

"If I put it into the tea-pot, it might be wasted; he might not drink all the tea. He never lets me pour it out for him. Would it alter the look of the milk?" [Pg 252]

"Not at all."

"Then I could put it into his cream-jug, and give him so little that he's sure to use it all and ring for more. He likes a deal of milk in his tea."

"Then you will do it, Sabina?"

Again Sabina hesitated. Finally she said, with sudden decision—

"Give me that twenty pound, and then I will."

"Not until you have earned it."

"If I don't have it beforehand, I won't do it at all," said Sabina doggedly.

Mrs. Vane shrugged her shoulders slightly, opened her bag, and put the little bottle back into its place.

"You said you could trust me; show me that you can," said Sabina, unmoved by this pantomime. "One of us will have to trust the other. I may do it, and then—who knows?—you may back out of the bargain."

"Did I ever 'back out of a bargain,' as you coarsely express it? I think, Sabina, I have trusted you a good deal already."

"Well, split the difference," said Sabina roughly. "Give me ten down on the nail, and ten when I've done the work. I dare say I can manage it to-night. I can write to you when it's over."

"Very well. Here are ten pounds for you; I will give you the other when your work is done. But do not write to me; come to me at the Grosvenor Hotel to-morrow morning. I shall stay the night in town!"

"Have you any idea who the man is?" said Sabina, as she received the bottle and the ten-pound note from her visitor's hands.

"Yes, I have; but I may be wrong."

"That's not very likely, ma'am. You'd 'a' made a good detective, as I always did think—you're so sharp."

"And I don't look it, as you said before. Perhaps I will tell you to-morrow morning, Sabina. At present I am going to find out all that I can about Miss Cynthia West. You did not give me her address; give it to me now."

She wrote it down in a little pocket-book, and then rose to take her leave. Sabina, who followed her to the cab, heard her tell the man to drive to the box-office of the Frivolity Theatre. [Pg 253]

It took Mrs. Vane three-quarters of an hour to reach the Frivolity. It was half-past three when she got there. She asked at once if it was possible to see the manager, Mr. Ferguson. A gold coin probably expedited her messenger and rendered her entrance to the great man possible; for Mrs. Vane was a very handsome and well-dressed woman, and the "important business" on which she sent word that she had come had possibly less influence on the manager's mind than the glowing account given by the man despatched from the box-office on her errand.

Flossy was lucky. Mr. Ferguson was in the building—a rather unusual fact; he was also willing to see her in his private room—another concession; and he received her with moderate civility—a variation from his usual manner, which Mrs. Vane must have owed to her own manner and appearance.

"I shall not detain you for more than a very few minutes, Mr. Ferguson," said Flossy, with the air of a duchess, as she accepted the chair which the manager offered her; "but I have a good reason for coming to you. I think that a young lady called Cynthia West was once acting at this theatre? To put my question in plain words—Do you know anything about her?"

The manager sneered a little.

"A good deal," he said. "Oh, yes—she was here! I don't know that I have anything to tell, however. I should think that Mr. Hubert Lepel, if you know him, could tell you more about her than any one."

"I happen to be Mr. Lepel's sister," said Flossy, with dignity.

"The deuce you are!" remarked the manager to himself. "That explains——" Aloud—"Well, madam, how can I assist you? Do you want to know Miss West's character? Well, that was—if I may use the word—notorious."

Flossy's eyes gleamed.

"So I expected to hear," she murmured. "I am afraid that my poor brother has some thought of—of marrying her."

"Oh, surely not!" said Mr. Ferguson. "Surely he wouldn't be such a fool!"

"Can you tell me anything definite about her?" [Pg 254]

"Excuse me, madam, for asking; but you—naturally—wish to prevent the marriage, if possible?"

"I certainly do not wish my brother to ruin himself for life, as he would do if she were such a—such a person as you imply." Mrs. Vane's lips were evidently much too delicate to say in plain terms what she meant. "If she were as respectable as she seems to be talented, of course objections about birth and station might be overlooked. But my brother has expectations from relatives who take the old-fashioned views about a woman's position; and the mere fact of her being a singer or an actress might be against her in their eyes. It would be much better for him if the whole thing were broken off."

She was purposely vague and diplomatic.

"Mr. Lepel's his own master, of course," said the manager; "so perhaps he knows all we can tell him—and more. But you are welcome to use any information that I can give you." His little green eyes gleamed with malice, and a triumphant smile showed itself at the corners of his thick hanging lips. "Miss West's career is well known. Lalli, a member of our orchestra, picked her out of the streets when she was sixteen or seventeen, trained her a bit, and brought her here. We soon found out what sort of person she was, and I spoke my mind to Lalli about it; for, though we're not particular as to a girl's character, still now and then——Well, she was under his protection at the time, and there was nothing much to be done; so we let her alone. He died suddenly about a couple of years ago; and then, I believe, she accosted Mr. Lepel in the street, and went to his rooms and fastened herself upon him, as women of her sort sometimes do. He took her up, sent her to Italy for a bit, put her under the care of that woman della Scala—as a blind to the public, I suppose—and got her brought out as a singer; and she seems to have had a fair amount of success."

Mr. Ferguson's account of Cynthia's career had an intermixture of fact, but it was so artfully combined with falsehood that it was difficult to disentangle one from the other.

Flossy listened with keen attention; it struck her at once that Mr. Ferguson was blackening the girl's character out of spite.

"Do you know where she came from before your musician, Lalli, discovered her, Mr. Ferguson?" [Pg 255]

"No, I do not, madam. But I have followed her course with interest ever since"—which was true.

"And do you know where she resided before he died?"

"No, madam—I really do not"—which was utterly false. "Perhaps I could ascertain for you, and let you know."

Flossy thanked him and rose. She had not attained her object precisely; but she had received information that might prove extremely valuable. The manager bowed her out of his room politely, and called to one of his subordinates to show her down-stairs.

This was a little mistake on Mr. Ferguson's part; he did not calculate on his visitor's questioning his subordinate, who happened to be a young man with a taste for the violin.

"Did you know a Mr. Lalli who was once in the orchestra here?" said Flossy graciously.

"Oh, yes, ma'am! He was here for a very long time."

"Do you know where he used to live?"

"Yes, ma'am, No.—, Euston Road; it's a boarding-house, kept by a Mrs. Wadsley. He died there."

Quite astonished by her own success, Flossy slipped a coin into his hand and made him call her a hansom cab. She was beginning to think of speed more than of the probability of being recognised in the London streets.

To Mrs. Wadsley's then in all haste. The dingily respectable air of the house and of the proprietress herself at once impressed Mrs. Vane with the idea that Mr. Ferguson had been largely drawing on his own imagination with respect to Cynthia West. Nothing certainly could be more idyllic than the story of Lalli's devotion to the girl, whom he had brought home one night with an assurance to Mrs. Wadsley that she was the daughter of an old friend, and that he would be responsible for the payment of her board and lodging until she began to earn her own living.

"He was just like a father to her," said Mrs. Wadsley confidentially; "and teach her he would, and scold her sometimes by the hour together. I assure you, Mrs. Vane, it was wonderful to see the pains that he took with her. I see in the papers that she has been singing at concerts lately; and I [Pg 256] said to my friend Mrs. Doldrum, 'How pleased poor dear old Mr. Lalli would have been if he had known!'"

"He was quite an old man, I suppose?" said Mrs. Vane. "There was no talk of marriage between them—of an attachment of any kind?"

Mrs. Wadsley drew herself up in rather an offended manner.

"Certainly not, madam—save as father and daughter might be attached one to another. Mr. Lalli was old enough to be the girl's grandfather; and Cynthia—oh, she was quite a child! I hope you do not think that I should have chaperoned her if any such matter had seemed likely to occur; but there was nothing of the kind. Mr. Lalli was quite too serious-minded for anything of that sort—a deeply religious man, although an Italian, Mrs. Vane."

"Indeed, I am glad to hear it," said Flossy solemnly. "Miss West had no engagement—no love-affair, in short—going on when she was with you?"

"Certainly not, Mrs. Vane."

"Did you ever hear her say where she had lived—where she had been educated—before she came to London?"

"I did hear something of a school that she had been at," said Mrs. Wadsley, after a little reflection; "but where it was I could not exactly tell you. They were Sisters, I believe, who taught her—Roman Catholics, very probably. 'St. Elizabeth's'—that was the name of the school; but where it is to be found I am sure I cannot say."

"At St. Elizabeth's, East Winstead?" said Mrs. Vane quickly. She had heard the name from the Rumbolds.

"I am sure I cannot say, Mrs. Vane."

"Miss West was not a Roman Catholic, was she?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Mrs. Wadsley with great stiffness.

Flossy's questions had not impressed her favorably; but the words next uttered by her visitor did away to some extent with the bad impression.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Wadsley, for your kind information! The fact is that a relative of mine his fallen in love with Miss West, and I was asked to find out who she was and all about her.

Everything I have heard is so entirely charming and satisfactory, that I shall be able to set everything right, and assure my friends that we shall be honored by an alliance with Miss West. I hope we shall see you at the wedding, Mrs. Wadsley, when it takes place." [Pg 257]

"When it takes place," Flossy repeated to herself, when she stood once more in the noisy London street; "but I do not think it will ever take place. I wonder how far it is to East Winstead; and whether it is worth while going there or not?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

It was not much after five, and the days were very long. Mrs. Vane found that she could reach East Winstead by seven, and, allowing for one hour at St. Elizabeth's, could be back in London by half-past nine. She, who was said to be an invalid, who never walked half a mile alone or exerted herself in any avoidable way, now showed herself as unwearied, as vigorous, as energetic as any able-bodied detective in the pursuit of his duty. She went first to the station where she had left Parker, and gave the maid her instructions. Parker was to go to the Grosvenor Hotel and engage rooms for the night for herself and her mistress, and to see that every requisite for comfort was provided for Mrs. Vane when she arrived. At half-past seven precisely she was to despatch a telegram which Flossy herself had written for the General's benefit, announcing her intention to stay the night in town. It was not to be sent earlier, as in that case the General would be rushing off to London to take care of his wife, and Flossy did not want him in the least. If he got the telegram between eight and nine, he would scarcely start that night, although she knew that she might fully expect to see him in the morning. He was a most affectionate husband, and never believed that his wife was capable of doing anything for herself.

Parker was much amazed by Mrs. Vane's proceedings, and did not believe that the dentist was responsible for them, or Mr. Hubert Lepel either, although Flossy was careful to put the blame of her detention upon these innocent persons. She was not allowed to know what her mistress was going to do, but was sent away from the station to the hotel at once in a hansom-cab. Then Flossy calmly provided herself with sandwiches and a flask of sherry, took a return-ticket for East Winstead and found herself moving out of the station in a fast train at exactly five minutes to six. It was quick work; but she had accomplished the task that she had set herself to do. Flossy had a genius for intrigue. [Pg 258]

She reached East Winstead at seven, and found a cab at the station. The drive to St. Elizabeth's occupied twenty minutes—longer than she had anticipated. She would have to do her work—make all her inquiries—in exactly one quarter of an hour if she meant to catch the next train to London. Well, a quarter of an hour ought to tell her all that she wished to know.

She took little notice of the beauty of garden and architecture at St. Elizabeth's; these were not what she had gone to see. She asked at the door if she could see the Sister in charge of the girl's school.

"Which—the orphanage or the ladies' school?"

"The orphanage," was Flossy's prompt reply; and accordingly she was shown into the presence of Sister Louisa.

"I am afraid that I must appear very brusque and abrupt," said Mrs. Vane, with the soft graciousness of manner which proved so powerful a weapon in her armory; "but I shall have to come to the point at once, as I have only a few minutes to spare. Can you tell me whether you ever had a child in your orphanage called Cynthia West?"

Sister Louisa considered, and then shook her head.

"'Cynthia' is an uncommon name," she said. "I am sure what we never had—at least, within the last ten years."

"It would not be so long ago," said Mrs. Vane. "I have reason, however, to think that 'Cynthia West' is not her real name. Would the name of 'Westwood'—'Cynthia Janet Westwood'—recall any child to your memory?"

Sister Louisa started, and a flush covered her mild thin face.

"Is it possible," she said, "that you mean our lost child Jane Wood?"

"She may have been known under that name," said Florence. "You had a girl here called 'Jane Wood,' then? Why do you think that she has any connection with Cynthia West?"

"You mentioned the name of 'Westwood,'" said Sister Louisa eagerly. "Jane Wood's name was really 'Westwood'; but, as she was the daughter of a notorious criminal, Mrs. Rumbold of Beechfield, who placed her with us, asked that she should be called 'Wood.' She was the child of Westwood, who committed a dreadful murder at Beechfield, in Hampshire—a gentleman called Vane——" Here Sister Louisa glanced at the visitor's card. "You know perhaps," she went on in some confusion; but Flossy interrupted her. [Pg 259]

"Mr. Vane, the murdered man, was my brother-in-law. I am the wife of General Vane of

Beechfield. I had some notion that this girl Cynthia West was identical with Westwood's daughter, but I could not be sure of the fact. How long was she with you, may I ask?"

Then she heard the whole story. She heard how the child had come to St. Elizabeth's, and been gradually tamed and civilised; of her wonderful voice and talent for music; of the generosity of certain persons unknown, supposed to be the Vanes; of the outburst of passion when "Janey" heard the lay-sister's accusation of her father, and her subsequent disappearance; then—not greatly to Flossy's surprise—of Mr. Lepel's visit, and his search for the girl, which—so far as the Sister knew—seemed to have ended in failure.

"But you have found her after all!" cried the good Sister, when Flossy acknowledged that she was the sister of Hubert Lepel, and presumably interested in his charitable enterprises. "I am so glad! And she is growing quite famous? Dear me, I wonder that Mr. Lepel did not let us know!"

"Possibly he thought that you would be more grieved than delighted by the discovery of her present position," said Flossy, not sorry to aim an arrow at the unknown Cynthia behind her back, and perhaps deprive her of some very useful and affectionate friends. "Miss West, as she calls herself, does not bear a good character." She felt a malicious pleasure in bringing the color into the Sister's delicate cheeks, the moisture into those kindly, mild gray eyes. "She went upon the stage almost at once, and lived—well, I need not tell you how she lived perhaps; you can imagine it no doubt for yourself. I am afraid she was a thoroughly bad girl from the first."

"Oh, no, no—I hope not!" exclaimed Sister Louisa, the tears flowing freely over her pale face. [Pg 260] "Our poor Janie! She was a dear child, generous and kind-hearted, although impetuous and wilful now and then. If you see her, Mrs. Vane, tell her that our arms are always open to her—that, if she will come back to us, we will give her pardon and care, and help her to lead a good and honest life."

"I am afraid she will never return to you—she would probably be ashamed," said Mrs. Vane, rather venomously, as she took her leave. "I am so sorry to hurry away, Sister, but I am afraid that I must catch my train. You are quite sure then that Jane or Janie Wood, who had such a beautiful voice, and ran away from you in July, 187-, was really the daughter of the convict Westwood, and that Mr. Lepel and Mrs. Rumbold placed her with you and sought for her afterwards?"

"Quite sure," said Sister Louisa.

There was a vague trouble at her heart—an uneasiness for which she could not account. Something in Mrs. Vane's manner—something in her tone, her smile, her eyes—was distasteful to the unerring instincts of the pure God-fearing woman, as it had been to the trained observation of Maurice Evandale. Flossy might do her best to be charming—she might disarm criticism by the sweetness of her manner; but, in spite of her efforts, candid and unsullied natures were apt to discern in her a want of frankness—a little taint of something which they hardly liked to name. Sister Louisa grieved sorely over what she had heard of Cynthia; but she was also disturbed by an unconquerable distrust of this fair fashionable woman of the world.

"I think there is scarcely any link wanting in the chain," said Mrs. Vane to herself, when, having just caught her train, she was being whirled back to the metropolis. "Jane Wood was Cynthia Janet Westwood. She had a fine voice, and was about sixteen years old when she left St. Elizabeth's, July, 187-. In July, 187-, the same year, Lalli appeared at Mrs. Wadsley's with a girl of sixteen, who also had a fine voice, who had been at St. Elizabeth's, and who called herself Cynthia West. Mr. Lepel had put Jane Wood at school; Mr. Lepel turns up later on as the lover—protector—what not?—of Cynthia West. There is not the slightest reasonable doubt that Jane Wood and Cynthia West are one and the same person. That prosy old Sister would prove it in a [Pg 261] moment if we brought them face to face. And Jane Wood was Westwood's daughter. Cynthia West is Westwood's daughter. Very easily traced! What will the world say when it knows that the rising young soprano singer is the daughter of a murderer? It won't much care, I suppose. But Hubert will care lest the fact be known. He has been too careful in hiding it for that not to be the case. Let me see—Cynthia West—presumably Westwood's daughter—meets a mysterious stranger in Kensington Gardens and addresses him as her father. The mysterious stranger comes from America, and has white hair and a white beard—quite unlike Mr. Andrew Westwood, be it remarked. Westwood escaped from Portland some years ago, and is rumored to have settled in the backwoods of America. I think there is very good reason for supposing that the mysterious stranger is Westwood himself, returned to England in order to secure his daughter's aid and companionship. And, if so, what a fool the man must be, when once he had got safely away, to run his head into a nest of enemies! He must be mad indeed! And, if mad," said Mrs. Vane, with a curiously cold and cruel smile, "the best thing for him will be incarceration at Portland prison once again."

It was growing dark, and she was beginning to feel a little tired. She put her feet upon the seat and closed her eyes. Before long she had fallen into a placid slumber, which lasted until she reached the London terminus. Then she drove straight to the Grosvenor Hotel, where she found Parker waiting, and a dainty little supper prepared for her.

Flossy did justice to her meal, and then went to bed, where she slept the sleep of the innocent and the righteous, until Parker appeared at her bedside the next morning with a breakfast-tray.

"And there's Miss Meldreth in the sitting-room inquiring for you, ma'am. Is she to come in? I wonder how she knew that you were here?"

"Oh, I saw her accidentally yesterday afternoon," said Mrs. Vane, "and told her to call! I want to know what she is doing in London. Yes—she can come in."

Parker accordingly summoned Miss Meldreth, and then, in obedience to a sign from her mistress, retired rather sulkily. She was not very fond of Mrs. Vane; but she resented any attempt on the [Pg 262] part of a former servant to come between her and her mistress' confidences; and she had an impression that there was something between Mrs. Vane and Sabina which she did not know.

"Well, Sabina, how did the experiment succeed?" said Mrs. Vane easily. In spite of her look of fatigue and her languid attitude amongst the pillows, she spoke as if she had not a care in the world.

"It succeeded all right," answered Sabina, a little shortly.

"What did you find out?"

"They're not real—his hair and beard, I mean. It's a wig. He's got grayish dark-brown hair, and very little of it underneath, and whiskers. He ain't nearly so old as we thought."

"Tell me how you managed it," said Mrs. Vane—"from beginning to end."

"Well, ma'am, he came in about five, as usual, to his tea; and I says to aunt Eliza, 'I'll carry in the tray'; and I says, 'what a lot of milk you've given him! I'll pour a little back.' And says she, 'you'd better not, for he likes his tea half milk, and he'll only ring for more.' 'Well, then,' I says, 'it'll give me a chance of going in a second time—and, you know, I like that.' So I emptied part of the milk away, and then I put half of the stuff that you gave me into his jug, and I took it into Mr. Dare's sitting-room. He looked at me very sharp when I went in, almost as if he suspected me of something; but he didn't say nothing, and neither did I. I set down his tray before him, and he pours out the tea. Almost before I was out of the door, 'Miss Meldreth,' he says, 'a little more milk, if you please.' 'Oh, didn't I bring you enough, sir?' I says. 'If you'll pour that into your cup then, I'll send out for some more, and it'll be here by the time you've done your first cup. The cat knocked a basin of milk over this afternoon,' says I, 'and so there isn't as much as usual in the house.'"

"All that was pure invention, I suppose?" interrogated Mrs. Vane cynically.

"One had to say something, ma'am. He looked a little put out, and hesitated for a minute or two; then he took and emptied the milk-jug straight into his cup, and began to drink his tea; and I went out and filled the jug again. I waited for a few minutes before I came back, and I found him [Pg 263] leaning back in his chair, with a sleepy look coming over him directly. 'Miss Meldreth,' he said, 'I'm sorry to have troubled you, for I really don't think I want any more tea'—and then he yawned fit to take his head off—'and I'm going to lie down on the sofa to get a little rest, for I am so uncommonly drowsy.'"

"That seems a little sudden," said Mrs. Vane thoughtfully. "Are you sure that he did not suspect anything?"

"No, ma'am—I don't think so. Well, he laid down, and I went in and out taking away the things; and, if you'll believe me, in ten minutes he was fast asleep and snoring like—like a grampus!"

"Well, Sabina?"

"I let him stay so for nearly half an hour, so as to be sure that he was thoroughly off, ma'am, and then I went up to him and touched his hair. It was very nicely fitted on; but it was a wig for all that, and one could easily see the dark hair underneath. The beard was more difficult to move—there was some sticky stuff to fasten it on as well as an elastic band behind the ears; but it was plainly a false one too. He's a dark-looking man, almost like a gipsy, I should say, with hair that's nearly black—something like his eyebrows. Do you think he's the man you want, ma'am?"

"I'm sure of it, Sabina. Do you want to earn three hundred pounds besides your twenty?"

"What, ma'am!"

"Three hundred pounds, I remember, was offered for the arrest of Andrew Westwood, escaped prisoner from Portland prison, five years ago. This man is Andrew Westwood, Sabina, who murdered Sydney Vane. You shall have the money to keep as soon as it is paid."

Sabina drew back aghast.

"A murderer," she said—"and him such a nice quiet-looking old gentleman! Why, aunt Eliza was always planning a match between him and me! It's awful!"

Flossy laughed grimly.

"People don't carry their crimes in their face, Sabina," she said. "Now you can go away and wait in the sitting-room until Parker has dressed me. Then you will come with me to Scotland Yard—I believe that is the place to go to. I want that man arrested before nightfall. Here are your ten pounds."

"Oh," said Sabina—"I wish I'd known!" [Pg 264]

"Do you mean that you would not have helped me?"

"I'm not sure, ma'am; I don't like the idea of shutting the poor man up for ever and ever in a gaol."

"Perhaps you don't mind the idea of murder?" said Mrs. Vane sarcastically. "Don't be a fool, Sabina! Think of the three hundred pounds too! You shall have it all, I promise you; and I will content myself with the satisfaction of seeing him once more where he deserves to be. Now call Parker."

Sabina went back to the sitting-room, not daring to disobey. Her reluctance, moreover, soon vanished as the thought of those three hundred pounds took possession of her. She was absorbed in golden dreams when Mrs. Vane rejoined her, and was quite prepared to do or say whatever she was told.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Mrs. Vane left Parker at the hotel with a message for the General, should he appear, that she was going to her dentist's and thence to her brother's lodgings. But she and Sabina Meldreth went straight to Scotland Yard and had an interview with one of the police authorities.

Mrs. Vane's statement was clear and concise. She was complimented on the cleverness that she had displayed; and Sabina was shown a photograph of Andrew Westwood taken while he was at Portland. She could not be quite so certain that it was Mr. Dare as Flossy would have desired her to be; but the evidence was on the whole so far conclusive, that it was determined to arrest Mrs. Gunn's lodger on suspicion. If he could give a satisfactory account of himself, and if he could not be identified, he would of course have to be set free again; but it seemed possible, if not probable, that Reuben Dare was the very man for whom the police had searched so vainly and so long. A cab was summoned, and an inspector of police as well as a detective in plain clothes and a constable politely followed Sabina into it. Mrs. Vane thought it more becoming to her position not to assist at the arrest. She therefore remained behind, unable to resist the temptation of awaiting their return with the prisoner.

She waited for nearly two hours. Then the cab came back again, and out of it emerged two police- [Pg 265]
officers and Sabina; but no detective, and no Reuben Dare. Flossy's heart beat quickly with a mixture of rage and fear. Had she taken all this trouble for nothing, and had Reuben Dare given a satisfactory account of himself after all?

"The bird has flown, ma'am," said the inspector, entering the office where she sat, with a rather crestfallen air. "He must have got some notion of what was in the wind; for he went out this morning soon after Miss Meldreth left the house, and evidently does not intend to come back again. He has left his portmanteau; but he has emptied it of everything that he could carry away, and left two sovereigns on the table in payment of his rent and other expenses for the week."

"He has gone to his daughter!" cried Flossy, starting up. "Why have you not been to her? I gave you her address."

"No use, ma'am," said the inspector, shaking his head. "We've been round there already, and left Mullins to watch the house. But I expect we are too late. We ought to have known last night. Amateurs in the detective line are sometimes very clever; but they are not always sharp enough for our work. The young woman has also disappeared."

Mrs. Vane's unusual absence from her home had not been without its results. Little Dick held high carnival all by himself in the drawing-room and the conservatory; and Enid, feeling herself equally freed from the restraint usually put upon her, wandered out into the garden, and found a cool and shady spot where she could establish herself at ease in a comfortable basket-chair. She did not feel disposed for exertion; all that she wished to do was to lie still and to keep silence. The old unpleasant feeling of illness had been growing upon her more and more during the last few days. She was seldom free from nausea, and suffered a great deal from faintness and palpitation of the heart. As she lay back in her cushioned chair, her face looked very small and white, the blue-veined eyelids singularly heavy. She was sorry to hear the footsteps of a passer-by resounding on a pathway not far from the spot which she had chosen; but she hoped that the [Pg 266]
gardener or caller, or whoever it might chance to be, would go by without noticing her white dress between the branches of the tree. But she was doomed to be disappointed. The footsteps slackened, then turned aside. She was conscious that some one's hand parted the branches—that some one's eyes were regarding her; but she was too languid to look up. Let the stranger think that she was asleep; then surely he would go upon his way and leave her in peace.

"Miss Vane," said a deep manly voice that she did not expect to hear, "I beg your pardon—do I disturb you?"

Enid opened her heavy eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Evandale—not at all, thank you!"

"I was afraid that you were asleep," said the Rector, instantly coming to her side; "and in that case I should have taken the still greater liberty of awaking you, for there is a sharp east wind in spite of the hot sunshine, and to sleep in the shade, as I feared that you were doing, would be dangerous."

"Thank you," said Enid gently.

She sat erect for a minute or two, then gradually sank back amongst her cushions, as if not equal to the task of maintaining herself upright. The Rector stood beside her, a look of trouble in his kind frank eyes.

"Shall I give you my arm back to the house?" he said, after a pause.

"Oh, no, thank you—I am not ill, Mr. Evandale!"

"But you are not well—at least, not very strong?"

"Well—no. No—I suppose that I am not very strong."

She turned away her head; but, notwithstanding the movement, he saw that a great tear was gathering underneath the veined eyelid, ready to drop as soon as ever it had a chance.

"Miss Vane," said the rector suddenly, "are you in any trouble? Excuse me for asking; but your face tells its own story. You were happier a year ago than you are now."

"Oh, yes," the girl sighed—"much happier!" and then the great tear fell.

"Can I do nothing to help you? My mission is to those who are in any trouble; and, apart from that, I thought once that you looked upon me as a friend." There was a touch of human emotion in the last words which seemed to bring him closer to Enid than the earlier sentence could have done. "But I know you have no need of me," the Rector added sorrowfully; "you have so many friends." [Pg 267]

"I have not a friend in the world!" the girl broke out; and then she half hid her face with her transparently thin fingers, and tried to conceal the fact that she was weeping.

"Not a friend, Miss Vane?" Mr. Evandale's tone betrayed complete bewilderment.

"Whom would you call my friend?" said Enid, almost passionately. "Not a man like my poor uncle, duped, blinded, deceived by any one who chooses to cajole him? Not a woman like his wife, who hates me, and wants me out of the way lest I should claim a share of the estate? Oh, I know what I am saying—I know too well! I can trust neither of them—for he is weak and under her control, and she has never been a friend to me or mine. I do not know what to do or where to go for counsel."

"I heard a rumor that you were engaged to marry Mr. Hubert Lepel," said the Rector gravely. "If that be true, he surely should be counted amongst your friends."

"A man," said Enid, with bitterness of which he would not have thought her capable, "who cares for me less than the last new play or the latest *débutante* at Her Majesty's! Should I call him a friend?"

"It is not true then that you are engaged to him?"

"I thought that I was," said Enid, still very bitterly. "He asked me to marry him; I thought that he loved me, and I—I consented. But my uncle has now withdrawn the half consent he gave. I am to be asked again, they tell me, when I am twenty. I am their chattel—a piece of goods to be given away and taken back. And then you ask me if I am happy, or if I call the man who treats me so lightly a friend!"

"I see—I see. But matters may yet turn out better than you think. Mr. Lepel is probably only kept back by the General's uncertainty of action. I can quite conceive that it would put a man into a very awkward position."

"I do not think that Hubert cares much," said Enid, with a little sarcasm in her tone.

"He must care!" said Evandale impetuously.

"Why?" the girl asked, suddenly turning her innocent eyes upon him in some surprise. "Why should he care?"

The Rector's face glowed.

"Because he—he must care." The answer was ridiculously inadequate, he knew, but he had nothing else to say. "How can he help caring when he sees that you care?—unless he has no more feeling than a log or a block of stone." He smote his hand angrily against the trunk of a tree beside him as he spoke. [Pg 268]

Still Enid looked at him with the same expression of amazement. But little by little his emotion seemed to affect her too—the blush to pass from his face to her pale cheeks.

"But—but," she stammered, at length, "you are wrong—in that way—in the way you think. I do not care."

"You do not care? For him do you not care?"

"As a cousin," said Enid faintly—"yes."

"Not as a lover?" The Rector spoke so low she could hardly hear a word.

"No."

"Not as a husband?"

"No."

"Then why did you consent to marry him?"

One question had followed another so naturally that the strangeness of each had not been felt. But Enid's cheeks were crimson now.

"Oh, I don't know—don't ask me! I felt miserable, and I thought that he would be a help to me—and he isn't. I can't talk to him—I can't trust him—I can't ask him what to do! And we are both bound, and yet we are not bound; and it is as wretched for him as it is for me—and I don't know what to do."

"Could you trust me better than you have trusted him?" said the Rector hoarsely.

He knew that he was not acting quite in accordance with what men usually termed the laws of honor; but it seemed to him that the time had come for contempt of a merely conventional law. Was Perseus, arriving ere the sacrifice of Andromeda was completed, to hesitate in rescuing her because the sea-monster had prior rights, forsooth? Was he—Maurice Evandale—to stand aside while this gentle delicate creature—the only woman that he had ever loved—was badgered into an early grave by cold-hearted kinsmen who wanted to sacrifice her to some family whim? He would do what he could to save her! There was something imperious in his heart which would not let him hold his tongue.

"Trust you? Oh, yes—I could trust you with anything!" said Enid, half unconscious of the full meaning of her words. [Pg 269]

"Do you understand me?" said Mr. Evandale. He dropped upon one knee beside her chair, so as to bring his face to a level with hers, and gently took both her hands between his own as he spoke. "I want you to trust me with your life—with yourself! Make no mistake this time, Enid. Could you not only trust me, but care for me? For, if you can, I will do my best to make you happy."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Enid. She looked at him as if frightened, then withdrew her hands from his clasp and put them before her face. "It is so sudden—I never thought——"

"You never thought that I loved you? No; I have kept silence because I thought that you loved another. But, if that is not true, and if you are only trying to uphold a family arrangement which is painful perhaps to both of you, why, then, there is nothing to keep me silent! I step in and offer you a way out of the difficulty. If you can love me, I am ready to give you my whole life, Enid. I have never in my life loved a woman as I love you. And I think that you could care for me a little; I seem to read it in your eyes—your poor tired eyes! Rest on me, my darling—trust to me—and we will fight through your difficulties together."

He had drawn her gently towards him as he spoke. She did not resist; her head rested on his shoulder, her slender fingers stole again into his hand; she drew a sigh of perfect well-being and content. This man, at any rate, she could trust with all her heart.

"Do you love me a little, Enid?"

"I think so."

"You are not yet sure?"

"I am not sure of anything; I have been so tossed about—so perplexed—so troubled. I feel as if I could be at rest with you—is that enough?"

"For the present. We will wait; and, if you feel more for me, or if you feel less—whatever happens—you must let me know, and I will be content."

"You are very good! But, oh"—with a sudden shrinking movement—"I—I shall have broken my word!"

"Yes; I am sorry that you have to do it. But better break your word than marry a man you do not love." [Pg 270]

"And who does not love me," said Enid, in an exceedingly low tone.

"Are you really sure of that, Enid?"

"Indeed—indeed I think so! He is so cold and indifferent, and we never agree when we talk together—he seems impatient of my ideas. Our tastes are quite different; I am sure that I should not be happy with him, nor he with me."

"You will be brave then, my love, and tell him so?"

"Yes." But again she shrank from him. "Oh, what shall I do if she—if Flossy tells me that I must?"

Mr. Evandale frowned.

"Are you so much afraid of Mrs. Vane?"

"Yes," she said timorously—"I am. She—she frightens me! Oh, don't be angry! I know I am very weak; but indeed I cannot help it!"—and she burst into despairing tears.

"My darling, my poor little Enid, I am not angry at all! We will brave her together, you and I. You shall not be afraid of her any longer; you will know that I am always near you to protect you—to strengthen you. And you will trust to me?"

She tried to answer "Yes;" but her strength suddenly seemed to die away from her. She slipped from his arm and lay back upon the cushions; a bluish tinge overspread her lips; her face turned deathly white; she seemed upon the verge of a swoon.

Evandale, alarmed as he was, did not lose his presence of mind. Fortunately he had in his pocket a flask of brandy which he had been about to carry to a sick parishioner. In a moment he had it uncorked and was compelling her to swallow a mouthful or two; then he fanned her with the great black fan which had lain upon her lap; and finally he remembered that he had seen a great watering-can full of water standing in the garden path not far away, and found that it had not been removed. The cold water with which he moistened her lips and brow brought her to herself; in a few minutes she was able to look up at him and smile, and presently declared herself quite well. But Evandale was very grave.

"Are you often faint, Enid?" he asked.

"Rather often; but this"—with a little tinge of color in her pale cheeks—"this is just a common kind of faintness—it is not like the other." [Pg 271]

"I know; but I do not like you to turn faint in this way. May I ask you a few questions about yourself?"

"Oh, yes—I know that you are quite a doctor!" said Enid, smiling at him with perfect confidence.

So the Rector put his questions—and very strange questions some of them were, thought Enid, though he was wonderfully correct in guessing what she felt. Yes, she was nearly always faint and sick; she had a strange burning sensation sometimes in her chest; she had violent palpitations, and odd feelings of a terrible fright and depression. But the doctor had assured her that she had not the faintest trace of organic disease of the heart; and that these functional disturbances would speedily pass away. Mr. Ingledew had sounded her and told her that she need not be alarmed—and of course he was a very clever man.

"Enid," said the Rector at last, after a long pause, and rather as if he was trying to make a sort of joke which, after all, was not amusing, "I am going to ask you what you will think a very foolish question. Have you an enemy in the house—here, at Beechfield Hall?"

Enid's eyes dilated with a look of terror.

"Why—why do you ask?"

"It is a ridiculous question, is it not? But I thought that perhaps somebody had been playing on your nerves, and wanting to frighten you about yourself. Is there anybody who might possibly do so?"

Her lips parted twice before any articulate word issued from them. At last he caught the answer —

"Only Flossy."

He was silent for a moment.

"Do you take any medicine?" he asked, at length.

"Yes; Mr. Ingledew sent me some."

"What is it like?"

"I don't know; it is not disagreeable. Flossy looked at it, and said that it was a calming mixture."

"I should like to see the prescription; perhaps it does not quite suit you. And who gives it to you?"

"I take it myself; it is kept in my bed-room."

"And what else do you drink and eat?" said the Rector, smiling. "You see, I am quite a learned physician. I want to know all about your habits."

"Oh, I eat and drink just what other people do." [Pg 272]

"Are you thirsty at night?"

"Yes—very. How did you guess that? I have orange water or lemonade put beside me every night, so that I may drink it if I wake up."

And then Evandale, who was watching her intently, saw that her face changed as if an unpleasant thought had suddenly recurred to her.

"What is it, dear?"

"It was only a dream I have had several times—it troubles me whenever I think of it; but I know that it is only a dream."

"Won't you tell me what it was? I should like to hear! Lay your head back on my shoulder again and tell me about it."

Enid sighed again, but it was with bliss.

"Perhaps I shall not dream it if I tell it all to you," she murmured. "It seems to me sometimes as if—in the middle of the night—I wake up and see some one in the room—a white figure standing by my bed; and she is always pouring something into my glass; or sometimes she offers it to me and makes me drink; and she looks at me as if she hated me; and I—I am afraid."

"But who is it, my darling?"

"I suppose it is nobody, because nobody else sees it but me. I made Parker sleep with me two or three times; but she said that she saw nothing, and that she was certain that nobody had come into the room. I suppose it was a—a ghost!"

"Nonsense, dearest!"

"Then it was an optical illusion, and I am going out of my mind," said Enid despairingly.

"Was the figure like that of anyone you know?"

"Yes—Flossy."

"Mrs. Vane? And you think that she does not like you?"

"I know that she hates me."

"My darling, it is simply a nightmare—nothing more." But he felt her trembling in his arms.

"It is more than a nightmare, I am sure. You know that people used to say that I might go out of my mind if those terrible seizures attacked me? I have not had so many of them lately; but I feel weaker than ever I did—I feel as if I were going to die. Perhaps it would be better if I were to die, [Pg 273] and then I should not be a trouble and a care to anybody. And it would be better to die than to go mad, would it not?"

"Enid," said the Rector very gravely, "I believe that your malady is entirely one of the nerves, and that it can be controlled. You must try to believe, my darling, that you could conquer it if you tried. When you feel the approach of one of these seizures, as you call them, resolve that you will not give way. By a determined effort I think that it is possible for you to ward them off. Will you try, for my sake?"

"I will try," said Enid wearily; "but I am afraid that trying will be useless."

"And another thing—I do not believe that Mr. Ingledew is giving you the right kind of medicine. I want you quietly to stop taking it for a week, and to stop drinking lemonade or orange-water at night. In a week's time let us see how you feel. If you are no better, I will talk to Ingledew myself. Will you promise me that? Say, 'Yes, Maurice.'"

"Yes, Maurice—I promise you."

"And one more thing, my own dearest. When that nightmare attacks you again, try to conquer your fear of it. Do not lie still; rise up and see what it really is. You may find that your dreamy state has misled you, and that what you took for a threatening figure is merely that of a servant, who has had orders to come and see whether you were sleeping or not. Nightmares often resolve themselves into very harmless things. And of the supernatural I do not think that you need be alarmed; God is always near you—He will not suffer you to be frightened by phantoms of the night. Remember when you wake that I shall be thinking of you—praying for you. I am often up very late, and I do not sleep heavily. I shall probably be awake thinking of you, or I may be praying for you, darling, in my very dreams. Will you think of that and try to be brave?"

"I feel braver now," said the girl simply. "Yes, Maurice, I will do all you ask. I do not think that I shall feel afraid again."

He left her soon afterwards, and returned on the following morning, to hear, not with surprise, that she had slept better, that she had had no nightmare, and that she suffered less from nausea [Pg 274] and faintness than usual. Mrs. Vane was away for a second night, and he had time to see Enid again before her return. She had not touched her medicine-bottles, and there was again a slight but marked improvement in her condition. Mr. Evandale induced her to fetch one of the bottles of Mr. Ingledew's mixture, which he put into his pocket and conveyed it to his own home. Here he smelt, tasted, and to some extent analysed it. The result was such as to plunge him for a short time into deep and troubled thought.

"I expected it," he said at last, with an impatient sigh. "The symptoms were those of digitalis-poisoning. There is not enough in this concoction to do her much harm however. It is given to her

in some other form—in that lemonade at night perhaps. Well, I shall soon see whether my suspicions are correct when Mrs. Vane comes home."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Cynthia, unconscious of the plots of which she was at present the innocent centre, was meanwhile contending with a sensation of profound discouragement, mental and physical. She had a severe headache, and was deeply depressed in spirits. She had lain awake almost entirely for two nights trying to reconcile her ideal of Hubert with the few words that had escaped him—words which surely pointed to a darker knowledge, a deadlier guilt than any which her love could of itself have attributed to him. Had he known then all the time that her father was not a murderer? Was her father's theory correct? Had he been screening his sister at the poor working-man's expense? Cynthia's blood ran cold at the thought, for, in that case, what side was she to take? She could not abandon her father—she might abandon Hubert; but, strange mystery of a woman's heart, she could not love him less. What she could do she knew not. For Enid's sake indeed she had set him free; but in the hour of her anguish she questioned her right to do so; for surely, if he knew more of the manner of Sydney Vane's death than the world knew, there was even a greater barrier between him and Enid than between him and Cynthia herself. Enid would [Pg 275] give him up—Cynthia felt sure of that; and, if she gave him up too, he would be indeed alone. The world might say that he deserved his loneliness; but she could not take the world's view. To her the man that she loved was sacred; his faults were to be screened, his crimes forgiven. Whatever he did, she could never cease to love him. So she said to herself; but, after all, her hour of trial had not come; she did not know as yet all that Hubert Lepel had done.

She had seen Hubert leave her with a sensation of the deepest dismay. She felt that a crisis had come and gone, and that in some way she had failed to turn it to the best account. In spite of her expressed resolve to see Hubert no more, she was disappointed that he did not return to her. She expected to see him on the following day—to remark his face at a concert where she was to sing on the Wednesday evening. He had left her on a Tuesday; she was sure that she would get a letter from him on Thursday. But Thursday was almost over, and she had neither seen nor heard from him. Had he resolved to give her up? Was he ill? Why had she not heard a word from him since Tuesday? She racked her brain to discover a cause for his silence other than her own wild appeal to him; for she did not believe that that alone would suffice to keep him away. But it was all of no avail.

Another source of anxiety for her lay in the fact that she had also not heard from her father since Tuesday morning. She did not know whether he had left Mrs. Gunn's house or not, and did not like to risk the sending of a letter. That he trusted far too much to his disguise Cynthia was well aware. His rashness made her sometimes quiver all over with positive fright when she thought of it. He was running a terrible risk—and for what cause? At first, simply because he wanted to see his daughter; now because he fancied that he had found a clue to the murderer of Sydney Vane—a slight, faint, elusive clue, but one which seemed to him worth following up. And Cynthia, who at first had hesitated to leave England, would now have been glad to start with him at once, if only she could get him away. She began to fear that he would stay at any risk.

"You are losing your beauty, child," Madame della Scala had discontentedly said to her that [Pg 276] morning at breakfast-time; "you have grown ten years older in the last week. And it is the height of the season, and you have dozens of engagements! To-night, now, you sing at Lady Beauclerc's—do you not?"

"Yes, Madame; but I shall be all right by that time. I have a headache this morning."

"You are too white, child, and your eyes are heavy. It does not suit your style to be colorless. You had better get my maid to attend to you, before you go out to-night. She is incomparable at complexions."

"Thank you—I shall not need rouge when I begin to sing," said Cynthia, laughing rather joylessly; "the color will come of itself."

"I know one who always used to bring it," said Madame, casting a sharp glance at the girl's pale face. "He had it in his pocket, I suppose, or at the tips of his fingers—and I never saw it fail with you. Where is the magician gone, Cynthia *mia*? Where is Mr. Lepel—*ce bel homme* who brought the rouge in his pocket? Why, the very mention of his name does wonders! The beautiful red color is back again now!"

"I do not know where Mr. Lepel is," said Cynthia, wishing heartily that her cheeks would not betray her.

"You have not quarrelled?"

"I do not know, Madame."

"Ah, then, you have! But you are a very silly child, and ought to know better after all that you have gone through. Quarrelling with Mr. Lepel means quarrelling with your bread-and-butter, as you English people term it. Why not keep on good terms with him until your training, at any rate, is complete?"

Cynthia raised her dark eyes, with a new light in them.

"I am to be friendly with him as long as I need his help? Is that it, Madame? I do not quite agree with you; and I think the time has come when I must be independent now."

"Independent! What can you do?" said Madame, throwing up her hands. "A baby like you—with that face and that voice! You want very careful guarding, my dear, or you will spoil your career. You must not think of independence for the next ten years."

Cynthia meditated a little. She did not want to tell Madame della Scala, who was a confirmed chatterer, that she thought of going to America; and yet, knowing that her departure would probably be sudden and secret, she did not want to omit the opportunity of saying a few necessary words. [Pg 277]

"If I took any steps of which you did not approve, dear Madame, I hope that you would forgive me and believe that I was truly grateful to you for all your kindness to me."

"What does that mean?" said Madame shrewdly. "Are you going to be married, *cara mia*? Is an elopement in store for us? *Dio mio*, there will be a fine fuss about it in the newspapers if you do anything extraordinary! You are becoming the fashion, my dear, as they say in England; and, when you are the fashion, your success is assured."

"I am not going to do anything extraordinary," said Cynthia, forcing a smile, "and I do not mean to elope with anybody, dear Madame; I only wanted to thank you for all that you have done for me. And now I must practise for the evening. Perhaps music will do my headache good."

But, even if music benefited her head, it did not raise her spirits. Each time that the postman's knock vibrated through the house, her heart beat so violently that she was obliged to pause in her singing until she had ascertained that no letter had come for her. No letter—no message from either Hubert or her father—what did this silence mean?

The day wore on drearily. She would not go out, much to Madame's vexation; she practised, she tried to read, she looked at her dresses—she tried all the usual feminine arts for passing time, going so far even as to take up some needlework, which she generally detested; but, in spite of all, the day was cruelly long and blank. She dined early in the afternoon, as she was going to sing that evening; and it was about seven o'clock that she resolved to go and dress for the party to which she was bound, saying to herself that all hope was over for that day—that she was not likely to hear from Hubert Lepel that night.

Just as she was going up-stairs a knock came to the door. She lingered on the landing, wondering whether any visitor had come for her; and it was with a great leap of the heart that she heard her own name mentioned, and saw the maid running up the stairs to overtake her before she reached her room. [Pg 278]

"It's Jenkins—Mr. Lepel's man, miss," said Mary breathlessly; "and he wants to know if he can speak to you for a moment."

Cynthia was half-way down-stairs before the sentence was out of the girl's mouth. Jenkins was standing in the hall. He was an amiable-looking fellow, and, although he had spoken flippantly enough to Sabina Meldreth of his master's friendship for Miss West, he had a genuine admiration for her. Cynthia had won his heart by kindly words and looks; she had found out that he had a wife and some young children, and had made them presents, and visited the new baby in her own inimitably frank, gracious, friendly way; and Jenkins was secretly of opinion that his master could not do better than marry Miss Cynthia West, although she was but a singer after all. He spoke to her with an air of great deference.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am; but I thought that I'd better come and tell you about Mr. Lepel."

"Have you a message—a note?" cried Cynthia eagerly.

"No, ma'am. Mr. Lepel's not able to write, nor to send messages. Mr. Lepel's ill in bed, ma'am, and the doctor's afraid that it is brain-fever."

Cynthia gasped a little.

"I thought he—he must be ill," she said, rather to herself than to Jenkins, who however heard, and was struck with sympathetic emotion immediately.

"I thought you'd think so, ma'am; and therefore I made so bold as to look round," he said respectfully. "He's not been himself, so to speak, for the last few days; and when his sister—Mrs. Vane—was up from Beechfield to see him, he seemed took worse; and Mrs. Vane she sent me for a doctor."

"Is Mrs. Vane with him now, then?" Cynthia asked quickly.

"No, ma'am. She did not stop long; but I expect that she'll be round either to-night or to-morrow morning."

"And is Mr. Lepel to have nobody to nurse him?" asked Cynthia indignantly.

"There's my wife, ma'am, who is used to nursing; and, if my master is worse, a trained nurse can be sent for. I thought you would like to know, ma'am. I've been talking to the landlady, and she's [Pg 279]

quite agreeable for my wife to come on for a bit and help to wait on Mr. Lepel. She's there now."

"I am very much obliged to you for coming, Jenkins."

"I thought, ma'am," continued Jenkins, "that, if ever you was passing that way, you might like to look in maybe to ask after Mr. Lepel, you know. If you was good enough always to ask for my wife, you see, ma'am, she could tell you how my master was, or any news about him."

Cynthia grasped the situation at once, and felt her face flush as she listened to the man's awkward kindly words. Evidently Jenkins knew that she was unacquainted with Mr. Lepel's family, and was trying to save her from the unpleasantness of meeting any of them unexpectedly. The thought gave her a moment's bitter humiliation; then she saw the kindliness of the motive and felt a throb of gratitude.

"It is very good of you to tell me that, Jenkins," she said, frankly putting out her hand to him, "and I am very much obliged to you. I shall come to-morrow; it is impossible for me to come to-night."

Jenkins was not accustomed to have his hand shaken by those whom he served, and Cynthia's action embarrassed him considerably. He was glad when she went on to ask a question.

"Do you think that Mr. Lepel is very—very ill?" There was a pathetic tremor in her voice.

"Well, ma'am, he don't know nothing; he lies there and talks to himself—that's all."

"He is unconscious! Oh!" cried Cynthia, as if the words had given her a stab of pain. "Does he talk about any one—anything?" she asked wistfully.

"We can't tell much of what he says, ma'am. But I think he was mainly anxious to see you. He kep' on sending messages to you; and that's partly why I come round this evening."

Cynthia wrung her hands.

"And I can't go—at least to-night; and I must—I must!"

"Don't you take on, ma'am," said Jenkins, evidently much moved by her distress. "I wouldn't trouble about to-night if I was you. Mrs. Vane may be there again, or the General, and a host o' folks. It would only bother them, and do my master no good, if you went to-night. To-morrow morning'll be the time. And now I must be going; for I could only get away while my wife was there, and she wanted to get back to the children by nine o'clock." [Pg 280]

So Jenkins took his leave, and Cynthia went up to her room to dress for her party.

What a mockery it seemed to her to don her pretty frock, her ornaments, her flowers—to see herself a radiant vision of youth and loveliness in her mirror—while all the time her heart was bleeding for her lover's suffering, and he lay tossing upon a bed of sickness, calling vainly upon her name! If she could have done as she liked, she would have relinquished all her engagements and sought his bed-side at once. But—fortunately perhaps—she was bound, for many reasons, to sing at Lady Beauclerc's party. Madame della Scala and others would be injured in reputation, if not in pocket, should she fail to appear. And, although she would not mind sacrificing her own interests, she could not sacrifice those of her friends even for the sake of her love.

She was said never to have looked so brilliant or sung so magnificently before. There was a new strange touch of pathos in her eyes and voice—something that stirred the hearts of those who heard. The new vibration in her voice was put down to genius by her audience, and not by any means to emotion.

"That girl will equal Patti if she goes on like this," said one musical amateur to another that evening.

"But she won't go on like this," his friend replied. "She'll marry, or break down, or something; she won't last; she won't be tied down to a professional life—that's my prophecy. She'll bolt!"

The amateur laughed him to scorn. But he had reason to alter his tone when some years later his friend reminded him of his prediction, and coupled it with the information that Cynthia West's last appearance as a singer had been at Lady Beauclerc's party. She never sang in public again.

But she had no idea, during the evening in question, that it was absolutely her last appearance. Her mind had never been so much set on a professional career as it was just then. She meant to go to America with her father certainly, but to take engagements as a vocalist in the States. That she was at all likely to cease work so suddenly and so soon never once occurred to her. [Pg 281]

She was glad when the evening was over—glad to get back to her own quiet room, and to lay certain plans for the morrow. She would go to Hubert in the morning—not to stay of course, but to see whether he was well nursed and tended; and she would take with her the ornaments that he had presented to her, and which she had meant to give back. She would get Mrs. Jenkins to put them away for her in some safe drawer or box; and, when he was better, he would find them and understand. She would accept nothing more from his hands. Yet, with all her pride and her sense of injured dignity, she wept half the night at the thought that he was suffering and that she could do nothing to alleviate his pain.

She set off the next morning, between nine and ten o'clock, with a little black bag in her hand. It was larger than she needed it to be for mere conveyance of the jewelry which she wanted to

restore; but she meant to fill it with fruit—black tempting grapes and red-cheeked hot-house peaches—for the invalid before she reached the house. She left word with Mary that she did not know when she would return, and that Madame was not to wait luncheon or dinner on her account. This message, and the fact of her carrying away a bag, led some persons to believe that she was acting a part in a long-premeditated scheme when she left Madame della Scala's house that morning. But no scheme was present in any shape or form to Cynthia's mind.

She did not at once see a hansom, and therefore she walked for a few yards along the broad pavement of the Bayswater Road, where at that hour not many passers-by were to be encountered. And here, to her great surprise, she met her father—but a father so changed, so utterly transformed in appearance, that she would not have known him but for his voice. He wore an overcoat that she had never seen before, and a tall hat; he had got rid of the white hair and beard, and had even shaved off his whiskers; he remained a lean, brown-faced, resolute-looking man, more refined, but decidedly more commonplace, than he had been before. This man would pass easily in a crowd; people used to stop and gaze after Reuben Dare. [Pg 282]

"Oh, I am so thankful—so glad!" cried Cynthia, when the meaning of the change burst upon her. "Nobody would recognise you now, father; your own face is a greater disguise than any amount of snowy hair. What made you alter yourself in this way?"

"Cynthia," said her father, drawing her into a quiet little side-street, and speaking in low earnest tones, "I have been a great fool! I wish I had taken your advice earlier. That woman Meldreth suspects me. For aught I know, I am already watched and followed. There is not a moment to lose. If I mean to escape, I'd better get out of the country as fast as I can—or find some snug corner where I can lie close until they have left off looking for me. There is a cab—a four-wheeler. Let us get into that, and we can talk as we go. I don't see any one who appears to be dogging me at present. Where were you going?"

"I will go wherever you go, father," said Cynthia.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Westwood was silent until he found himself with his daughter inside the cab.

"Where did you tell him to go?" he then asked of her.

"To St. Pancras Station. I thought that we could more easily evade watchers at a big railway-station than anywhere else."

"They will watch the stations," said the man. "I may have got the start, and I may not. The stations are hardly safe."

"Let the man drive on for a few minutes while you tell me the reason why you think you are watched," said Cynthia, suspecting panic; "he cannot be going far out of the way, and, if we change our minds we can tell him so presently."

"Well," said Westwood, evidently recovering nerve and self-possession under the influence of his daughter's calmer manner and speaking in an easier tone, "it's that woman Meldreth—she is a spy. Who do you think came to her house yesterday but Mrs. Vane? The very woman who has [Pg 283] most reason to dread me and to wish to get me shut up in prison, if my idea of her is true! I think she wanted to see me with her own eyes. She looked at me as if she would read me through and through."

"Where did you meet her, father?"

"In the street. I was asked to show her Mrs. Gunn's house. It was pure accident of course, but it gave us an opportunity of looking at each other."

"Did you go back to the house after that?"

"Yes, I did, my girl, because I had left my portmanteau there with papers and money, without which I should soon be in 'Queer Street.' Yes, I went back, and found Mrs. Vane gone. But the Meldreth woman had a queer look about her, and I suspected what she was about, though I don't know that I could have balked her but for my peculiar constitution. Sleeping-stuff don't have no effect on me, my dear—it never had. They tried it in the prison when I was there at first, and couldn't sleep for thinking of the woods and the open fields and my own little girl—and it nearly drove me mad. Sabina Meldreth gave me some sleeping-stuff in my tea last night."

"What for, father?"

"That's what I wanted to know. When I felt the old pricks and twitches beginning, I pretended to be very sleepy, and I lay down on the sofa and went off, as she thought, into a deep slumber. Presently she came in, and—what do you think, Cynthy?—she began to examine my hair and beard! Of course she soon saw that it would come off; and then she laughed a little to herself. 'Twenty pounds for this job,' she said—'and more perhaps afterwards. I wonder what Mrs. Vane's up to now? I'll be off to her first thing to-morrow morning. It's somebody she's got a spite against, I'll be bound!' And then she went away and left me alone, having done her work."

"So then you came away?"

"Not immediate, my girl. I was off at five o'clock this morning. I got shaved at a little place in Gray's Inn Road—after disposing of my wig and beard elsewhere, you know; and I bought this rig-out at two different places in Holborn. Then I breakfasted at a coffee-stall and came on here. They'll only just have found out that I've gone by now—if indeed so soon—unless they have found it out accidental-like."

"The woman—Meldreth is her name?—would not know what to do without consulting Mrs. Vane first, would she?" [Pg 284]

"No. But then we don't know where Mrs. Vane is—she may have been in the house all the time for aught we know."

"I think not," said Cynthia decisively. "She would have come herself to look at you when Miss Meldreth was examining your hair if she had been in the house."

"Well, perhaps she would. You've got a head on your shoulders, Cynthia—that you have! Miss Meldreth would have to get to Mrs. Vane and tell her this morning, as she said; then Mrs. Vane would let the police know. That gives us till about eleven or twelve o'clock."

"Two hours' start. Is not that sufficient?"

Westwood shook his head.

"The first thing they will do is to telegraph to all the ports."

"But you look so different now, father! And I can make myself look quite different too."

"You! Why, you don't suppose I am going to let you come with me?"

"Oh, yes, father dear, I cannot leave you now!"

"It would be madness, Cynthia. You are well known, and you would be too easily recognised. Everybody turns to look at a handsome girl like you."

"If you can disguise yourself, so can I."

"We have not time for that. Besides, why do you want to leave England so soon and so suddenly?"

"Oh, I don't—I don't!" said Cynthia, suddenly trembling and clinging to him. "Only I can't bear the idea of your being without me now when you are in danger."

"I can send for you, my lass, when I am safe. You will come then?"

"Yes, father."

"You'll come straight, without waiting for any good-byes or to tell any one where you are going?"

"Yes, father—unless——"

"Well? Unless what?"

"Father, Mr. Lepel is very ill. They say that he has brain-fever. If he were dying, you would let me wait to say good-bye to him?"

She had put her hand through his arm, and was leaning against his shoulder. Her father looked at her sideways, with a rough pity mingled with admiration.

"Were you going to him now, Cynthia?" [Pg 285]

"Yes, father."

"I've interrupted you. It's hard on you to have a father like me although he is an innocent man."

"I honor my father and I love him," was Cynthia's swift response. "My greatest grief is that he cannot be near me always."

There was a silence; the cab had quitted the smoother roads and entered on a course of rattling stones. It was difficult to speak so as to be heard; but Westwood raised his voice.

"Cynthia!"

"Yes, father."

"It seems to me that you need watching over as much as ever you did when you was a little baby-girl. I don't see why you should be abandoned in your need any more than you're willing to abandon me. If I can be any sort of help to you, I won't try to leave London at all. I can hide away somewhere no doubt as other folks have done. There are places at the East-end where no one would notice me. Shall I stay, Cynthia?"

"Dear father! No, you will be no help to me—no comfort—if you are in danger!"

He put his arm round her and pressed her close to him; but he did not speak again until they reached the station. The streets were noisy, and conversation was well-nigh impossible. When they got out, Cynthia paid the cabman and dismissed him. Her father walked forward, glancing

round him suspiciously as he went. It was a quarter to eleven o'clock. Cynthia joined him in a dark corner of the great entrance-hall.

"I will take your ticket," she said, "where will you go?"

Westwood hesitated for a moment.

"It's not safe, Cynthia. I will not go at all. I should only be arrested at the other end; I am sure of it. I'll tell you what we will do. You may go and take a ticket for Liverpool and bring it to me—in full view of that policeman there, who is eyeing us so suspiciously. Then you must say 'good-bye' and walk straight out of the station. I will mingle with the crowd on the platform; but I will not go by train—I'll slip eastward and lose myself in Whitechapel. I've made up my mind—I don't start for Liverpool to-day."

"Perhaps you are right," said Cynthia, in a faltering voice. "But how shall I know where you are?" [Pg 286]

"Better for you not to know, my dear. I shall put them off the scent in this way, and you will have no idea of what has become of me. Now get my ticket and say good-bye—as affectionate and as public as you like. It will all tell in the long run; that bobby has his eye on us."

Cynthia did as she was desired. Her father kissed her pale, agitated face several times, and made his adieux rather unnecessarily conspicuous. Then Cynthia left the station, and her father made his way to the platform, where he mingled with the crowd, and finally got away by another door, and turned his face towards the illimitable east of London.

Cynthia did not take a cab again. It was a relief to her to walk, and she was in a neighborhood that she knew very well. She turned into Euston Square, then down Woburn Place, and through Tavistock Square to Russell Square. She could not stay away from Hubert any longer.

She knew the house—it was the place to which she had come one autumn day when Mr. Lepel wanted to hear her sing. She had never been there since. The square looked strangely different to her; the trees in the garden, in spite of their green livery, gave no beauty to the scene. It was as cheerless and as dark as it had been on the cold autumnal morning when she had gone to learn her fate from the critic's lips; and yet the sun was shining now, and the sky overhead was blue. But Cynthia's heart was sadder than it had been in the days of her friendlessness and poverty.

She rang the bell and asked for Mrs. Jenkins, who appeared almost at once and led the girl into Hubert's deserted sitting-room.

"Oh, miss, I'm so glad you have come!" she said. "For we can't get Mr. Lepel to be quiet at all, and we were just on the point of sending off for you, because he calls for you constant, and the doctor, he says, 'could you get the lady that he talks about to come and sit beside him for a little time? That might calm him,' he says; 'and if we calm him, we may save his life.'"

"Oh, is he so ill as that?" cried Cynthia.

"He couldn't be much worse, miss, the doctor says. Can you stay, miss, now you're here? Just for an hour or two at any rate!" [Pg 287]

"I can stay as long as I can be of any use," said the girl desperately. "Nobody wants me—nobody will ask for me; it is better for me to be here."

The words fell unheeded on Mrs. Jenkins' ears. All that she cared about was the welfare of her husband's employer. Both Jenkins and his wife adored Mr. Lepel, and the thought that he might die in his illness had been agony to them—and not on their own account alone. They genuinely believed in Miss West's power of soothing and calming him, and Mrs. Jenkins could not do enough for the girl's comfort.

"You'll take off your things here, miss, will you not? And then I'll take you to Mr. Lepel's own room. But wouldn't you like a glass of wine or a cup of tea or something before you go in? You look terrible tired and harassed like, miss; and what you are going to see isn't exactly what will do you good. Poor Mr. Lepel he do look dreadful—and that's the long and the short of it!"

"I don't want anything, thank you, Mrs. Jenkins," said Cynthia, faintly smiling; "and I should like to go to Mr. Lepel at once."

"Have you ever seen anything of sick people, miss, or done any nursing?"

"Never, Mrs. Jenkins."

"Don't be too frightened then, miss, when you first see Mr. Lepel. People with fevers often look worse than they really are."

Cynthia set her lips; if she was frightened, she would not show it, she resolved.

Then, after some slight delay, she was admitted to Hubert's room; and there, in spite of her resolution, at first she stood aghast.

It startled her to perceive that, although she knew his face so well, she might not have recognised it in an unaccustomed place. It was discolored, and the eyes were bloodshot and wandering; the hair had been partially cut away from his head, and the stubble of an unshaven beard showed itself on cheeks and chin. Any romance that might have existed in the mind of a

girl of twenty concerning her lover's illness was struck dead at once and forever. He was ill—terribly ill and delirious; he looked at her with a madman's eyes, and his face was utterly changed; his voice too, as he raised it in the constant stream of incoherent talk that escaped his lips, was hoarse and rasping and unnatural. Anything less interesting, less attractive to a weak soul than this delirious fever-stricken man could not well be imagined; but Cynthia's soul was anything but weak. [Pg 288]

She was conscious that never in her life had she loved Hubert Lepel so intensely, so devotedly as she loved him now. Something of the maternal instinct awakened within her at the sight of his great need. He had no one to minister to his more subtle wants—no one to tend him out of pure love and sympathy. The man Jenkins, who sat beside the bed, ready to hold him down if in his delirium he should attempt to throw himself out of the window, was awkward and uncouth in a sick-room. Mrs. Jenkins, although ready and willing to help, was longing to steal away to her little children at home. The landlady down-stairs had announced that she could not possibly undertake to wait upon an invalid. All these facts became clear to Cynthia in a very little time. She saw, as soon as she entered the room, that the window-blind was awry and the curtains were wrongly hung, that the table and the chest of drawers were crowded with an untidy array of bottles, cups and glasses, and that the whole aspect of the place was desolate. This fact did not concern her at present however; her attention was given wholly and at once to the sick man.

She stood for a minute or two at the foot of the bed, realising with a pang the fact that he did not know her. His eyes rested upon her as he spoke; but there was no recognition in them. She could not hear all he said; but, between strings of incoherent words and unintelligible phrases, some sentences caught her ear.

"She will not come," said the sick man—"she has given me up entirely! Quite right too! The world would say that she was perfectly right. And I am in the wrong—always—I have always been wrong; and there is no way out of it. Some one said that to me once—no way out of it—no way out of it—no way out of it—oh, Heaven!"

The sentence ended with a moan of agony which made Cynthia writhe with pain.

"He's always saying that," Jenkins whispered to her—"'No way out of it!' He keeps coming back to that as if—as if there was something on his mind." [Pg 289]

Cynthia raised her hand to silence him. The torrent of words broke out again.

"It was not all my fault. It was Flossy's fault; but one cannot betray a woman, one's sister—can one? Even she would say that. But she has gone away, and she will never come back again. Cynthia—Cynthia! I might call as long as I pleased—she would never come. Why don't you fetch her, some of you? So many people here, and nobody will bring Cynthia to me! Cynthia, Cynthia, my love!"

"I am here, dear—I am here, beside you," said Cynthia.

But he did not seem to understand. She touched his hot hand with her own, and smoothed his fevered brow. The restless tongue went on.

"She has given me up, and I shall never see her any more! She gave me too hard a task; I could not do it—not all at once. It is done now. Yes, I have done it, and it has divided us for ever. Why did you make me speak, Cynthia? He was not miserable—he was happy. But I am to be miserable for ever and ever now. There is no way out of the misery—no way out of it—darkness and loneliness all my life, and worse afterwards. Cynthia, Cynthia, you are sending me to perdition!"

He half rose from his bed, and made as if he would struggle with her. Jenkins came to the rescue; but Cynthia would not move aside.

"Lie down, dearest," she was saying—"lie down and rest. Cynthia is here—Cynthia is with you; she will never leave you any more unless you send her away. Lie down, my darling, and try to rest."

He did not understand the words; but the sweet rhythm of her voice caught his ear. He fell back upon the pillows, staring, helpless, subdued. She kept her cool hand upon his brow.

"Is that Cynthia?" he said suddenly.

"Yes, dearest, it is Cynthia."

"How kind of her to come!" said Hubert, looking away from the girl as if Cynthia were on the other side of the room. "But she should not look so angrily at me. I have done what I could, you know. It is all right now, Cynthia, I have done what I could—I have saved him—indeed I have! I'll take the punishment—no way out of it but that! A life sentence—a life sentence for me!" [Pg 290]

The words died away upon his lips in a confused babble that they could not understand. He murmured inarticulately for a time, but there came long pauses between the words, his eyelids drooped a little, and he grew perceptibly less flushed. In about half an hour the doctor came into the room. He cast a swift look at Cynthia, and another at his patient; then he nodded sagaciously.

"Better," he said curtly. "I thought so. Some more ice, Jenkins. He has been quieter since you came, I conclude, madam?"

Cynthia bowed her head.

"You are the lady for whom he has been asking so often? I know your face—Miss Cynthia West, I believe? Can you stay?"

"Yes," said Cynthia, without hesitation.

"If you keep him as quiet as that, you will save his life," said the doctor; and then he beckoned Jenkins out of the sick-room, and gave him various stringent orders and recommendations—to all which Jenkins lent an attentive if a somewhat puzzled ear.

The doctor looked in again before he went away. Mr. Lepel was lying back on his pillows, perfectly motionless and silent; Miss West, kneeling beside the bed, still kept one hand on his, while with the other she put cooling applications to his head or merely laid her hand upon his forehead. As long as she was touching him the patient seemed perfectly content. And again the doctor nodded—and this time he also smiled.

So passed the hours of that long summer day.

CHAPTER XL.

When the light was fading a little, there was a new sound in Hubert Lepel's sick-room—the rustle of a silk dress, the tripping of little high-heeled shoes across the floor. Cynthia looked round hastily, ready to hush the intruder; for Hubert was much quieter than he had been, and only murmured incoherent sentences from time to time. A fresh outburst of delirium was of all things [Pg 291] to be warded off if possible, and there was a faint hope that he might sleep. If he slept, his life, humanly speaking, was saved. But it was hardly likely that sleep would come so soon.

Cynthia looked round, prepared to rebuke the new-comer—for she had taken upon herself all the authority of nurse and queen-regent in the sick man's room; but her eyes fell upon a stranger whose face was yet not altogether unknown to her. She had seen it years before in the Beechfield lanes; she remembered it vaguely without knowing to whom it belonged. In her earlier years at school that face had stood in her imagination as the type of all that was cold and cruel and fair in ancient song or story, fable or legend. It had figured as Medusa—as Circe; the wonderful wicked woman of the Middle Ages had come to her in visions with just such subtle eyes, such languorous beauty, such fair white skin and yellow hair; the witch-woman of her weirdest dream had had the look of Florence Lepel; just as Hubert's far different features, with the dark melancholy expression of suffering stamped upon them, had stood for her as those of Fouqué's ideal knights, or of Sintram riding through the dark valley, of Lancelot sinning and repenting, of saint, hero, martyr, paladin, in turn, until she grew old enough to banish such foolish dreams. She had been a strangely imaginative child; and these two faces seemed to have haunted her all her life. That of her hero lay beside her, stricken with illness, fevered, insensible; that of the evil woman—for this Cynthia instinctively believed Florence Vane to be—confronted her with a strange, mocking, malignant smile.

Cynthia put up her hand.

"Hush!" she said quietly. "He is not to be disturbed."

"Are you the nurse?" said Mrs. Vane's cool light voice.

"I am a friend," replied Cynthia quietly. "If you wish to talk to me, I will come into the other room."

"Upon my word, you take things very calmly!" said Florence. "I really never dreamt——It is a most embarrassing situation!"

But she did not look embarrassed in the least; neither did Cynthia.

A heavier step on the boards now made itself heard, and the General's face, ruddy and framed in [Pg 292] venerable gray hairs, pressed forward over his wife's shoulder.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear—this is very bad!" he grumbled, either to himself or to Flossy. "Poor lad—poor lad! He looks very ill—he does indeed!"

Flossy came closer to the bed. As soon as she drew near, her brother seemed to grow uneasy; he began to turn his head from side to side, to move his hands, and to mutter incoherent words.

"You disturb him," said Cynthia, looking at Mrs. Vane. "The Doctor says that he must be kept perfectly quiet. Will you kindly go into the other room, and, if you want me, I will come to you."

"We are not particularly likely to want you, young woman," said Florence coldly. "If you are not a qualified nurse, I do not see why you should try to turn Mr. Lepel's own sister out of the room. It is your place to go—not mine."

For all answer, Cynthia turned again to Hubert, and began applying ice to his fevered head. She seemed absorbed by her task, and took no further notice of the visitors. For once Flossy felt herself a little quelled.

She turned to Mrs. Jenkins, who had followed her into the room.

"Has not the doctor procured a proper nurse yet for Mr. Lepel?" she said.

Mrs. Jenkins fidgeted, and looked at Cynthia.

"The young lady," she said at last, "seems to be doing all that is required, ma'am. The doctor says as we couldn't do better."

"In that case, my dear," said the pacific General, "I think that we had better not interfere with existing arrangements. We will go back to the hotel and inquire again in the morning."

"Go back to the hotel, and leave that person in possession?" cried Flossy, with fine and virtuous scorn. "Are you mad, General? I will not put up with such a thing for a moment! She will go out of this house before I go!"

These words reached Cynthia's ears. The girl simply smiled. The smile said, as plainly as words could have done, that she would not leave Hubert Lepel's rooms unless she was taken away from them by force.

Meanwhile Mrs. Jenkins was whispering and explaining, the General was expostulating, and [Pg 293] Flossy waxed apparently more and more irate every moment. Cynthia, with her hand on Hubert's pulse, felt it growing faster; his incoherent words were spoken with energy; he was beginning to raise his head from the pillow and gaze about him with wild excited eyes. She turned sharply towards the visitors.

"Go into the other room at once!" she said, with sudden decision. "You have aroused him already —you have done him harm! Keep silence or go, if you wish to save his life!"

The passionate ring of her voice, low though it was, had its effect. The General stopped short in a sentence; Mrs. Jenkins looked at the bed with a frightened air; Flossy, with an impatient gesture, walked towards the sitting-room. But at the door she paused and looked back at Cynthia, whose eyes were still fixed upon her. What there was in that look perhaps no one else could see; but it magnetised Cynthia. The girl rose from her knees, gently withdrew her hand from Hubert's nerveless fingers, and signed to Mrs. Jenkins to take her place. Then, after watching for a moment to see that the patient lay quietly and did not seem distressed by her departure, she followed Mrs. Vane into the other room. The General hovered about the door, uncertain whether to go or to remain.

The two women faced each other silently. They were both beautiful, but they bore no likeness one to the other.

There could not have been a more complete contrast than that presented by Florence Vane and Cynthia Westwood as they confronted each other in the dim light of Hubert's sitting-room. Cynthia stood erect, looking very tall and pale in her straight black gown; her large dark eyes were heavy from fatigue and grief, her lips had taken a pathetic downward curve, and her dusky hair had been pushed back carelessly from her fine brow. There was a curious dignity about her —a dignity which seemed to proceed chiefly from her own absence of self-consciousness, swallowed up as this had been in the depth of a great sorrow. Opposite to her stood Florence, self-conscious and alert in every nerve and vein, but hiding her agitation under an exterior of polished grace and studiedly haughty courtesy, her fair beauty framed in an admirable setting of [Pg 294] exquisite colors and textures, her whole appearance indescribably dainty and delicate, like that of some rare Eastern bird which hesitates where to set its foot in a strange place.

Thus the two saw each other; and Flossy felt vaguely that Cynthia ought to be at a disadvantage, but that in some strange and miraculous manner she was not. Indeed it was Cynthia who took the lead and spoke first.

"If you wish to speak to me," she said, "I am here; but I cannot leave Mr. Lepel for long."

"I have no wish to speak—necessity alone compels me," said Mrs. Vane, giving the girl a haughty stare from under her half-closed eyelids. "I am compelled, I fear, to ask you a few questions. I presume that a nurse is coming?"

"I think not. The doctor said that he need not send one so long as Jenkins and I were here."

"And pray how long do you mean to remain here?"

"As long as he has need of me."

"You are under a mistake," said Mrs. Vane loftily. "Mr. Lepel did not send for you, I believe?"

"He called for me in his delirium," answered Cynthia, whose eyes were beginning to be lighted up as if from an inward fire. "He is quiet only when I am here."

Flossy laughed derisively.

"A good reason! Is he not quiet now, with the woman Jenkins at his side? You will perhaps allow that his relatives—his family—have some right to attend to him during his illness; and I must really say very plainly—since you compel me to do so—that I should prefer to see him nursed by a professional nurse, and not by a young girl whose very presence here is a scandal to all propriety."

Cynthia drew herself up to her full height.

"I think I can scarcely understand you," she said. "I am acting under the doctor's orders, and am here by his authority. There can be no scandal in that. When Mr. Lepel is conscious and can spare me, I will go."

"Spare you! He will be only too glad to spare you!" cried Mrs. Vane. "I do not know what your connection with him has been—I do not want to know"—the insinuation conveyed by her tone and manner was felt by Cynthia to be in itself an insult; "but this I am fully convinced of, that my poor brother could not possibly have known that you were the daughter of that wretched criminal, Andrew Westwood—the man who murdered Sydney Vane! If he had known that, he would never have wished to see your face again!" [Pg 295]

She saw the girl wince, as if she had received a cut with a whip, and for a moment she triumphed.

The General, who was just inside the room, listening anxiously to the conversation, now came to her aid. He stepped forward hurriedly, his face growing crimson, his lower jaw working, his eyes seeming to turn in his head as he heard the words.

"What is that? What—this young person the daughter of Westwood the murderer? Abominable! What business has she here? It is an insult to us all!"

Cynthia turned upon him like a wild animal at bay, defiance flashing in her mournful magnificent dark eyes.

"My presence insults you less than the words Mrs. Vane has spoken insult me!" she cried, tossing back her head with the proud stag-like gesture which Hubert had learned to know so well. "She is more cruel than I ever thought one woman could be to another! She must know that I have nothing to reproach myself with—that my life is as pure as hers—purer, if all one hears is true." She could not deny herself the vengeful taunt, but was recalled to her better self when she saw Florence blanch under it and suddenly draw back. "But about myself I do not choose to speak. Of my father I will say one word—to you, sir, who I am sure will be just at least to one who craves only for justice—my father, sir, was innocent of the crime for which he was condemned; and some day his innocence will be manifested before all eyes. Mr. Lepel knows—he knew before he was taken ill—that I am Andrew Westwood's daughter. I told him a few days ago."

"And he was so much horrified by the news that this illness is the result. I see now," said Mrs. Vane coolly, "why this break down has taken place. The poor boy, General, has been so harassed and overcome by the discovery that his brain has for the time being given way. And yet this girl pretends that he wants her to remain!"

"I appeal to the doctor!" said Cynthia, suddenly turning as white as Florence herself had done. "If he supports me, you will yield to his decision? If he says that I am not necessary here, I will go. I have no wish to inflict my presence on those to whom it is unwelcome." [Pg 296]

She glanced proudly from Mrs. Vane to the General. The old man was much perturbed. He was walking about the room, muttering to himself, his lips protruding, his brow wrinkled with anger and disgust.

"Too bad—too bad!" Cynthia heard him say. "Westwood's daughter—nursing Hubert too! Tut, tut—a bad business this!"

Cynthia resolved upon a bold stroke—she would address him.

"Sir," she said, taking a step towards him, "will you listen to me for a moment? I promise you that I will go if the doctor says that I am not wanted. You need not fear that I shall force myself upon you. I only ask you to forgive me the fact of being my father's daughter until Mr. Lepel is a little stronger—if the doctor says that I must not leave him yet. When he is better, I vow—I swear that you shall see and hear no more of me! I shall leave the country, and you will never be troubled by me again. But, till then, have pity! Let me help to nurse him; he has been my best friend in the whole world, and I have never yet been able to do anything for him! When he is better, I will go away. Till then, for pity's sake, sir, let me stay!"

Her voice broke; she clasped her hands before her and held down her head to hide her tears. The General, brought to a sudden stop by her appeal to him, eyed her with a mixture of native pity and long-cultivated detestation. He could not but be sorry for her, although she was Westwood's daughter and, by all reports, not much better perhaps than she should be; for he firmly believed in the truth of all Flossy's malignant hints and innuendos. But Cynthia was a handsome woman, and the General was weak; he could not bear to see a handsome woman cry.

"My good girl," he stammered—and then Flossy's significant smile made him stammer all the more—"my girl, I—I do not wish to blame you—personally, of course—not your fault at all—we can't help its being painful, you know."

"Painful—yes," cried Cynthia eagerly; "but pain is sometimes necessary! You will not drive me away from Hubert's bedside if I can be of any use to him?"

"No, no—I suppose not," said the General, melting in spite of himself. "I wouldn't for the world do anything to harm poor Hubert. Suppose we hear what the doctor says?" [Pg 297]

Cynthia's hand was on the bell immediately, and Jenkins showed himself at the door without delay.

"Jenkins," she said, "it is very important that we should have the doctor here at once. Mrs. Vane—General Vane—want——"

"Give your own orders, General," said Flossy abruptly. She could not lose a chance of annoying and insulting Cynthia.

"H'm, ha—the doctor, my man," said the General, rather taken aback by the demand upon him—"get us the doctor as soon as you can. Tell him—tell him that Mr. Lepel's relatives are here, and no doubt he will come at once."

There was a little silence in the room when Jenkins had disappeared upon his errand. The General stood, with his hands clasped behind him, looking out of a window; Mrs. Vane had sunk into a chair, in which she lay back, her graceful neck turned aside, as if she wanted to avoid the sight of Cynthia, who meanwhile stood upon the hearthrug, head bent and hands folded, waiting gravely and patiently for what she felt to be the decision on her fate.

Presently Mrs. Vane moved a little, fixed her cold eyes on the motionless figure before her, and spoke in tones so low that they did not reach the General's ears.

"What have you done with your father?" she asked.

Cynthia raised her eyes to Mrs. Vane's face for a moment with a flash of scorn in their lustrous depths. She made no other answer.

"You need not think," said Florence deliberately, "that I do not know where he has been until to-day. I know all about him."

"Yes; you set your spies on him," said Cynthia, in equally low but bitter tones. "I was aware of that."

"I know of his movements up to eleven o'clock this morning, and so do the police," said Mrs. Vane. "He came to you this morning—perhaps by appointment, perhaps not—how do I know?—and you drove away with him to St. Pancras Station. There you took his ticket to Liverpool—there [Pg 298] you said good-bye. Why did you not wait to see him off? The answer is easy to read—because he never went to Liverpool at all. Did you think we were children like yourself that you could throw dust in our eyes as easily as that?"

Cynthia's dilated eyes asked a question that her lips would not utter. Flossy smiled.

"You want to know if he has been taken?" she said. "Not yet; but he soon will be. You should not have been seen with him if you wanted him to escape. I suppose you were not aware that the relationship was known?"

No, this certainly Cynthia had not known.

"You have been the means of identifying him to the police," Mrs. Vane went on, with the cruel smile still playing about her thin lips; "otherwise we should hardly have been sure that he had changed his disguise. I almost wonder that you never thought of that."

Then Cynthia made a desperate attempt to stem the tide.

"You are mistaken," she said—Mrs. Vane laughed softly.

"You had better not try to tell lies about it—it is not your forte. Brazen it out, as you have done hitherto, and you may succeed. A detective has been to Madame della Scala's house already, and he will probably find you out—if you stay here—before long. I am afraid that you are not a very good hand at keeping a secret; but I have put you on your guard, and you should thank me."

"I do not thank you for torturing me," said Cynthia, with a hard dry sob that seemed to be born of agony. "I would rather face all the police and the magistrates of London than you! They will have no difficulty about finding me. If I cannot stay here, I will go back to Madame's house."

"Which you will find closed to you," said Flossy. "After the story that she has heard, Madame della Scala refuses to receive you there again. You seem to think very little of your father's crime, Miss Westwood; but you will not find society condone it so easily."

Cynthia's face flushed hotly, but she did not reply.

"You had better go away," said Mrs. Vane, leaning forward and speaking almost in a whisper. "Go, and tell no one where you are going—it will be better for you. The police will be here before very long, and possibly they may arrest you."

"I do not think they can do that. No, I shall not hide myself." [Pg 299]

"It would be safer for your father," said Flossy, almost inaudibly. "Listen—I will make a bargain with you. If you go, I will hide part of my own knowledge—I will not let the woman Meldreth describe him accurately—I will help you to put the detectives off the track; and, in return, you will go away at once—where I care not—and never see Hubert again. You may save your father then."

"I will make no bargain with you," said Cynthia solemnly. She looked straight into the white, subtle face—straight into the velvet-brown languorous eyes, full now of a secret fear. "You forget that God protects the innocent and punishes the guilty. I will stay with Hubert; and God will

defend my father and the right."

"Your father will be hanged yet," said Flossy, turning away restlessly. It was her only answer to the girl's courageous words.

CHAPTER XLI.

A little bustle was heard outside the door; and then the doctor came in. He was a middle-aged man, tall, spare, thoughtful-looking, a little abrupt in manner, but with a kindly face. He had not advanced two steps into the room before he stopped short, held up his hand, and said—

"Hallo—what's that?"

It was the patient's voice again uplifted in snatches of delirious talk.

"Cynthia!" they distinctly heard him calling. "Where's Cynthia? Tell Cynthia that she must come!"

"And why are you not there?" said Doctor Middlemass, darting his finger in Cynthia's direction. "Why don't you go to him at once? It's madness to let him cry out like that!"

Cynthia's look was piteous; but for the moment she did not move.

"Would it not be better for a qualified nurse to be obtained for my brother?" said Mrs. Vane. "This young—lady"—a perceptible pause occurred before the word—"has had no experience in nursing; and it is surely not necessary——"

"Oh, doctor," the girl burst out, "must I not stay? I cannot go away when he calls for me like that!" [Pg 300]

Her hands were strained on her bosom; her eyes had the hungry look of a mother who hears her child cry aloud and cannot go to him. The doctor shot a look at her pale tortured face, and observed the cold composure of the finely-dressed lady in the arm-chair, and the subdued uneasiness of the old gentleman in the background. He began to suspect a tragedy—at any rate, a romance.

"Go to him at once," he said to Cynthia, pointing to the bed-room door, "and keep him quiet at any cost. A trained nurse would not do him half the good that you can do him, if you choose. And now, madam," he continued rather sternly, as Cynthia disappeared with a joyful face into the other room, "may I ask what this interference with my orders may mean?"

"I am Mr. Lepel's sister," said Flossy coldly, "and it was I who sent for you, Doctor Middlemass. I think I have some right to take an interest in my brother's condition."

"Certainly, madam"—the doctor spoke with portentous grimness and formality—"but—excuse me—no right to tamper with any of my prescriptions. I prescribed Miss West to my patient; and she was doing him all the good in the world when I went away. He has got another fever-fit upon him now, a little higher temperature, and we shall not be able to do anything more for him at all. If you do not wish my orders to be followed, madam, have the goodness to send for another doctor and I will throw up the case."

"You misunderstand, sir—you misunderstand!" said the General fussily, coming forward with his most imposing air. "My wife and I, sir, have not the slightest desire to interfere. We only wish to know what your prescriptions are. That young woman, sir, has no right to be here at all."

"From what I have been told," said the doctor dryly, "I should have said that she had the greatest possible right to be here; but, however, that is no business of mine. She has a wonderfully soothing effect on Mr. Lepel's condition, and, as long as she is here, he is quiet and manageable. Listen! He is scarcely speaking at all now; her presence and her touch have calmed him at once. It would be positive madness to take her away!"

"Would it not be well," said Mrs. Vane quietly, "to send a trained nurse here too? There is a woman whom I know; she would be very glad to come, and she would relieve that young lady of the more painful and onerous portions of her task. I mean, dear," she said, looking towards her husband, "old Mrs. Meldreth's daughter—Sabina. She is an efficient nurse, and she has nothing to do just now." [Pg 301]

"Has she had experience in cases of brain-disease?" said Doctor Middlemass snappishly.

"I really do not know." She knew perfectly well that Sabina's knowledge of nursing was of the most perfunctory kind. "She has had experience of all kinds of illness, I believe, and she is thoroughly trustworthy. She could be installed here as an attendant on Miss—Miss West."

Attendant! "As spy" she meant, on all poor Cynthia's movements.

"I should like to see the woman first," said the doctor bluntly. He was not easy to manage, as Flossy swiftly perceived. "If she is competent for the task, I have no objection—Miss West must not be allowed to overdo herself; but I myself should prefer to send a person who is accustomed to deal with illnesses of this kind."

"As you please, of course," said Flossy. She saw that it would be of no use to press Sabina Meldreth upon him, much as she would have liked to secure the services of a spy and an informer in the house. As she paused, the General came forward.

"I should like to know, sir," he said, bristling with indignation, "what you mean by saying that that young lady—that girl—has a right to be here? I do not understand such language?"

"Why, of course she has a right to be here," said the doctor, staring at him in a purposely matter-of-fact way, "since she is the lady that he is engaged to marry."

"Marry! Bless my soul—no such thing!" roared the General, utterly forgetting that there was an invalid in the adjoining room. "Why, he's going to marry my——"

"Dear Richard, hush, hush!" said his wife, laying her hand entreatingly upon his arm. "Don't make such a noise—think of poor Hubert!"

"Kindly moderate your voice, sir," was the doctor's dry remark. "My patient will hear you if you don't take care."

"It does not matter to me whether he hears me or not," the General began; but Flossy's hand [Pg 302] tightened its grasp upon his arm in a way which he knew that he must obey.

The General was a docile husband, and his protest died away in inarticulate angry murmurs.

"Don't trouble about it, General—I will arrange everything," said his wife caressingly. "Go over to the window again and leave me to speak to Doctor Middlemass for a moment;" and, as the General retired, still growling, she half smiled, and raised her eyes to the doctor's face as if she invited sympathy.

But Doctor Middlemass looked as unresponsive as a block of wood.

"I must go to my patient," he said, "It was to see him, I presume, that I was summoned?"

"Not entirely," said Flossy very sweetly. "We wanted to know whether it was absolutely necessary that Miss West should stay with my brother."

"Absolutely necessary, madam!"

"Then of course we should not think of objecting to her presence, which, I must tell you, is painful to us, because——"

"Excuse me, madam," said the doctor, who was certainly a very uncivil person, "if I say that these family-matters are of no interest to me, save as they affect my patient."

"But they do affect your patient, doctor. I think it was the worry of the affair that brought on this illness. We have found out that this Miss West's name is really 'Westwood,' and that she is the daughter of the dreadful man who shot my husband's brother Beechfield some years ago. Perhaps you remember the case?"

"Oh, yes—I remember it!" said the doctor shortly. "That's the daughter? Poor girl!"

"It is naturally unpleasant to think that my brother—a cousin also of the General's—should be contemplating a marriage with her," said Mrs. Vane.

"Ah, well—perhaps so! We are all under the dominion of personal and selfish prejudice," said Doctor Middlemass.

"I hoped that this illness might break the tie between them," sighed Flossy pensively.

"So it may, madam—by killing him. Do you wish to break it in that way?"

"This doctor is a perfect brute!" thought Mrs. Vane to herself; but she only looked in a [Pg 303] reproachful manner at the "brute," and applied her handkerchief delicately to her eyes. "I trust that there is no likelihood that it may end in that way. My poor dear Hubert," she sighed, "if only you had been warned in time!"

Perhaps this display of emotion softened Doctor Middlemass' heart, or perhaps he was not so insensible to Mrs. Vane's charms as he tried to appear; at any rate, when he spoke again it was in a qualified tone.

"I trust that he will get over this attack. He is certainly a little better than I expected to find him; but I cannot impress your mind too strongly with the necessity for care and watchfulness. Anything that tends to tranquilise the mind of a person in his condition must be procured for him at almost any risk. When the delirium has passed, an ordinary nurse may be of greater use than Miss West; but at present we really cannot do without her. You heard for yourself how he called her when she went out of the room?"

"Yes, I heard. Then shall I send the woman of whom I spoke, doctor? She might be a help to Miss West, whose work I of course would rather assist than retard in any way."

"You can thoroughly rely upon her?" said the doctor dubiously.

"Thoroughly. She is a most valuable person."

"She might come for a day or two, and we shall see whether she is of any use or not. Will you

send for her?"

Yes, Mrs. Vane would send. And then the doctor went to look once more at Hubert, of whose condition he again seemed somewhat doubtful; and afterwards he took his leave. When he had gone, Mrs. Vane also departed, taking her docile husband back with her to the Grosvenor Hotel. She had gained her point and was secretly triumphant; for she had secured the presence of a spy upon Cynthia, and could depend upon Sabina Meldreth to give a full account of Miss West's habits and visitors.

Flossy had great faith in her system of espionage. She sent Parker at once with a note summoning Sabina to the hotel, and there she laid her plans. Sabina was to go that very night to Mr. Lepel's rooms, and was to make herself as useful as she could. It was presumed that Cynthia [Pg 304] had not seen with sufficient clearness for the encounter to be a source of danger the woman in black who had followed Westwood to Kensington Gardens. Sabina was told to keep herself in the background as much as possible—to be silent and serviceable, but, above all, to be observant; for it was likely that Westwood would try to communicate with his daughter, and, if he did so, Sabina would perhaps be able to track him down.

Flossy had completely lost all fear for herself in the excitement of her discoveries. It seemed to her that she and her secret were entirely safe. Nobody, she thought, had ever known of her understanding with Sydney Vane in days gone by; nobody had any clue to the secret of his death; so long as Hubert was silent, she had nothing at all to fear; and Hubert had succumbed to her for so long that she did not dread him now. Nothing seemed to her more unlikely than that after so many years he should deliberately divest himself of name and fame, clear Westwood's reputation at the cost of his own, and sacrifice his freedom for the sake of a scruple of conscience. Flossy did not believe him foolish enough or self-denying enough to do all that—and in her estimate of her brother's character perhaps, after all, Flossy was very nearly right.

Sabina Meldreth presented herself to Cynthia and Mrs. Jenkins that evening, and was not very graciously received. However, she proved herself both capable and willing, and was speedily acknowledged—by Mrs. Jenkins, at least—to be "a great help in the house." Cynthia said nothing; she hardly seemed to know that a stranger was present. Her whole soul was absorbed in the task of nursing Hubert. When he slept, she did not leave the house; she lay on a sofa in another room. She could not bear to be far away from Hubert; and more and more, as the days went on and the delirium was not subdued, did she shrink from the knowledge that any other ears beside her own should hear the ravings of the patient—should marvel at the extraordinary things he said, and wonder whether or no there was any truth in them.

"He talked in this way because he has brooded over my poor father's fate!" Cynthia said to herself, with piteous insistence. "He must have been so much distressed at finding that I was the daughter of Andrew Westwood that his mind dwelt on all the details of the trial; and now he [Pg 305] fancies almost that he did the deed himself. I have read of such strange delusions in books. When he is better, no doubt the delusion will die away. It shows how powerfully his mind was affected by what I told him—the constant cry that he sees no way out of it shows how he must have brooded over the matter. No way out of it indeed, my darling, until the person who murdered Mr. Vane is discovered and brought to justice! And I almost believe that my father is right, and that the murderer, directly or indirectly, was Mrs. Vane."

To Cynthia, Hubert's ravings were the more painful, because they bore almost entirely upon what had been the great grief—the tragedy—of her life. He spoke much of Sydney Vane, of Florence, and of Cynthia herself, but in such strange connection that at times she hardly knew what was his meaning, or whether he had any definite meaning. Presently, however, it appeared to her as if one or two ideas ran through the whole warp and woof of his imaginings. One was the conviction that in some way or another he must take Westwood's place—give himself up to justice and set Westwood free. Another was the belief that it was utterly impossible for Cynthia ever to forgive him for what he had done, and that the person chiefly responsible for all the misery and shame and disgrace, which had fallen so unequally on the heads of those concerned in "the Beechfield tragedy," was no other than Florence Vane.

Farther than these vague statements he did not go. He never said in so many words that he was guilty of Sydney Vane's death, and that he, and not Westwood, ought to have borne the punishment. Yet he said enough to give Cynthia cause for great unhappiness. She tried not to believe that there was any foundation of truth for his words; but she could not succeed. The ideas were too persistent, too logical, to be altogether the fruit of imagination. More and more she clung to the belief that Flossy was responsible for Mr. Vane's sudden death, that Hubert knew it, and that for his sister's sake he had concealed the truth. If this were so, it would be terrible indeed; and yet Cynthia had a soft corner in her heart for the man who had sacrificed his own honor to conceal his sister's sin.

Cynthia did not go back to Madame della Scala's house. Flossy had done her work with the singing-mistress as she had done it elsewhere. She blackened Cynthia's name wherever she went. [Pg 306] So, two days after the girl's departure from Norton Square, her boxes and all her belongings were sent to her from her former home without a word of apology or explanation. She felt that she was simply turned out of Madame's house—that she could never hope to go back to it again. She was now absolutely homeless; and she was also without employment; for she had withdrawn from several engagements to sing at concerts, and at more than one private house she had received an intimation that her services could be dispensed with. No reason in these cases was given; but it was plain that the world did not think Miss West a very reputable person, and that

society had turned its back upon her. Cynthia had not leisure to think what this would mean for her in the future; at present she cared for nothing but her duties in Hubert Lepel's sick-room.

Her boxes were deposited at last in Mrs. Jenkins' little house at the back; and there a small room was appropriated to Cynthia's use. She was "supposed to be lodging at Mrs. Jenkins'," as Sabina told her mistress; but she practically lived in Hubert's rooms. Still it was a comfort to her to think that she had that little room to retire to when Hubert should recover consciousness; and till then she did not care where or how she lived.

Sabina found little to report to Mrs. Vane, who had now returned to Beechfield. Cynthia went nowhere, and received neither visitors nor letters. She had been interviewed by the police-officials; but they had not been able to get any information from her. As for Andrew Westwood, he seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth; and some of the authorities at Scotland Yard went so far as to say that the report made to them of his discovery must have been either an illusion of the fancy or pure invention on the part of Sabina Meldreth and Mrs. Vane.

CHAPTER XLII.

[Pg 307]

Enid's conscience was not at rest. During her interviews with Mr. Evandale she was inclined to think that he knew everything, understood everything—even the difference between right and wrong—better than she herself knew and understood it; but when he was away her heart failed her. What if Hubert cared for her all the time? Would she not then be doing him a grievous wrong by forgetting that she had promised to marry him when she was twenty-one? The General's opposition to her engagement would probably vanish like a dream when she was a little older, if she and Hubert showed any inclination to each other. There was no real reason why they should not marry; and Hubert knew that. And what would he say when he heard that she had weakly fallen in love with another man, and wanted to break her word to himself?

Enid shrank back and blushed with shame at the prospect before her. It was all very well for Maurice to say that she must not sacrifice herself; but was it not a woman's duty to sacrifice herself for the good of others? She said so to Maurice; and his answer was very ready.

"For the good of others? But do you think it is for Hubert's good to marry a woman who does not love him, and especially if it is a woman whom he does not love?"

"Ah, if I could only be sure of that!" sighed Enid.

She was not long left in doubt. The General could not keep a secret; and, as soon as he and his wife returned to Beechfield, Enid felt that something was wrong—something which concerned herself. Flossy was very quiet; she eyed Enid strangely once or twice, but she did not tell her about the events of the past week. It was the General who sighed over her, petted her, kissed her at unusual times, and looked at her with an air of pity that the girl found almost intolerable. After three or four days of it, she broke through her usual rule of reserve, and asked Flossy what the General meant.

"You had better ask him," said Mrs. Vane, arching her delicate brows.

"I have asked him, and he will not tell me." [Pg 308]

"I suppose it is simply that Hubert is ill. He thinks probably that you are distracted by anxiety about him."

Enid colored guiltily.

"But we have good accounts of him," she said, as if explaining away her own apparent indifference; "he is going on as well as we can expect. And I suppose you would be with him if he were dangerously ill?"

"I am not sure of that," said Flossy rather drily; but she would say no more.

It was after breakfast one morning that Enid insisted upon being satisfied. She and the General had, as usual, breakfasted together, and a letter had just been received from the Doctor in attendance on Hubert, over which the General coughed, fidgeted, sighed, and was evidently so much disturbed that Enid's attention was roused to the uttermost. For the earlier part of the meal she had been sitting with her hands clasped before her, not attempting to touch the food upon her plate. She had no appetite; she had passed a bad night, and was little inclined to talk. But the General's movements and gestures excited her curiosity.

"Have you had bad news, uncle Richard?"

"No, no, my dear! He's going on very well—very well indeed."

"You mean Hubert?"

"Yes—yes, of course! Whom else should I mean? You needn't be alarmed about him at all; he'll soon be about again."

There was a tone of mingled vexation and perplexity in the General's voice.

"Is he conscious now?" Enid asked eagerly.

"Well, no—not exactly—light-headed a little, I suppose. At least——"

"Who has written, uncle Richard? Can I see the letter?"

"No, no, no! Not for you to read, my dear! It's from the doctor—nothing much—nothing for you to see."

Enid was silent for a few minutes; then she spoke with sudden determination.

"Uncle Richard, you are treating me like a child! There is something that you are hiding from me which I ought to know—I am sure of it! Will you not tell me what it is?"

"You are quite mistaken, my dear! There is nothing to tell—nothing, that is, in the least particular —nothing that you need trouble about at all." [Pg 309]

"There is something! Oh, uncle Richard"—and she rose from her seat and knelt down beside him, putting one arm around his neck and fixing her wistful blue eyes upon his weather-beaten countenance—"you do not know how much anxiety you cause me by being silent, when I am sure that there is something in your mind which concerns me, and which I am not to know! Even if it is a great misfortune—a great sorrow—I would rather know it than imagine all sorts of dreadful things, as I do now. Whatever it is, please tell me. It is cruel to keep me in ignorance!"

The General looked puzzled and troubled.

"You had better ask Flossy, dear," he said, pulling the ends of his long white moustache, and looking away from the pleading face before him. "If there's anything to tell, she could tell it better than I."

"I don't think so, uncle dear," said Enid softly. Her eyes filled with tears. "I would rather hear evil tidings from your lips than from those of any other person, because—because I know you love me and would not grieve me willingly. Is Hubert worse than I know? Is he—is he dead?"

"Bless my soul, no!" cried the General. "Why, what put that idea into your mind, child? No, no—he is going on as well as possible—upon my word, he is!"

"What is it then, dear uncle Richard?"

"It's his nurse," said the General desperately.

"His nurse?" Enid's eyes grew large with amazement.

"She isn't a proper, respectable, trained nurse at all. She is just an amateur—a young woman who has no business to be there at all—not much older than yourself, Enid, my dear. That is the reason that Flossy would not stay. We found this young person nursing him, and so we came away. Flossy was very much shocked—very much annoyed about it, I can tell you. I wrote to ask if she was still there, and the doctor says she is."

Enid's white cheeks had turned crimson, but more with surprise than with anger. The General crossed one leg over the other, and carefully averted his eyes as he went on— [Pg 310]

"I don't mean to say anything against her. Flossy says—but you and I have nothing to do with that —she's not a very nice girl; that is all. These professional singers and actresses seldom are. You don't know anything about such people, my little girl, and it is all the better for you. But Hubert should not have friends among people of that kind. I am very much disappointed in Hubert—very much disappointed indeed!"

"This girl is a friend of Hubert's then?"

"I suppose so. Well—yes, of course."

"Who is she? What is her name?"

"She is a singer, my dear," said the General, putting his arm affectionately round the girl's shoulders, "and she is an uncommonly pretty girl—I don't deny that. Oh, of course there is nothing for you to be anxious about! Hubert befriended her, I believe; and she was grateful, and wanted to repay him—and—and all that, you know." The General was rather proud of having given this turn to the story.

"But I think that was very kind and good of her," said Enid, with kindling eyes. "Why are you so distressed about it, uncle Richard? I should like to have done the same for poor Hubert too. What is the girl's name?"

"They call her," said the General, looking very much abashed—"they call her Cynthia West. But that isn't her real name."

"Cynthia West?" said Enid, in a low tone. Then she was silent. She was recalling the day when she had questioned Hubert about Cynthia West. He had said that he knew her—a little. And this girl whom he knew "a little" had gone to nurse him in his hour of need! Well, was there anything particularly wrong in that?

The General, having once begun the story, could not keep it to himself.

"It is a most extraordinary thing," he said, "how Hubert came to know her at all. I should have thought that he would steer clear of her—as clear as of poison—when he was engaged to you and all."

"Oh, he would not think of me!" said Enid quietly. "Why should he have avoided Cynthia West?"

"Why?" said the General, bringing his fist down on the table with a bang that made the dishes rattle, and caused Enid to give a nervous start. "Why, because she is not Cynthia West at all! She is the daughter of that ruffian—that murderer—to whom your desolate orphaned condition is due, [Pg 311] my darling! She is Westwood's child, the man who killed your dear father and ought to have been hanged for it long ago!"

Enid's hand slipped from her uncle's neck. She knelt on, looking up at him with dazed incredulous eyes and quivering white lips. The communication had given a great shock to her trust in Hubert.

"Perhaps—perhaps," she said at last, "Hubert did not know."

"Oh, but he did—he did!" said her uncle, whose memory for dates and details was generally at fault. "If not at once, he knew before very long; and he ought never to have spoken to her again when once he knew. As for all that stuff about his not being quiet unless she was in the room—about her being the only person who could manage him when he was delirious, you know—why, that was stuff and nonsense! They ought to have got a strait-waistcoat and strapped him down to the bed; that would surely have kept him as quiet as any Miss Cynthia West!"

The General said the name with infinite scorn.

"Is that what they said—that he was quiet when she was there?" Enid inquired.

"So they said—so they said! I don't see the sense of it myself," replied the General, feeling that he had perhaps said a little too much.

"Then did he send for her?"

"No, my dear; he was unconscious when she came. I believe that his man Jenkins was at the bottom of it all. He went and told her that poor Hubert was ill."

"But I don't quite understand. If Hubert did not send for her, what right had she to come?"

"You may well ask that. What right indeed! An abominable thing, I call it, for Westwood's daughter to go and nurse one of our family! Don't grieve about it, my darling! If Hubert was led astray by her wiles for a little time, you may be sure that he will be ashamed of himself before very long. He has a good heart, and will not let you go; he loves you too sincerely for that, I am quite sure. So you must not fret."

"I don't; I shall not grieve—in that way, uncle," said Enid gravely, but with perfect calm. "You mean that Hubert cares for her, and that she loves him too?"

"I don't know what she does," said the General, with a rather ominous growl. "I only know that [Pg 312] there were some entanglement—understanding between them—a flirtation I dare say—young men are not always so careful as they ought to be—and perhaps the girl has taken it seriously."

"Poor girl," said Enid softly—"I am very sorry for her!"

"Sorry? Sorry for Westwood's daughter? Enid, you forget what is due to yourself and to your father! Do not speak of her! Forget her; and rest assured that when Hubert is better he will dismiss her with thanks—if thanks are necessary—and that we shall soon see him here at Beechfield again. And, my dear, when he is better, I will put no further obstacle in your way, if you still desire the—the engagement to go on."

"You forget, uncle Richard," said Enid very quietly, "that there was no real engagement."

She had always maintained to herself before that there was one. He looked at her with wonder.

"But, my dear, there was a sort of an understanding, you know; and Flossy always said that you were so fond of each other."

"Flossy did not know," Enid answered coldly. Then she withdrew herself from the General's encircling arm and rose to her feet. "You have not told me yet, uncle," she went on, "what news you had from the doctor this morning."

"Oh, nothing fresh!" said the General, in rather a guilty tone; and then, as she pressed him, he explained further. "You see, my dear child, we thought that this Miss West ought to go away, because none of us can go to see Hubert while she is there—if for no other reason, because she is that man's daughter; and I wrote to the doctor to inquire whether Hubert could not do without her now; and he says, No—that there would be danger of a relapse if she should go."

"Then of course you will say that she must be asked to stay until Hubert is better, uncle."

"Certainly."

"Do you think so, my dear?"

"But it is naturally very painful to you, and to all of us, to think that Hubert's recovery is

dependent on that girl. I call it positively degrading!" cried the General, crumpling up his papers, and rising from his seat in a sudden fury.

"It is painful—yes," said Enid, with a heavy sigh; "but I suppose that it cannot be helped;" and she [Pg 313] turned away, so that he might not see the quivering of her lip or the tear that rolled down her pale cheeks as she said the words.

She went out into the conservatory and sat down amongst the flowers. She had been too proud to show the General how much she was hurt; but, as a matter of fact, she was very deeply wounded by what she heard. Her affections were not bruised—she had never cared for Hubert so little in her life; but her pride had received a tremendous blow. Even if he had only "flirted" with Cynthia West, as the General had suggested, the flirtation was an insult to the girl whom he had asked in marriage. Indeed it seemed worse to Enid than a *grande passion* would have seemed; for her readings in poetry and fiction had taught her that a genuine and passionate love sometimes caused people to forget the claims of duty and the bonds of a previous affection. But the General had not seemed to think that anything of this kind existed; although the fact that Hubert's delirium could not be quieted except in Cynthia's presence showed, even to Enid's innocent eyes, that some strong sympathy, some great mutual attraction, united them. If it were so, Enid asked herself, could she blame him? What had she herself done? Had she not given her heart away to Maurice Evandale, although her word was plighted to Hubert Lepel?

But then, she said to herself, she had never professed any great affection for Hubert; she had not taken the initiative in any way. He need not have asked her to marry him—he might have left her perfectly free. She felt indignantly that she had been trifled with—that he had asked her to be his wife without caring to make her so, and that he might perhaps have trifled in the same manner with Cynthia West. If that were the case, Enid Vane said to herself that she could never forgive him. He had profaned love itself—the holiest of earth's mysteries—and she resented the action, although she might gain by it her own freedom and happiness.

It was even possible that this gain might be denied to her. Suppose, when he was better, that he came back and claimed her promise, repudiated Cynthia's attempt to earn his gratitude, and [Pg 314] explained his conduct in such a manner that no fair-minded person could refuse him credence? What then could she do? Enid felt that she might not have the strength to fight against him unless Maurice were at her side; and Maurice had, unfortunately for her, been suddenly summoned to the North of England to attend his father's death-bed. He had left Beechfield with many fears for Enid's welfare; but he was of course obliged to go, and had had no opportunity of declaring himself to the General as a suitor for Enid's hand before his departure. For the moment therefore Enid was quite alone; and, seeing the net in which she was caught—a net of fraud and trickery and lies—her heart failed her, and she felt herself helpless indeed.

She was in far more danger than she guessed; for Mrs. Vane looked upon her as a deadly enemy, and was resolved that she should never have the chance of confiding what she knew to another person. From what Hubert had said, the girl had made up her mind to tell him all she knew when once she was his wife. To tell Hubert was what Flossy was resolved that Enid should never do. She should never marry Hubert or any other man; sooner than betray Flossy's secrets, Enid Vane should die. The white still woman with the brown eyes and yellow hair was ready to face the chances of detection—ready to take life, if necessary, rather than see her plans defeated and herself disgraced. With Enid out of the way, she might not be safe; but she would be safer than she was now.

She took note however of the warning that Parker had given her. She had been going too fast; she must be more careful for the future. She must proceed by such slow degrees that Mr. Ingledew himself should be deceived. And she must change her plans also; for she found that Enid no longer touched the cooling drinks that were placed beside her every night—the girl said that she did not care for them, and sent them away untouched. But surely there were plenty of other ways!

Mr. Evandale had said a few guarded words to Mr. Ingledew about his treatment of Miss Vane, and his remarks had caused the surgeon to send a simple tonic mixture instead of the soothing draughts which had formerly excited some surprise and even some indignation in the Rector's mind. He did not much believe in soothing draughts, as he soon elicited from Mr. Ingledew that [Pg 315] they had been made up in conformity with Mrs. Vane's views of the case rather than according to what Mr. Ingledew himself thought necessary; and a word from the Rector, whose medical knowledge was really considerable, caused Mr. Ingledew to change his opinions very speedily. At the same time, tonics, like other things, could be doctored; and, as Mr. Evandale was out of the way, Enid's welfare lay, for the time being, at Flossy's mercy.

She began to suffer in the old way—from dizziness and nausea and pains for which she could not account, with an utterly inexplicable weakness and languor, different from all her former symptoms. Perhaps Mrs. Vane had altered her treatment. At any rate, it was certain that some mysterious factor was at work stealing the girl's energy away from her, diminishing her vitality, bringing her, in short, to the very gates of death. And so insidiously did the work proceed that even Parker, who had had suspicions of her mistress, scarcely noticed the advance of Enid's malady. There were no more fainting-fits—nothing definitely alarming; but day by day the girl grew weaker, and no one noticed or guessed the reason why.

Enid's nights were restless; but she had not been disturbed since Flossy's return from London by the white figure which she had seen at her bedside. She told herself that Maurice was right—that

her nerves had played her false, and that the appearances had been a mere phantasm of her imagination. She quite lost her fear of seeing it again; and, although she had held no further conversation with the Rector after Mrs. Vane's arrival in the house, she was reassured and strengthened by the remembrance of his words. When she awoke in the night-time now, she knew no fear.

And yet—it was about three weeks after the beginning of Hubert Lepel's illness—her heart gave a wild leap when she opened her eyes one night, and saw in her room, by the faint light of a glimmering taper, the ghostly figure of a woman clothed from head to foot in white. She stood, not by the bedside, but by the mantelpiece, with something—was it a medicine-phial?—in her hand. What the visitant was doing Enid could not exactly see; but she started up, and at the movement the white woman turned and showed her face.

Enid uttered an exclamation—a sort of gasp of terror—for her worst fears were realised. The [Pg 316] phantom which she had dreaded had come to her again in spite of Maurice's promises of aid. He had forgotten to pray for her perhaps—a childish notion crossed her mind that perhaps because of his forgetfulness the ghost was there.

But was it a ghost—a phantom of the senses, and not a living woman after all? For the face which met the girl's eyes was not one that she could easily mistake—it was the face of Florence Vane.

CHAPTER XLIII.

At that moment Enid recalled, by one instinctive flash of memory, the words that Maurice Evandale had said to her. If ever she saw "the ghost" again, she was to speak to it—she was not to be afraid. God would take care of her. With a sort of mental clutch at the strength residing in those words, she maintained herself in a sitting posture and looked the white woman full in the face. Yes, it was Flossy's face; but was it Flossy herself? For the figure made a strange threatening gesture, and glided smoothly towards the door as if to disappear—though in natural and not very ghost-like fashion, for the door stood wide open, and it was the soft cool night-breeze of summer that had opened Enid's slumbering eyes. In another moment the visitor would be gone, and Enid would never know whether what she saw was a reality or a dream.

That should not be. Strength and courage suddenly returned to her, inspired by the remembrance of her lover and his words, she would speak.

"Why are you here?" she said.

Still no answer. The figure glided onward, and its eyes—glittering and baleful—were never once removed from Enid's face. With one supreme effort, the girl sprang from the bed and threw herself in the strange visitor's way. The figure halted and drew back. Enid laid a hand upon its arm. Ah, yes, thank Heaven, she felt the touch of flesh and blood! No weird reflected image of a wandering brain was before her; a woman—only a wicked desperate woman—stood in her way. Enid was not afraid.

"Florence," she said, "why are you here?" [Pg 317]

The woman dashed down the detaining hand. She knew that it was of no use to assume any longer the character with which she had hoped to impress the mind of the sensitive, nervous, delicate girl. She was no ghost indeed; she could figure no longer as a nightmare in Enid's memory. She stood revealed. But she did not lose her self possession. After a moment's pause, she spoke with dignity.

"I came here," she said, "to see whether you were sleeping quietly. Surely I may do so much for my husband's niece?"

"And what were you doing there?" said Enid, pointing to the mantelpiece. "Why were you tampering with what Mr. Ingledew sends me to take?"

"Tampering, you silly girl? You do not know the meaning of your own words!"

"Do I not? What have you in your hand?"

She grasped at the little phial which Flossy had half hidden in the white folds of her dressing-gown—grasped at it, and succeeded, by the quickness of her movement, in wrenching it from Mrs. Vane's hand. Then, even by the dim light of the candle, she could see that Flossy's color waned, and that her narrow eyes were distended with sudden fear.

"Why do you take that? Give it me back!"

"Yes," said Enid, upon whom the excitement had acted like a draught of wine, giving color to her face and decision to her tones—"yes, when I have found out what it contains."

"You little fool—you will not know when you look at it!"

"I will keep it and ask Mr. Ingledew or Mr. Evandale. You were pouring from it into the medicine that Mr. Ingledew gave me—for what purpose you know, not I."

A gasp issued from Flossy's pale lips. Her danger was clear to her now.

"Give it back to me!" she said. "I will have it—I tell you I will!"

Enid's hand was frail and slight; not for one moment could she have resisted Mrs. Vane's superior strength—for Flossy could be strong when occasion called for strength—and she did not try. With a quick sweep of her arm she hurled the little bottle into the grate! It broke into fragments as it [Pg 318] fell, the crash striking painfully on the ear in the stillness of the night. The two women looked into each other's faces; and then Flossy quailed and fell back a step or two.

"What good or harm will that do?" she asked slowly. "Why did you break it?"

"Better for it to be broken than used for others' harm."

"How do you know that it was meant to do harm?"

"I don't know it; I feel it—I am sure of it. If you lie and cheat and rob, where will you stop short? Is it likely that I of all people can trust you?"

Florence caught at the bed as if for support. She was trembling violently; but her face had all its old malignancy as she said—

"You are going to slander me to your uncle, I suppose? Every one knows that you would gain if I—I and little Dick were out of the way!"

Enid looked at her steadily.

"You are very clever, Florence," she said, "and it is exceedingly clever of you to mention little Dick to me. You know that I love him, although I do not love you. I shall do no harm to him that I can help. But this—this burden is more than I can bear alone! I shall go to another for help."

"You have promised to speak to nobody but Hubert on the subject," said Flossy, turning upon her with a look of tigress-like fury.

"To nobody but my husband or my promised husband."

"And that is Hubert."

"No; it is not Hubert."

"Not Hubert? Then who—who?"

"That is nothing to you. You will hear in good time. You have no right to question me; you lost your authority over me long ago."

"Not Hubert?" Flossy repeated once more, as if bewildered by the news. Then she burst into a low wild laugh. "You are right," she said. "He has replaced you already; he is desperately in love with Cynthia Westwood, the daughter of the man who murdered your father, and he has given you up. He never cared for you; he wanted your money only. Did that never occur to your innocent mind? As soon as he is better, he will make Cynthia his wife."

"He is free to do so if he pleases," said the girl, with a touch of scorn in her voice. "I am thankful [Pg 319] to escape from you both. You will not expect me to live under the same roof with you again."

"Go where you please," returned Florence, "say and do what you please; I shall be only too glad to think that I shall never see your face again. I always hated you, Enid Vane; from the time that you were a child I hated you, as I hated your mother before you. Some day you will perhaps know why."

"I don't want to know. I have always felt that you hated me," said Enid, the hot color receding from her cheeks. She was one of those people on whom the consciousness of being disliked produces a chilling effect. "But I never hated you; I do not hate you now. Oh, Flossy, is there no way of setting things straight without letting anybody know?"

Florence sneered at the almost child-like appeal.

"For myself," she said, "I have a resource which will not fail me even if you do your worst. Do you think that I would ever live to bear public disgrace? Not for twenty-four hours! Remember this, Enid Vane—the day when the whole story, as we know it, comes to light will be my last. If you betray me, you will be my murderess. You will have killed me as truly as ever—as ever a cruel assassin killed your father Sydney Vane!"

With a gesture of her arm, as if to keep the girl from touching her, she swept towards the open door. Enid did not attempt to stop her. A sensation of awe, of affright even, seized her as she watched the white figure gliding steadily along the passage until the darkness hid it from her view. Then she sank down on the bed once more, trembling and afraid. The desperate boldness which had for a long time possessed her was succeeded by a reaction of horror and dismay. How could she hide herself from Flossy's hate—how save herself from Flossy's sure revenge?

As she thought of these things, she knew by certain well-marked symptoms that one of her old attacks of almost cataleptic stupor was coming upon her. In the old days she would have succumbed to it at once. But Evandale's words rang in her ears. What had he said? He thought that she might control herself—that she might prevent these nervous seizures from overcoming

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her. She sat up, and by a violent effort roused herself a little. Then she tried the experiment of walking across the room to the open window, where the fresh air revived her. A glass of water, a few turns across the room, and, quite suddenly, she was once more mistress of herself. She had conquered the feeling of faintness—conquered the terrible rigidity of limb which used to attack her at these times. The Rector's words had proved the tonic that her weakened nerves seemed to require. For the first time in her life she was a conqueror. There was no reason why she should not conquer again and again until her nerves recovered their tone and the fatal tendency was overcome.

New strength came to her with this consciousness. She lighted a lamp and donned a dressing-gown; then, after a little deliberation, she went to Parker's room. She found the maid up and partially dressed. There was a scared look on the woman's face which caused Enid to suspect that her conversation with Mrs. Vane had been partially if not altogether overheard. But this Enid resolved not to seem to know.

"Parker," she said quietly, "I am thinking of going to London. Will you come with me?"

"Yes, miss, that I will—to the end of the world if you like!" was the unexpectedly fervent response.

But Enid showed no surprise.

"Can you tell me about the trains? What is the earliest?"

"There's one at six, miss; but you wouldn't start so early as that, would you?"

"The sooner the better, I think. I will dress now, and call you presently to pack my bag. The boxes can be sent afterwards."

"Yes, miss."

"And, Parker, if you come with me, you must remember that you are quitting Mrs. Vane's service. She will never take you back if you leave her now."

"I wouldn't come back—not if she paid me double!" cried Parker, honest tears starting to her beady eyes. "I don't care what she does; but I'll never work for her again—not after what I have heard and seen!"

"You must not speak either to me or any one else about what you have heard or seen," said Enid gravely, "particularly in the house to which we are going. Will you remember that?"

"Oh, yes, miss—I'll not say a single word! And you have settled where to go, miss, if I may make so bold as to ask?" [Pg 321]

"I am going to my aunt—Miss Vane," said Enid briefly; and Parker retired, not daring to ask any more questions, being a little overawed by the growth of some new quality in the girl's nature—some novel development of strength and character which imposed silence on her companion in this self-enforced exile.

The dawn was breaking when Enid began to make her preparations for departure. The faint yellow light of day stole into the room when she drew back the window-curtains and stood looking—perhaps for the last time, she thought—upon the flower-gardens and the lawn, upon the sheet of water in the distance, the beech woods, and the distant hills—spots that she had known from childhood, and which were dearer to her than any new scenes could ever be. And yet she did not falter in her purpose. Even to herself she did not seem the same gentle submissive maiden that she had hitherto been considered. Some new strength had passed into her veins; she was eager to act as became the woman who was one day to be the wife of Maurice Evandale.

She had one task to perform that was very hard to her. She could not go without writing a farewell letter to the General, who had always been so kind and good to her. She made it as short and simple as possible, and she explained nothing. Without consulting Mr. Evandale, and perhaps her aunt Leo, of whom she was genuinely fond, she felt that she was not free to speak.

> "Dearest uncle Richard," she wrote—"I think it best to go to London to-day and see aunt Leo. I am taking Parker with me. Forgive me if I say that I do not think I can ever come back again. I hope you will not look on me as ungrateful for all your kindness to me. I will write again, and shall hope to see you in London. Your loving niece, ENID."

She placed the letter in an envelope, addressed it, and left it in a conspicuous position on the dressing-table. Then she put on her hat and cloak, and asked Parker whether she was ready to leave the house. The clock had struck five, and they had some distance to walk before they could reach a railway-station. Parker prevailed upon her to eat and drink before they started; but the girl's appetite was small, and she left her biscuits almost untouched upon the plate. [Pg 322]

As the two stole silently down the corridor, Enid noticed that the door of Dick's night-nursery was half open. She hesitated, then with a mute sign to Parker to go on, she entered the room and made her way to the child's bedside. Parker lingered long enough to see her kneel down beside it, and lay her face for a few moments on the pillow beside the sleeping boy. She kissed him very gently; and when, with a sleepy movement, he turned and put his arm round her, as if to hold her there, the tears began to fall down her pale cheeks. But she dared not stay too long. She rose

presently, put his hand back under the coverlet, and kissed him once again.

"Dear little Dick," she murmured sorrowfully, "will you some day think that I did not love you, when you know what I have done, and what I shall have to do?"

When Enid rejoined Parker she was pale, but calm; the tears lingered on her eyelashes, but had been carefully wiped away from her cheeks. They left the house in silence by a side-door which could be easily unbolted; and for some time Parker did not venture to open her lips. Her young mistress looked like a different being with that grave determination on her face, that steady serious light in her sad but serene blue eyes.

Just when they reached the point from which the Hall could last be seen, Enid turned and looked at it for a moment. It was her last farewell; and the yearning tenderness that stole into her face as she gazed and gazed again brought the tears to Parker's eyes. The maid had taken a strong liking to Miss Enid Vane, and was ready to devote her whole strength to her service. At the same time, the thought of the revenge that Mrs. Vane might wreak upon her for this desertion was misery to Parker; for what should she do if her mother learned that she had once been dismissed from a situation in disgrace, or if she could not earn enough to keep her mother in the comfort to which she had grown accustomed? She was quite ready and willing to leave Mrs. Vane; but she was afraid when she considered the future; and, as she walked along the road beside her young mistress, the tears now and then brimmed over, and had to be surreptitiously wiped away. [Pg 323]

"If you are regretting what you have done, Parker," said Enid at length, "you are quite at liberty, you know, to go back to Beechfield Hall."

"Oh, no, miss—I wouldn't go back for anything! There's some things that even a servant can't bear to see going on. It's only my poor mother, miss, that I'm thinking about."

"Why?" said Enid gently—at that moment it was easy to her to sympathise with sorrow. "Is it your wages that you are thinking of? I am sure that you will not be a loser by coming with me."

"It's not the money, miss, thank you—it's—it's my character," said Parker, with a sudden gush of tears—"it's what my mother may hear of me that I care about! I wouldn't deceive you, miss, for the world! I'll tell you about it, if you'll kindly hear."

And then, as the two women walked along the lonely country road in the shining freshness of the early summer morning, Parker made her confession. She told the story of her disgrace and summary dismissal, of Mrs. Vane's apparent kindness to her, and of the way in which she had been used as a tool in the furtherance of Mrs. Vane's designs. Enid turned a shade paler as she heard of how she had been tracked, watched, spied upon; but there was no anger in her voice as she replied.

"I think we ought both to be thankful, Parker, to get away just now from Beechfield Hall. It will be better for us if we never see Mrs. Vane again. I do not think that she will hurt you however, or tell your story to your mother. She will have other things to think about just now."

Parker wondered vaguely what those other things were; but she did not say a word. For a minute or two Enid also was silent, and thought of Flossy. What was she doing? Of what was she thinking now?

As a matter of fact, Flossy was at that moment just awakening to a sick shuddering consciousness of what had happened. She had gone to her room and fallen to the floor in a death-like swoon. When she was able to move, she crept to the bell and rang again and again for Parker. But Parker of course did not come; and little by little Mrs. Vane became aware that she was deserted, that Enid and her maid had left the house, and that, for all she knew, instant ruin and disgrace hung like an inevitable fate above her head. [Pg 324]

When Enid spoke, it was in kindly tones.

"You must forget the past and start afresh, Parker. We all have to do that, you know, Mr. Evandale says. We will make a new beginning."

"I have often thought, miss, that I should like to tell Mr. Evandale all about it, and hear what he would say."

"You shall do so, Parker. We shall see Mr. Evandale in London very likely." Enid paused a little, and then said, in her even, serious voice, "I will tell you what I have told to no one else, Parker, because you have trusted me—I am going to marry Mr. Evandale."

"Are you, miss? I'm sure I'm very glad to hear it! We all thought, miss, that it was Mr. Lepel."

"No; I shall never marry Mr. Lepel."

"Is it a secret, miss?" said Parker.

"Until Mr. Evandale comes back from Yorkshire—that is all. After that we will have no more concealments of any kind. I think," said Enid softly but seriously—"I think that perfect truth is the most beautiful thing in the whole world."

CHAPTER XLIV.

Miss Vane's welcome of her niece was dashed by amazement.

"Why, good gracious, child," she said, "what have you come at this hour of the day for? I'm delighted to see you; but I never heard of such a thing! Arriving at nine o'clock in the morning from Beechfield, especially after all the accounts I have heard of your health! You look fit to faint as it is!"

"I am tired," said Enid, with a little smile.

She sat down in Miss Vane's pretty dining-room, where her aunt was seated at breakfast, and began to take off her gloves. Parker had retired into the lower regions of the house, and the two ladies were alone.

"I won't hear anything until you have had some coffee," said Miss Vane, in her quick decisive way. "Get a little color into those pale cheeks, my dear, before you begin to talk! There—drink [Pg 325] your coffee! Not a bad plan, after all, to start before the heat of the day comes on, only it is a wonderfully energetic proceeding! Have you come to shop, or are you anxious about Hubert? I went to his rooms the other day and saw him. He is weak; but he is quite sensible now, you know."

"Who was there?" said Enid, setting down her cup with a new color in her cheeks.

Miss Vane looked at her sharply.

"Oh, the nurse of course—a Beechfield woman, I believe, recommended by Florence! I saw no one else, not even the Jenkinses, who, I hear, have been most devoted to him in his illness."

Enid dropped her eyes. She did not care just then to ask any questions about Cynthia West. If Miss Vane knew the story, she evidently considered it unfit for Enid's ears.

"And now, my dear, what brings you to town," said aunt Leo briskly, when the meal was ended, and Enid had been installed on a comfortable sofa, where she was ordered to "lie still and rest;" "and how did you induce Richard and Flossy to let you come?"

"I ought perhaps to have told you as soon as I came in, aunt Leo," said Enid, sitting up, "that nobody knew—that, in fact, I have run away from Beechfield, and that I never, never can go back!"

"Oh," said Miss Vane, "that's rather sudden, is it not? But I suppose you have a reason?"

"Yes, aunt Leo, but one which—at present—I cannot tell."

"Cannot tell, Enid, my dear?"

"Not just yet—not until I have consulted some one else."

"Oh, Hubert, I suppose?"

"No," said Enid, blushing and holding down her head—"not Hubert."

Miss Vane put up her gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and inspected her for a minute or two.

"You look as if you had been worried out of your life!" she said. "You are as thin as a thread-paper! Well, you will not be worried here, my child. You can stay as long as you like, and tell me everything or nothing, as you please. One thing I will say—I suppose Flossy is at the bottom of it [Pg 326] all?"

"Yes, aunt Leo."

"That accounts for everything. Flossy never could be trusted. Did she want you to be engaged to Hubert?"

"I think so—at first. Now I do not know."

"I suppose they badgered you into it?" said Miss Vane thoughtfully. "Are you going on with it?"—in her usual abrupt tone.

"With the engagement, aunt Leo? Oh, no!"

"Come—that's a good thing!" said aunt Leo briskly. "For I don't think Hubert is quite worthy of you, my dear. He has disappointed me rather. Well, I won't bother you with any more questions, especially as I have a visitor coming at ten o'clock—a young parson from the country who has written to request an interview. There's the bell—I suppose he has arrived. Begging, I expect! I told Hodges——Why, he's showing the man in here! Hodges——"

But it was too late. Hodges always obeyed his mistress to the letter; and his mistress, thinking she would be alone, had ordered "the parson" to be shown into the dining-room. The presence of a visitor made no difference in Hodges' opinion. Accordingly, in spite of Miss Vane's signs and protests, he flung the door wide open, and announced, in a stentorian voice, the parson's name—

"Mr. Evandale."

Then Miss Vane—and Hodges too, before he closed the door—beheld a curious sight; for, instead of looking at his hostess, the parson, who was a singularly handsome man, with a band of crape on his arm, made two strides to the sofa, from which Enid, with a low cry of joy, arose and flung herself into his arms.

"My own darling!" exclaimed the man.

"Maurice—dearest Maurice!" the girl rejoined; and then she burst out crying upon his shoulder; and he kissed her and called her fond names in entire oblivion of Miss Vane's stately presence.

The old lady was both scandalised and offended by these proceedings. Her sharp eyes looked brighter and her rather prominent nose more hawk-like than ever as she made her voice heard at last.

"I should like some explanation of this extraordinary behavior!" she said; with asperity. "Sir, I have not the honor of knowing you! Enid, what does this mean?" [Pg 327]

"I am the Rector of Beechfield," said Mr. Evandale. "I most heartily beg your pardon, Miss Vane, for the way in which I have introduced myself to you! I wrote to ask if I might see you, because I know what a friend you have always been to Enid, and I wanted to see you myself and tell you how Enid and I had come to understand each other; but, when I saw my darling here—safe with you—I was so much taken by surprise——"

"I am taken by surprise too," said Miss Vane grimly. "Pray, sir, does the General know of your mutual understanding?"

"No, aunt Leo; and that is one reason why I came to you," said Enid, abandoning Maurice Evandale and bestowing an embrace upon her aunt. "You know, I had just told you that I was not engaged to Hubert."

"You gave up Hubert for this gentleman, did you?"

"I think, aunt Leo, that Hubert gave me up first;" and Enid raised her head and looked earnestly into her aunt's eyes, which fell before that serious candid gaze.

"Well, my dear, well—and was it for this that you came to me?"

Miss Vane's voice was gentler now; and Mr. Evandale took advantage of the opportunity afforded him to pour out the story of his love for Enid—of his certainty that she was not happy, and his endeavor to win her confidence. He went on to say that he had been in Yorkshire attending his father's funeral and settling his affairs for the last few days, and that it had occurred to him to call on Miss Vane—of whom he had so often heard!—on his way through London to Beechfield. He had meant to tell her of Enid's unhappiness and of his attachment to her, and to ask Miss Vane's interest and help; and it was the greatest possible surprise to him to find Enid in the room when he entered it.

"What did you mean by saying that she was safe here?" said Miss Vane at this point. "Safe with me, you said."

Maurice looked at the girl.

"I have told aunt Leo nothing yet," she said. "And, oh, dear aunt Leo, you won't be vexed, will you, if I may speak to Maurice just for five minutes first? Because indeed I am so puzzled that I do not know what to do."

Miss Vane subdued a rising inclination to anger, and did her best to smile. [Pg 328]

"Ah, well, I know what you young people are!" she said good-humoredly. "I suppose I shall be taken into your secrets by-and-by."

Enid kissed her cheek.

"If they were our secrets, you should know all about them this very minute," she said; "but they are not ours, dear auntie."

"Flossy's, I suppose?" said Miss Vane rather shortly, as she disengaged herself from Enid's arm and went out of the room. But she was not ill-pleased, although she pretended to feel piqued by the request for a private interview. "He looks like a man to be trusted," she said. "Enid will be happier with him than with Hubert—poor Hubert, poor miserable, deluded boy! As for Flossy, I cannot think of her without a shudder. Heaven knows what she has done, but she has most certainly driven Enid out of the house by her conduct! I hope it is nothing very seriously wrong."

At that moment a telegram was put into Miss Vane's hands. It was from the General.

"Is Enid with you? If not, telegraph at once. I am coming up to town by next train."

It seemed long to Miss Vane before she was summoned to the promised conference with Enid and Mr. Evandale. Here a great shock awaited her. Enid had told her whole story to Maurice, and he had said that, while the midnight interview between Enid and Mrs. Vane might be kept secret—as nothing could absolutely be proved respecting Flossy's sinister designs on Enid's life or health—the confession that Mrs. Meldreth had made to Enid in her last moments should be made known. Enid was however still reluctant; and Miss Vane was brought in chiefly to give her advice, and thus to settle the question.

"Well," she said, looking keenly from one to the other, as she sat beside Enid's sofa and Mr. Evandale stood before her, "I think I may safely say that it's not the money that either of you cares about."

"No, indeed!" The voices were unanimous.

"Neither money nor lands matter very much to you. But you"—to Evandale—"hate the deceit; and you, on the other hand"—turning to Enid—"are fond of the poor child, who, I must say, has been [Pg 329] treated about as badly as any of you. Isn't that the case?"

"Yes, aunt Leo."

"And what's to be done with him when the truth is made known? Is he to be made over to his rightful owner—Sabina Meldreth?"

Enid and Mr. Evandale looked at each other.

"No," said the Rector, at length—"certainly not! We would bring him up ourselves, if need be; and Enid would be to him all that his own mother and Mrs. Vane have failed to be."

"And he should never suffer," said Enid, with tears in her eyes. "I love him as if he were my own little brother, aunt Leo. He should have all the property—as far as I am concerned—if Maurice thought it right."

"Yes, certainly, if the General chose to leave it to him; but the General ought to know," said Mr. Evandale decisively. "I do not see how we can be parties to a deception any longer."

"It is a very hard position for all of us," said Miss Vane. "As for me, I am most seriously concerned for my brother. Have you thought what a terrible shock you are preparing for him?"

Evandale looked grave and did not answer.

"He is devotedly fond of his wife and of the child. To tell him that Florence is a liar and a cheat—that she has practised a deception upon him for many years, in order to gain position and a good income for herself as the mother of his son—above all, to tell him that the boy is not his son at all—do you think that he will survive it? Dare you take upon yourselves the responsibility of shortening his days in that way? I must confess that in your places I should hold my tongue; because it does not seem to have occurred to you that, after all, old Mrs. Meldreth may not have been speaking the truth."

"I never thought of that," said Enid.

"If you had seen the woman herself, Miss Vane, you would have been convinced of her sincerity," said the Rector.

"Possibly. But only you two were there. The General will probably refuse to listen to Enid's testimony, and will fume himself into an apoplectic fit when he hears that she has any to give. [Pg 330] You, Mr. Evandale, did not hear the woman's communication at all. Suppose you kill the General by the news—do you want to take the matter into court? Is Enid to stand up and tell her experiences to a pack of lawyers, and hear the world say that she has done it to get the estate for herself? You could not bear it, Enid, my child! You would lose your head and contradict yourself; and Flossy would brazen it out and be the heroine of the day; and Mr. Evandale would be ruined in costs."

"I don't mind that, so long as the truth prevails," said Mr. Evandale. "I do not want the money—neither does Enid; we would sooner endow an hospital with it or give it to little Dick than keep it if gained under such auspices. But it is hard to see Mrs. Vane—whom I firmly believe to be guilty of fraud as well as of an attempt upon my darling's life—triumphant in wrong-doing."

"Well, nobody ought to know better than you, Mr. Evandale, that the wicked flourish like the green bay-tree," said Miss Vane drily; "and I don't see that it is our part to destroy them."

"Aunt Leo, you are making us feel ourselves horrid!" said Enid from the cushions amongst which her aunt had insisted on installing her. "We do not want to punish her, or to make dear uncle Richard ill, or to turn poor little Dick out of Beechfield."

"Yet it is just those things which you propose doing."

There was a moment's silence. Then the Rector looked at Enid.

"I think we shall have to give it up, Enid, unless we get other evidence."

"Oh, I am so glad!" cried Enid, with tears in her eyes. "It was when I felt that it was perhaps my duty to speak that I was so miserable! But, if it would simply make mischief and be of no use, I am only too glad to feel that I may keep silence."

"I'm glad you see it in that light," said Miss Vane briefly. "I want as little as you do, Mr. Evandale, to see Enid kept out of her rightful inheritance; but I am convinced that, if Enid told my brother what she had heard, he would never believe her, that the excitement would make him ill; there would be a family quarrel, and the whole thing would be productive of no good result at all. If we [Pg 331] get more evidence, or if one of the guilty parties would confess, why, then it would be a different matter."

"I shall not mind seeing uncle Richard now," said Enid softly.

"But you will not go back to Beechfield?" said Mr. Evandale.

"No, indeed; she'll stay here," Miss Vane replied for her. "She'll stay here until she is married; and I hope that that day may not be far off."

"I hope not," said Maurice fervently. "Do you think that I may speak to the General to-day?"

"I should think so. But what about Hubert Lepel, Enid?"

Enid flushed crimson.

"If there is one thing more than another about which the General is particular, it is the keeping of a promise," continued Miss Vane. "He may say that he will hold you to your word."

"He cannot," Enid answered, with lowered eyelids. "For, if what I have been told is true, Hubert has broken his word to me—and so I am free."

"She must be free; she did not love him," said Maurice Evandale conclusively, as if that statement settled the question.

"Ah, well, if love were all," Miss Vane began, but the opening of the door interrupted her. "What is it, Hodges? Another telegram? Is it the General again, I wonder?"

She tore open the brown envelope with more anxiety than she liked to show; her eyebrows went up, and her mouth compressed itself as she read the words—first to herself, and then to Enid and the Rector. The message was again from the General, and ran as follows—

> "Hope Enid is safe. Cannot come myself because of carriage-accident. Dick seriously injured; but doctor gives hope."

"Oh, poor little Dick!" said Enid. "And I away from him!"

Miss Vane glanced at the Rector, and read in his eyes what was in her own mind—"If Dick should die, there would be no further perplexity." Then both dropped their eyes guiltily, and hoped that Enid—dear, innocent, loving Enid!—had not guessed what they were thinking.

"At any rate," said Miss Vane, after a little pause, "you can do nothing now; and it is just as well that we have all resolved to hold our tongues." [Pg 332]

And then she went away to write some letters; and Enid was left alone with Maurice Evandale.

"My darling," said her lover, "are you sure that you are content and happy now?"

"Quite sure, Maurice—except that I think—I half think—that I ought not to be married; I shall make such a bad wife to you if I am always ailing and weak."

"But you are not going to be ailing and weak, dearest—you are going to be a strong woman yet. Did you not tell me how you conquered that nervous inclination to give way last night after your interview with Mrs. Vane? And did you not walk to the station and travel up to town in the early morning without doing yourself a particle of harm? Believe me, darling, your ill-health was in great part a figment got up by Mrs. Vane for her own ends. You are perfectly well; and, when we are married, you will be strong too. Do you believe me, Enid?"

"Perfectly."

"And are you sure yet whether you love me or not?"

She smiled, and the color flooded her sweet face. And he, although he knew well enough what she would say, pressed for an answer, and would not be satisfied until it had been put into words.

"Do you love me, Enid? Tell me, darling—'Yes' or 'No'?"

And at last she answered very softly—

"I love you, Maurice, with all my heart and soul!"

CHAPTER XLV.

Maurice Evandale was obliged to go to Beechfield that evening; but, before he went, he explained his position more fully to Miss Vane than he had thought it necessary to do with Enid. His father had left him an ample income; he had no near relatives, and was able to look forward with confidence to giving Enid a comfortable home. He wanted to marry her as soon as possible; but, as Miss Vane pointed out to him, there was no use in being in too great a hurry, for many things would have to be settled before Enid's hand could be given in marriage. She herself had always meant to leave Enid a fair share of her own wealth, and she announced her intention of settling a considerable sum upon her at once. If the General would do the same thing, Enid would be a bride with a goodly dower. But Miss Vane was a little inclined to think that her brother would be angry with the girl for leaving his house, and that he might be difficult to manage. Mr. Evandale [Pg 333]

must be guided by circumstances—so she said to him; and, if Dick was ill, and the General anxious and out of temper, he had better defer his proposal for a week or two. She promised that she would do her best to help him; and he knew that he might rely on Enid's assurance of her love.

Accordingly he went back to Beechfield; and Enid was left at Miss Vane's, there to gain strength of mind and body in the pleasant peaceable atmosphere of her house.

Miss Vane did not give many parties or go much into society about this time. With those whom she really loved she was always at her best; and many of her associates would have been thoroughly astonished to see how tender, how loving this worldly, cynical old woman, as they thought her, could show herself to a girl like Enid Vane. She gave up many engagements for Enid's sake, and lived quietly and as best suited her young visitor. For Enid, although rapidly recovering, was not yet strong enough to bear the excitement of London gaieties. Besides, Dick was reported to be very ill, and during his illness Enid could not have borne to go out to theatres and balls.

The General had been driving to the station when the accident took place. The horse had taken fright and grown unmanageable; the phaeton had been nearly dashed to pieces; and Dick, who had been on the box beside his father, had had a terrible fall. He had never spoken or been conscious since; he lingered on from day to day in a state of complete insensibility; and while he was in that state the General would not leave him. Of Flossy nobody heard a word. The General wrote to his sister, and sent kind messages to Enid, but did not mention Flossy. Aunt Leo and Enid both wondered why.

Enid had been in town nearly a week, when one morning a letter was brought to her at the sight of which she colored deeply. She was sitting at the luncheon-table with her aunt, and for a few minutes she left the letter beside her plate unopened. [Pg 334]

"Won't you read your letter, dear?" said Miss Vane.

"Thank you, aunt Leo." Then she took the letter and opened it; but her color varied strangely as she read, and, when she had finished it, she pushed it towards her aunt. "Will you read it?" she said quietly. "It seems to me that he does not understand our position."

The servants were not in the room, and she could talk freely. Aunt Leo settled her eye-glasses on her nose, and looked at the letter.

"Why, it's from Hubert!" she said breathlessly.

Then she read it half aloud; and Enid winced at the sound of some of the words.

"My dearest Enid," Hubert had written—"I have just heard that you are in town. If I could come to see you, I would; but you know, I suppose, that I have been ill. I have had no letter from you for what seems an interminable time. I must ask you to excuse more from me to-day—my hand is abominably shaky!

"Yours,
"H.L."

The handwriting was certainly shaky; Miss Vane had some difficulty in deciphering the crooked characters.

"H'm!" she said, laying the letter on the table and looking inquiringly at her niece. "What does he mean?"

"He means that he still thinks me engaged to him," said Enid, the color hot in her girlish cheeks.

"Then you had better disabuse him of that notion, my dear, for you can't be engaged to two people at once; and I have given my consent to your marriage with Mr. Evandale."

"Do you think," said Enid, in a half whisper, "that I have been mistaken, and that Hubert will be—sorry?"

"No, dear, I don't!"

"Aunt Leo, is this report true about him and Miss West?"

"What do you know about Miss West, Enid?"

"Uncle Richard told me. She came to nurse Hubert when he was ill. Uncle Richard seemed to think that very wrong of her; but I don't. I think it was right, if she loved him. If Maurice were ill, I should like to go and nurse him, whether he cared for me or not."

"Child," said Miss Vane solemnly, "you are a simpleton! You don't know what you are talking about! I have seen Cynthia West and talked to her, and she is not a woman who, I should think, knows what true love is at all. She is hard and careless and worldly, and singularly ill-mannered. She is not the woman that Hubert would do well to marry." [Pg 335]

"What am I to say to him?" asked Enid, with her eyes on the tablecloth, "if he says that he does not want to marry her—that he wants to marry me?"

"You must tell him the truth, my dear," said Miss Vane, rising briskly from the table, and shaking

out a fold of her dress on which some crumbs had fallen—"namely, that you don't care a rap for him, but that you are in love with the Beechfield parson; and if Hubert is a gentleman, he will not press his claim. And to do Hubert justice, whatever may be his faults, I believe that he generally acts like a gentleman."

Miss Vane went away from the dining-room to dress for a drive and a round of calls. Before long, Enid, who had refused to accompany her, was left in the house alone; and then a vague desire began to take definite shape in her mind. She would see Hubert for herself. She would claim her own freedom, and tell him that he was free. He was well enough now to listen to her, if he was well enough to write. She would go to him while aunt Leo was out—that very afternoon.

A hansom-cab made the matter very easy. She had almost a sense of elation as she stood at the door of Hubert's sitting-room and knocked her timid little knock, which had to be twice repeated before the door was opened; and then a tall slight girl in black stood in the doorway and asked her what she wanted.

"I want to see Mr. Lepel," said Enid, blushing and hesitating.

"Mr. Lepel has been ill." The girl's clear voice had a curious vibration in it as she spoke. "Do you want to see him particularly?"

Enid took courage and looked at her. The girl wore a black hat; her dress was severely plain, and her face was pale. Enid thought there was nothing remarkable about her—therefore that she could not be Cynthia West.

"I am his cousin," she explained simply, "and my name is Vane—Enid Vane."

A flash of new expression changed the girl's face at once. Not remarkable—with those great dark [Pg 336] eyes, and the lovely color coming and going in the oval cheeks! Enid confessed her mistake to herself frankly. The girl was remarkably handsome—it was a fact that could not be gainsaid. Enid looked at her gravely, with a little feeling of repulsion which she found it difficult to help.

"Will you come in?" said Cynthia. "Mr. Lepel is in his room; but he means to get up this afternoon. If you will kindly wait for a few moments in his sitting-room, I am sure that he will be with you before long. I will speak to his man Jenkins."

She had ushered Enid into Hubert's front room, from which the untidiness had disappeared. His artistic properties were displayed to great advantage, and every vase was filled with flowers. It was plain that a woman's hand had been at work.

Enid glanced around her with curiosity. Cynthia pushed a chair towards her, and waited until the visitor had seated herself. Then, repeating the words, "I will speak to his man Jenkins," she prepared to leave the room.

Enid rose from her chair.

"You are Miss West," she said—"Cynthia West?"

"Cynthia Westwood," replied the girl, and looked sorrowfully yet proudly into Enid's eyes.

Her face was flushed, but Enid's had turned pale.

"Will you stay and speak to me for a minute or two? I see that you were going out——"

"It does not matter; I need not go," said Cynthia, removing her hat and laying it carelessly on one of the tables. "If you want to speak to me——"

Neither of them concluded her sentence. Each was conscious of great embarrassment.

For once in her life, Cynthia stood like a culprit; for she thought that Enid loved Hubert Lepel, and that she—Cynthia—had withdrawn him from his allegiance. It was Enid who broke the silence.

"I wanted to see you," she said. "I came to see you more than to see Hubert. I heard you were here."

Cynthia looked up quickly.

"You heard Mrs. Vane's opinion of me, I suppose?" It was bitterly spoken.

"My uncle told me—not Mrs. Vane," said Enid. "I should not believe a thing just because Mrs. [Pg 337] Vane said it—nor my uncle, for his opinions all come from Mrs. Vane."

Her expressions were somewhat vague; but her meaning was clear. Cynthia flashed a grateful glance at her.

"You mean," she said, holding her graceful head a trifle higher than usual, "that you do not think that I am unwomanly—that I have disgraced myself—because I came here to nurse Mr. Lepel in his illness?"

"No! I should have done the same in your place—if I loved a man."

The color mounted to the roots of Cynthia's hair.

"You know that?" she said quickly. "That I—I love him, I mean? There is no use in denying it—I

do. There is no harm in it. I shall not hurt him by loving him—as I shall love him—to the last day of my life."

"No; I should be the last person to blame you," said Enid very gently, "because I know what love is myself;" and then the clear color flamed all over her fair face as it had flamed in Cynthia's.

Cynthia bit her lip.

"You do not think," she said, with the impetuous abruptness which might have been ungraceful in a less beautiful woman, but was never unbecoming to her, "that because I love him I want to take him away from those who have a better right than I to his love? I learned to care for him unawares; I had given him my love in secret long before—before he knew. He knows it now; I cannot help his knowing. But I am not ashamed. I should be ashamed if I thought that I could make him unfaithful to you."

Enid looked at her, and admired. Cynthia's generosity was taking her heart by storm. But for the moment she could not speak, and Cynthia went on rapidly.

"You do not know what he has been to me. I have had trouble and misfortune in my life, and I have had kindness and good friends also; but he—he was almost the first—he and you together, Miss Vane, although you do not know what I mean perhaps. Do you remember meeting a ragged child on the road outside your park gates, and speaking kindly to her and giving her your only shilling? That was myself!"

"You," cried Enid—"you that little gipsy girl! I remember that I could not understand why I was [Pg 338] sent away." Then she stopped short and looked aside, fearing lest she had said something that might hurt.

"I know," said Cynthia. "Your aunt—Miss Vane—was shocked to find you talking to me, for she knew who I was. She sent you back to the house; but before you went you asked Mr. Lepel to be good to me. He promised—and he kept his word. Although I did not know it until long afterwards, it was he who sent me to school for many years, and had me trained and cared for in every possible way. I did not even know his name; but I treasured up my memories of that one afternoon when I saw him at Beechfield all through the years that I spent at school. I knew your name; and I kept the shilling that you gave me, in remembrance of your goodness. I have worn it ever since. See—it is round my neck now, and I shall never part from it. And do you think that, after all these years of gratitude and tender memory of your kindness, I would do you a wrong so terrible as that of which Mrs. Vane accuses me? I would die first! I love Hubert; but, if I may say so, I love you, Miss Vane, too, humbly and from a distance—and I will never willingly give you a moment's pain. I will be guided by what you wish me to do. If you tell me to leave the house this day, I will go, and never see him more. You have the right to command, and I will obey."

"But why," said Enid slowly, "did you not think of all this earlier? Why, when you were older, did you not remember that you—you had no right——"

She could not finish her sentence.

"Because of his relationship to you, and his engagement to you?" said Cynthia. "Oh, I see that I must tell you more! Miss Vane, I was ungrateful enough to run away from the school at which he placed me, as soon as my story became accidently known to my schoolfellows. I was then befriended by an old musician, who taught me how to sing and got me an engagement on the stage. When he died, I was reduced to great poverty. I heard of Mr. Lepel at the theatre. He wrote plays, and had become acquainted with my face and my stage-name; but he did not know that I was the girl whom he had sent to school; and I did not know that he was the gentleman [Pg 339] whom I had seen with you at Beechfield. His face sometimes seemed vaguely familiar to me; but I could not imagine why."

"And he did not remember you?"

"Not in the least. I applied to him for help to get work," said Cynthia, flushing hotly at the remembrance; "and he found out that I had a voice and helped me. I went to him because I heard of his kindness to others, and I had read a story that he had written, which made me think that he would be kind. And he was kind—so kind that, without design, without any attempt to win my heart, I fell in love with him, Miss Vane, not knowing that he was your cousin, not knowing that he was plighted to another. You may not forgive me for it; I can only say that I do not think that it was my fault; and I am sure that he—he was not to blame. You may punish me as you will"—there was a rising sob in Cynthia's throat—"but you must forgive him, and he will be true—true to you."

She covered her face and burst into passionate tears. She could control herself no longer; and at first she hardly felt the touch of Enid's hand upon her arm, or heard the words of comfort that fell from Enid's lips.

"You do not understand me," Enid was saying, when at last Cynthia could listen, "and I want to make you understand. I have misjudged you—will you forgive me? It has been very, very hard for you!"

The tears were rolling down her own cheeks as she spoke. Cynthia surrendered her hand to Enid's clasp, and listened as if she were in a dream—a pleasant beautiful dream, too good to last.

"We may perhaps be divided all our lives," said Enid, "because of things that happened when we

were children—things that you cannot help any more than I. But, as far as it is possible, I want always to be your friend. Think of me as your friend—will you not, Cynthia?"

"If I may," said Cynthia.

"I shall always remember you," Enid went on. "And I do not think that it was wrong for you to love Hubert, or for him to love you—and he does love you, does he not? You need not be afraid to tell me, because I came here chiefly for one thing—to tell him that I cannot marry him, and to ask him to set me free."

"Not for my sake?" said Cynthia, trembling from head to foot. [Pg 340]

"Not for your sake, dear, but for my own," said Enid, taking both her hands and looking straight into Cynthia's tear-filled eyes; "because I have been as unfaithful to him as I think that he has been to me—and I have given my heart away to some one else. I am going to marry Mr. Evandale, the Rector of Beechfield."

The two girls were standing thus, hand-in-hand, the eyes of each fixed on the other's face, when the door of communication with the next room was suddenly opened. Hubert stood there, leaning on Jenkins' arm—for he was still exceedingly weak—and the start of surprise which he gave when he saw Enid and Cynthia was uncontrollable. Cynthia dropped Enid's hand and turned away; there was something in her face which she could not bear to have seen. Enid advanced towards her cousin, and held out her hand in quiet friendly greeting.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"I have come to answer your note myself," said Enid to her cousin, as he made his way with faltering steps into the room. "I hope that you are better now?"

Hubert had seldom felt himself in a more uncomfortable position. What did this mean? Had Enid and Cynthia been comparing notes? He looked from one to the other in helpless dismay, and scarcely answered Enid's inquiry as he sank into the chair that Tom Jenkins wheeled forward for him. Cynthia had turned her back upon the company, and was again putting on her little black hat. It was plain that both she and Enid had been crying.

"You must have been very ill," said Enid, regarding him with compassionate eyes.

"For a few days I believe that I was rather bad; but I am all right now," said Hubert, taking refuge in conventionalities. "My kind nurse has introduced herself to you perhaps?"

"We introduced ourselves to each other," said Enid; and then she walked away from him to Cynthia. "Will you leave us together for a little time?" she murmured. "You do not mind? I shall [Pg 341] not be long; but I want to make Hubert understand what I said to you just now."

She had drawn Cynthia outside the door as she spoke. The two looked at each other again gravely, and yet with a kind of pleasure and satisfaction—then they kissed each other. Cynthia ran down-stairs; Enid re-entered the drawing-room and closed the door. Mrs. Jenkins had appeared on the scene with a tea-tray, which she arranged on a small table at Hubert's elbow; and, till she had gone, Enid did not speak. She sat down in a low arm-chair and observed her cousin steadily. He was certainly very much changed. His hair was turning gray on the temples; his eyes were hollow and haggard; he was exceedingly thin. There was an air of gloom and depression about him which Enid had not noticed before.

She gave him a cup of tea and took one herself before she would let him speak of anything but commonplaces. He did not seem inclined to talk; but, when she took away his cup, he laid a detaining hand on her arm, and said—

"It is very good of you to come."

"I would have come before if I had been able—and if you had wanted me."

"You are always welcome," said Hubert. But his tone was languid, and his eyes did not meet her own.

"Hubert, are you well enough to have a little talk with me—a sort of business conversation?"

"Certainly, Enid. I am really quite well now." There was still no alacrity in his reply.

"And you wrote to me, saying that I had not written——"

"And you had not—for a month or more," said he, smiling a little more frankly into her face. "Was I wrong?"

"Did you expect me to write?"

"Yes, certainly. Why not?"

"You did not think that I should believe what your sister has been saying?" Enid asked.

"Flossy? What does she say?"

"Miss West has not told you? Of course she knows; for she was here when Mrs. Vane and the General called."

"I suppose that everything disagreeable has been kept from me," said Hubert, after little pause. [Pg 342]
"I know that there is a pile of letters which my nurses will not let me read. Tell me what has been going on."

"I am sorry to have to say disagreeable things to you," said Enid softly. "It will not make you ill again, will it, Hubert?"

"Out with it! It won't matter!" said Hubert, in a rather impatient tone. "What do you want to say?"

"Nothing to make your pulse throb and your face flush in that manner," she answered, sitting down beside him and laying her cool fingers on his wrist. "Dear Hubert, I have no bad news for you, though I may say one or two things that sound disagreeable. Please don't excite yourself in this way, or I must go away."

"No, no—you must speak out now; it will do me no harm. What is it?"

"Flossy saw Miss West here. She was displeased by her presence. Uncle Richard believed every word that his wife said, and was led to think that Cynthia West was a wicked designing creature who wanted to marry you. You can imagine what Florence would say and what uncle Richard would believe."

"I can indeed! And did she come here and say this to Cynthia?"

"She said a great deal, I believe. She tried to make Cynthia go away—Uncle Richard told me; and —shall I tell you everything, Hubert?—he said that you would not be 'led astray' for very long, and that I should find that you were true—true to me."

"Enid, did you believe him?"

"I don't know exactly what I believed. It seemed to me that Cynthia West had done a very noble thing in coming to nurse you when you were ill."

Hubert turned and seized her hands.

"Heaven bless you for saying that, Enid! She saved my life."

"And we should be grateful to her, and not malign her, should we not? But it is only right, Hubert, that I should know the truth."

"The truth? What is there to know?" said Hubert, relinquishing her hands and frowning heavily. "Flossy is absurdly wrong and mistaken, and Cynthia West is one of the noblest women in the world—that is all that I have to say. When I am a little stronger, Enid, it will be better if you will [Pg 343]
consent to marry me at once; then we can go away together and spend the winter in Egypt or Algiers."

He spoke hardily, determinedly. He had made up his mind to carry out his sacrifice, if Enid desired it, at any cost. He had, as the General would have said, returned to his allegiance.

Enid looked at him with a keenness, an intentness, which struck him as remarkable.

"Do you want me to marry you?" she said.

"Of course I do! Why else should I have asked you?" he returned, with all a sick man's petulance. "I want to get the ceremony over as soon as possible—as soon as you will consent. When shall it be!"

"One moment, Hubert. Tell me first what I want to know. Is Flossy right in saying that Cynthia loves you?"

"You may be quite sure that Flossy is infernally wrong in anything she says!" he answered.

He had never spoken so roughly to her before. She drew back for a second, and he immediately apologised.

"I beg your pardon, Enid; I am sorry to be so irritable. Think of me as a sick man still, and forgive me. But Flossy knows nothing of the matter."

"Not even that Cynthia cares for you?"

A deep flush rose to his face.

"You should not ask me. It is the last thing that I can tell," he said, with the same sharpness of tone.

"Then tell me another thing, Hubert. Do you not care for her?"

"Yes—a great deal. She has been a kind friend—an excellent nurse—and I am grateful to her. Enid, I do not like to think that you believe me to be untrue to you."

She took his hand in hers and kissed it—a movement which discomposed him exceedingly.

"I did not think for one moment that you would desert me, Hubert, if I wanted you to perform

what you had promised."

"Enid, what do you mean? Of course I shall perform what I have promised. Has Flossy been making you jealous and suspicious? My dear, believe me, there is no occasion for you to be so. You are very dear to me, and I will be faithful to you always. You shall never have cause to complain." [Pg 344]

"Yes, I know," she said gently. "You are very good, Hubert, and you would not for the world do what you think to be a cruel thing. But would it not be better for you to be perfectly open with me? If you care for Cynthia West, would it not be better even for me that you should marry the woman whom you love?"

She looked at him and saw his face twitch. Then he shook his head.

"This is folly, Enid, and I am really not strong enough to stand it. You have no need to be troubled with doubts and fears, my little girl. Cynthia West is as good and true as a woman can be; and I—I mean to make you happy and do my duty as a man should do."

Enid smiled, but her eyes were filled with tears.

"Ah, Hubert, I am so glad that you say that!" she cried. Hubert looked worried, tormented, anything but glad; but she went on: "I always trusted you—always believed in you—and I was right. You would never be untrue—you would never——"

"For Heaven's sake, Enid, stop!" said Hubert faintly. "I can't—I can't bear this sort of thing!" And indeed he looked so ghastly that she had to find smelling-salts and bring him some cold water to drink before she could go on.

"I am very sorry," she said penitently, "and I will say what I have to say very quickly, if you will let me. You will not acknowledge the truth, I see, though it would be wiser if you would. You love Cynthia West, and Cynthia loves you; and, though you are willing to keep your word to me, you care for me only as a cousin and a friend. Is not that really the truth?"

"My dear Enid, you are developing a wonderful amount of imagination and, I may say, of courage!"

"I don't know about imagination," she said, smiling again; "but I think that I have gained a great deal of courage since I saw you last. As you will not set me free for your own sake, I must ask you to set me free for mine. I cannot marry you, Hubert. Will you forgive me for breaking my word?"

Her eyes shone so brightly, her smile was so sweet, that Hubert looked at her in amazement. He had never seen her half so beautiful. She was transfigured; for love and happiness had done their work, and made her lovelier than she had ever been in all her life before. [Pg 345]

"I am in earnest," she went on. "I have been false to you, Hubert dear—and yet I never liked you so well as I like you now. I have given my word to some one else—to some one that I love better—and I want to know if you will forgive me and set me free."

"Enid I cannot understand! Do you think that I am not ready—anxious—to marry you? My dear, if you will only trust me and honor me so far——"

Enid laughed in his face.

"Why won't you believe that I am in earnest?" she said. "Indeed I am speaking seriously. I love Maurice Evandale, the Rector of Beechfield, better than I love you, uncivil though it may sound."

He caught her by the hands.

"Really—truly—Enid? You love him?"

"Far better than I ever loved you, dear Hubert! You are my cousin, whom I love sincerely in a cousinly way; but I love Maurice with all my heart and soul!"—and a deep blush overspread her countenance, while her happy smile and lowered eyes attested the truth of her statement.

"And are you happy?"

"Very happy! And, Hubert, I should like to see you happy too. Now acknowledge the truth, please. You love Cynthia—is not that true?"

"Enid, you are a witch!"

"And she loves you?"

He did not answer for a minute or two. Then with unaccustomed gravity of tone, he said—

"I fear so, Enid."

"You fear so? Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Because I am afraid that, even if we love each other, we ought not to marry."

Enid's face grew thoughtful, like his own.

"You mean because of my father?" she said, in a low voice.

"Yes—because of your father."

But he did not mean it in the sense that she attributed to his words. He lay back in his chair, sighing heavily, and again growing very pale.

"Hubert," said the girl, "I think you are wrong. Cynthia is not to blame for her father's actions—it [Pg 346] is not fair to punish the innocent for the guilty."

"My dear, I must tell you before you go on that Cynthia does not believe her father guilty."

"Not guilty? Oh, Hubert! But you think so, do you not?"

He struggled with himself for a minute.

"No, Enid," he said at last.

Her face grew troubled and perplexed.

"But the jury said that he was guilty! You think that they were wrong? Perhaps some new evidence has been found! I shall be glad for Cynthia's sake if her father is innocent."

"Shall you, Enid?"

"Yes; for it must be such a terrible thing for a girl to know that her father has committed a great crime. She can never forget it; her whole life must be overshadowed by the remembrance. I am so thankful to think that my own dear father—although his end was tragic—lived a good and honorable life. It would be awful for Cynthia if she believed her father to be a wicked man!"

Hubert turned away his face. It was terrible to him to hear her speak thus. It seemed to him that, whenever an impulse came upon him to speak the truth, she herself made the truth appear unspeakable. Better perhaps to leave the matter where it stood. It was a mere question of transferring a burden from Cynthia's strong to Enid's feeble shoulders.

"Whether Westwood was really innocent or guilty," he said, with an effort, "is not for us to decide —now."

"No; and therefore we must do our best for Cynthia and for ourselves," said Enid, with sudden resolution. "I did not know before that there was even a doubt about his guilt; but, if so, our way is all the clearer, Hubert. You are not hesitating because you do not want to marry a convict's daughter, are you?"

"Not at all."

"Then it is because you are afraid that we—that I perhaps—shall be hurt? I know that Flossy and the General feel strongly on the point. But, Hubert, I absolve you—I give you leave. In my father's name I speak; for I am sure that in another world where all things are known he sees as I do— [Pg 347] that the innocent must not be punished for the guilty. If you love Cynthia, Hubert, marry her; and I will give you my best wishes for your happiness. I am sure that it should be so—else why should God have permitted you to love each other?"

"Enid, you are an angel!" cried Hubert.

He seized her hand and pressed it to his lips. She felt tears hot upon her fingers, and knew that they came from his eyes. She bent down and kissed his forehead.

"God bless you dear!" she said. "I am so happy myself that I cannot bear you and Cynthia to be unhappy. Will you tell her when she comes in that I want you to marry her as soon as possible? She is so good, so noble, that I am sure you will be happy with her. And you can go abroad together if you are married soon. Good-bye Hubert! We shall always think of each other lovingly, shall we not?"

"I shall think of you—gratefully," he said, with his face bowed down upon his hands—"as of an angel from heaven!"

"Oh, no—only as a poor, weak, erring little girl, who broke her word to you and had far more happiness than she deserved. And now good-bye."

He would have detained her—perhaps to say more words of gratitude—perhaps to say something else; but she withdrew herself from his clasping hand and quietly left the room. She knew that he was better alone. She went down-stairs, let herself out of the house, and met Cynthia on the steps. The girl was just returning after a hurried walk round and round the square.

"Go to him," said Enid softly. "He wants help and comfort, and he wants your love. You will be very happy by-and-by."

And Cynthia went.

CHAPTER XLVII.

Cynthia came softly into the room. She looked timidly towards Hubert's chair, then rushed

forward and rang the bell violently. She had had some fear of the result of Enid's visit, and her fear was certainly justified.

Hubert had fainted away when his visitor had left the room. [Pg 348]

It was not until some time afterwards that Cynthia allowed him to talk again. She had medicaments of various kinds to apply, and insisted upon his being perfectly quiet. She had wanted him to go to bed again; but he had resisted this proposition; and, in consequence, he was still in the sitting-room, though lying upon the sofa, at the hour of half-past eight that evening, when the light was fading, and Cynthia was at his side.

"You feel better now, do you not?" she said to him.

"Yes, thank you." The tone was curiously dispirited.

"I must call Jenkins, and you must go to bed."

He caught her hand.

"Not yet, Cynthia—I want to say something."

"To-morrow," she suggested.

"No, not to-morrow—to-night. I am quite well able to talk. Cynthia, where is your father?"

The question was utterly unexpected.

"My father?" she echoed. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I have an impression that he is in England, and that you have seen him lately."

"If I had," said Cynthia tremulously, "I should be bound not to tell any one."

"Ah, that is true! And you would not trust even me," he remarked, with a great sigh. "Well, I suppose that you are right!"

"I trust you perfectly," she said.

"You have no reason to do so. Cynthia, do you know why Enid Vane came to-day?"

"Yes,—she told me."

"She is engaged to Mr. Evandale. She has set me free."

There was a silence. Cynthia did not move; and at last Hubert said, in a stifled voice—

"I love one woman, and one only. What can I say to her?"

"Nothing but that," said Cynthia softly; and then she turned and kissed him.

"I dare not say even that," he muttered.

"Why not? You told me once of an obstacle—Enid Vane was the obstacle, was she not?"

"One obstacle. But there was another." [Pg 349]

"Another!" exclaimed Cynthia. "What could that be?"

She was kneeling beside him, her hand locked fast in his, her arm upon his shoulder. A sort of sob broke from his lips.

"Oh, my darling," he said, "I am the last man that you ought ever to have loved!"

"But I love you now, Hubert."

"I am a villian, Cynthia—a mean miserable cur! Can't you accept that fact, and leave me without asking why?"

"No, I cannot, Hubert; I don't believe it."

"It is no good telling me that—I know myself too well. Believe all that I say, Cynthia, and give me up. Don't make me tell you why."

"I shall always love you," she whispered, "whether you are bad or good."

"Suppose that I had injured any one that was very dear to you—saved myself from punishment at his expense? I daren't go any farther. Is there nothing that you can suppose that I have done—the very hardest thing in the whole world for you to forgive? You can't forgive it, I know; to tell you means to cut myself off from you for the rest of my life; and yet I cannot make up my mind to take advantage of your ignorance. I have resolved, Cynthia, that I will not say another word of—of love to you—until you know the truth."

She gazed at him, her lips growing white, her eyes dilating with sudden terror.

"There is only one thing," she said at length, "that I—that I——"

"That you could not forgive. I am answered, Cynthia; it is that one thing that I have done."

He spoke very calmly, but his face was white with a pallor like that of death. She remained motionless; it seemed as if she could scarcely dare to breathe, and her face was as pale as his own.

"Hubert," she said presently, only just above her breath, "you must be saying what you do not mean!"

"I would to God that I did not mean it!" he exclaimed, bestirring himself and trying to rise. "Get up, Cynthia; I cannot lie here and see you kneeling there. Rather let me kneel to you; for I have [Pg 350] wronged you—I have wronged your father beyond forgiveness. It was I—I who killed Sydney Vane!"

He was standing now; but she still knelt beside the sofa, with her face full of terror.

"Hubert," she said caressingly, "you do not know what you say. Sit down, my darling, and keep quiet. You will be better soon."

"I am not raving," he answered her; "I am only speaking the truth. God help me! All these years I have kept the secret, Cynthia; but it is true—I swear before God that it is true! It was I who killed Sidney Vane. Now curse me if you will, as your father did long years ago."

He fell back on the sofa, and buried his face in his hands with a moan of intolerable pain.

There came a long silence. Cynthia did not move; she also had hidden her face.

"Oh," she said at last, "I do not know what to do! My poor father—my poor father! Think of the shame and anguish that he went through! Oh, how could you bear to let him suffer so?" And then she wept bitterly and unrestrainedly; and Hubert sat with his head bowed in his hands.

But after a time she became calm; and then, without looking up, she said, in a low voice—

"I should like to hear it all now. Tell me how it happened."

He started and removed his hands from his face. It was so haggard, so miserable, that Cynthia, as she glanced at him, could not forbear an impulse of pity. But she averted her head and would not look at him again.

"You must tell me everything now," she said.

And so he told the story. He found it hard to begin; but as he went on, a certain relief came to him, in spite of shame and sorrow, at the disburthening himself of his secret. He did not spare himself. He told the tale very fully, and, little by little, it seemed to Cynthia that she began to understand his life, his character, his very soul, as she had never understood them before. She understood, but she did not love.

The confession left her cold; her father's wrongs had turned her heart to stone.

"And now," he said, when he had finished his story, "you can fetch your father and clear him in [Pg 351] the eyes of the world as soon as you like. I will take any punishment that the law allots me. But I think that I shall not have to bear it long. Even a life sentence ends one day, thank God!"

Then Cynthia spoke.

"You think," she said very coldly, "that I shall tell your story—that I shall denounce you to the police?"

"As you please, Cynthia," he answered, with a sadness born of despair.

"You throw the burden on me!" she said. "You have thrown your burdens on other people's shoulders all your life, it seems. But now you must bear your own." She rose and moved away from him. "I shall not accuse you. Your confession is safe enough with me. You forget that I—I loved you once. I cannot give you up to justice even for my father's sake. You must manage the matter for yourself."

"Cynthia," he cried hoarsely—"Cynthia, be merciful!"

"Had you any mercy for my father?" she asked him, looking at him with eyes in which the reproach was terrible to his inmost soul. "Did you ever think what he had to bear?" Her hand was on the door. "I am going now," she said—"I am going to my father; I have learned the place in which he lives. But I shall not tell him what you have just told me. Justify him to the world if you like; till that is done, I will never speak to you again."

"Cynthia—Cynthia!" cried the wretched man.

He rose from the sofa and stretched out his arms blindly towards her. But she would not relent.

As she left the room, he fell to the floor—insensible for the second time that day. She heard the crashing fall—she knew that he was in danger; but her heart was hardened, and she would not look back. The only thing she did was to call Jenkins before she left the house and send him to his master. And then she went out into the street, and said to herself that she would never enter the house again.

Jenkins went up to the drawing-room, and found Mr. Lepel lying on the floor. He and his wife managed with some difficulty to get him back to bed. Then they sent for the Doctor. But, when [Pg 352]

the Doctor came, he shook his head, and looked very serious over Hubert's state. A relapse had taken place; he was delirious again; and no one could say whether he would recover from this second attack. Cynthia was asked for at once; but Cynthia was nowhere to be found.

"She will come back, no doubt, sir," Jenkins said.

"I hope she will," the Doctor answered, "for Mr. Lepel's chances are considerably lessened by her absence."

But the night passed, and the next day followed, and the next; but Cynthia never came.

In the meantime there was one person in the house who knew more of her than she chose to say. Miss Sabina Meldreth had been keeping her eye, by Mrs. Vane's orders, upon Cynthia West. She had listened at the door during the conversation between Enid and Hubert, but without much result. Their voices had been subdued, and she had gained nothing for her pains. But it was somewhat different during the interview between Cynthia and Hubert. The emotion of the two speakers had been rather too difficult to repress. Some few of Hubert's words, as well as Cynthia's passionate sobs, had reached her ears; and Cynthia's last sentences, spoken in a clear penetrating voice, had not been lost on her. She was behind the folding-door between the two rooms when Cynthia made her exit. Sabina Meldreth's heart beat with excitement. Miss West would go to her father, would she? Then she, Sabina, would follow her—would track the felon to his hiding-place! The hint that Hubert could clear him if he would was lost upon her in the delight of this discovery. She could not afford to miss this opportunity of pleasing Mrs. Vane and earning three hundred pounds. She followed Cynthia down-stairs, seized a hat from a peg in the hall, and walked out into the street.

It was already dark, but the girl's tall graceful figure was easily discernible at some little distance. Miss Meldreth followed her hurriedly; she was determined to lose no chance of discovering Westwood and delivering him up to the authorities.

Down one street after another did she track the convict's daughter. Cynthia went through quiet quarters—if she had ventured into a crowded thoroughfare, she would soon have been lost to view. But she had no suspicion that she was being pursued, or she might have been more careful. [Pg 353] In a quiet little court on the north side of Holborn she presently came to a halt. There was a dingy little house with "Lodgings to Let" on a card in the window, and at the door of this house she stopped and gave three knocks with her knuckles. In a few moments the door was opened, and she stepped in. Sabina could not see who admitted her.

She waited for some time. A light appeared after a while in an upper window, and one or two shadows crossed the white linen blind. Sabina went a little higher up the court and watched. Shadows came again—first, the shadow of a woman with a hat upon her head—ah, that was Miss West!—next that of a man—nearer the window and more distinct. Sabina thought that she recognised the slight stoop of the shoulders, the stiff and halting gait.

"I've caught you at last, have I, Mr. Reuben Dare!" she said to herself, with a chuckle, as she noted the number of the house and the name of the court. "Well, I shall get three hundred pounds for this night's work! I'll wait a bit and see what happens next."

What happened next was that the lights were extinguished and that the house seemed to be shut up.

"Safe for the night!" said Sabina, chuckling to herself. "I won't let the grass grow under my feet this time. I'll tell the police to-morrow morning, and I'll write to Mrs. Vane as well. He shan't escape us now!"

She retraced her steps to Russell Square, and at once indited a letter to Mrs. Vane with a full account of all that she had seen and heard. She slipped out to post it that very night, and lay down with the full intention of going to Scotland Yard the next morning. But in the morning she was delayed for an hour only; but that hour was fatal to her plans. When the police visited the house in Vernon Court, they found that the rooms were empty, and that Cynthia and her father had disappeared. Nobody knew anything about them; and the police retired in an exceedingly bad humor, pouring anathemas upon Sabina's head. But Sabina did not care; she had received news which had stupefied her for a time and hindered her in the execution of her designs—little Dick Vane was dead.

The child had never rallied from the accident which had befallen him. For several days and nights he had lain in a state of coma; and then, still unconscious, he had passed away. [Pg 354] His watchers scarcely knew at what moment he ceased to breathe; even the General, who had seldom left his side, could not tell exactly when the child died. So peacefully the little life came to a close that it seemed only that his sleep was preternaturally long. And with him a long course of perplexity and deceit seemed likely also to have its end.

Mrs. Vane had disappointed and displeased the General during the boy's illness; she had steadily refused to nurse him—even to see him, towards the end. The General was an easy and indulgent husband, but he noticed that his wife seemed to have no love for the child who was all in all to him. The worst came when Flossy refused to look at the boy's dead face when he was gone. The General reproached her for her hardness of heart, and declared bitterly that the child had never known a mother's love. And Flossy did not easily forgive the imputation, although she professed to accept it meekly, and to excuse herself by saying that her nerves were too delicate to bear the

shock of seeing a dead child.

Troubles seemed to heap themselves upon the General's head. His boy had gone; Enid, whom he tenderly loved, had left his house; Hubert, to whom also he was much attached, lay ill again, and was scarcely expected to recover. By the time the funeral was over, the General had worked himself up to such a state of nervous anxiety, that it was felt by his friends that some immediate change must be made in his manner of life. And here a suggestion of Flossy's became unexpectedly useful—she proposed that the General should go to his sister's for a time, and that she should stay at Hubert's lodging.

It was not that she cared very much for her brother, or that she was likely to prove a good nurse, but that she was afraid, from what Sabina said, that Hubert might be doing something rash—making confession perhaps, or taking Cynthia West into his confidence. If she were on the spot, she felt that she could hinder any such rash proceeding with Sabina's help.

But Sabina was not to the fore. When she heard that Mrs. Vane was coming to town, she threw up her engagement and went back to her aunt's at Camden Town. A trained nurse took her place, and Mrs. Vane lodged in the house.

Contrary to the doctor's expectations, Hubert survived the crisis of his fever, and passed at last into the convalescent stage; though very weak, he was pronounced to be out of danger, and he began to grow stronger every day. But, as every one who had known him in happier days had reason to remark, he bore himself like an utterly broken-hearted, broken-spirited man. It seemed as if he would never hold up his head again—all hope went from him when Cynthia left his side. [Pg 355]

CHAPTER XLVIII.

Cynthia had, as Sabina suspected, gone straight to her father when she left Russell Square. Some time before he had let her know that he was still in England, and had sent her his address, warning her however not to visit him unless she was obliged to do so. On this occasion she had almost forgotten his warning; she went to him as a child often goes to its parents, more for comfort than for absolute protection; and he was astonished, as well as alarmed, when she flung herself into his arms and wept on his shoulder, calling him now and then by all sorts of endearing names, but refusing to explain to him the reason of her visit or of her grief.

"It's not that man that you're fond of, is it, my dearie? He hasn't played you false, has he?"

"No, father, no—not in the way you mean."

"He ain't worse—dying or anything?"

"Oh, no!"—with a sudden constriction of the heart, which might have told her how dear Hubert was to her still.

"Then you've quarrelled?"

"I suppose we have," said Cynthia, with an unnatural hysterical laugh. "Oh, yes—we have quarrelled, and we shall never see each other any more!"

"In that case, my girl, you'd better cast in your lot with me. Shall we leave England to-morrow?"

Cynthia was silent for a moment.

"Is it safer for you to go or to stay, father?"

"Well, it's about equal," said Westwood cheerfully. "They're watching the ports, I understand; so maybe I should have a difficulty in getting off. On the other hand, I'm pretty certain that the landlady here suspects me; and I thought of making tracks early to-morrow morning, Cynthia, my dear, if you have no objection to an early start." [Pg 356]

"Anything you please, dear father."

"We're safest in London, I think," said Westwood thoughtfully; "but I think that I shall try to get out of the country as soon as I can. I am afraid it is no good to follow up my clue, Cynthia; I can't find out anything more about Mrs. Vane."

Cynthia gave a little shiver, and then clung to him helplessly; she could not speak.

"I've sometimes thought," her father continued, "that your young man—Mr. Lepel—knew more than he chose to say. I've sometimes wondered whether—knowing me to be your father and all that, Cynthia—there might not be a chance of getting him to tell all the truth, supposing that I went to him and threw myself on his—his generosity, so to speak? Do you think he'd give me up, Cynthy?"

"No, father—I don't think he would."

"It might be worth trying. A bold stroke succeeds sometimes where a timid one might fail. He's ill, you say, still, isn't he?"

Cynthia thought of the fall that she had heard as she left the room.

"Yes," she answered almost inaudibly; "he has been very ill, and he is not strong yet."

"And you've left him all the same?" said her father, regarding her curiously. "There must have been something serious—eh, my lass?"

"Oh, father, don't ask me!"

"Don't you care for him now then, my girl?" said Westwood, with more tenderness than he usually showed.

"I don't know—I don't know! I think I—I hate him; but I cannot be sure."

"It's his fault then? He's done something bad?"

"Very bad!" cried poor Cynthia, hiding her face.

"And you can't forgive him?"

"Not—not till he has made amends!" said the girl, with a passionate sob.

Her father sat looking at her with a troubled face.

"If your mother hadn't forgiven me many and many a time, Cynthia," he said at last, "I should have gone to destruction long before she died. But as long as ever she lived she kept me straight." [Pg 357]

"She was your wife," said Cynthia, in a choked voice. "I am not Hubert's wife—and I never shall be now. Never mind, father; we were right to separate, and I am glad that we have done it. Now will you tell me where you are thinking of going, or if you have made any plans?"

Westwood shook his head.

"I've got no plans, my dear—except to slip out at the door, early to-morrow morning. Where I go next I am sure I do not know."

Cynthia resolutely banished the thought of her own affairs, and set herself to consider possibilities. Her mind reverted again and again to the Jenkins family. Their connection with Hubert made it seem a little dangerous to have anything to do with them at present; and yet Cynthia was inclined to trust Tom Jenkins very far. He was thoroughly honest and true, and he was devoted to her service; but, after some reflection, she abandoned this idea. If she and her father were to be together, she had better seek some place where her own face was unknown and her father's history forgotten. After a little consideration, she remembered some people whom she had heard of in the days of her engagement at the Frivolity. They let lodgings in an obscure street in Clerkenwell; and, as they were quiet inoffensive folk, Cynthia thought that she and her father might be as safe with them as elsewhere. She did not urge her father to leave England at present; for she had a vague feeling that she ought not to cut him off from the chance—a feeble chance, but still a chance—of being cleared by Hubert Lepel's confession. She had not much hope; and yet it seemed to her possible that Hubert might choose to tell the truth at last, and that she could but hope that, having confessed to her, he might also confess to the world at large, and show that Westwood was an innocent and deeply injured man.

She stayed the night, sleeping on a little sofa in the sitting-room; but early the next day they went out together, making one of the early morning "flittings" to which Westwood was accustomed; and Cynthia took her father to his new lodgings in Clerkenwell.

For some days she did not go out again. Excitement and the shock of Hubert's confession had for once disorganised her splendid health. She felt strangely weak and ill, and lay in her bed without eating or speaking, her face turned to the wall, her head throbbing, her hands and feet deathly cold. Westwood watched her anxiously and wanted her to have a doctor; but Cynthia refused all medical advice. She was only worn out with nursing, she said, and needed a long rest; she would be better soon. [Pg 358]

One day when she had got up, but had not yet ventured out of doors, her father came into her room with a bunch of black grapes which he had brought for her to eat.

"How good you are, father!" Cynthia said gratefully.

She took one to please him but she did not seem inclined to eat. She was sitting in a wooden chair by the window, looking pale and listless. There were dark shadows under her eyes and a sad expression about her mouth; one would scarcely have known her again for the brilliant beauty who had carried all before her when she sang in London drawing-rooms not three months earlier.

Her father looked at her with sympathetic attention.

"You want cockering up," he said, "and coddling and waiting on. When once we get out of this darned old country, you shall see something different, my girl! I've got money enough to do the thing in style when we reach the States. You shall have all you want there, and no mistake!"

"Thank you, father," said the girl, with a listless smile.

"I've had a long walk to-day," Westwood said, after a pause, "and I've been into what you would call danger, my girl. Ah, that rouses you up a bit, doesn't it? I've been to Russell Square."

"To Russell Square." Cynthia's face turned crimson at once. "Oh, father, did you see—did you hear——"

"Did I hear of Mr. Lepel? That's what I went for, my beauty! In spite of your quarrel, I thought you'd maybe like to hear how he was getting on. I talked to the gardener, a bit; Mr. Lepel's been ill again, you know."

"A relapse?" said Cynthia quickly.

"Yes, a relapse. They've had a hospital-nurse for him, I hear. He's not raving now, they say, but very weak and stupid-like."

"Have none of his friends come to nurse him?" said Cynthia.

"I don't know. The gardener wouldn't hear that, maybe. He said there'd been a death in the family—some child or other. Would that be General Vane's little boy, do you suppose?" [Pg 359]

"It might be."

"Then Miss Vane will be the heiress. She and Mr. Lepel——" He hesitated for a moment, and Cynthia looked up.

"Miss Vane is going to marry Mr. Evandale father. She is not engaged to Mr. Lepel now."

"Oh! Not engaged to Mr. Lepel now? Then what the dickens," said Westwood very deliberately, "did you and Mr. Lepel quarrel about, I should like to know?"

"I can't tell you, father. Nothing to do with that, however."

"I expect it was all a woman's freak. I had made up my mind for you to marry that fellow, Cynthia. I rather liked the looks of him. I'd have given you a thumping dowry and settled him out in America, if you'd liked. It would have been better than the life of a newspaper-man in London any day."

Cynthia did not answer. Her face wore a look of settled misery which made Westwood uncomfortable. He went on doggedly.

"When he gets better, I think I shall go and see him about this. I've no mind to see my girl break her heart before my eyes. You know you're fond of him. Why make such a mystery of it? Marry him, and make him sorry for his misdeeds afterwards. That's my advice."

Cynthia's hands began to tremble in her lap. She said nothing however, and Westwood did not pursue the subject. But a few days later she asked him a question which showed what was weighing on her mind.

"Father, what do you think about forgiveness? We ought to forgive those that have injured us, I suppose? They always said so at St. Elizabeth's."

"Up to a certain point, I think, my girl. It's no good forgiving them that are not sorry for what they've done. It would go to my heart not to punish a rascal that robbed me and laughed in my face afterwards, you know. But, if I've reason to think that he's repented and tried to make amends, why, then, I think a man's a fool who doesn't say, 'All right, old fellow—try again and good luck to you!'"

"Make amends! Ah, that is the test!" said Cynthia, in a very low voice. [Pg 360]

"Well, it is and it isn't," said her father sturdily. "Making amends is a very difficult matter sometimes. The best way sometimes is to put all that's been bad behind you, and start again fresh without meddling with the old affairs. Of course it's pretty hard to tell whether a man's repentant or whether he is not."

He knew very well that she was thinking of Hubert Lepel, and was therefore all the more cautious and all the more gentle in what he said. For he had gone over to Hubert's side in the absence of any precise knowledge as to what the quarrel had been about. "A woman's sure to be in the wrong!" he said to himself—hence his advice.

"But, if one is sure—quite sure—that a man repents," said Cynthia falteringly, "or, at least, that he is sorry, and if the wrong is not so much to oneself, but to somebody else that is dear to one, then——"

"If you care enough to worry about the man, forgive him, and have done with it!" said her father. "Now look here, Cynthy—let's have no beating about the bush! I think I know pretty well what's happening. Mr. Lepel knows something about that murder business—I am pretty sure of that. You think, rightly or wrongly, that he could have cleared me if he had tried. Well, maybe so—maybe not; I can't tell. But, my dear, I don't want you to bother your head about me. If you're fond of the fellow, you needn't let my affairs stand in your way. Why, as a matter of fact, I'm better off now than I should ever have been in England; so what seemed to be a misfortune has turned out to my advantage. I'm content enough. Mr. Lepel has held his tongue, you say"—though Cynthia had not uttered a single word; "but I reckon it was for his sister's sake. And, though she's a bad lot, I don't see how a man could tell of his sister, Cynthy—I don't indeed. So you go back to Mr. Lepel

and tell him not to bother himself. I can take care of myself now, and all this rubbish about clearing my character may as well be knocked on the head. As soon as I'm out of the country, I don't care a rap! You tell that to Mr. Lepel, my beauty, and make it up with him. I wouldn't for the world that you should be unhappy because I've been unfortunate."

This was a long speech for Westwood; and Cynthia came and put her hands on his shoulders and laid her cheek to his long before he had finished. [Pg 361]

"Dear father," she said, "you are very good and very generous!"

"Confess now, Cynthy—you love him, don't you?" said Westwood, with unusual gentleness.

"I am afraid I do, father," she said, crying as she spoke.

"Then be faithful to him, my lass, like your mother was to me."

They said no more. But Cynthia brooded over her father's words for the next three days and nights. Then she came to him one day with her hat and cloak on, as if she were going for a walk.

"Father," she began abruptly, "do you allow me to go to Hubert—to see him, I mean?"

"Of course I do, my dear."

"Although you believe what you said—and what I did not say—that he could have cleared you if he had liked?"

"Yes, my dear—if you love him."

"Yes, I love him," said Cynthia sadly.

"I'm going to sail next week; he'll never be troubled by me again," said her father. "You can either stay with him, Cynthia, or he can come out with us. Out there we can all forget what's over and done. You go to him and tell him so at once."

He kissed her on the forehead with unaccustomed solemnity. Cynthia flung her arms round his neck and gave him a warm embrace. The eyes of both father and daughter were wet as they said good-bye.

Cynthia knew nothing of Mrs. Vane's visit to London. She expected to meet a trained nurse only, and the Jenkins—Sabina Meldreth and the doctor perhaps beside, but no one else. She set forth at an hour which would enable her to reach the house when Hubert was likely to be up—at least, if he were able to leave his bed. She did not know what she was going to say to him—what line she was about to take. She only knew that she could not bear to be away from him any longer, and that love and forgiveness were the two thoughts uppermost in her mind.

She was not aware that her father had considered it unfit for her to go alone to Russell Square. He had followed her all the way from Clerkenwell, and was in the square immediately behind herself. When she mounted the steps and rang the bell, he crossed the road and walked along the pavement by the gardens in the middle of the square. Here he fancied that he should be unobserved. He saw the door opened; he saw Cynthia making her inquiries of the servant. Then she went in, and the door was shut. [Pg 362]

He waited for some time. Presently a man, whom he knew to be the faithful Jenkins, appeared on the steps of the house and looked about him. Then he crossed the road and advanced to Westwood, who was leaning against the railings.

"Mr. Reuben Dare, I think?" he said, touching his hair respectfully. Westwood stared at the sound of that name. "Miss West and Mr. Lepel wants to know if you will kindly come up-stairs. They have a word or two to say, and they hope that you will not fail to come."

Westwood smiled to himself—a rather peculiar smile.

"All right," he said; "if they want me to come, I'll come. But I think they had both better have let me stay away."

Nevertheless he followed Jenkins to the house.

CHAPTER XLIX.

The door had been opened to Cynthia by a strange servant. She asked if Mr. Lepel was at home—a conventionalism of which she immediately repented. Was he well enough to see anybody, at least? she asked.

The girl did not know, but asked her to walk inside. Mr. Lepel was better; he was dressed every day and sat in the drawing-room; but he had not seen any visitors as yet. He was in the drawing-room now, she thought, and he was alone.

"I will go up," said Cynthia decidedly. "You need not announce me. I will go myself; he knows me very well."

The girl fell back doubtfully; but Cynthia's tone was so resolute, her air so assured, that there was nothing for it but to give way. Besides Mrs. Vane was out, and nobody had said what was to be done in case of visitors.

Cynthia went in very quietly. Hubert was lying on a sofa in the darkest corner of the room. The blinds were partially closed; but she could see his face, and she thought at first that he was [Pg 363] asleep. His eyes were closed, his hands were stretched at his sides; his attitude was expressive of the utmost langour and weariness. She came a little nearer and looked at him closely. His frame was sadly wasted, and there was an expression of suffering and melancholy upon his face that touched her deeply. She drew nearer and nearer to the sofa; but he did not look up until she was almost close to him. Then he opened his eyes. She cried "Hubert!" and dropped on her knees beside him, so as to bring her face upon a level with his own. She put her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

"Oh, Hubert," she said, "I could not stay away! I love you, my darling—I love you in spite of all! Will you forgive me for being so cruel when I saw you last?"

She felt him tremble a little.

"Cynthia!" he said; and then with a sudden gesture he threw his arm around her, rested his head upon her shoulder, and burst into tears—tears of weakness in part, but tears also of love, of penitence, of almost unbearable relief.

She held him close to her, kissing his dark head from time to time, and calling him by fond, caressing names. But for some minutes he did not seem to be able or to care to speak. She caught the word "Forgive!" once or twice between his gasps for breath; but she could distinguish nothing more.

"Darling," she said at last, "you will do yourself harm if this goes on. Be calm, and let us talk together a little time. Yes, I forgive you, if I must say so before anything else. There, there! Ah, my own love, how could I have left you so long? I was cruel and unkind!"

"No, Cynthia—no! I never thought that I should see you again," he said brokenly. "Don't leave me again—just yet."

"I will never leave you, if you like," she murmured softly.

"Never, Cynthia?"

"So long as we both do live. You know what I mean?"

"I daren't think. You don't mean that you will now—now become——"

"Your wife? Yes, if you will have me, Hubert. There is no barrier between us now."

"Your father?" he murmured, looking at her with weary wistful eyes. [Pg 364]

"My father sent me to you to-day. No, darling, I have not told him."

"I wish to Heaven you had, Cynthia!"

"What! I betray your confidence? No, I could not do that. But he had some notion already, Hubert. He told me that he suspected you—or your sister—some time ago; and he said to me to-day that he believed that you could have cleared him if you had liked."

"And what did you say? I wish that you had found it in your heart to tell him everything you knew."

"I could not do that. But I did not deny what he had said!" and then she told him all that she remembered of her father's words.

"His generosity crushes me to the earth!" said Hubert hoarsely. "I must tell him the whole story, and let him decide."

"He has decided."

"I cannot accept that decision. Since I have been lying here, Cynthia, and since you left me, I have seen it all as it appeared in your eyes. I have wondered at my own cowardice; and I hope—I trust that I have repented of it. It is time that I did, Cynthia, for I believe that I am a dying man."

"No, no!" she cried, clinging to him passionately. "You will get better now—you must get better—for my sake!"

"I wish I could, my darling—I wish I could!"

"Why have you such gloomy thoughts? You are depressed; you have wanted me. I shall soon make you well. I shall take you away from England to some warm bright country where you will have nothing to do but be happy and grow quite strong; and I will take care of you, and make up to you if I can for everything that you have lost."

"Yes, if one had not a conscience," said Hubert, with a faint sad smile, "one could be very happy, could one not? But you forget; you told me before that I must make amends. My darling, there is only one course open to me now."

"Hubert!" She knew by instinct what course he meant to take.

"We are going to have the whole truth told now," he went on softly. "And what a relief it will be! My God, I wonder that I could bear the burden so long! For I have suffered, Cynthia, though not as your father has. I am going now to tell the truth and bear the penalty; there is no other way." [Pg 365]

"There cannot be much of a legal penalty," said Cynthia, trying to speak bravely. "It was a duel."

"Manslaughter, I suppose. It will depend a good deal on public feeling what the punishment will be; and public feeling will—very rightly—be against me. To let another man be condemned to death when I could have cleared him with a word! I think, Cynthia, that the mob will tear me to pieces if they can get hold of me!"

"They will not get hold of you. And if the public knows that it was all for your sister's sake——"

"I want to save Flossy, Cynthia. I think I can shield her still."

"I do not think that my father will shield her, Hubert. He knows."

"She must be shielded, if possible, dear, for the old General's sake. What a fool I was not to prevent that marriage! Well, it can't be helped now. But one thing I can do—I can exonerate your father, and confess that I shot Sydney Vane, without a word about my sister. That must be so, Cynthia. And your father must be silent."

"You will deprive yourself of your one excuse," said Cynthia quietly.

"I know. I cannot help it. I must stand forth to the world as a brutal murderer—as once your father did, my Cynthia. It is only right and just. They must sentence me as they please. But it will not be for long; I shall probably not come out of prison. But, if I do——"

Cynthia burst into tears.

"I can't bear it—I can't bear it!" she cried. "My father is right—he has got over the worst of it and outlived all that was hard. It would be terrible for you! How could you bear it—and how could I?"

"You could bear it if you thought it brought me happiness, could you not? I know I am selfish, Cynthia."

"No, no—you are anything but selfish! Oh, darling, live for me a little if you will not for yourself! Father asks you to do that as well as I. You will make us suffer if you suffer—and I cannot bear to part from you again! If you love me, Hubert, say nothing—for my father's sake and mine!" [Pg 366]

It was a strange plea. And while Hubert listened and strove to calm her, there came a new and unwonted sound upon the stairs—the sound of a struggle, of trampling feet, of angry voices—of a woman's shriek and a man's stifled curse. Cynthia sprang to her feet.

"I hear my father's voice!" she said. "What can that mean?"

There had been another visitor that afternoon to Hubert's lodgings in Russell Square. Sabina Meldreth had presented herself at three o'clock, and had inquired for Mrs. Vane. She was told that Mrs. Vane had gone out, and was not likely to be back until six or half-past six o'clock.

"And then the General's coming with her," Jenkins had informed her, "and they're to dine together, because it is the first time that master has stayed up to dinner since he was taken ill."

"Oh, that'll do very well for me!" said Sabina sullenly. "I shall see the whole lot of them then, I suppose. I'll wait!" and she planted herself on one of the wooden chairs in the hall.

"Won't you come down-stairs?" said Jenkins. "My missus is there."

"No, I won't. I want to see Mrs. Vane; and perhaps she'll get away or refuse to see me if I am down-stairs. Sitting here, she can't escape so easy. I want Mrs. Vane."

Jenkins shrugged his shoulders.

"You seem to have got a grudge against her," he observed. "Didn't she pay you properly?"

"No, she didn't—not that it's any business of yours," Sabina remarked.

And, after that speech, Jenkins retired with dignity, feeling that it was not his part to converse any longer with a woman who chose to be so very impolite to him.

"She looks very queer!" he observed to his wife down-stairs. "She's in black, and her eyes are red as if she'd been crying, and her face as white as death. I think she looks as if she was going out of her mind."

Whereupon Mrs. Jenkins herself went up-stairs to inspect the dangerous Sabina, but came down with the report that "she looked quiet enough." And so the afternoon went on—and still Mrs. Vane did not arrive. But Cynthia did. [Pg 367]

When Sabina heard Miss West's voice speaking to the maid at the door, she gave a violent start. Then she rose and went cautiously into a little room which opened off the hall, and stood behind

the door, so that Cynthia could not see her. As soon as Cynthia had gone up-stairs, Sabina dashed out into the hall again, and inspected the square through the pane of glass at the side of the hall door.

"It's him sure enough," she said to herself, "and his daughter's gone up-stairs! Well, they are bold as brass, the pair of them! They didn't ought to be allowed to escape, I'm sure; but I don't know what to do. I wish Mrs. Vane would come home, and the General too. They'd take care he was nabbed fast enough! And here they come!"

For at that moment Miss Vane's carriage drove up to the door, and out of it came its owner, as well as Mrs. Vane and the General. Sabina opened the door before the man had time to knock. And no sooner had Mrs. Vane entered than she was confronted by Sabina.

"What do you want here!" she asked.

Sabina had, as Flossy expected, come with demands that would not perhaps have been easy to satisfy; but all her plans were swept away by the appearance of Westwood in the square. Sabina did not attempt to stand on ceremony.

"For goodness' sake, ma'am, don't go up-stairs nor let them go just yet!" she said hurriedly. "There's the man Westwood in the square—and his daughter's just gone up to Mr. Lepel. I know him by sight perfectly. If you want him to be arrested, ma'am, you could get it done now easily."

"What's that?" said old Miss Vane, stepping back with her hand to her ear. "Why are you looking so pale, Flossy? What's all this about?"

Flossy looked at her husband and then looked at Sabina. She would have given anything to stop Sabina's tongue. For the General had never yet been made aware of one half of her man[oe]uvres, and she did not think that he even knew that Westwood was alive. The whole thing [Pg 368] would probably excite him terribly; and there was a certain unsigned document in the General's bureau at home about which Flossy was particularly anxious. She had not wanted him to hear too much about Westwood's fate.

But there was no help for it now. He came forward with his sister, wanting to know what all the disturbance was about, and questioning first one and then another in turn. Sabina was not voluble; but, acting on a hint from Mrs. Vane, she did not at once say how she came to recognise the man. The General flew into a rage, as Flossy had expected him to do, and wanted to go out and lay hands himself on his brother's murderer. With great difficulty his wife and sister persuaded him to listen to reason. The footman was despatched for the police, and Jenkins was deputed to accost the man and bring him to the house. In this last piece of business Flossy took the lead. She had a notion that Jenkins was in Cynthia's confidence, and would not do what was required of him if he knew its purpose; and for that reason she coolly gave him a message from Hubert and Cynthia. Neither the General nor Miss Vane heard it, or perhaps they would not have allowed it to be sent; but it certainly effected all that they desired. Quietly and unsuspiciously Westwood came stepping across the square in Jenkins' wake; and just as quietly was taken up the stairs and shown into a little sitting-room, where it had been decreed that he should be delayed until the police could arrive.

But Westwood was not altogether at his ease. He was surprised to find that neither Cynthia nor Lepel were there to meet him—surprised to find himself left alone in a bare little room for five or ten minutes at the very least. At last he tried the door. It was locked. And then the truth flashed across his mind—he had been recognised—he had been entrapped. Perhaps even Cynthia and Hubert Lepel were in the plot. They had perhaps meant him to be caught and sent back to Portland, to die like a wild beast in a cage.

"There'll be murder done first!" said Westwood, looking round him for a weapon. "Let's see which is the strongest—Hubert Lepel or me. And now for the door! The window is too high."

He had found a poker, and he dealt one crashing blow at the lock of the door. It was not strong, [Pg 369] and it yielded almost immediately. There was a shriek from some one on the stairs—the rush of two men from the hall. The General and a servant were instantly upon him, and, what was worse, Cynthia's arms were around his neck, her hand upon his arm.

"Father, don't strike! You will kill somebody!" she cried.

"And what do I care? Is it you that have given me up? Do you want me to die like a rat in a hole?" the man cried, trying to shake her off.

But the men were at his side—resistance was useless—the door at the foot of the stairs had been barred, and there was no way of escape.

"The police will be here directly—keep him till they come!" cried the General at the top of his voice. "I shall give him in charge! He is the murderer Westwood, the man who killed my bother, Sydney Vane, and afterwards escaped from Portland Prison, where he was undergoing a life sentence! I remember the man perfectly. Sabina Meldreth, you can identify him?"

"Oh, yes, I can identify him!" said Sabina curtly. "He's Miss West's father, anyway—and we all know who that was. We heard her call him 'father' just now her very self."

The servants tightened their grasp on the man's arm. But at that moment an interruption occurred. The drawing-room door was flung open, and Hubert Lepel, ghastly pale, and staggering

a little as he moved, appeared upon the scene.

"This must go no further," he said. "Keep the police away, and let this man go. He is not Sydney Vane's murderer."

"Don't interfere, sir!" shouted the General from the stairs. "This is Westwood, the man who escaped from Portland—and back to Portland he shall go!"

"It is Westwood, I know," said Herbert, supporting himself against the door-post, and looking down calmly upon the excited group below; "but Westwood was not a murderer. General, you have been mistaken all this time. I wish to make a statement of the truth—it was I who killed Sydney Vane! Now do what you like!"

CHAPTER L.

[Pg 370]

A sudden hush fell upon the group. Each looked at the others aghast. The general opinion was that Mr. Lepel's fever had returned upon him and that he was raving. But at least three persons knew or suspected that he spoke only the truth.

"He's mad—delirious!" said the General angrily. "Take him back to his room, some of you, and help me to secure the criminal!"

"You had better come here and listen to my story first," said Hubert, still clutching at the door to steady himself. "Keep the police down-stairs for five minutes, General, if you please. Neither Westwood nor I shall escape in that time. Jenkins, drop that gentleman's arm!"

Jenkins relinquished his hold of Westwood's arm with great promptitude. Cynthia said a few words to him in an undertone which sent him down-stairs at once. She had heard the front door open and shut, and believed that the police had come. They, at least, could be detained for a few minutes—she had no hope of anything more; but she felt that Hubert's confession should be made to his own relatives first of all. She ran to his side and gave him her arm to lean upon, conducting him back to the drawing-room; and thither the others followed her in much agitation and perturbation of mind. The General was almost foaming at the mouth with rage; Miss Vane looked utterly blank and stupefied; Flossy's face was white as snow; Sabina watched the scene with stolid and sullen curiosity; while Westwood marched into the drawing-room with the air of a proud man unjustly assailed.

They found Hubert leaning against the mantelpiece. He would not sit down; but he was not strong enough to stand without support. Cynthia was clinging to him with her face half hidden on his shoulder; his arm was clasped about her waist.

"What does this mean?" said the General.

"It means," answered Flossy's quiet voice, "that Hubert is raving, and that the doctor must be sent for immediately." [Pg 371]

"You know better than that, Florence," said her brother. "I speak the truth, and nothing but the truth. I accuse no one else," he said, with marked emphasis; "but I wish you all now to know what were the facts. It was I who met Sydney Vane that day in the fir plantation beside the road that leads up the hill to Beechfield. We quarrelled, and we agreed to settle the matter by a duel. We were unequally matched. He had a revolver and I had this man Westwood's gun, which I found on the ground. We fired, and Sydney fell."

There was a brief silence. Then a bitter cry escaped from Miss Vane's lips.

"Oh, Hubert, Hubert," she wailed, "can this be true?"

"God knows that it is true!" answered Hubert; and his face carried conviction if his words did not.

"It is impossible!" cried the General. "To begin with, if you had committed this crime—for a duel in the way you mention was a crime and nothing else—you would never have allowed this man to suffer for it. I absolutely refuse to believe, sir, that my kinsman is such a base, cowardly villain! This is a fit of delirium—nothing else!"

"It is simple truth," said Hubert sadly. "That I did not at once exonerate Andrew Westwood is, to my thinking, the worst part of my crime. I acknowledge that I—I dared not confess; and I left him to bear the blame."

"Good heavens, sir, do you tell me that to my face?" thundered the old man, with uplifted hand. "You are a disgrace to the family! I am glad that you do not bear my name."

He would perhaps even have struck the younger man if Cynthia had not twined her arms more closely round Hubert's neck, and made herself for the moment a defence to him. But Hubert drew himself away.

"Let me go, Cynthia," he said quietly. "You must not come between us. The General is right, and I am a disgrace to my name. He must do what he thinks fit."

But the General had turned away, and was walking furiously up and down the room, too angry

and too much overcome for speech. Miss Vane was sobbing bitterly. Flossy watched her brother's face. She saw that he was trying not to implicate her. Would she escape? If his silence and her own could save her, she would be safe. But she had reckoned without Andrew Westwood. [Pg 372]

"I beg pardon, sir," said Cynthia's father, addressing himself to the General; "but this ain't fair! Mr. Lepel is getting more of the blame than he deserves. Suppose you let me speak a word for him?"

"You!" said the General, stopping short. "You, who have suffered his punishment, cannot have much to say for him! If—if this is true," he went on, with a curious mixture of stiffness and of shame, "we have much to answer for with respect to you—much to make up——"

"Not so much as maybe you think," said Andrew Westwood. "I was bitter enough at the time, and I have thought often and often of the words that I said at the trial—how I cursed the man that brought me to that pass and all that he held dear. Curses come home to roost, they say. At any rate, the person who is dearest to him, I believe, is my very own daughter, whom I myself love better that any one in the whole wide world; and far be it from me to wish evil to her or to any one that she loves."

Miss Vane's handkerchief fell to her lap. The General stared at the speaker open-mouthed. The man's native nobility of soul amazed them both. Andrew Westwood went on soberly.

"You have not asked Mr. Lepel how he came to fight Mr. Vane, sir. You might be sure that it wasn't for a poor reason; and there was never anything considered dishonorable in a fair fight between two armed men."

"That does not do away with the injury to yourself," said the General grimly. "Such blame as there was ought to have been borne by him and not by you."

Westwood waved his hand.

"As for injury," he said, "me and Cynthia have agreed to forget about that. If I'd been at Portland all this time, why, then no doubt I should feel it worse. But I got away after four years of it, and made my way to America, and 'struck ile' there. I've done better since then than, ever I did in my life before; so I have no need to complain. But you haven't asked him why he fought Mr. Vane, sir."

"Well, why was it?" said the General sternly and grudgingly.

He did not see that his wife suddenly rose from her seat, and with clasped hands darted a look full of miserable fear and entreaty towards her brother. But all the others saw, though some of them did not understand; and Hubert responded to the appeal. [Pg 373]

"I cannot tell you," he answered, with his eyes on the ground.

"But I can!" said Westwood. "And Mrs. Vane could, if she chose! Blame her if you like, sir, for she's known the truth all along as much as Mr. Hubert's done; and it was to save her that he would not open his lips."

They had tried in vain to stop him—Hubert by angry imperative words, Flossy by a piteous cry of terror; but Westwood's rough sonorous voice rose above all other sounds. He paused for a moment, looking at the General's face of incredulous dismay, at Mrs. Vane's shrinking figure, and his tones softened a little as he spoke again.

"I don't wish to say more myself than is necessary. Miss Lepel as she was then and Mr. Sydney Vane were in the habit of meeting each other in the wood. Many of the village people knew it—it was common talk in Beechfield. Mr. Lepel found it out and was angry. He told Mr. Vane there must be no more of it; and then the quarrel followed that Mr. Lepel speaks about. I don't want to make too much of it"—casting a reluctant glance at Hubert—"but I think that Mr. Lepel was right in objecting and in trying to put a stop to it."

It was certain that he had very much softened the facts of the case; but the General could not have looked more confounded, or Flossy more overwhelmed, if a great deal more had been said. The veins swelled upon the old man's forehead, his face grew lividly purple as he strode over to his wife's side and laid his hand heavily on her shoulder.

"Florence, is this true?" he said.

She sat mute and shrinking in her chair, crushed as if beneath an invisible weight—her hands clasped, her white face averted. Miss Vane, watching her eagerly, felt with a thrill of horror that she looked like a guilty woman.

"Is this true?" the General asked again, giving her a little shake. But Flossy still sat mute.

Then Miss Vane interposed.

"Let her alone, Richard," she said. "She is overcome—she cannot answer just now. She will explain everything by-and-by."

"Speak!" cried the General, his eyes blazing with rage. He would have shaken her again and more violently if Hubert had not interfered. [Pg 374]

"You forget, sir, that she is a woman and that she is your wife," he said. "Whatever may have

happened in the past, she has no doubt regretted what was an imprudence. I was to blame for taking up the matter too seriously. You know what your brother was; I know my sister. We must judge them by what we know."

The words were halting and ambiguous; but they produced some effect. The General fell back, still gazing at his wife; and Flossy, released from the pressure of his heavy hand, sat up and looked about her with a strange red light glowing in her eyes. Then, to everybody's horror, she burst into a fit of wild laughter terrible to hear.

"He says that he knows his sister!" she cried. "Oh, yes—he knows her well enough! What maudlin stuff will he talk next? 'Imprudence' in meeting each other in the wood! I tell you that Sydney Vane loved me—that he was ready to abandon wife and child for me!"

"Florence, have mercy! Stop—stop!" cried Hubert. But his sister would not stop.

"He was ready to go to the world's end with me, I tell you! We had arranged to start the next day—we were going to Ceylon, never to come back again. We meant to be happy because we loved each other. That was what Hubert found out!" she cried, laughing wildly. "That was what he tried to stop! That was why he killed Sydney Vane—the man I loved—oh, Heaven, the man for whom I would have sold my very soul!"

And then the hysteric passion overcame her, and she fell back in a frenzy of laughter, sobs, and screams, painful alike to see and hear. Cynthia, Miss Vane, and Sabina went to her aid. Between them they carried her into another room, whence her terrible screams resounded at intervals through the house; and the three men were left alone. The General sank down upon a chair near the table and hid his face in his hands. He was breathing heavily, and every now and then a moan escaped him in the silence of the room.

"Oh, Heaven," he said, "what have I done that this should come upon me all at once? What have I done?"

Hubert, exhausted by the excitement that he had gone through, staggered to the sofa and threw himself down upon it. Westwood remained in his former position, grasping the back of a chair and looking from one to the other, as if he were anxious to help, but knew not how to offer any assistance. In the silence that prevailed, the sound of heavy footsteps could be distinctly heard upon the stairs. The police had arrived at last. [Pg 375]

Almost immediately Cynthia and Sabina Meldreth returned to the room. They had left Miss Vane with Florence, who seemed more manageable when her aunt touched her and spoke to her than with anybody else. And, as soon as they came in, Cynthia went up to Hubert, kissed him, and sat down beside him, holding her hand in his. But Sabina Meldreth looked fixedly at the General.

"Don't take on, sir!" she said, going up to the table and speaking rather softly. "She ain't worth it—she's a reg'lar bad 'un, she is!"

"Woman, how dare you!" cried the poor General, starting from his seat, and turning his discolored face, his bloodshot eyes, angrily upon the intruder. "I do not believe a word—a word you say! My wife is—is above reproach—my wife—the mother of my boy!" There was a curious little hitch in his speech, as if he could not say the words he wanted to say.

"The mother of your boy!" cried Sabina, with intense scorn. "Much mother she was to him! Look here, sir! I'll own the truth now, and perhaps it will soften things a bit to you. The boy was not Mrs. Vane's at all—he was mine."

Everyone started. The General uttered an inarticulate cry of rage; then his head dropped on his hands, and he did not speak again. In vain Hubert tried to silence the speaker.

"Keep your story for another time," he said. "There is no need to make such accusations now. You cannot substantiate them, and you are only paining General Vane."

"You'd better ask Miss Enid, sir," said the woman half defiantly, half desperately. "She knows. It troubled her a good bit as to whether she ought to tell the General or not; but I believe she decided not. Mrs. Vane thought that if she married you you would keep her quiet. My mother confessed it all to Miss Enid on her death-bed. I expect the Rector knows too by this time. He was always trying to get it out of me." [Pg 376]

"Can this be true?" said Hubert, half to himself and half to the General. But the old man, with his head bowed upon the table, did not seem to hear.

"It's true as Gospel!" said Sabina. "And I don't much care who knows it now. My prospects are all gone, as far as I can make out. This gentleman here is not the murderer, it seems, and so I sha'n't get the three hundred pounds for finding him; and Mrs. Vane's payments will be stopped now, no doubt. She was giving me two hundred a year. I'll take less if you like to give me something, sir, for going away and holding my tongue. When Mrs. Vane knew about—about me, and mother was in trouble over my misfortune, it was just at the time when your own little baby was born, sir. It was a boy too, and it died when it was only twelve hours old. And Mrs. Vane spoke to mother about my baby that was just the same age; and mother and I both thought it would be a good thing if my little boy could be made the heir of Beechfield Hall. For in that way Mrs. Vane's position would be better, and she would be able to pay mother and me a good round sum. And so we settled it. But now poor little Dick's dead and gone, and all Mrs. Vane's schemes have come to

naught. Mother always said that there would be a bad ending to the affair."

"You seem to have forgotten, young woman," said Andrew Westwood sternly, "that there is a God above us all who takes care of the innocent and punishes the guilty."

"I'd not forgotten it," said Sabina, confronting him with an unabashed air; "but I hadn't believed it till now."

At that moment an inspector in plain clothes, who had been hastily fetched from Scotland Yard, made his way into the room and inquired what he was wanted for.

"We shall both have to go with you, I think," said Hubert firmly, glancing at Westwood as he rose. "I presume that you cannot liberate Mr. Westwood at once."

"What—Westwood the convict? I should think not!" said the inspector briskly; and he made a sign to his men, who stepped forward with a pair of handcuffs.

"I shall come quietly enough," said Westwood, with a smile. "You needn't trouble yourself about the bracelets."

"Ah, I dare say!" said the inspector. "You've been rather a slippery customer hitherto, I believe. We'll make sure of you now." [Pg 377]

But Hubert interfered.

"No, no," he said—"Westwood is innocent! It was I—I who committed the crime for which he was condemned. Put the handcuffs on me, if on any one, but not on that innocent man!"

"Well, this is a rum start!" said the inspector to himself. "You don't look very fit to run away, sir; we won't trouble you," he said to Hubert with a friendly smile. "Head wrong, I suppose?" he asked of Cynthia, in a stage-aside.

They had some trouble in convincing him that Hubert meant to be taken to the station with Westwood; and, even when he had heard the story, it was plain that he did not quite believe it. However, he consented to let Hubert accompany him and then he remarked that, as it was getting late, it would be better if his companions started at once.

"And the old gentleman?" he said, looking at the General with interest. "Is he coming too?"

Hubert hesitated. Then he went up to the old man and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Will you not look at me, sir?" he said. "Have you nothing to say to me before I go?"

No, he had nothing to say; he would never say anything again. The General was dead.

CHAPTER LI.

The proceedings relating to Westwood's trial and Hubert Lepel's confession naturally excited great interest. The whole matter had to be investigated once more; and it could not be denied that a howl of indignation at Hubert's conduct went up through the length and breadth of the land. Even Flossy's indiscretions—to call them by no harsher name—were not held to excuse him for suppressing the fact that he had taken Sydney Vane's life, and then allowed Andrew Westwood to suffer the penalty of a crime which he had not committed. The details that came out one after another whetted the public appetite to an incredible extent. And in such a case it soon [Pg 378] became evident that no details could be suppressed at all. Even the fact of the attachment between Hubert and Cynthia leaked out, although everybody tried hard to keep it a secret; and great was the wonder excited by Cynthia's steady refusal to give up the lover who had nearly caused her father's death.

"She must be a heartless creature indeed!" the busybodies said. "Who ever heard of such a revolting position? Has her father cast her off? What a grief it must be to him! It is like a terrible old Greek tragedy!"

And, when the busybodies heard that Westwood had not objected to his child's marriage with Hubert Lepel, and had actually appeared to be friendly with him, they concluded that all parties concerned must be equally devoid of the finer qualities of human nature, and that a painful revelation of baseness and secret vice had just been made.

But, in spite of public indignation, it was not possible for Hubert Lepel to receive very severe punishment from the arm of the law. He had never been examined at Westwood's trial—and the law does not compel a man to inculpate himself. He was held to have committed manslaughter, and he was condemned to two years' imprisonment. And Westwood received a "free pardon" from the Queen—which Cynthia thought a very inadequate way of testifying to his innocence; and he walked through London streets a free man once more, and might have been made into a hero had he chosen, especially when it became known that he was very well off, and that he had a daughter so beautiful and gifted as the young lady who had previously been known to the general public as Cynthia West.

Cynthia was entreated to sing again and again, and was assured that people would flock to hear

her and to see her more than ever. But she steadily refused to sing in any public place. She could not overcome the feeling that her audience only came to stare at her as Westwood's daughter, and not to hear her sing. She withdrew therefore from the musical profession, and lived a quiet life in London with her father, who had postponed his departure for a few weeks. He would not return to America until the close of Hubert Lepel's trial.

[Pg 379] The General's sad death, caused chiefly by excitement, was felt, when the shock was passed, to be almost a relief for his friends. They all felt that it would have been sad indeed if the old man had lived to see himself desolate, his name dragged through the mud, his wife branded with shame, the boy that he had loved not only laid in the grave, but known to be no kin to him at all. He could not have borne it; his life would have been a misery to him; and it was perhaps well that he should die. His will had been unsigned, and the property therefore passed to Enid, with the usual "half" to his widow.

Flossy found herself better off than she had expected to be. She never seemed to regret her actions, not even the hysterical outburst which had caused her to confess her guilt and to hasten the General's end. She declared herself relieved that she had now nothing to conceal. As for the execration that she met with from all who knew her story, she cared very little indeed. She refused to see her old acquaintances, and went abroad as soon as possible. Her lawyer alone knew her address—for she did not correspond with her English friends; but she was occasionally heard of at a foreign watering-place, where she posed as an interesting widow completely misunderstood by a sadly prejudiced world. In time she married again, and it was said that her husband, a Russian nobleman, ill-treated-her; but Flossy was quite capable of holding her own against any number of Russia noblemen, and it was more likely that he suffered at her hands than she at his. In the wild Northern lands however she finally made her home; and she announced to her lawyer her determination never to set foot in England again. A traveller who afterwards came across her in Russian reported to her relatives that she was looking haggard and worn, that she was said to take chloral regularly, and that she suffered from some obscure disease of the nerves for which no doctor could find a cure. And thus she passed out of the lives of her English friends—unloved, unmourned, unhappy, and, in spite of wealth and title, unsuccessful in all that she tried to attain.

Enid, the owner of Beechfield Hall, took a dislike to the place, and would not live in it for many a long day. She remained with Miss Vane until a year had passed after the General's death, and then she married Mr. Evandale and took up her abode at the Rectory. She made an ideal parson's [Pg 380] wife. Her health had grown stronger in the quiet atmosphere of Miss Vane's home; and, curiously enough, she never had another of her strange "seizures" after her departure from Beechfield Hall. She herself always believed that she had conquered them by an effort of will; but Mr. Evandale was disposed to think that she had been occasionally put under the influence of some drug by Mrs. Vane, and that Mrs. Vane had either wished to remove her altogether from her path or undermine her health and intellect completely. At a later date she had grown tired of this method, and tried to take a quicker way; but in this attempt she had been foiled. Parker remained in Enid's service, and made a faithful nurse, devoted to her mistress and her mistress's children, and above all devoted to her master, who had spoken to her gently of her past, and given her new hope for the future.

And, when the little Evandales began to overflow the Rectory nurseries, Enid managed to conquer her distaste for the stately old Hall that had stood empty for so many years, and came thither with her family to fill the vacant rooms with merry faces, and to chase away all ghosts of a tragic past by the sound of eager voices, of laughter, and of pattering feet. And then a deeper love for the old home, now grown so beautiful and dear, stirred within her; and in time she even marvelled at herself that she had stayed away so long from Beechfield Hall.

Sabina Meldreth developed in a curious direction. The Rector "got hold of her," as he expressed it, and managed to lay his finger on the soft spot in her heart. It proved to be a remorseful love for delicate children; and this trait of character became her salvation. She never talked of the past or said that she repented; but she gave herself little by little, with strange steadfastness and thoroughness, to the service of sick children in hospitals. She went through a nurse's training, and got an engagement as nurse in the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children. Here she seemed happy; and the children loved her—which some people thought odd, because she preserved a good deal of her roughness of manner and abruptness of speech in ordinary life. But she was made of finer fibre than one would have imagined, and children never found her harsh or unkind or unsympathetic. The memory of little Dick remained with her perhaps, but she never spoke of him.

[Pg 381] During the months of Hubert's imprisonment Cynthia did not correspond with him. He had asked her not to do so. Her letters would of course have been overlooked. All that she could do until the trial was over was to send him flowers, which he was permitted to receive; and very dear those boxes of rare blossoms soon became to him. He spent a great part of his time in the infirmary; for his strength had been very much tried during the time of his convalescence, and it often seemed as if his anticipations were to be realised, and as if his term of punishment would not last very long. Cynthia had made him promise that she should be summoned to his side if he were absolutely in danger. For many a week she used to be half afraid to look at her letters in the morning, lest the dread summons should be amongst them; but, after a time, her courage began to revive, and she dared—yes, she actually dared—to hope for a brighter future. But, when the term of his imprisonment began, she knew that she must wait patiently for its end before the cloud of darkness was lifted from her life.

"It's about time we was getting back to the States, I reckon," her father said to her one day.

"So soon, father?"

"What should we stay in England for?" he asked, without glancing at her. "I want to get back to my work; and I want to show you the place, and see about the new house."

For at times he drew glowing pictures of the house that he intended to build for Cynthia some day. Cynthia used to smile and listen very sweetly. She never contradicted him; she only grew a little abstracted now and then when he waxed very eloquent, and drew the needle a little faster through the work that she now affected. He did not usually seem to notice her silence; but on this occasion he broke out rather petulantly.

"One would think you took no interest in it at all! You might sometimes remember that it's all for you."

"I do remember it, father dear—and I am very grateful."

"Well, then," said Westwood, at once restored to cheerfulness, "just you look here at these plans. I've been talking to an architect, and this is the drawing he's made for me. Nice mansion that, isn't it? You see, there's the ground-floor—a study for me, and a drawing-room and a morning- [Pg 382] room, and all sorts of things for you; and here's a wing which can be added on or not, as is required. Because," he went on rather quickly and nervously, "if you was to marry out there, you could set up house-keeping with him, you know; and, when the family grew too large for the house, we could just add room after room—here, you see—until we had enough."

"Yes, father." And then Cynthia added with simplicity, which was perhaps a little assumed. "Miss Enid Vane says that Hubert will be ordered to the Riviera for the winter when—when he is free."

"What has that to do with it?" said Westwood, rolling up his plans and moving a few steps away from her.

"Only that perhaps we had better not think too much about the house, father. We might not be able to come to it."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" her father said slowly. "You're still thinking of Mr. Lepel, Cynthia?"

"Yes, father dear."

"You mean to marry the man that would have seen me hang and never said a word to save me?"

"He would not have done that, you know, father. He spoke out at last, in order to save you from being rearrested. And you gave me your consent before——"

"Ay, before I knew that he had done the deed! I thought that his sister had done it, and that he was keeping her secret, when I gave my consent, my girl. It makes a deal of difference."

"Not to me," said Cynthia quietly. "He did wrong; but I learned to love him before I knew the story; and I can't leave off loving him now."

Westwood sat down and began rapping the table with his roll of plans in a meditative manner.

"Women are curious folk," he said at last. "When a man's prosperous, they nag at him and make his life a weariness to him; but, when he's in trouble, they can't be too faithful nor too fond. It's awkward sometimes."

"But it's their nature, you see, father," said Cynthia, smiling a little as she folded up her work.

"I suppose it is. And I suppose—being one of them—it's nothing to you that this man's name has been cried high and low throughout the British Empire as a monster of iniquity, a base cowardly [Pg 383] villain, so afraid of being found out that he nearly let another man swing for him—that's nothing to you, eh?"

Cynthia's cheeks burned.

"It is nothing to me because it is not true," she said. "I know the world says so; but the world is wrong. He is not cowardly—he is not base; he has a noble heart. And when he did wrong it was for his sister's sake and to save her from punishment—not for his own. Oh, father, you never spoke so hardly of him before!"

"I am only repeating what the world says," replied Westwood stolidly. "I am not stating my own private opinion. What the world says is a very important thing, Cynthia."

"I don't care for what it says!" cried Cynthia impatiently.

"But I care—not for myself, but for you. And we've got to pay some attention to it—you and I and the man you marry, whoever he may be."

"It will be Hubert Lepel or nobody, father."

"It may be Hubert; but it won't be Hubert Lepel with my consent. He has no call to be very proud of his name that I can see. Look here, Cynthia! When he comes out, you can tell him this from me—he may marry you if he'll take the name of 'Westwood' and give up that of 'Lepel'. Many a man does that, I'm told, when he comes into a fortune. Well, you're a fortune in yourself, besides what

I've got to leave you. If he won't do that, he won't do much for you."

"I am not ashamed of his name," said Cynthia, with a little tremor in her voice.

"Well, perhaps not; but I'd rather it was so. I don't think I'm unreasonable, my dear. 'Lepel' isn't a common name, and it's too well known. As 'Mrs. Hubert Westwood' you will escape remark much more easily than as 'Mrs. Hubert Lepel.' I don't think it is too much to ask; and it's the one condition I make before I give my consent to his marrying you."

"I will tell him, father. Perhaps he will not mind."

"If he minds, he won't be worthy of you—that's all I've got to say," said Westwood, rising to his feet and preparing to leave the room.

But Cynthia intercepted him:

"Father, if he consents, you will forgive him, will you not?" she said putting her hands on his shoulder and looking anxiously into his eyes. [Pg 384]

"Forgive him, my dear? Well, I suppose I have done that, or I shouldn't say that he might marry you at all."

"And you will forget the past, and love him a little for my sake?"

"I'm bound to love the people you love, Cynthy," said the old man stooping to kiss the beautiful face, and patting her cheek with his roll of plans; "and I don't think you've got any call to feel afraid."

CHAPTER LII.

The newspapers had cried out that Hubert Lepel's two years were a miserably insufficient punishment for the crime of which he had been guilty; but to Cynthia it seemed as if those two years were an eternity. She did not talk about him to any one; she interested herself apparently in the affairs of her father's house; she made a thousand occupations for herself in the new land to which she had gone. Occasionally she had a letter—which she dearly prized—from Enid Vane, and in these letters she heard a little now and then about Hubert; but, after Enid's marriage, the letters became less frequent, and at last ceased altogether. And then she knew that the two years were over, and that Hubert must be free.

Free—or dead! She sometimes had a keen darting fear that she would never see his face again. His health had suffered very much in confinement, she had learnt from Enid's letters; and she knew that he had seemed very weak and ill during those terrible days of his trial for manslaughter. She could never think of them without a shiver. How had the two years ended for him? Was he a wreck, without hope without energy, without strength, coming out of prison only to die? Cynthia brooded over these possibilities until sleep fled from her eyes and the color from her cheeks. Her father looked at her now and then with anxious, grieving eyes; but he did not say a word. She noticed however that he greatly advocated the good qualities of a fine young Scotchman called MacPhail, who had lately settled on an estate in the neighborhood, and had [Pg 385] shown a great inclination for Cynthia's society. Westwood was never tired of praising his good looks, his manly ways, his abilities, and his intelligence, and of calculating openly, in his daughter's hearing, the amount of wealth of which he was sure MacPhail was possessed. Cynthia grew impatient of these praises before long.

"Dear father," she said, taking his grizzled head between her hands one day and kissing it, "I like your Mr. MacPhail very well; but I shall get tired of him very soon if you are always praising him so much."

"But you do like him, Cynthy?" said her father, turning round hastily.

"Oh, yes—I think that he is a very estimable young man! I know all his good points by heart; but I can't say that I find him interesting."

"Interesting?" echoed Westwood. "What do you mean, Cynthy? Isn't he clever enough for you?"

"He is clever enough for anybody, no doubt," said Cynthia, with a little laugh. "But he never reads, he never thinks—except about his stock—and he isn't even a gentleman."

"Neither am I, Cynthia, my dear," said her father sorrowfully.

"You, you darling old man," said the girl lightly—"as if you were not one of Nature's gentlemen, and the dearest and noblest of men to boot! If he were like you, father, I should think twice as much of him;" and she put her arm round his neck and kissed him.

Westwood's face beamed.

"You're not ashamed of your old father?" he said delightedly. "Bless you, my girl! What I shall do when the time comes for me to lose you, I'm sure I don't know!"

"You are not likely to lose me father. I shall probably stay with you always," said Cynthia rather

sadly. But she brightened up when she saw his questioning face. "You and I shall always keep house together, shall we not?"

"Don't you think, Cynthia," said he, detaining her as she was about to move away, "that we might take MacPhail into partnership some of these days?"

"Partnership?" she repeated, not seeing his drift at first. "What do you want with a partner, father? Is there too much for you to do? Or haven't you enough capital? Why should you want a partner?" [Pg 386]

"It isn't a partner for myself that I'm talking about, my pretty. I want a son—and the partner would be for you. In plain words, Donald MacPhail is head over ears in love with you Cynthia. Couldn't you bring yourself to look upon him as your husband, don't you think?"

"No, I could not," said Cynthia quickly and decisively. "There is only one man whom I could think of—and you know who that one is. If I do not marry him, I will marry nobody at all."

Westwood sighed and looked dispirited, but said no more.

Cynthia exerted herself to be particularly frigid to Mr. MacPhail when he next visited the house, and succeeded so well that the young Scotchman was utterly dismayed by her demeanor, and was not seen there again for many a long day.

Mr. MacPhail was not the only suitor that Cynthia had to send about his business. She was too handsome, too winning, to escape remark in a place where attractive women were rather rare. Her father used afterwards to observe, with a chuckle of delight, that she had had an offer from every eligible young man—and from some that were not eligible—within a circuit of sixty miles around his homestead; but Cynthia did not altogether like the recollection.

They did not often see English newspapers; but at this time Westwood took to poring over any that he could obtain from neighbors or from the nearest town. One day Cynthia saw that a copy of the *Standard* was lying in a very conspicuous position on her writing-table. She took it up and read the announcement of the death at her own house of Leonora Vane, aged sixty-nine. She wondered a little that Enid had not written to tell her of Miss Vane's death; and then the tears fell slowly from her eyes, as she considered how completely she was now cut off from the Vanes and all their concerns—as completely as if she herself had "passed to where beyond these voices there is peace." The old life was over; she had come to a new world where all her duties lay; and the past, with its vigorous life, its passionate emotions, its intense joys, its bitter pains, existed for her no more.

And yet she could not forget it; absorb herself as she would in household cares, busy herself as she would with her father's requirements and the needs of her poorer neighbors—and for these Cynthia was a centre of all that was beneficent and beautiful—moments would come when the present seemed to her like a dream and the past the only reality. When had she lived so fully as when she knew from Hubert's lips the meaning of his love for her—of her love for him? Life would be dull and gray indeed if it contained no memory of those exquisite, passionate moments! For these, the rest of her existence was a mere setting; and for these she knew well enough that she was glad that she had lived. [Pg 387]

Thus she sat thinking, with her cheek upon her hand and the tears wet upon her long dark lashes; and she did not hear the footsteps of any one approaching until her father touched her on the shoulder and said—

"Cynthy, here's visitors!"

Then she looked up. At first she saw only the ruddy, face and reddish hair of the admirable MacPhail, and she rose to her feet with an impatient little sigh. After MacPhail came another neighbor—a tall thin man with a military bearing, generally known as "the Colonel," though it was not clear that he had ever held any rank in the army. And after these two a stranger followed—also a tall man, thin, dark, grave, with eyes that seemed to Cynthia like those of one who had returned from beyond the grave.

A start like a sort of electric shock ran through Cynthia's frame. It was impossible for her to speak, to do more than extend her hand in silence to each of the new-comers. And then she looked once more upon her lover's face—upon the face of Hubert Lepel. In the presence of her father and the two comparative strangers, she could not even utter a word of greeting. Her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth, and she dared not even raise her eyes.

Hubert seemed at first as tongue-tied as herself; but presently, she heard him talking in a quiet unobtrusive way, as if he and "the Colonel" were old friends; and it transpired that the two had met during Hubert's previous wanderings in America, and that they had seen a good deal of the world together.

Before long, all four men were busily engaged on a comparison of America and England and in a discussion on contemporary politics, and Cynthia was able to devote herself to household duties and the entertainment of her guests. Hubert was staying in Colonel Morton's house, she found, and they had met Mr. Westwood and MacPhail when they were having a long tramp over the hills; and, strangely enough, Westwood had immediately asked both men to dinner. [Pg 388]

It was not until the meal was over and the men had gone out to smoke in the pleasant piazza,

with its clustering vines which adorned the front of Westwood's house, that Cynthia had a moment in which to compare her present impressions with her past. It struck her that Hubert looked older, as well as graver and sadder, and perhaps more dignified. His hair was turning gray and thin at the temples; his moustache was also streaked with white—bleached, as Cynthia knew, by trouble, not by age. He was thin, but he looked stronger than when she saw him last; and his gait was firm and elastic. His face was slightly tanned—probably by the sun and sea-air in his recent expedition from England—and the brown hue gave him a look of health and vigor which he had not possessed in England. But the change in his expression was more striking to Cynthia than any alteration in physical aspect. His eyes had lost their anxious restlessness, his mouth was set as if in steadfast resolution; his brow was calm. He looked like a man who had gone "through much tribulation," but had come out victor at the last.

And Cynthia—was she changed? He had thought so when he came upon her that afternoon; but his heart had yearned over her all the more fondly for the change. He had never seen her so thin, so pale, so worn; the dark eyes had not been set in such hollows of shadow when he last saw her; the cheeks had never before been so colorless. He felt that she had suffered for him—that she had borne his punishment with himself; and the thought made it difficult for him to restrain himself from falling at her feet and kissing the very hem of her garment as he looked at her. But at dinner she looked more like her old beautiful self. She was in black when he arrived; but she came to dinner in a pretty gown of cream-colored embroidered muslin, with a bunch of crimson flowers at her bosom. The color had come back to her cheeks too, and the light to her eyes—he [Pg 389] saw that, though he could not get her to look at him.

Cynthia sat in the window, not daring to join the party on the piazza—hoping perhaps that one of them would separate himself from the others and come to her. Hubert was walking with her father now—up and down, up and down, deep in talk. Was it merely talk of politics and farming and common things?

She saw them withdraw to a corner of the piazza where they could converse unheard by their companions. Westwood was smoking; but his speech was fluent, Cynthia could see; he was laying down the law, emphasising his sentences by an outstretched finger, blowing great rings of smoke into the air between some of his remarks. Hubert listened and seemed to assent. His head was bowed, his arms were folded across his chest; he looked—Cynthia could not help the thought—like a prisoner receiving sentence, a penitent before his judge. Westwood turned to him at last, as if awaiting an answer—the moonlight was on his face, and showed it to be grave and anxious, but unmistakably kind. Hubert raised his head and made some answer; and then—Cynthia's heart began to beat very fast indeed—her father held out his hand. The two men grasped each other's hands warmly and silently for a moment, then both turned away. Westwood took out a great red handkerchief and blew his nose vehemently; Hubert leaned for a moment against the balustrade and put his hand across his eyes. Cynthia's own eyes swam in sympathetic tears as she strove to imagine what had been said. In that moment her love for Hubert was almost less than her love for her father—the man who, in spite of lawless instincts, faulty training, great misfortunes and mistakes, had a nature that was large enough and grand enough to know how to forgive.

Her eyes were so blinded with tears that she saw but indistinctly that her father was coming across the piazza to the long open window by which she sat. She drew herself back a little, so as to be out of the range of vision of the Colonel and Mr. MacPhail. She knew that the crisis of her fate was come.

"Cynthia, my dear," said her father's homely ragged voice—how dear it had grown, she felt that she had never known till now—"here's a gentleman wants to have a word with you. And he has [Pg 390] my good wishes and my friendship, dearie; and that's a thing that I thought you'd like to know. He calls it my forgiveness; but we know—we understand—it's all the same. I'll leave him with you, my beauty, and you can say to each other what you please." And then he kissed her very tenderly and turned away.

She felt that Hubert had followed him, and had stepped into the room; but she could not raise her eyes.

She was obliged to see him however when he knelt down before her, and put his clasped hands very gently upon her knee.

"Cynthia," said his voice—the other voice that she loved to hear—"your father says that he has forgiven me. Can you forgive?"

She put her hand upon his, and a great tear fell down her cheeks.

"I have nothing to urge in my defence," he said. "If you like to punish me—to send me away from you for ever—I know that I shall have deserved my fate. I dare not ask for anything from you, Cynthia, except your forgiveness. May I hope to gain that?"

"If my father has forgiven you," she said a little hurriedly, "I cannot do less."

There was a little silence. He bowed his head and touched with his lips the slender fingers that rested lightly upon his own joined hands. He felt that she trembled at the touch.

"What is to be my fate, Cynthia? I put my life into your hands. I owe it to your father and to you."

"What do you want it to be?" she asked softly, but with an effort of which he was profoundly conscious and ashamed.

"Oh, my love, my only love, you know what I desire!" he said, with sudden passion; and for the first time he raised his head and looked into her face. "I dare not ask—I am not worthy! If there is anything that you can bear to say—to give me—you must do it of your own free will; I cannot ask you for anything."

"But you know," said Cynthia, looking at him at last, and letting, the gleam of a smile appear through the tears that filled her eyes, "a woman likes to be asked."

And then, when their eyes had once met, their lips met too, and there was no need for him to ask her anything. [Pg 391]

But, when there was no longer any need, he found it easier to ask questions.

"Cynthia, my darling, do you love me?"

"With my whole heart, Hubert!"

"And will you—will you really—be—my wife?"

"Yes, Hubert."

"And you forgive me? Oh, that is more wonderful than all! You bow me to the earth with your goodness—you and your father, Cynthia! What can I do to be worthy of it? He is going to give me his name as well as yourself; and Heaven knows that I will do my best to keep it clean!"

His head sank on her bosom.

"Hubert," she said, "you must not talk in that way! Do you think that I should ever be ashamed of your name, darling? It is just that my father has no son, and does not want his old name to die out. If you will sacrifice your name, instead of my sacrificing mine, as women generally do, you will make him very happy and very proud of you. He wants a son, and you will be as a son to him, Hubert darling, will you not?"

And so the treaty was ratified.

Hubert and Cynthia were married in three weeks; and the marriage turned out an uncommonly happy one. Contrary to even Cynthia's expectations, Westwood and his son-in-law became the very best of friends. Westwood was proud of Hubert's literary knowledge, of his former social standing, of his many gifts and accomplishments. It was he who one day proposed that Hubert should go back to the name of Lepel—the name by which he had been known in the literary and dramatic world, and by which he would perhaps be remembered long after "the Beechfield tragedy" was forgotten. But Hubert refused. He was too proud of the new name that he had won, he said, ever to give it up. As for literature, he had no inclination for it now. In this new home, in a new world, with father, wife, and boys beside him, and a political career which opened out a future such as he had never dreamed of when he was writing his plays and poems in Russell Square—a future made easy to him by Westwood's position and character in the States, and also by the large fortune which Miss Vane had left him unconditionally on her death—he had no wish to change his lot in life. Out of evil had come good; but only through repentance and the valley of humiliation, without which he would indeed have gone wearily and sadly to an end without honor and without peace. But he had won a great victory; and he was not without his great reward. [Pg 392]

THE END.

Transcriber's Notes:
Page 11: Changed "at a friend" to "as a friend"
Page 18: Changed "closed first" to "closed fist"
Page 31: Changed "her sister" to "his sister"
Page 122: Changed "infringment" to "infringement"
Page 142: Changed "insistance" to "insistence"
Page 148: Changed "freinds" to "friends"
Page 151: Changed "cutseyed" to "curtseyed"
Page 155: Changed "bettter" to "better"
Page 176: Changed "delighful" to "delightful"
Page 229: Changed "mediated" to "meditated"

Page 242: Changed "Kensingston" to "Kensington"
Page 243: Changed "remenber" to "remember"
Page 274: Changed "profond" to "profound"
Page 280: Changed "lovelinesss" to "loveliness"
Page 307: Changed "grevious" to "grievous"
Page 345: Changed "thoughful" to "thoughtful"
Page 379: Changed "word" to "world"

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