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Agnes Blake Poor**

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Title: Boston Neighbours In Town and Out

Author: Agnes Blake Poor

Release date: May 22, 2011 [EBook #36196]
Most recently updated: January 7, 2021

Language: English

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"HE TOOK OUT HIS EYEGLASS TO STUDY IT."

**BOSTON NEIGHBOURS
IN TOWN AND OUT
BY AGNES BLAKE POOR**



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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The author and the publishers desire to make acknowledgment to the publishers of the *Century Magazine* and of the *New England Magazine* for their courtesy in permitting the re-issue of certain stories which were originally published in these periodicals.

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OUR TOLSTOI CLUB

I should be glad to tell a story if I only knew one, but I don't. Some people say that one experience is as interesting as another, and that any real life is worth hearing about; but I think it must make some little difference who the person is. But if I really must tell one, and since you all have told yours, and such nice ones, and anything is better than nothing when we are kept in all the morning by a pouring rain, with nothing to do, because we came only for a week, and did not expect it to rain, I will try and tell you about our Tolstoi Club, because that was rather like a story—at least it might have been like one if things had turned out a little differently.

You know I live in a suburb of Boston, and a very charming, delightful one it is. I cannot call it by its real name, because I am going to be so very personal; so I will call it "Babyland," which indeed people often do in fun. There never was such a place for children. The population is mostly under seven years old, for it was about seven years ago that young married people began to move into it in such numbers, because it is so healthy; but it was always a great place for them even when it was small. The old inhabitants are mostly grandfathers and grandmothers now, and enjoy it very much; but they usually go into town in the winter, with such unmarried children as they have left, to get a little change; for there is no denying that there is a sameness about it—the sidewalks are crowded with perambulators every pleasant day, and at our parties the talk is apt to run too much on nursery-maids, and milkmen and their cows, and drains, to be very interesting to those who have not learned how terribly important such things are. So in winter we—I mean the young married couples, of whom I am half a one—are left pretty much to our own devices.

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Though we are all so devoted to our infant families, we are not so much so as to give up all rational pleasures or intellectual tastes; we could not live so near Boston, you know, and do that.

Our husbands go into town every day to make money, and we go in every few days to spend it, and in the evenings, if they are not too tired, we sometimes make them take us in to the theatres and concerts. We all have a very nice social circle, for Babyland is fashionable as well as respectable, and we are asked out more or less, and go out; but for real enjoyment we like our own clubs and classes the best. We feel so safe going round in the neighbourhood, because we are so near the children, and can be called home any time if necessary. There is our little evening dancing-club, which meets round at one another's houses, where we all exchange husbands—a kind of grown-up "puss-in-the-corner"; only, as the supply of dancing husbands is not quite equal to that of wives, we have to get a young man or two in if we can; and for the same reason we don't ask any girls, who, indeed, are not very eager to come. Then there is the musical club, and the sketching-club, and we have a great many morning clubs for the women alone, where we bring our work (and it is splendid to get so much time to sew), and read, or are read to, and then talk over things. Sometimes we stay to lunch, and sometimes not; and we would have an essay club, only we have no time to write the papers.

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Now, many of these clubs meet chiefly at Minnie Mason's—Mrs. Sydney Mason's. She gets them up, and is president: you see, she has more time, because she has no children—the only woman in Babyland who hasn't, and I don't doubt she feels dreadfully about it. She is not strong, and has to lie on the sofa most of the time, and that is another reason why we meet there so often; and then she lives right in the midst of us all, and so close to the road that we can all of us watch our children, when they are out for their airings, very conveniently. Minnie is very kind and sympathetic, and takes such an interest in all our affairs, and if she is somewhat inclined to gossip about them, poor dear, it is very natural, when she has so few of her own to think about.

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Well, in the autumn before last, Minnie said we must get up a Tolstoi Club; she said the Russians were the coming race, and Tolstoi was their greatest writer, and the most Christian of moralists (at least she had read so), and that everybody was talking about him, and we should be behindhand if we could not. So we turned one of our clubs, which had nothing particular on hand just then, into one; and, besides Tolstoi, we read other Russian novelists, Turgenieff and—that man whose name is so hard to pronounce, who writes all about convicts and—and other criminals. We did not read them all, for they are very long, and we can never get through anything long; but we hired a very nice lady "skimmer," who ran through them, and told us the plots, and all about the authors, and read us bits. I forget a good deal, but I remember she said that Tolstoi was the supreme realist, and that all previous novelists were romancers and idealists, and that he drew life just as it was, and nobody else had ever done anything like it, except indeed the other Russians; and then we discussed. In discussion we are very apt to stray off to other topics, but that day I remember Bessie Milliken saying that the Russians seemed very queer people; she supposed that if every one said these authors were so true to life, they must be, but she had never known such an extraordinary state of things. Just as soon as ever people were married—if they married at all—they seemed wild to make love to some one else, or have some one else make love to them.

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"They don't seem to do so here," said Fanny Deane.

"We certainly do not," said Blanche Livermore. "I think the reason must be that we have no time. I have scarcely time to see anything of my own husband, much less to fall in love with any one else's."

We all laughed, but we felt that it was odd. In Babyland all went on in an orderly and respectable fashion. The gayest girls, the fastest young men, as soon as they were married and settled there, subsided at once into quiet, domestic ways. At our dances each of us secretly thought her own husband the most interesting person present, and he returned the compliment, and after a peaceful evening of passing them about we were always very thankful to get them back to go home with. Were we, then, so unlike the rest of humanity?

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"Are we sure?" asked Minnie Mason, always prone to speculation. "It is not likely that we are utterly different from the rest of the world. Who knows what dark tragedies lie hidden in the recesses of the heart? Who knows all her neighbour's secret history?" This was being rather personal, but no one took it home, for we never minded what Minnie said; and as many of the club were, as always occurred, detained at home by domestic duties, we thought it might apply to one of them. But I can't deny that we, and especially Minnie, who had a relish for what was sensational, and was pleased to find that realistic fiction, which she had always thought must be dull, was really exciting, felt a little ashamed at our being so behind the age—"provincial," as Mr. James would call it; "obsolete," as Mr. Howells is fond of saying—at Babyland as not to have the ghost of a scandal among us. None of us wished to give cause for the scandal ourselves; but I think we might not have been as sorry as we ought to be if one of our neighbours had been obliging enough to do so. We did not want anything very bad, you know. Of course none of us could ever have dreamed of running away with a fascinating young man—like Anna Karenina—because in the first place we all liked our husbands, and in the next place, who could be depended upon to go into town to do the marketing, and to see that the children wore their india-rubbers on wet days? But anything short of that we felt we could bear with equanimity.

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That same fall we were excited, though only in our usual harmless, innocent way, by hearing that the old Grahame house was sold, and pleased—though no more than was proper—that it was sold to the Williamses. It was a pretty, old farm-house which had been improved upon and enlarged, and had for many years been to let; and being as inconvenient as it was pretty, it was always changing its tenants, whom we despised as transients, and seldom called upon. But now it was

bought, and by none of your new people, who, we began to think, were getting too common in Babyland. We all knew Willie Williams: all the men were his old friends, and all the women had danced with him, and liked him, and flirted with him; but I don't think it ever went deeper, for somehow all the girls had a way of laughing at him, though he was a handsome fellow, and had plenty of money, and was very well behaved, and clever too in his way; but we could not help thinking him silly. For one thing, he would be an artist, though you never saw such dreadful daubs as all his pictures were. It was a mercy he did not have to live by them, for he never sold any; he gave them away to his friends, and Blanche Livermore said that was why he had so many friends, for of course he could not work off more than one apiece on them. He was very popular with all the other artists, for he was the kindest-hearted creature, and always helped those who were poor, and admired those who were great; and they never had anything to say against him, though they could not get out anything more in his praise than that he was "careful and conscientious in his work," which was very likely true. Then he was vain; at least he liked his own good looks, and, being æsthetic in his tastes, chose to display them to advantage by his attire. He wore his hair, which was very light, long, and was seldom seen in anything less fanciful than a boating-suit, or a bicycle-suit, though he was not given to either exercise, but wanted an excuse for a blouse, and knee-breeches, and tights, and a soft hat—and these were all of a more startling pattern than other people's; while as to the velvet painting-jackets and brocade dressing-gowns, in which he indulged in his studio, I can only say that they made him a far more picturesque figure than any in his pictures. It was a shame to waste such materials on a man. Then he lisped when he was at all excited, which he often was; and he had odd ways of walking, and standing, and sitting, which looked affected, though I really don't think they were.

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He made enthusiastic, but very brief, love to all of us in turn. I don't know whether any of us could have had him; if one could, all could; but, supposing we could, I don't believe any of us would have had the courage to venture on Willie Williams. But we expected that his marriage would be romantic and exciting, and his wedding something out of the common. Opinions were divided as to whether his ardent love-making would induce some lovely young Italian or Spanish girl of rank to run away from a convent with him, or whether he would rashly take up with some artist's model, or goose-girl, or beggar-maid. We were much disappointed when, after all, he married in the most commonplace manner a very ordinary girl named Loulie Latham.

We all knew Loulie too; she went to school at Miss Woodberry's, in the class next below mine; and she was a nice girl, and we all liked her well enough, but there never was a girl who had less in her. She was not bad-looking, but no beauty; not at all the kind of looks to attract an artist. Blanche Livermore said that he might have married her for her red hair if only there had been more of it. The Lathams were very well connected, and knew everybody, and she went about with the other girls, and had a fair show of attention at parties; but she never had friends or lovers. She had not much chance to have any, indeed, for she married very young.

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She was a very shy, quiet girl, and I used to think that perhaps it was because she was so overcrowded by her mother. Mrs. Latham was a large, striking-looking if not exactly handsome, lady-like though loud, woman, who talked a great deal about everything. She was clever, but eccentric, and took up all manner of fads and fancies, and though she was a thoroughly good woman, and well born and well bred, she did know the very queerest people—always hand in glove with some new crank. Hygiene, as she called it, was her pet hobby. Fortunately she had a particular aversion to dosing; but she dieted her daughter and herself, which, I fear, was nearly as bad. All her bread had husks in it, and she was always discovering that it was hurtful to eat any butter or drink any water, and no end of such notions. She dressed poor Loulie so frightfully that it was enough to take all the courage out of a girl: with all her dresses very short in the skirt, and big at the waist, and cut high, even in the evening, and thick shoes very queerly shaped, made after her own orders by some shoemaker of her own, and loose cotton gloves, and a mushroom hat down over her eyes. Finally she took up the mind-cure, and Loulie was to keep thinking all the time how perfectly well she was, which, I think, was what made her so thin and pale. Mrs. Latham always said that no one ever need be ill, and indeed she never was herself, for she was found dead in her bed one morning without any warning.

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This happened at Jackson, New Hampshire, where they were spending the summer. Of course poor Loulie was half distracted with the shock and the grief. There was no one in the house where they were whom she knew at all, or who was very congenial, I fancy, and Willie Williams, whom they knew slightly, was in the neighbourhood, sketching, and was very kind and attentive, and more helpful than any one would ever have imagined he could be. He saw to all the business, and telegraphed for some cousin or other, and made the funeral arrangements; and the end of it was that in three months he and Loulie Latham were married, and had sailed for Europe on their wedding tour.

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This was ten years ago, and they had never come back till now. They meant to come back sooner, but one thing after another prevented. They had no children for several years, and they thought it a good chance to poke around in the wildest parts of Southern Europe—Corsica, and Sardinia, and the Balearic Isles, and all that—and made their winter quarters at Palermo. Then for the next six years they lived in less out-of-the-way places. They had four children, and lost two; and one thing or another kept them abroad, until they suddenly made up their minds to come home.

We had not heard much of them while they were gone. Loulie had no one to correspond with, and Willie, like most men, never wrote letters; but we all were very curious to see them, and willing to welcome them, though we did not know how much they were going to surprise us. Willie Williams, indeed, was just the same as ever—in fact, our only surprise in him was to see him look

no older than when he went away; but as for Mrs. Williams, she gave us quite a shock. For my part, I shall never forget how taken aback I was, when, strolling down to the station one afternoon with the children, with a vague idea of meeting Tom, who might come on that train, but who didn't, I came suddenly upon a tall, splendidly shaped, stately creature, in the most magnificent clothes; at least they looked so, though they were all black, and the dress was only cashmere, but it was draped in an entirely new way. She wore a shoulder-cape embroidered in jet, and a large black hat and feather set back over great masses of rich dark auburn hair; and, though so late in the season, she carried a large black lace parasol. To be sure, it was still very warm and pleasant. I never should have ventured to speak to her, but she stopped at once, and said, "Perhaps you have forgotten me, Mrs. White?"

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"No—oh, no," I said, trying not to seem confused; "Mrs.—Mrs. Williams, I believe?"

"You knew me better as Loulie Latham," she said pleasantly enough; but I cannot say I liked her manner. There was something in it, though I could not say what, that seemed like condescension, and she hardly mentioned my children—and most people think them so pretty—though I saw her look at them earnestly once or twice.

Willie was the same good-hearted, hospitable fellow as ever, and begged us to come in, and go all over his house, and see his studio that he had built on, and his bric-à-brac. And a lovely house it was, full of beautiful things, for he knew them, if he could not paint them, and indeed he had a great talent for amateur carpentering. We wished he would come to our houses and do little jobs to show his good-will, instead of giving us his pictures; but we tried to say something nice about them, and the frames were most elegant. Of course we saw a good deal of Mrs. Williams, but I don't think any of us took to her. She was very quiet, as she always had been, but with a difference. She was perfectly polite, and I can't say she gave herself airs, exactly; but there was something very like it in her seeming to be so well satisfied with herself and her position, and caring so little whether she pleased us or not. Of course we all invited them, and they accepted most of our invitations when they were asked together, though she showed no great eagerness to do so; but she would not join one of our morning clubs, and had no reason to give. It could not be want of time, for we used to see her dawdling about with her children all the morning, though we knew that she had brought over an excellent, highly trained, Protestant North German nurse for them. When we asked her to the dancing-class, she said she never danced, and we had better not depend on her, but Mr. Williams enjoyed it, and would be glad to come without her. We did not relish this indifference, though it gave us an extra man, and Minnie Mason said that it was not a good thing for a man to get into the way of going about without his wife.

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"Why not?" said Mrs. Williams, opening her great eyes with such an air of utter ignorance that it was impossible to explain. It was easy to see that she need not be afraid of trusting her husband out of her sight, for a more devoted and admiring one I never saw, whether with her or away from her talking of "Loulou" and her charms, as if sure of sympathy. But we had our doubts as to how much she returned his attachment, and Minnie said it was easy to see that she only tolerated him; and we all thought her unappreciative, to say the least. He was very much interested in her dress, and spent a great deal of time in choosing and buying beautiful ornaments and laces and stuffs for her, which she insisted on having made up in her own way, languidly remarking that it was enough for Willie to make her a fright on canvas, without doing so in real life. Blanche Livermore said she must have some affection for him, to sit so much to him, for he had painted about a hundred pictures of her in different styles, each one worse than the last. You would have thought her hideous if you had only seen them; but Willie's artist friends, some of them very distinguished, had painted her too, and had made her into a regular beauty. Opinions differed about her looks; but those who liked her the least had to allow that she was fine-looking, though some said it was greatly owing to her style of dress. We all called it shockingly conspicuous at first, and then went home and tried to make our things look as much like hers as we possibly could, which was very little; for, as we afterwards found out, they came from a modiste at Paris who worked for only one or two private customers, and whose costumes had a kind of combination of the fashionable and the artistic which it seemed impossible for any one here to hit. We used to wonder how poor Mrs. Latham would feel, could she rise from her grave, to behold her daughter's gowns, tight as a glove, and in the evening low and long to a degree, her high-heeled French shoes, and everything her mother had thought most sinful. Her hair had grown a deeper, richer shade abroad, and she had matched it to perfection, and one of Willie's pictures of her, with the real and false all down her back together, looked like the burning bush. She was in slight mourning for an old great-uncle who had left her a nice little sum of money; and we thought, if she were so inimitable now, what would she be when she put on colours?

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We did better in modelling our children's clothes after hers, and I must say she was very good-natured about lending us her patterns. She had a boy and girl, beautiful little creatures, but they looked rather delicate, which she did not seem to realise at all; she was very amiable in her ways to them, but cool, just as she was to their father.

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It must be confessed that we spent a great deal of time at our clubs in discussing her, especially at the Tolstoi Club; for, as Minnie remarked, she seemed very much in the Russian style, and it was not disagreeable, after all, to think that we might have such a "type," as they call it, among us.

Just as we had begun to get accustomed to Mrs. Williams's dresses, and her beauty, and her nonchalance, and held up our heads again, she knocked us all over with another ten-strike. It was after a little dinner given for them at the Millikens', and a good many people had dropped in

afterward, as they were apt to do after our little dinners, to which of course we could not ask all our set, however intimate. Mrs. Reynolds had come out from Boston, and as she was by way of being very musical, though she never performed, she eagerly asked Willie Williams, when he mentioned having lived so long in Sicily, whether he had ever seen Giudotti, the great composer, who had retired to the seclusion of his native island in disgust with the world, which he thought was going, musically speaking, to ruin. We listened respectfully, for most of us did not remember hearing of the great Giudotti, but Willie replied coolly:

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"Oh, yes; we met him often; he was my wife's teacher. Loulou, I wish you would sing that little thing of Mickiewicz, '*Panicz i Dziewczyzna*,' which Giudotti set for you."

Loulie was leaning back on a sofa across the room, lazily swaying her big black lace fan. She had on a lovely gown of real black Spanish lace, and a great bunch of yellow roses on her bosom, which you would not have thought would have looked well with her red hair; but they suited her "Venetian colouring," as her husband called it—

"Ni blanche ni cuivrée, mais dorée
D'un rayon de soleil."

Willie's strong point, or his weak point, as you may consider it, was in quotations. She did not seem any too well pleased with the request, and replied that she hardly thought people would care to hear any music; it seemed a pity to stop the conversation—for all but herself were chattering as fast as they could. But of course we all caught at the idea, and the hostess was pressing, and after every mortal in the room had entreated her, she rose, still reluctantly, and walked across the room to the piano, saying that she hoped they really would not mind the interruption.

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It sounded fine to have something specially composed for her, but we were accustomed to hear Fanny Deane, the most musical one among us, sing things set for her by her teacher—indeed, rather more than we could have wished; and I thought now to hear something of the same sort—some weak little melody all on a few notes, in a muffled little voice, with a word or two, such as "weinand," or "veilchen," or "frühling," or "stella," or "bella," distinguishable here and there, according as she sang in German or Italian. So you may imagine how I, as well as all the rest, was struck when, without a single note of prelude, her deep, low voice thrilled through the whole room:

"Why so late in the wood,
Fair maid?"

I never felt so lonely and eery in my life; and then in a moment the wildly ringing music of the distant chase came, faint but growing nearer all the time from the piano, while her voice rose sweeter and sadder above it, till our pleasure grew more delicious as it almost melted into pain. The adventures of the fair maid in the wood were, to say the least, of a very compromising description; but we flattered ourselves that our course of realistic fiction had made us less provincial and old-fashioned, and we knew that nobody minded this sort of thing abroad, especially the Russians, of whom we supposed Mickiewicz was one till somewhat languidly set right by Mrs. Williams.

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After that her singing made a perfect sensation all about Boston, the more because it was so hard to get her to sing. Her style was peculiar, and was a good deal criticised by those who had never heard her. She never sang anything any one else did—that is, anybody you might call any one, for I have heard her sometimes sing something that had gone the rounds of all the hand-organs, and make it sound new again; but many of her songs were in manuscript, some composed for her by Giudotti, and others old things that he had picked up for her—folk-songs, and ballads, and such. She always accompanied herself, and never from any notes, and very often differently for the same song. Sometimes she would sing a whole verse through without playing a note, and then improvise something between. She always sang in English, which we thought queer, when she had lived so long abroad; but she said Giudotti had told her always to use the language of her audience, and Willie, who had a pretty turn for versifying, used to translate for her. We felt rather piqued that she should ignore the fact that we too had studied languages, but we all agreed that she knew how to set herself off, and indeed we thought she carried her affectation beyond justifiable limits. She had to be asked by every one in the room, and was always saying that it was not worth hearing, and that she hoped people would tell her when they had enough of it, though, indeed, she could rarely be induced to sing more than twice. If her voice was praised, she said she had none; and when she was asked to play, she would say she could not—she could only accompany herself. A likely story—as if any one who could do that as she could, could not play anything!—and we used to hear her, too, when she was in her own house, with nobody there but her husband. As for him, he overflowed with pride and delight in her music, and evidently much more than pleased her, and sometimes he even made her blush—a thing she rarely did—by his remarks, such as that if we really wanted to know how Loulou could sing, we must hide in the nursery. It was while singing to her baby, it appeared, that the great Giudotti had chanced to hear her, and immediately implored the privilege of teaching her, for anything or nothing.

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Minnie Mason said that it was impossible that a woman could sing like that unless she had a history; and she spent much of her time and all of her energy for several weeks in finding out what the history could be. It was wonderful how ingeniously she put this and that together, until one day at the club she told us the whole story, and we wondered that we had never thought of it before. It seems that before Loulie Latham was married there had been a love-affair between her

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and Walter Dana. It is not known exactly how far it went, but her feelings were very much involved. She was too young, poor thing, and too simple, to know that Walter Dana was not at all a marrying man; he could not have afforded it, if he had wanted to ever so much. He was the sort of young man, you know, who never does manage to afford to marry, though in other respects he seemed to get on well enough. He had passed down through several generations of girls, and was now rather attentive, in a harmless, general sort of way, to the married women, and came to our dances.

"And then," said Minnie, "when he did not speak, and she was so suddenly left alone, and nearly penniless, after her mother's death, and Willie Williams was so much in love with her, and so pressing—though I don't believe he was ever in love with her more than he was with a dozen other girls, only the circumstances were such, you know, that he could hardly help proposing, he's so generous and impulsive. But he is not exactly the sort of man to fall in love with, and his oddities have evidently worn upon her; and now she feels with bitter regret how different her life might have been if she could have waited till her uncle left her this money. Walter has got on better, and might be able to marry her now, and she is young still—only twenty-nine. It is the wreck of two lives, perhaps of three. Willie is most unsuspecting, but should he ever find out—"

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We all shuddered with pleasurable horror at the thought that we were to be spectators of a Russian novel in real life.

"I have seen them together," went on Minnie, "and their tones and looks were unmistakable. Surely you remember that Eliot Hall german he danced with her, the winter before her mother's death—the only winter she ever went into society; and I recollect now that he seemed very miserable about something at the time of her marriage, only I never suspected why then."

"How very sad!" murmured Emmie Richards, a tender-hearted little thing.

"It is sad," said Minnie, solemnly; "but love is a great and terrible factor in life, and elective affinities are not to be judged by conventional rules."

For my own part, I thought Willie Williams a great deal nicer and more attractive than Walter Dana, except, to be sure, that Walter did talk and look like other people. Perhaps, I said, things were not quite so bad as Minnie made them out. It was to be hoped that poor Loulie would pause at the brink. A great many such stories, especially American ones, never come to anything, except that the heroine lives on, pining, with a blighted life; and I thought, if that were all, Willie was not the kind of man who would mind it much. Very likely he would never know it.

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Blanche Livermore said the idea of a woman pining all her days was nonsense. All girls had affairs, but after they were married the cares of a family soon knocked them all out of their heads. To be sure, Blanche's five boys were enough to knock anything out; but Minnie told us all afterward, separately, in confidence, that it was a little jealousy on her part, because she had been once rather smitten with Walter Dana herself. This seemed very realistic; and I must say my own observations confirmed the truth of Minnie's story. Mrs. Williams did look at times conscious and disturbed. One night, too, Tom and I called on them to make arrangements about some concert tickets. Willie welcomed us in his usual cordial fashion, saying Loulou would be down directly; and in ten minutes or so down she came, in one of her loveliest evening dresses, white embroidered crape, with a string of large amber beads round her throat.

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"I am afraid you are going out, Mrs. Williams; don't let us detain you."

"Not at all," she said, with her usual indifference. "We are not going anywhere. I was waiting upstairs to see the children tucked up in their beds."

It seemed like impropriety of behaviour in no slight degree to fag out one's best clothes at home in that aimless way, but when in ten minutes more Mr. Walter Dana walked in, her guilt was more plainly manifest, and I shuddered to think what a tragedy was weaving round us. Only a day or two after, I met her alone, near nightfall, hurrying toward her home, and with something so odd about her whole air and manner that I stopped short and asked, rather officiously perhaps, if Mr. Williams and the children were well.

"Oh, yes; very—very well, indeed!" she threw back, in a quick, defiant tone, very unlike her usual self; and then, as I looked at her, I perceived to my dismay, that she was crying bitterly. I felt so awkward that I did not know what to say, and I stood staring, while she pulled down her veil with a jerk, and hurried on. I could not help going into Minnie's to ask her what she thought it could mean. Minnie, of course, knew all about it.

"She has been in here, and I have been giving her a piece of my mind. I hope it will do her good. Crying, was she? I am very glad of it."

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"But, Minnie! how could you? how did you dare to? how did you begin?" I asked in amazement, heightened by the disrespectful way in which Minnie had dealt with elective affinities.

"Oh, very easily. I began about her children, and said how very delicate they looked, and that we all thought they needed a great deal of care."

"But she does seem to take a great deal of care of them. She has them with her most of the time."

"Yes; that's just it. She always has them, because she wants to use them for a cover. I am sure she takes them out in very unfit weather, and keeps them out too long, just for a pretext to be

strolling about with him."

"You certainly have more courage than I could muster up," I said. "What else did you say?"

"I did not say anything else out plainly; but I saw she understood perfectly well what I meant."

"I don't see how you ever dared to do it."

"It is enough to make one do something to live next door to her as I do. You know that Walter Dana has not been at either of the two last dancing-classes. Well, it is just because he has been there, spending the whole evening with her alone. I have been kept at home myself, and have seen him with my own eyes going away before Mr. Williams gets home. I can see their front gate from where I sit now, and the electric light strikes full on every one who comes and goes."

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I thought this was about enough, but we were to have yet more positive proof. One evening, soon after, we were all at the Jenkses'. It was a large party, and the rooms were hot and crowded. The Williamses were there, and Walter Dana; but he did not go near Loulie; he paid her no more attention in company than anybody else—from motives of policy, most probably—and she was even quieter than usual, and seemed weary and depressed. Mrs. Jenks asked her to sing, and she refused with more than her ordinary decision. "She would rather not sing to-night, if Mrs. Jenks did not mind," and this refusal she repeated without variation. But Mrs. Jenks did mind very much; she had asked some people from a distance, on purpose to hear Mrs. Williams, and when she had implored in vain, and made all her guests do so too, she finally, in despair, directed herself to Mr. Williams, who seemed in very good spirits, as he always did in company. It was enough for him to know that Professor Perkins and Judge Wheelwright depended on hearing his wife, to rouse his pride at once, and I heard him say to her coaxingly:

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"Come, Loulou, don't you think you could sing a little?"

Loulou said something in so low a tone that I could not catch a word.

"Yes, dear, I know; but I really don't think there's any reason for it—and they have all come to hear you, and it seems disobliging not to."

Again Loulie's reply was inaudible, all but the last words, "Cannot get through with it."

"Oh, yes, you will. Come, darling, won't you? Just once, to oblige me. It won't last long."

Loulie still looked most unwilling, but she rose, more as if too tired to contest the point than anything else, and walked over to the piano. Her cheeks were burning, but I saw her shiver as she sat down. Her husband followed her, looking a little anxious, and I wondered if they had been having a scene. Surely the course of dissimulation she was keeping up must have its inevitable effect on her nerves and temper, but her voice rang out as thrilling and triumphant as ever. She sang an English song to the old French air *Musette de Nina*. It was a silly, sentimental thing, all about parted loves and hopeless regrets; but the most foolish words used to sound grandly expressive as she gave them. When she came to the last line, "The flowers of life will never bloom more," at "never" her accompaniment stopped, her voice shook, struggled with the next words, paused, and a look of despair transformed her whole face. I followed the direction of her eyes, and caught sight of Walter Dana, just visible in the doorway, and, like every other mortal in the room, gazing on her in rapt attention. It was like looking on a soul in torture, and we all shuddered as we saw it. What must it have been for him? He grew crimson, and made an uneasy movement, which seemed to break the spell; for, Loulie, rousing herself with an effort, struck a ringing chord, and taking up the words on a lower note, carried them through to the end, her voice gaining strength with the repetition that the air demanded. No one asked her to sing again; and when she rose Walter Dana had disappeared, and the Williamses left very soon afterward.

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Things had come to such a pass now that we most sincerely repented our desire for a Tolstoi novel among us; and if this was life as it was in Russia, we heartily wished it could be confined to that country. We felt that something shocking was sure to happen soon, and so it did; but if you go through with an earthquake, I am told, it never seems at all like what you expected, and this came in a most unlooked-for way. It was on a day when our Tolstoi Club met at Minnie Mason's, and she looked really ill and miserable. She said she had enough to make her so; and when we were all assembled, she asked one of us to shut all the doors, lest the servants should hear us, and then took out, from a locked drawer in her desk, a newspaper. It was the kind of paper that we had always regarded as improper to buy, or even to look at, and we wondered how Minnie had ever got hold of it; but she unfolded it nervously, and showed us a marked passage:

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"It is rumoured that proceedings for a divorce will soon be taken by a prominent Boston artist, whose lovely wife is widely known in first-class musical circles. The co-respondent is an old admirer of the lady's, as well as an intimate friend of her husband's."

We all read these words with horror, and Emmie Richards began to cry.

"We ought to have done *something* to prevent it," said Blanche, decidedly.

"What could we do?" said I.

"Poor Willie hasn't a relation who could look after those children," murmured Bessie Milliken.

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We all felt moved to offer our services upon the spot, but just then there came a loud ring at the

door-bell. We all started. It could not be a belated member of the club, for we always walked right in. Minnie had given orders, as usual, to be denied to any chance caller; but in a moment the door opened, and the maid announced that Mr. Williams was in the hall, and wished to see Mrs. Mason.

"Ask Mr. Williams, Ellen, if he will please to leave a message; tell him I am engaged with my Tolstoi Club."

"I did, ma'am; but he says he wishes to see the club. He says it is on very particular business, ma'am," as Minnie hesitated, and looked for our opinion. Our amazement was so great that it deprived us of words, and Minnie, after a moment, could only bow her head in silent affirmation to the girl, who vanished directly. Could Mrs. Williams have eloped, and had her husband rushed round to claim the sympathy of his female friends, among whom were so many of his old flames? It was a most eccentric proceeding, but we felt that if any man were capable of it, it was poor Willie. But even this conjecture failed, and our very reason seemed forsaking us, as Mr. Williams walked into the room, followed by Mr. Walter Dana, who looked rather awkward on the occasion, while Willie, on the contrary, was quite at his ease, and was faultlessly dressed in a London walking-suit of the newest cut; for he had plenty of such things, though he hated to wear them. He carried a large note-case in his hand.

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"Good-morning, Mrs. Mason," he began, "good-morning—" with a bow that took us all in; and without an invitation, which Minnie was too confused to give, he comfortably settled himself on a vacant chair, which proceeding Mr. Dana imitated, though with much less self-assurance, while his conductor, as he appeared to be, went on: "I beg your pardon for disturbing you; but I am sorry to find that you have been giving credence, if not circulation, to some very unpleasant and utterly false rumours concerning my wife's character. I do not know, nor do I care to know, how they originated, but I wish to put a stop to them; and as Mr. Dana is the other person chiefly concerned in them, I have brought him with me."

I believe we felt as if we should like to sink into the earth; nay, it seemed to me that we must have done so, and come out in China, where everything is different. Willie Williams, without a lisp, without a smile, grave as a judge, and talking like a lawyer opening a case—it was a transformation to inspire any one with awe. He saw that we were frightened, and proceeded in a milder tone, but one equally strange in our ears.

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"Don't think I mean to blame you. I know women will talk, and I do not believe any of you meant the least harm, or dreamed of things going as far as they have. Indeed, Louise [!] attaches no importance to it whatever. She says it is only idle gossip, and will die out if let alone, and she did not wish me to take any notice of it; but I felt that I must do so on my own account, if not on hers. I don't care what trash gets into such journals as that," and he looked scornfully at the unhappy newspaper, which we wished we had never touched with a pair of tongs; "but I do not want our friends and neighbours to think more meanly of me than I deserve, when I have it in my power to put a stop to it at once. Mr. Dana, is it true that you and Mrs. Williams were ever in love with each other?"

"It is not," replied Mr. Dana, who began to take courage under the skilful peroration of his chief. "I was never on any terms with Mrs. Williams, when she was Miss Latham, but those of the very slightest, and, of course, most respectful acquaintance. I don't believe we ever exchanged a dozen words."

"I believe you," murmured Blanche Livermore, who sat next to me, and whose unruly tongue nothing could long subdue; and indeed we had none of us supposed that Loulie Latham conducted her love-affairs by means of conversation.

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"Did you dance the german with her at the Eliot Hall Assembly on January 4, 188-?"

"I regret very much that I never had the pleasure of dancing the german with Mrs. Williams. At the party to which you refer I danced with Miss Wilmerding."

We all remembered Alice Wilmerding and her red hair, just the shade of Loulie Latham's, but which had not procured her an artist for a husband; indeed, it had not procured any at all, for she was still single.

"Neither," pursued Willie Williams, "is there any truth in the report that Louise was obliged to marry me for a support. She had no need to do so, being possessed of very sufficient means of her own, as I can show by her bank-account at that date."

How he had got hold of every scrap we had said to one another, and even of all we had thought, we could not imagine then, but we afterward found out that he had procured every item from the editor of that horrid paper, under threats of instant personal and legal attack; and as to how this person happened to know so much, I can only advise you not to say or think anything you would be ashamed to have known while there are such papers in existence.

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"The only reason that Loulou and I married each other," went on Loulou's husband, "is that we loved each other; and we love each other now, if possible, twice as much as we did then. If you think she does not care for me because she is not demonstrative in company, you are mistaken. She gives me as much proof of it as I want. We all have our peculiarities, and I know I have a great many which she puts up with better than most women would. Of course I don't expect her to be without hers either; but they don't trouble me any more than mine do her, and, besides,

most of what has struck you as singular in her behaviour can be easily explained. You have thought she was conceited about her music, but it's no such thing; she has not an atom of conceit in her; indeed, she thinks too humbly of herself. She has heard so much music of the highest class that she thinks little of any drawing-room performance, her own or anybody else's, and her reluctance to sing is genuine, for she has a horror of being urged or complimented out of mere politeness. You are not pleased, I hear" [*how could he know that?*], "that she refused to join all your clubs and classes; one reason was that she really did not care to. Every one has a right to one's own taste; she has met a great deal of artistic and literary society abroad, and has become accustomed to live among people who are doing something; and it is tedious to her to go about so much with people who are always talking about things, as we are given to do here. She is really fond of hard reading, as but few women are; and she likes better, for instance, to stay at home and spend her time in reading Dante by herself in the original, than to go to a club and hear him talked over, with a little skimming from a translation interspersed. She dresses to please me and herself, and not to be envied or admired; and if she has a fondness for pretty clothes for their own sake, that is not surprising, when she had so little chance to indulge it when she was a girl."

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Here he paused, and it was high time, for we were growing restive under the catalogue of his wife's virtues; but in a moment he resumed.

"There is another reason, too, why she has not been more sociable with you all. You don't know how unhappy Loulou is about her children; but you do know, perhaps, that we have lost two,"—here his voice faltered slightly, with some faint suggestion of the Willie Williams of our old acquaintance,—"and she is terribly afraid that the others will not live to grow up. I don't think them as fragile as she does; but they do look delicate, there's no denying it. We came home, and here, very much on their account; but yours are all so healthy and blooming that it's almost too much for poor Loulou sometimes, especially when people—" he was considerate enough not to look at Minnie—"tell her that they look poorly, and that she ought to be more careful of them. How can she be? She is always with them—more than is good for her; but she has an idea that they won't eat as much as they ought, or go to sleep when they should, without her; and she never leaves them at lunch, which is, of course, their dinner. I think she is a little morbid about them, but I can't torment her to leave it off; and I hope, as they get older and stronger, she'll be more cheerful. It is this that makes her out of spirits sometimes, and not any foolish nonsense about being in love with anybody else."

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"*Mon âne parle, et même il parle bien!*" whispered the incorrigible Blanche, and though I don't think it fair to call Willie Williams an ass at any time, our surprise at his present fluency was nearly as great as the prophet's. He seemed now to have made an end of what he wished to say, but Mr. Dana, whose presence we had nearly forgotten, looked at him meaningly, as if in request.

"Oh, yes—I had forgotten—but it is only due to Mr. Dana to say that he has been coming to my house a good deal lately on business. I would tell you all about it, but it's rather private." But, humbled as we were, we could not hear this without a protesting murmur, disclaiming all vulgar curiosity. I did, indeed, wonder for a moment if he were painting Walter's portrait; if he were, I did not think it strange that the latter looked a little sheepish about it; but I afterward found out through Tom that it concerned some good offices of them both for an old friend in distress. "When he came to my house in the evening when I was out, it was to meet another person, and Mrs. Williams, half the time, never saw either of them. As to that song at Mrs. Jenks's party, which, I hear, created so much comment, she was feeling very unhappy that night because little Violet had a cold, and she thought she might have made a mistake in trying to keep her out, and toughen her, as you do your children here. Perhaps that heightened her expression; but as to breaking down on the last line of the song, that effect was one of Giudotti's lessons, and he taught her how to give that look. He always said she had the making of a great tragic actress in her. She does try to look at the wall," went on Willie, simply, "but it was so crowded there that she could not, and Mr. Dana could not help standing in the way of it. I think I have said all I need say—and I hope you won't mind it or think I am very impertinent, but I couldn't bear to have this thing going on; and I hope we shall all be as good friends as we were before, and that it will all be very soon forgotten." And he bowed and departed, followed by Mr. Dana, with alacrity.

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We were doubtful as to these happy results. We could all admire Willie Williams for standing up so gallantly for his wife, but we did not like her any the better for being so successfully stood up for, and we felt that we could never forget the unpleasant sensation he had given us. It took a long course of seeing him in his old shape and presentment among us—working in the same flamboyant clothes, at paintings as execrable as ever; with the same lisp, and the same trip and jerk, and the same easy good nature, and trifling enthusiasms—to forget that he had ever inspired us with actual fear, and might again, though he never has. We came also, in course of time, to like Loulou better, though it was rather galling to see how little she heeded the matter that cost us all so much remorse; but she lost her reserve in great measure as her children grew healthier and more like other people's. I think the hatchet was fairly buried for good and all when, in another year, she had another baby, a splendid boy weighing nine pounds and three quarters, at whose birth more enthusiasm was manifested in Babyland than on any similar occasion before, and who was loaded with the most beautiful presents, one in particular from Minnie Mason, who was much better, for her recovery of health dates from that sudden incursion into our Tolstoi Club, and the shock it gave her.

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I should have said as to that, that after the men had left us Blanche Livermore exclaimed, "Well, girls, I think we are pretty sufficiently crushed!"

This was generous of Blanche, when she was the only one among us who had ever expressed any incredulity as to the "Russian novel," as we called it. "The fact is," she went on, "I have come to the conclusion that we have not yet advanced to the realistic period here; we are living in the realms of the ideal; and, what is worse, I fear I am so benighted that I like it best; don't you?" And, encouraged by an inarticulate but affirmatory murmur from all of us, she proceeded:

"Let us all agree to settle down contentedly behind the age in our provinciality; and, that we may keep so, let us cut the realists in fiction, and take up something they don't approve of. I vote that we devote the rest of the season to a good thorough course of Walter Scott!"

And so we did.



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A LITTLE FOOL

"What, my dear Marian! And do you really and truly mean to say you thought of taking the girl without going to ask her character!"

"There are so many difficulties about it. You see, she lived last with Mrs. Donald Craighead for two years, and that would be quite enough for a character. They all went abroad in a great hurry on account of Mr. Craighead's health, and Mrs. Craighead promised to give her one, but forgot it, and she couldn't bear to bother them when they were all in such trouble. I know myself that all that about them is true."

"So do I; but that does not prove that she ever lived with them. Cannot she refer to any of the family?"

"No; she did nothing but laundry work there, and never saw any of their friends, I fancy; but she does have a written character from the family she lived with before them, very nice people in South Boston."

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"What's their name?"

"I don't remember," said Miss Marian Carter, blushing, "but I have it written down at home."

"I should certainly go there, if I were you."

"It is so far off, and I never went there in my life."

"Well, you ought. It sounds very suspicious. Of course there are a few nice people in South Boston; they have to live there because they own factories and things, and have to be near them; but then, again, there are such dreadful neighbourhoods there. Most likely she depends on your not taking the trouble, and you will find the number she gave you over some low grog-shop."

"Oh, I should be so frightened! I really do not think I can go!"

"You surely ought not to risk taking her without, and very likely have her turn out an accomplice of burglars, like that Norah of mine, through whom I lost so much silver."

"I thought you had a character with her."

"So I did, or I should not have taken her. I make it a principle not to. It only shows how great the danger is with a character; without one it amounts to a certainty."

"She was such a nice-looking girl!"

"That makes no difference. I always mistrust maids who look too nice. They are sure to have some story, or scrape, or something, like that Florence of mine, who looked so much of a lady, and turned out to be a clergyman's daughter, and had run away from her husband—a most respectable man. He came to the house after her, and gave no end of trouble."

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"But this girl did not look at all like that; not a bit above her place, but so neatly dressed, and with a plain, sensible way about her; and her name is Drusilla Elms—such a quaint, old-fashioned, American-sounding name, quite refreshing to hear."

"It sounds very like an assumed name. The very worst woman I ever had was named Bathsheba Fogg; she turned out to have been a chorus girl at some low theatre, and must have picked it up from some farce or other."

"Then you really think I ought to go to South Boston?"

"I should do so in your place," replied Mrs. William Treadwell.

This gave but scant encouragement, for Marian could not but feel that the result of her friend's going and that of her own, might be very different; and Mrs. Treadwell, as she watched her visitor off, smiled good-humouredly, but pityingly. "Poor dear Marian! What a little fool she is to swallow everything that she is told in that way! It is a wonder that the Carters ever have a decent servant in their house."

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However much of a wonder it might be, it was still a fact; but it did not occur to Marian, as she bent her way homeward, to revive her feeble self-confidence, crushed flat by her friend's scorn, with any recollection that such fearful tales as she had just heard were without a parallel in her own experience. It is to be feared that she was a little fool, though she kept her mother's house very well and carefully, if, indeed, it were her mother's house. Nobody but the tax-gatherer knew to whom it really belonged, and he forgot between each assessment. It stood on Burroughs street, Jamaica Plain, a neighbourhood that still boasts an air of dignified repose. It was without the charm of a really old-fashioned house, or even such as may be possessed by a modern imitation of one; indeed it bore the stamp of that unfortunate period which may be called the middle age of American architecture, extending, at a rough estimate, from 1820 to 1865; but it was a well-built house, and looked, as at present inhabited, a pleasant abode enough, of sufficient size to accommodate a numerous female flock—Marian's grandmother and her great-aunt, her mother and her aunt, her widowed sister and two children, a trained nurse who was treated as one of the family, three servants, and Marian herself to make up the round dozen. The grandmother had lost the use of her limbs, and the great-aunt that of her mind; the mother and the trained nurse were devoted to them, and the aunt to philanthropic objects, and the sister to her children; so the housekeeper's duties devolved on Marian, though she was still but a child in her elders' eyes, and were well discharged, as they all allowed, though qualifying their praise with the remark that it was "easy enough to keep a house without a man in it."

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As Marian Carter passed along bustling, suburban Centre Street, she looked a very flower of the Western world of feminine liberty; fine and fair, free and fearless, coming and going at her own pleasure, on foot or by the horse-cars, those levellers of privilege; no duenna to track her steps, no yashmak or veil to hide her charms. Yet the fact was that she knew less of men than if she had lived in a harem or a convent. She had no sultan, no father confessor. She could not, like Miss Pole of Cranford memory, claim to know the other sex by virtue of her father having been a man, for Marian's father had died before she was born. Her sister Isabel and she had had friends, and had gone into society in a mild way, and being pretty girls, had met with a little general attention, but nothing ever came of it. The family never entertained, except now and then an old friend to tea, their means and opportunity being small; nor could young men venture to call. The grandmother had been a great invalid before she lost the use of her limbs, and the great-aunt a formidable person before she lost that of her mind, while Aunt Caroline from her youth upward had developed a great distaste for the society of men, even when viewed as objects of philanthropy.

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When Isabel was four and twenty she went to New York to visit some cousins, and though they lived very quietly, she made the acquaintance of a young civil engineer, at home on a vacation from his work in the United States of Colombia, who had married and borne her off after the briefest possible courtship, never to see her old home again till she came back, ten years after, a widow with two children, to eke out her small means by the shelter of the family abode. I cannot delay the humiliating confession, postponed as long as may be for the sake of the artistic unity of my picture, that the youngest of these children was a boy, if, as his mother was wont to plead, "a very little one." He was dressed in as unboyish a fashion as possible, and being christened Winthrop, was always called Winnie. He was a quiet, gentle child, kept down by his position; but though thus made the best of, he was felt to be an inconvenience and an encumbrance, if not now, certainly in the future. There was no end to the trouble it would make when Winnie grew older, and required a room to himself, and would be obliged to go to a boys' school, which might even lead up to the direful contingency of his "bringing home other boys."

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After Isabel's departure, Marian, though the prettier of the two, found it dull to go about alone. No one asked her to New York; the cousin had died, and the cousin's husband had married again; and when she grew past the dancing age, perhaps earlier than she need, she went nowhere where she had any chance of meeting any men but the husbands of one or two married friends, and she was such a little fool that she fancied they despised her for being an old maid. She knew she was five-and-thirty on her last birthday, and was foolish enough to be afraid and ashamed of owning to it. She need not have done so, for she did not look a day older than twenty-five; but the memories of her contemporaries were pitiless.

She enjoyed her housekeeping, which gave her life some object, and her intercourse with her butcher, a fine young fellow who admired her hugely, was the nearest approach to a love-affair in which she had ever indulged, so much sentiment did he contrive to throw about the legs of mutton and the Sunday roast. Though honestly thinking herself happy, and her position a fortunate one, she relished a change, which seldom came, and was glad of the prospect of a visit to South Boston, now that she could conscientiously say she ought to go since Emma Treadwell had ordered it. The excitement of going off the beaten track was heightened by the mystery which invested the affair. Marian had not dared to confess to her managing friend that the "written character" to which she referred had struck her rather oddly when the neat, civil, young,

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but not too young woman whose appearance had so favourably impressed her had handed it to her with an air which seemed to indicate that nothing more need be said on the subject, although it only said, "Drusilla Elms refers by permission to — Hayward, City Point, South Boston," in a great, scrawling, masculine-looking hand. The name was easy enough to read, a painful effort having evidently been made to write thus much legibly; but the title, be it Mr., Mrs., or Miss, was so utterly unreadable that Marian, who dreaded, like most timid people, to put a direct question, ventured upon an indirect one:

"Is—Mr. Hayward a widower?"

"Oh, dear, no, ma'am!" replied Drusilla, emphatically.

"And—they—still live there?"

"Oh, dear, yes, ma'am!"

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Marian was very glad that the Saturday she chose for her expedition was Aunt Caroline's day for the Women's and Children's Hospital, and that Isabel had taken Minna and Winnie for a holiday trip into town to see the Art Museum, which left fewer people at home to whom to explain her errand, and to whose comments to reply. Mrs. Carter said it was silly to go so far, and if she couldn't be satisfied to take the girl without, she had better find some one near by. The trained nurse, who was slowly but surely getting the whole household under her control, said that Miss Carter's beautiful new spring suit would be ruined going all the way to South Boston in the horse-cars; and Mrs. Carter, who would never have thought of this herself, seconded her. Marian did not argue the point, but she wore the dress nevertheless. She never felt that anything she wore made any impression on any one she knew, but she could not help fancying that if she had the chance she might impress strangers. No one she knew ever called her pretty, and perhaps five-and-thirty was too old to be thought so; and yet, if there was any meaning in the word, it might surely be applied to the soft, shady darkness of her hair and eyes, and the delicate bloom of her cheeks and lips, set off by that silver-grey costume, with its own skilfully blended lights and shades of silk and cashmere, and the purple and white lilacs that were wreathed together on her small bonnet. She made a bad beginning, for while still enjoying the effect of her graceful draperies as she entered the horse-car for Boston, she carelessly caught the handle of her nice grey silk sunshade in the door, and snapped it short in the middle. She could have cried, though the man who always mended their umbrellas assured her, with a bow and smile, that it should be mended, when she called for it on her way back, "so that she would never know it;" but it deprived her costume of the finishing touch, and she really needed it on this warm sunny day; then, it was a bad omen, and she was foolish enough to believe in omens. Her disturbance prevented her from observing much of the route after she had drifted into a car for South Boston, and had assured herself that it was the right one. Perhaps this was as well, as the first part of the way was sufficiently uninviting to have frightened her out of her intention had she looked about her. When at last she did, they were passing along a wide street lined with sufficiently substantial brick buildings, chiefly devoted to business, crossed by narrower ones of small wooden houses more or less respectable in appearance; but surely no housemaid who would suit them could ever have served in one of these. Great rattling drays squeezed past the car, and Chinese laundrymen noiselessly got in and out. The one landmark she had heard of in South Boston, and for aught she knew the reason of its existence, was the Perkins Institution for the Blind, which her Aunt Caroline sometimes visited. But she passed the Institution, and still went on and on. That the world extended so far in that direction was an amazement in itself; she knew that there must be something there to fill up, but she had had a vague idea that it might be water, which is so accommodating in filling up the waste spaces of the terrestrial globe. Finally the now nearly empty car came to a full stop at the foot of a hill, the track winding off around it, and the conductor, of whom she had asked her way, approached her with the patronising deference which men in his position were very apt to assume to her: "Lady, you'll have to get out here, and walk up the hill. Keep straight ahead, and you can't miss it."

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"And can I take the car here when I come back?" asked Marian, clinging as if to an ark of refuge.

"Oh, yes," said the man, encouragingly; "we're along every ten minutes. It ain't far off."

Marian slowly touched one little foot, and then another, to the unknown and almost foreign soil of South Boston. She looked wistfully after the car till it turned a corner, and left her stranded, before she began slowly to climb the hill. It was warm, and she missed her sunshade. "I shall be shockingly burned!" she thought. She looked about her, and acknowledged that the street was a pleasant, sunny one, and that its commonplace architecture gained in picturesqueness by its steep ascent. As she neared the top the houses grew larger, scattered among garden grounds, and she at last found the number she looked for on the gate-post of one of the largest. She walked up a brick-paved path to the front door between thick box borders, inclosing beds none too well weeded, but whose bowery shrubs and great clumps of old-fashioned bulbs and perennials had acquired the secure possession of the soil that comes with age. Behind them were grape-vines trained on trellises, over which rose the blossoming heads of tall old cherry-trees, and through the interstices in the flowery wall might be caught glimpses of an old garden where grass and flowers and vegetables mingled at haphazard. It dated from the days when people planted gardens with a view to what they could get out of them, regardless of effect; and the house, in like manner, had been built to live in rather than to look at. No one could say how it had looked before trees had shaded it and creepers enveloped it so completely. The veranda which ran around it was well sheltered from the street, fortunately, thought Marian, for the bamboo chairs and sofas, piled up with rugs and cushions, with which it was crowded, were heaped with

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newspapers, and hats, and tennis-rackets, and riding-whips, and garden-tools, and baskets, tossed carelessly about. On the door-mat lay a large dog, who flopped his tail up and down with languid courtesy as she approached. She was terribly afraid of him, but thought it safer to face him than to turn her back upon him, and edging by him, gave a feeble ring at the door-bell. No one came. She rang again with more energy, and then, after a brief pause, the door was opened by a half-grown boy.

Marian only knew a very few families who aspired to have their doors opened by anything more than a parlour-maid, and these had butlers of unimpeachable respectability. But this young person had a bright, but roguish look, which accorded better with the page of farce than with one of real life. He seemed surprised to see her, though he bowed civilly.

"Is Mrs. Hayward at home?" asked Marian, in the most dulcet of small voices; and as he looked at her with a stare that seemed as if it might develop into a grin, she added, "or any of the ladies of the family? I only wish to see one of them on business."

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"Walk in, please, ma'am, and I'll see," faltered the porter, appearing perplexed; and he opened the door, and ushered Marian across a wide hall with a great, old-fashioned staircase at the further end—a place that would have had no end of capabilities about it in a modern decorator's eyes, but which looked now rather bare and unfurnished, save for pegs loaded with hats and coats, and stands of umbrellas—into a long, low room that looked crowded enough. Low bookcases ran around the walls, and there were a great many tables heaped with books and magazines, and a piano littered with music in a most slovenly condition; a music-stand or two, and a violin and violoncello in their cases clustered about it. The walls over the books were hung with old portraits, which looked as if they might be valuable; among them were squeezed in whips, and long pipes on racks, and calendars, and over them were hung horns and heads of unknown beasts, whose skins lay on the floor. Over the fireplace hung a sword and a pair of pistols in well-worn cases, but they were free from dust, which many of the furnishings were not. The long windows at the side opened on to the veranda, which was even more carelessly strewed with the family possessions than at the front door, and from which steps led down to a tennis-court in faultless trim, the only orderly spot on the premises.

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What a poor housekeeper Mrs. Hayward must be! She must let the men of the family do exactly as they pleased, and there must be at least half a dozen of them, while not a trace of feminine occupation was to be seen. No servant from here could hope to suit the Carter household, no matter how good a character she brought. But somehow the intensely masculine air of the place had a wild fascination for Marian herself, in spite of warning remembrances of how much her family would be shocked. There was something delicious in the freedom with which letters and papers were tossed about, and books piled up anywhere, while their proper homes stood vacant, and in the soothing, easy tolerance with which persecuted dust was allowed to find a quiet resting-place. A pungent and pleasing perfume pervaded the premises, which seemed appropriate and agreeable to her delicate senses, even though she supposed it must be tobacco-smoke. She had smelled tobacco only as it exhaled from passers in the street, and surely this fine, ineffable aroma came from a different source than theirs! While she daintily inhaled it as she looked curiously about, her ears became aware of singular sounds—a subdued scuffling and scraping at the door at the further end of the room, and a breathing at its keyhole, which gave her an unpleasant sensation of being watched; and she instantly sat stiffly upright and looked straight before her, her heart beating with wonder and affright lest the situation might prove actually dangerous. The sounds suddenly ceased, and in a moment more a halting step was heard outside, and a gentleman came in at the other door—a tall man, whose hair was thick, but well sprinkled with grey; whose figure, lean and lank, had a certain easy swing about its motions, in spite of a very perceptible limp; and whose face, brown and thin, and marred by a long scar right across the left cheek, had something attractive in its expression as he came forward with a courteous, expectant look. Marian could only bow.

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"I beg your pardon; did you wish to see me?" inquired the stranger, in a deep, low voice that sounded as if it might be powerful on occasion.

"Oh, I am very sorry to trouble you! I only wanted to see the mistress of the house, if she is able ___"

"I am afraid I am the only person who answers to that description." There was a good-natured twinkle in his eye, and he had a pleasant smile, but his evident amusement abashed her. "I keep my own house," he went on.

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"Oh, I beg your pardon! I thought there was a Mrs. Hayward!"

"I am sorry to say that there is none. But I am Mr. Hayward, and shall be very glad if I can be of any service to you."

"I don't want to disturb you," said Marian, blushing deeply, while Mr. Hayward, with, "Will you allow me?" drew up a chair and sat down, as if to put her more at her ease. "It is only—only—" here she came to a dead stop. "I do not want to take up so much of your time," she confusedly stammered.

"Not at all; I shall be very happy—" he paused too, not knowing how to fill up the blank, and waited quietly, while Marian sought frantically in her little bag for a paper which was, of course, at the very bottom. "It is only," she began again—"only to ask you about the character of a chambermaid named Drusilla—yes, Drusilla Elms. I think it must be you she refers to; at least I

copied the address from the reference she showed me; here it is," handing him the slip of paper; and as he took out his eyeglass to study it, "only I couldn't tell—I didn't know—whether it was Mr., or Mrs., or what it was before the name, I am very sorry."

"So am I. It has been the great misfortune of my life, I assure you, that I write such a confounded —such an execrable hand. Pray accept my apologies for it." [Pg 58]

"Oh, it was not a bad hand!—not at all! It was my own stupidity! I suppose you really did give her the character, then?"

"In spite of your politeness, I am afraid I too plainly recognise the bewildering effect of my own scrawl. I think I must have given her the reference, though I don't remember doing so."

"The name is so peculiar——"

"Yes; but the fact is that our old Catherine, who has been cook here for a longer time than I can reckon, generally engages our other maid for us, and she dislikes to change the name, and calls them all Margaret. I think we had a very nice Margaret two years ago, but I will go and ask Catherine; she may recollect."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself! I have no doubt that you are quite right—none at all!"

"But I have so many doubts, I should like to be a little surer; and if you will excuse me for a moment—well! *What*, in the devil's name, are you up to now?"

It must be explained that by this time he had reached the further door, and that the sudden close of his speech was addressed, not to Marian, but to some invisible person, or rather persons; for the subdued laughter which responded, the very equivalent to a girlish giggle, surely came from more than one pair of boyish lungs. Some stifled speech, too, was heard, to which the master of the house replied, "Go to ——, then, and be quick about it!" as he closed the door behind him, leaving Marian trembling with apprehension lest he might be mad or drunk. And yet if this were swearing, and she feared it was, there was something gratifying in the sound of a good, round, mouth-filling oath, especially when contrasted with the extreme and punctilious deference of his speech to her. He came back in a moment, and, standing before her with head inclined, said, as if apologising for some misdeed of his own:

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"I am very sorry, but Catherine is out, doing her marketing. She will probably return soon, if you do not mind waiting."

"Oh, no!" said Marian, shocked with the idea that her presence might be inconvenient; "I could not possibly wait! I am in a very great hurry."

"Then, if you will allow me to write what she says? I promise," he added, with another humorous twinkle in his eye, "to try and write my very best."

"Thank you, if it is not too much trouble," said Marian, rising, and edging toward the door as if she had some hopes of getting off unnoticed. It was confusing to have him follow her with an air of expectation, she could not imagine of what, though she had a consciousness, too, of having forgotten something, which made her linger, trying to recollect it. He slowly turned the handle of the outer door, and, opening it for her exit, seemed waiting for her to say something—what, she racked her brains in vain to discover. He looked amused again, and as if he would have spoken himself; but Marian, with a sudden start, exclaimed, "Oh, dear, it rains!" She had not noticed how dark the sky was growing, but to judge by the looks of the pavement, it had been quietly showering for some time.

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"So it does!" said he. "That is a pity. I fear you are not very well protected against it."

"Oh, it doesn't matter!" cried Marian, recklessly; "it is only a step to the horse-cars."

"Enough for you to get very wet, I am afraid."

"It isn't of the least consequence. I have nothing on that will hurt—nothing at all!"

Mr. Hayward looked admiringly and incredulously at the lilacs on her bonnet. "I can hardly suppose your flowers are real ones, though certainly they look very much like them; if they are not, I fear a shower will scarcely prove of advantage to them. You must do me the honour of letting me see you to the car." As he spoke he extracted from the stand an enormous silk umbrella with a big handle, nearly as large as Marian herself.

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"I could not think of it!" she cried, and hurried down the wet steps, sweeping them with the dainty plaiting round the edge of her silvery skirt.

"Oh, but you must!" he went on in a tone of lazy good humour, yet as one not accustomed to be refused. There was something paternal in his manner gratifying to her, for as he could not be much over fifty, he must think her much younger than she really was.

"Don't hurry; there is a car every ten minutes, and a very good place to wait in; there—take care of the wet box, please, with your dress, and take my arm, if you don't mind."

"Oh, no, thank you! Really, I am very well covered!" protested Marian, squeezing herself and her gown into the smallest possible space. The big umbrella was up before she knew it, and he was hobbling along the brick path by her side, in an old pair of yellow leather slippers as ill fitted to

keep out the wet as her own shining little shoes.

"I am very sorry you should have been caught in this way," he said apologetically.

"Don't mention it."

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"I hope you have not far to go."

"Oh, no, indeed! That is—yes, rather far; but when I get into the car, I am all right, because it meets—I mean, I can take a cab. It is very easy to get about in town, you know." She turned while he opened the gate, and caught sight of the front windows, thronged, like the gates of Paradise Lost, with faces which might indeed have served as models for a very realistic study, in modern style, of cherubim, being those of healthy boys of all ages from twelve to twenty, each wearing a broad grin of delight.

"Confound 'em!" muttered her conductor in a low tone, but Marian caught the words, and the accompanying grimace which he flung back over his shoulder. Could his remarkable house be a boys' school? If so, he was the very oddest teacher, and his discipline the most extraordinary, she had ever heard of; it was too easy of egress, surely, to be a private lunatic asylum, a thought which had already excited her fears.

"Please lower your head a little, Miss—" he paused for the name, but she did not fill up the gap; "the creepers hang so low here," and he carefully held the umbrella so as best to protect her from the dripping sprays.

"How very pretty your garden is!" she said as he closed the gate.

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"It is a sad straggling place; we all run pretty wild here, I am afraid."

"But it is so picturesque!"

"Picturesque it may be, and we get a good deal of fruit and vegetables out of it; it isn't a show garden, but it is a comfort to have any breathing-place in a city."

"This seems a very pleasant neighbourhood."

"Hum! well, yes; I think it pleasant enough. It is my old home; near the water, too, and the boys like the boating. It's out of the way of society, but then, we have no ladies to look after. It is easy enough, you know, for men to come and go anyhow."

"Coming and going anyhow" rang with a delicious thrill of freedom in Marian's ears, and in the midst of her alarm at possible consequences she revelled in her adventure, such a one as she had never had before, and probably never should again; and there was the car tinkling on its early way. Mr. Hayward signed to it to stop, and waded in his slippers through the wet dust, for it could not be called mud yet, to hand her deferentially in.

"You are sure you can get along now?" he asked, as the car came to a stop.

"Oh, yes, indeed! Thank you so much; I am very sorry——"

"No need of it, I assure you. I am sorry I cannot do more." He looked at the big umbrella doubtfully, and so did she; but the idea of offering it to her was too absurd, and they both laughed, which Marian feared was improperly free and easy for her. Then, as she turned on the step to bow her farewell, he added, "I beg your pardon; but you have forgotten to leave me your address. I should be very glad to write in case Catherine——"

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"Mrs. W. Cracker, 40 Washington Street," stammered Marian, frightened out of her little sense, and rattling off the first words that came into her head, suggested in part by a baker's cart which passed at the moment. She should never dare to give her real address! Anything better than to have those dreadful boys know who she was! He looked puzzled, then laughed; but it was of no use for him to say anything, for the car had started, and swept her safely beyond his reach at once. She could see him looking after it till it turned out of sight, and was thankful he had not followed her, as he might perhaps have done if he had not had on those old slippers.

Marian did not go directly home, but stopped at Mrs. William Treadwell's till the spring shower was over, that she might be able to tell her family that she had been there, and thus avoid over-curious questioning as to where she had been caught in it. She briefly informed them that she could obtain no satisfactory account of Drusilla Elms—the people to whom she referred seemed to have forgotten her—and wrote to the girl that she had made other arrangements. She waited in fear for a few days, lest something might happen to bring her little adventure to light; but nothing did, and her fears subsided, with a few faint wishes as well. What a pleasant world, she wistfully thought, was the world of men—a world where conventionalities and duty calls gave way to a delicious, free, Bohemian existence of boating and running about; where even housekeeping was a thing lightly considered, and where dogs jumped on sofas, and people threw their things around at pleasure—nay, even smoked and swore, regardless of consequences temporal or eternal!

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About a fortnight after her wild escapade, the household of Freeman-Robbins-Carter-Dale, to use the collective patronymic of the female dynasty which reigned there, was agitated by the unusual phenomenon of an evening visitor who called himself a man, though but in his freshman year at Harvard University. It was the son of their deceased cousin in New York, whose husband, though married again, retained sufficient sense of kinship to insist that the boy should call on his

mother's relatives, which duty the unhappy youth had postponed from week to week, and from month to month, until the awkwardness of introducing himself was doubled. He had struggled through this ordeal, and now sat, the centre of an admiring female circle who were trying to hang upon his words. Winnie, whose presence might have given him some support, had been sent to bed; but his sister was privileged to remain up longer, and being a serious child, and wise beyond her years, she fixed him with her solemn gaze, while one great-aunt remarked over and over again on his resemblance to his grandfather, and the other as often inquired who he was, though his name and pedigree were carefully explained each time by the nurse. Mrs. Carter addressed him as "Freddy, dear!" and Miss Caroline asked what he was studying at college, and his cousin Isabel pressed sweet cake upon him. Only his cousin Marian sat silent in the background. He thought her very pretty, and not at all formidable, though so old—not that he had the least idea how old she really was.

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"Did you bolt the front door, Marian, when you let Trippet out?" asked her mother. Trippet was the family cat, who had shown symptoms of alarm at the aspect of the unwonted guest.

"I—I think so."

"You had better go and look," said her sister. "It would be no joke if Freddy's nice overcoat and hat were to be taken by a sneak-thief. They are very troublesome just now in the suburbs," she continued; "but we never leave anything of value in our front hall, and we always make it a rule to bolt as well as lock the door as soon as it grows dusk. There is no harm in taking every precaution."

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"Sneak-thieves and second-floor thieves have quite replaced the old-fashioned midnight burglar," said Miss Caroline.

"They are just as bad," said Mrs. Dale.

"Women—ladies—are taking to it now," said Master Frederick. "I heard the funniest story about one the other day." He paused, and grew red at the drawing upon himself the fire of eight pairs of eyes, but plucked up his courage and resumed the theme, not insensible to the possible delight of terrifying those before whom he had quailed. "It was in Ned Hayward's family, my classmate; he and his brother Bob—he's a junior—live in South Boston with their uncle, Colonel Hayward—the celebrated Colonel Hayward, you know, who was so distinguished in the war, and—and everything; perhaps you know him?"

"We have heard of him," said Mrs. Carter, graciously.

"Well, I've been out there sometimes with him, and it's no end of jolly—I mean, it is a pleasant place to visit in. The Colonel's an old bachelor, and brings his nephews up, because, you know, their father's dead." He stopped short again, overwhelmed with the sound of so long a speech from himself.

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"But about the thief? Oh, do tell us," murmured the circle, encouragingly.

"Well," began Fred, seeing his retreat cut off, and gathering courage as the idea struck him that the topic, if skilfully dwelt on, might last out the call, "it happened this way. Bob was at home a few weeks ago to spend Sunday, and took a lot of fellows—I mean a large party of his classmates; and there were some boys there playing tennis with his brothers—it was on a Saturday morning—and a woman came and asked for the lady of the house; that's a common dodge of theirs, you know. Well, of course, the Colonel went in to see her. The boys wanted to see the fun, so they all took turns in looking through the keyhole; and Bob says she was stunning—I mean very pretty—and looked like a lady, and dressed up no end; but she seemed very confused and queer, and as if she hardly knew what to say, and she pretended to have come to ask for the character of a servant with the oddest name, I forget what; but most likely she made it up, for none of them could remember it. Well, she hung on ever so long, looking for a chance to hook something, I suppose, and at last, just as she was going, it began to rain, and she seemed to expect him to lend her an umbrella. But he wasn't as green as all that comes to; he said he would see her to the car himself; so off he walked with her as polite as you please. Bob says it's no end of fun to see his uncle with a lady; he doesn't see much of them, and when he does he treats 'em like princesses. He took her to the car, and put her in, and just as it started he asked her address, and she told him—" here an irrepressible fit of laughter interrupted his tale—"she told him that it was Mrs. W. Cracker, 40 Washington Street. Did you ever hear such stuff? Of course there's no such person, for the Colonel wasted lots of time taking particular pains to find out. Bob says they're all sure she was a thief, except his uncle, who was awfully smashed on her pretty face, and he sticks to it she was only a little out of her head. They poke no end of fun at him about it, but it really was no joke for him, for he walked with her down to the car in his old slippers in the wet, and caught cold in the leg where he was wounded; he's always lame in it, and when he takes cold it brings on his rheumatic gout. He was laid up a fortnight; he's always so funny when he's got the gout; he can't bear to have any of the boys come near him, and flings boots at their heads when they do, for of course they have to wait on him some, and he swears so. Bob says he's sorry for him, for of course it hurts, but he can't help laughing at the queer things he says. He always swears some when he's well, but when he's sick it fairly takes your head off."

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"Dear me! dear me!" said Mrs. Carter; "swearing is a sad habit. I hope, Freddy, dear, that you will not catch it. Colonel Hayward is a very distinguished officer, and they have to, I suppose, on the battle-field; but there is no war now, and it is not at all necessary."

"Oh, he won't let the boys do it! He swears at them like thunder if they do, but they don't mind it. He's awfully good-natured, and lets them rough him as much as they please, and they've done it no end about the pretty little housebreaker. Bob has made a song about her to the tune of *Little Annie Rooney*—that's the one his uncle most particularly hates. Phil had a shy at her with his kodak, but what with the rain and the leaves, you can't see much of her."

"It is a pity," said Miss Caroline; "it might be shown to the police, who could very likely identify her. I dare say she has been at Sherborne Prison, and there we photograph them all. If it were not that Mary Murray is in for a two years' sentence, I should say it answered very well to her description."

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Some more desultory conversation went on, while the hands of the clock ran rapidly on toward eleven. The youthful Minna silently stole away at a sign from her mother, without drawing attention upon herself. Ten o'clock was the latest hour at which these ladies were in the habit of being up; but how hint to a guest that he was staying too long? They guessed that it might not seem late to him, and feared that he was acquiring bad habits in college.

The poor fellow knew perfectly well that he was making an unconscionably long call; but how break through the circle? And then he was remembering with affright into how much slang he had lapsed in the course of his tale, and was racking his brains for some particularly proper farewell speech which should efface the recollection of it. Suddenly his eyes were caught by Marian's face. Her look of abject misery he could attribute only to her extreme fatigue, and he made a desperate rally:

"I'm afraid, Miss Dale, I mean Mrs. Robbins, that I'm making a terribly long call. I am very sorry."

"Oh, not at all! Not at all! Pray do not hurry! You must come often; we shall be delighted to see you."

"It seems a very long way," murmured Freddy, conscious that he was saying something rude, but unable to help himself; and he finally succeeded in escaping, under a fire of the most pressing invitations to "call again," for, as Mrs. Carter said, "we must show some hospitality to poor Ellen's boy. Marian, you look tired. I hope you did not let him see it. Do go to bed directly. I must confess I feel a little sleepy myself." But the troubles which Marian bore with her to the small room which she shared with her little niece were of a kind for which bed brought no solace, and she lay awake till almost dawn, only thankful that Minna slumbered undisturbed by her side.

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To Marian every private who had fought in the war was an angel, and every officer an archangel *ex officio*. That she should have been the cause of an attack of rheumatic gout to a wounded hero filled her with remorse, especially as this particular hero was the most delightful man she had ever met. She wept bitterly from a variety of emotions—pity, and shame, too—for what must he think of her? That last misery, at any rate, she could not and would not endure, and before breakfast she had written the following letter:

"BURROUGHS STREET, JAMAICA

PLAIN.

"DEAR COLONEL HAYWARD,

"I was very, very sorry to hear that you had taken cold and been ill in consequence of that unfortunate call of mine on Saturday, three weeks ago. I really came on the errand I said I did; but I don't wonder you thought otherwise, after I had behaved so foolishly. I did not know who you were, nor where I had been, and I gave the wrong name because I was frightened. But I cannot let you think so poorly of me, or believe I had the least intention of giving you so much pain and trouble. I can remember the war" [this was a mortifying confession for Marian to make, but she felt that the proper atonement for her fault demanded an unsparing sacrifice of her own feelings], "and I know how much gratitude I, and every other woman in our country, owe to you. Begging your pardon most sincerely, I am,

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"Yours very truly,
"MARIAN R. CARTER.

"May 5th, 1885."

Marian found no time to copy this letter over again before she took it with her on her morning round of errands, to slip into the first post-box, and she would not keep it back for another mail, although she feared by turns that it was improperly forward, and chillingly distant. Posted it was, and she could not get it back. She did not know whether she wanted him to answer it or not. It would be kind and civil in him to do so, but she felt that she could hardly bear the curiosity of the family, as his letter was passed from hand to hand before it was opened to guess whom it could be from, or handed round again to be read. There was no more privacy in the house than there was in an ant-hill.

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She had not long to speculate, for the very next afternoon, as the family were all sitting in grandmamma's room downstairs, their common rallying-ground, as it was the pleasantest one in the house, and the old lady, who disliked being left alone, rarely went into the drawing-room till evening, the parlour-maid brought in a card, which went the rounds immediately:

"MR. ROBERT HAYWARD,
"City Point, South Boston."

"What can he want?" said Mrs. Dale.

"Very likely to see me on business," said Aunt Caroline.

"It must be Colonel Hayward," said Isabel, remembering Frederick's tale.

"It was Miss Marian he wanted to see," said Katy.

"How very strange!" said Miss Caroline. But Mrs. Carter, dimly remembering Marian's South Boston errand, till now forgotten, and bewildered with the endeavour to weave any coherent theory out of her scattered recollections, was silent; and Marian glided speechless out of the room, and up the back stairs to her own for one hasty peep at her looking-glass, and then down the front stairs again.

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"Aunt Marian!" shouted Winnie from a front upper window, and she started at his tone, grown loud and boyish in a moment; "the gentleman came on a horse, and tied it to a post, and it is black, and it is stamping on the sidewalk; just hear it!" But Marian, whose pet he was, passed him without a word.

She lingered so little that the Colonel had no more time to examine her abode than she had had his, and here the subject was more complex. The room was not very small, but it was very full, and everything in it, so to speak, was smothered. The carpet was covered with large rugs, and those again with small ones, and all the tables with covers, and those with mats. Each window had four different sets of curtains, and every sofa and chair was carefully dressed and draped. The very fireplace was arrayed in brocaded skirts like a lady, precluding all possibility of lighting a fire therein without causing a conflagration, and, indeed, those carefully placed logs were daily dusted by the parlour-maid. Every available inch of horizontal space was crowded with small objects, and what could not be squeezed on that was hung on the walls. The use of most of these was an enigma to the Colonel; he had an idea that they might be designed for ornament, and some, as gift books and booklets and Christmas cards, appealed to a literary taste; but he was a little overwhelmed by them, especially as there were a number of little boxes and bags and baskets about, trimmed and adorned in various fashions, which might contain as many more. There were a great many really pretty things there, if one could have taken them in; but they were utterly swamped, owing to the fatal habit which prevailed in the family of all giving each other presents on every Christmas and birthday.

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The Colonel felt terribly big and awkward among them. He sat down on a little chair with gilded frame and embroidered back and seat. It cracked beneath him, and he sprang hastily up and took another, from which he could see out of a window, and into a trim little garden where plants were bedded out in small beds neatly cut in shaved green turf. A few flowers were allowed in the drawing-room, discreetly quarantined on a china tray, though there were any number of empty vases, and from above he could hear the cheerful warble of a distant canary-bird, which woke no answering life in the stuffed corpses of his predecessors standing about under glass shades.

The room looked stuffy, but it was not; the air was very sweet and clean and clear, and the Colonel felt uncomfortably that he was scenting it with tobacco. There could be no dust beneath those rugs, no spot on the glass behind those curtains. There was a feminine air of neatness, and even of fussiness, that pleased him; everything was so carefully preserved, so exquisitely cared for. It would be nice to have some one to look after one's things like that; he knew that the rubbish at home was always getting beyond him somehow.

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And now came blushing in his late visitor, even more daintily pretty than he had thought her before.

The Colonel made a long call, as all the family, anxious to see the great man, dropped in one after the other; but the situation was not unpleasing to him, and he even exerted himself to win their liking, which was the easiest thing in the world. He told Mrs. Carter that he had come on behalf of his quondam servant, Drusilla Elms, whose name, he was sorry to say, his cook had forgotten; but now she remembered it, and could give her the very highest character, and he should be sorry if their carelessness had lost the poor girl so excellent a place. He listened to the tale of the grandmother's rheumatism, and even made some confidences in return about his own. He talked about the soldiers' lending libraries with Aunt Caroline, and promised to write to a friend of his in the regulars on the subject. In his imposing presence the great-aunt sat silently attentive. He had met Isabel's late husband, and he took much notice of her children. He said Winnie was a fine little lad, but would be better for a frolic with other boys. Could he not come over and spend a Saturday afternoon with them at South Boston, and his boys would take him on the water? Oh, yes; they were very careful, and quite at home in a boat. Yes, he would go with them himself, if Mrs. Dale would prefer it; and then the invitation was given and accepted—no unmeaning, general one, but a positive promise for Saturday next, and the one after if it rained. Of course, he should be charmed to have some of the ladies come, too. Miss Carter would, perhaps, for she knew the way. He did not take leave till his horse, to Winnie's ecstatic delight, had pawed a large hole in the ground; and a chorus of praise arose behind him from every tongue but Marian's.

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Colonel Hayward said nothing about his visit at home; but as he stood after returning from his long ride, for which the boys had observed that he had equipped himself with much more than ordinary care, smoking a meditative cigar before the crackling little fire which the afternoon east wind of a Boston May rendered so comfortable, he was roused by his nephew Bob's voice:

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"Really, Uncle Rob, our bachelor housekeeping is getting into a hopeless muddle!" Then, as his

uncle said nothing: "I am afraid—I am really afraid that one of us will have to marry."

"Marry yourself, then, you young scamp, and be hanged to you; you have my full consent if you can find a girl who will be fool enough to take you."

"Of course, I could not expect *you* to make the sacrifice; but though I am willing—entirely for your sake, I assure you—I shall not render it useless by asking some giddy and inexperienced girl. I shall seek some mature female, able and willing to cope with them——"

"Them?"

"The spiders. I have long known that they spun webs of immense size in and about our unfortunate dwelling; but I was not prepared to find that they attached them to our very persons." As he spoke he drew into sight a fabric hanging to the back of his uncle's coat. It was circular in shape, about the size of a dinner-plate, white in colour, and ingeniously woven out of thread in an open pattern with many interstices, by one of which it had fastened itself to the button at the back of the Colonel's coat as firmly as if it grew there.

"What the ——!" I spare my readers the expletives which, with the offending waif, the Colonel hurled at his nephew as the young man and his brothers exploded in laughter. [Pg 80]

"I never was so surprised!" cried Mrs. Treadwell.

"I did not think anything in the matrimonial line could surprise you!" cried her husband.

"Not often; but Colonel Hayward and Marian Carter! I could hardly believe it. Mrs. Carter herself seems perfectly amazed, though of course she's delighted. I suppose she had given up all idea of Marian's marrying."

"She is a sweet little thing," said Mr. Treadwell; "I wonder she has not been married long ago."

"I thought he was a confirmed old bachelor," said the lady; "I wonder where he met her! I wonder whatever made him think of her! I hope they'll be happy, but I don't know. Marian is a good girl, but she has so little sense!"

"I should think any man ought to be happy with Miss Carter," said the gentleman, warmly; "I only hope he'll make her happy. Hayward's a very good fellow, but he'll frighten that little creature to death the first time he swears at her." [Pg 81]

"Colonel Hayward is a *gentleman*, William; he would never swear before a lady."

"I wouldn't trust him—when she's his wife."

Nevertheless, Mrs. Robert Hayward has not yet been placed in danger of such a catastrophe, not even when her husband has been laid up with rheumatic gout. To be sure, her ministrations on those occasions were more soothing than those of the boys. Perhaps she was even a little disappointed in her craving for excitement, and her new household ran almost too smoothly. The boys gave no trouble, though they were aghast on first hearing that the Colonel really contemplated matrimony, and Bob reproached himself in no measured terms for having drawn attention to the "work of Arachne," and driven his uncle to rush madly upon fate. But Marian made it her particular request that things should go on as before, which pleased her bridegroom, though he had never dreamed of any change; and when they came to know her, she pleased the boys as well.

"It's easy enough to get on with Aunt Marian," Bob would say; "she's such a dear little fool! She swallows everything men tell her, no matter how outrageous, and thinks if we want the moon, we must have it. If only Minna would turn out anything like her! But no; they are ruining all the girls now with their colleges. I doubt if Aunt Marian isn't the last of her day and generation." [Pg 82]



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WHY I MARRIED ELEANOR

It has often been remarked that if every man would truthfully tell how he wooed and won his wife, the world would be the gainer by a number of romances of real life which would put to shame the novelist's skill. "How" is the word usually employed in such cases, and, indeed, properly enough. There are a number of marriages where the reason is sufficiently palpable, and where any stronger one fails there is the all-sufficing one of propinquity. But none of these were allowed in the case of my marriage with Eleanor. Why did I do it? was the absorbing nine days' wonder; for, as was unanimously and justly observed, if it were a matter of propinquity alone, why did I not marry—? But I anticipate.

To begin at the beginning, then, and to tell my tale as truthfully as if I were on oath; there was no reason why Eleanor, or any other girl, should not have married me. I was by all odds the best match in New England, being the only son and heir of Roger Greenway, third of the name. Whether my father could ever have made a fortune any more than I could is doubtful; but he inherited a considerable estate, so well invested that it only needed letting alone to grow, and for this he had the good sense. Large as it was when I came into it, it was more than doubled by my prospective wealth on the other side, for my mother was the oldest of the four daughters of old Jonathan Carver, the last of the Massachusetts vikings whose names were words of power in the China seas.

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My father was an elderly man when he married, and my mother was no longer young. She and her sisters were handsome, high-bred women, with every accomplishment and virtue under the sun. They did not, to use the vulgar phrase, marry off fast. Indeed, the phrase and the very idea would have shocked them. They were beings of far too much importance to be so lightly dealt with. When, only a few years before her father's death, Louisa married Roger Greenway, it was allowed by their whole world to be a most fitting thing; and when I appeared in due season, the old gentleman was so delighted that he made a will directly, tying up his whole estate as tightly as possible for future great-grandchildren. Some years after his death, my Aunt Clara, the second daughter, married a Unitarian clergyman of good family, weak lungs, æsthetic tastes, and small property, who never preached. He lived long enough to catalogue all our family pictures and bric-à-brac, and arrange the "Carver Collection" for the Art Museum, and then died of consumption soon after my own father, leaving no children. By the time these events had passed with all due observances, Aunt Frances and Aunt Grace thought it was hardly worth while to marry; there had been a sufficient number of weddings in the family, and they were very comfortable together—and then how could they ever want for an object, with that fine boy of dear Louisa's to bring up? We all had separate households; but my aunts were always at "Greenways," my place on the borders of Brookline and West Roxbury, which my father had bought when young and spent the greater part of his life in bringing to a state of perfection; and my mother and I were apt to pass the hottest summer months at Manchester-by-the-Sea, where Aunt Clara, during her married life, had reared a little fairy palace of her own; and to spend much of the winter at the great old Carver house on Mount Vernon Street, which Jonathan Carver had left to his unmarried daughters for life.

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I was the first object of four devoted and conscientious women. The results were different from what might have been expected. The world said I would be spoiled, and then marvelled that I was not; but my mother's and aunts' conscientiousness outran their devotion, and they all felt, though they would not acknowledge it to each other, that I had rather disappointed them. I grew up a big, handsome young fellow enough, very young-looking for my age, with a trick of blushing like a girl at anything or nothing, which gave me much pain, though it won upon all the old ladies, who said it showed the purity of my mind and the goodness of my heart.

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By the way in which my moral qualities were always selected for praise, it will be divined that but little could be said for my intellectual. Had I been a few steps lower on the social ladder, something might have been said against them. It was only by infinite pains on my own part and that of the highly salaried tutor who coached me, that I was ever squeezed through Harvard University. I did squeeze through, and with an unblemished moral record; my Aunt Clara, the pious one of the family, said it might have been worse, and my mother, to whom my commencement day was a blessed release from four years of perpetual worry, said she was highly gratified at the way in which dear Roger had withstood the temptations of college life. For this I deserved no credit. The temptations of which she thought were none to me. Where would have been the excitement of gambling, when I had nothing to lose? and one brought up from infancy in an atmosphere of fastidious refinement the baser female attractions repelled at once, before they had the chance of charming. I hated tobacco, and liquor of all kinds made me deadly sick. A more subtle snare was set for me.

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Time slipped away for the first few years after I left college. We all went to Europe and returned. I potted a little about my place, and discharged social duties, and such few local political ones as a position like mine entails even in America. I did not know why I did not do more, or what more to do. I did not think I was stupid exactly; it seemed to me that I could do something, if I only knew what. Perhaps I was slow—I certainly was in thought; but sometimes I startled myself by hasty action before I thought at all, which gave me a dim consciousness of the presence of my "genius." My mother's expectations had just begun to take an apologetic turn, when my Aunt Frances, the clever one of the family, put forward a bright idea. She said that it was all very well for a young man who had his own way to make in the world to wait awhile; a man with my opportunities could never be in a satisfactory position to employ them until he was married.

While I remained single there must always be speculations, expectations, and reports. Once let me be married, and all these worries, troublesome and distracting at present, would receive their proper quietus. The sisters all applauded her penetration, and all said with one voice that if Roger were to marry, he could not do better than—but I anticipate again.

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Greenways and the neighbouring estates were large, and the only very near neighbours we had were the Days and the Beechers; in fact, they were both my tenants. When my father bought the place there was an old farm-house on it, which, though it stood rather near the spot where he wished to build, was too well built and too picturesque to pull down. Old Sanderson, our head gardener for many a year, lived there with his wife, and their house, with its own pretty garden and little greenhouse, was one of my favourite haunts when a child. When the old couple died, nearly at the same time, Sanderson had long left off active work, and his deputy and successor, Macfarlane, lived in another house some distance off. My mother said of course she could never put him into the Garden House with all those children; she could never put another servant there at all; she hated to pull it down; she did not know what to do with it. My Aunt Grace, the impulsive one of the family, broke in, and all the others followed suit with, "Why would it not be just the thing for Katharine Day?"

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Katharine Day had been Katharine Latham, an old school friend of my Aunt Grace. She was the daughter of a country clergyman, a pretty woman of fascinating manners, and her relations were very well bred, though poor. The friendship was an excellent thing for her; I don't mean to say that it was not so for my aunt also, for I never knew a woman who could pay back a social debt to a superior more gracefully than Mrs. Day. She was always a little pitied as not having met with her deserts in marriage, though Mr. Day was a handsome man, with good connections and a fine tenor voice. He had some kind of an office with a very fair salary, but his wife said, and it was a thing generally understood, that they were very poor. They felt no shame, rather a sort of pride, in getting along so well in spite of it. They went everywhere, and all her richer friends admired Mrs. Day for being such a good manager, and dressing and entertaining so beautifully on positively nothing, and showed their admiration by deeds as well as words. One paid Phil's college expenses, another took Katie abroad, and they were always having all kinds of presents. They were invited everywhere in the height of the season, and always had tickets for the most reserved of reserved seats. My mother, or my guardian, for her, let them have the Garden House at a mere nothing of a rent, but we said that it was really a gain for us, they would take such beautiful care of it.

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Phil Day, though he was some years younger than I, was my classmate in college, and graduated far ahead of me. My mother was consoled for his superiority by thinking what a nice intimate friend he was for me. That he was my intimate friend was settled for me by the universal verdict. In reality I did not like him at all, but it would have been unkind to be as offish as I must have been to keep him from being always at my house, sailing my boats, riding my horses, playing at my billiard-table, smoking my cigars, and drinking my wines, as naturally as if he had been my brother, albeit I had a suspicion that these luxuries were not as harmless to Phil as they were to me. He was a clever, handsome fellow, and very popular. What I really disliked in him was his being such a terrible snob, but this was an accusation that it seemed particularly mean for me to make against him, even to my own mind.

Phil's sister Katie was worth a dozen of him. She was a beautiful creature, tall and lithe, with a rich colour coming and going under a clear olive skin, and starry dark eyes that seemed to shoot out rays of light for the whole length of her long lashes. She was highly accomplished, and always exquisitely dressed. Mrs. Day said it did not cost much, for dear Katie was so clever at making her own clothes. To be sure, she could not make her boots and gloves, her fans and furs, and these were of the choicest. Their price would have made a large hole in her father's salary, but probably he was never called upon to pay it—for I know my Aunt Grace, for one, thought nothing of giving her a whole box of gloves at a time. Katie inherited all her mother's fascination of manner and practical talent, and, like her, well knew how to pay her way. She was a great pet of my mother and aunts. She poured out tea, and sang after dinner, helped in their charity work, and chose their presents. They had an idea that I could marry whom I pleased, but I knew they felt I could not do better than marry Katie. It was their opinion, and that of every one else, that she deserved a prize in the matrimonial line. Providence evidently designed that she should get one, for, as all her friends remarked, "If Katie Day could do so beautifully with so little, what could she not do if she were rich?" Providence as evidently had destined me for the lucky man, and even the other young men bowed to manifest destiny in the united claims of property and propinquity.

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The Beechers lived a little farther off the other way. About them and their dwelling there was no glamour of boyish memories. The bit of land on which it stood had always cut awkwardly into ours, and my father had longed to buy it; but it had some defect in the title which could not be set right until the death of some old lady in the country. She died at last just about the time that he did, and in the confusion caused by his sudden death the land was snapped up by O'Neil, an Irishman, who turned a penny when he could get a chance by levying blackmail upon a neighbourhood—buying up bits of land, building tenement houses on them, and crowding them with the poorest class of his country people, on the chance of being bought off at last at an exorbitant rate by the neighbouring proprietors.

In this present case O'Neil had mistaken his man. My guardian and first cousin once removed, John Greenway, was the last person alive to screw a penny out of. He would have borne any such infliction himself with Spartan firmness; judge with what calmness he endured it for a ward. He

built a high wall on O'Neil's boundary, planted trees thickly around that, and then proceeded to harass the unhappy tenants by every means within his power and the letter of the law, so that they ran away in hordes without waiting for quarter-day. O'Neil failed at last, and my guardian bought in the concern for a song. Before this, however, O'Neil, in desperate straits, had made a few cheap alterations in the house, advertised it as a "gentleman's residence," and let it to the Beechers, who were only too glad to get so well-situated a house so low.

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Mr. Beecher was well educated and of a good family, though he had no near relations who could do anything for him. He had married early a young lady much in the same condition, and had done but poorly in life, hampered in all his efforts by a delicate wife and a large family. When we bought the place I had not attained my legal majority; but I was old enough to have my wishes respected, and I said positively that I would not have him turned out. As I used to meet the poor old fellow—not that he was really old, though he looked to me a perfect Methuselah—with his grey head and shining, well-brushed coat, trotting to the station, a good mile and a half off, at seven in the morning, through winter's cold and summer's heat; and back again after dark, for nine months in the year, my heart used to ache for him. But I could not tell him so, and of course there was precious little I could do for him. My mother and aunts were eminently charitable, but what could they do for Mrs. Beecher? Her hours and ways and thoughts were not as theirs. She did not come very often when they invited her, nor seem to enjoy herself very much when she did. There was but little use in taking her rare flowers and hothouse grapes, and they could not send her food and clothes as if she were a poor person. The Beecher house had a garden of its own, out of which Mr. Beecher, with a little help from his boys, contrived to get their fruit and vegetables, though it always looked in very poor order. We were thankful that it was so well shut out from our view, and poor Mrs. Beecher was equally thankful that her boisterous boys and crying babies were so well shut in. My mother did not approve of her much, and said she must lack method not to get on better. Jonathan Carver's daughters had been so trained by their father that any one of them could have stepped into his counting-house and balanced his books at a minute's warning. They kept their own accounts, down to the last mill, by double entry, and were fond of saying that if you only did this you would always be able to manage well. They were most kind-hearted, when they saw their way how to be, but they had been so harassed from childhood up by begging letter-writers and agents for societies that they had a horror of leading people to expect anything from them; and as the Beechers evidently expected nothing, it was best that they should be left in that blissful condition. They were indeed painfully overwhelmed by their obligations in the matter of the house. I made the rent as low as I decently could, and put in improvements whenever I had the chance. I used to rack my brains to think what more I could do for them; but in all my wildest dreams it never occurred to me that I might give them a lift by marrying Eleanor.

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Eleanor was their oldest child, and a year or two younger than Katie Day. She was really as plain as a girl has any right to be. She had the light eyelashes and freckles which often mar the effect of the prettiest red hair, and hers was not a pretty shade, but very common carrots. Her features and her figure were not bad exactly, and her motions had nothing awkward—one would never have noticed them in any way. It might have been better for her had she been strikingly ugly. Anything striking is enough for some clever girls to build upon; but whether Eleanor were clever or stupid, no one knew or cared to know. She was a good girl, and helped her mother, and looked after the younger children;—but then, she had to. Her very goodness was a mere matter of course, and had nothing for the imagination to dwell upon. She was not a bit more helpful to her mother than Katie Day was to hers; and if Katie's path of duty led to trimming hats and writing notes, and Eleanor's to darning the children's stockings and washing their faces, why, that was no fault in the one nor merit in the other.

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I felt very sorry for Eleanor, when I thought of her at all, which was not often, but I could do even less for her than for her father. We used to invite them when we gave anything general, but they did not always come, and when we sent them tickets they often could not use them. They had not many other invitations, and could seldom accept any, on account of the cost of clothes and carriage hire. My mother, of course, could not take them about much, for there were our own family and the Days, whom she took everywhere, and who enjoyed going so much. I always asked Eleanor to dance, but as she was dreadfully afraid of me, I fear it gave her more pain than pleasure. She did not dance well, and I could not expect my friends to follow my example. Phil Day, indeed, once declared that he "drew the line at Eleanor Beecher." I remember longing to kick him for the speech, and that was the liveliest emotion I ever felt in connection with her.

Why I did not marry Katie is plainer—to myself at least. I came very near it, not once alone, but many times. I do not think that there was any man who could have seen her day after day, as I did, and not have fallen in love with her, unless there were some barrier in the way. Mine was fragile as a reed, but it proved in the end to be strong enough. It arose in the days when I was a green young hobble-de-hoy of nineteen, dragging along in my freshman year, and she was a bright little gipsy four years younger. At a juvenile tea-party at the Days' we were playing games, and one—I don't know what it was, except that it demanded some familiarity with historical characters and readiness in using one's knowledge. The little wit I had was soon hopelessly knocked out of me, while Katie, quick and alert, was equally ready at showing all she knew, and shielded herself by repartee when she knew nothing. I made some absurd blunder, perhaps more in my awkward way of putting things than in what I really meant, between the two celebrated Cromwells, giving the impression that I thought the great Oliver a Catholic. I might have made some confused explanation, but was silenced by Katie's ringing laugh, a peal of irresistible girlish gayety, such as worldly prudence is rarely strong enough to check at fifteen. Perhaps she was

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excited and could not help it, but I thought she laughed more than she need, and there was something scornful in the tone that jarred on me painfully. I could not be so foolish as to resent it, but I could not forget it, and often when she has looked most lovely, and the star of love has shone most propitious, some sharper cadence than usual in her voice, or a hint at harder lines under the soft curves of her face, or a contemptuous ring in her musical laugh, has withered the words on my lips, and the hour has passed with them unspoken. It was, I dimly felt, only a question of time; the flood must some day rise high enough to sweep the frail barrier away.

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Katie and Eleanor had but little in common on the surface, nor were there ever any deeper sympathies of thought and feeling between them. Still, they were girls, living near together, and with all the others much farther off. It was impossible that there should not be some intercourse of business or pleasure, though never intimate and always irregular; and one pleasant September it came about that we spent a good many hours together, playing lawn tennis on my court. There was another young man hanging about; an admirer of Katie's, he might be called, though he was not very forward to try his chances, thinking, as I plainly saw, that they were not worth much. Herbert Riddell was not much cleverer than I was, and, though not poor, had no wealth to give him importance. He was a thoroughly good fellow, and felt no jealousy of me, and it was pleasant for him to loiter away the golden autumn days with beauty on the tennis court, even if both were another's property. We were well enough matched, for, though Herbert and Katie were very fair players, while Eleanor was a perfect stick, yet I played so much better than the others that I generally pulled her through. She really tried her best, but somehow the more she tried the more blunders she made, perhaps from nervousness, and one afternoon they were especially remarkable. We were hurrying to finish our match, as it was getting late and nearly time for "high tea" at the Days', to which we were all asked, though Eleanor, as usual, had declined, and Katie, as usual, had not pressed her. It was nothing to either Herbert or me, for we both found Mrs. Day a much more lively *pis aller* in conversation than Eleanor. Katie was serving, and sent one of her finest, swiftest balls at Eleanor, who struck at it with all her force, and did really hit it, but unfortunately and mysteriously sent it straight up into the air. We all watched it breathlessly, as it came down—down—and fell on our side of the net. Katie, warm and excited, laughed loud and long. I thought that there was a little affection of superiority in her mirth, just like there was in the high, clear, scornful music that woke the echoes of long ago, and I in turn lost my self-possession, and returned my next ball with such nervous strength that it flew far beyond the lawn and over the clumps of laurels into the wood beyond. We had lost the set.

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"Really, Mr. Greenway," cried Katie, "you must have tried to do that; or have you been taking private lessons of Eleanor?" She stopped, her fine ear perhaps detecting something strained and hard in her own voice. I see her still as she looked then, poised like Mercury on one slender foot, one arm thrown back and holding her racket behind her head, framing it in, the little dimples quivering round her mouth, ready to melt into smiles at a word, while from under her dark eyelashes she shot out a long, bright look, half saucy defiance, half pleading for pardon. It was enough to madden any man who saw her, and it struck home to Riddell. Poor fellow! it was never aimed at him, and it fell short of its mark:

"My heart's cold ashes vainly would she stir,
The light was quenched she looked so lovely in."

Eleanor, meanwhile, was bidding her usual good-by, nothing in her manner showing that she was at all offended. She need not be, for of course Katie could not seriously intend any slight to her, any more than to a stray tennis ball to which she might give a random hit. But I could not let a lady go home alone from my own ground in just this way, and I had a sort of fellow-feeling with her, which I wanted to show.

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"I will see Miss Beecher home, and then come back," I said, and hastened after her, although I had seen, by the prompt manner in which she had walked off, that she did not intend, and very likely did not wish, I should. I was glad to leave the ground and get away from them. I kept saying to myself that after all Katie was not much to blame; girls would be thoughtless, and Katie was so pretty and so petted that she might well be a little spoiled; and then I asked myself what right I had to set myself up as a judge of her conduct? None at all; only I wished that women, who can so easily and lightly touch on the raw places of others, would use their power to heal and not to wound. I could picture to myself some girl with an eagerness to share the overflowing gifts of fortune with others, a respectful tenderness for those who had but little, a yearning sweetness of sympathy that should disarm even envy, and give the very inequalities of life their fitness and significance. We men have rougher ways to hurt or heal; and though I tried desperately hard, I could not hit on anything pleasant or consolatory to say to Eleanor.

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She had got pretty well ahead of me, and was out of sight already. Her way home was by a long roundabout walk through our place, and then by a short one along the public road. When I turned into the winding, shady path which led through the thick barrier of trees hiding the Beecher wall, she was loitering slowly along before me; and though she quickened her pace when she heard me behind her, as a hint that I need not follow, I soon caught up with her, and then I was sorry I had tried to, for I saw that she was crying most undisguisedly and unbecomingly.

"Miss Beecher—Eleanor," I stammered out, "you mustn't mind it—she didn't mean it—it was too bad—I was a little provoked myself—but don't feel so about it."

"Oh, it's not that," said Eleanor, stopping short, and steadying her trembling voice, so that it seemed as if she were practised in stifling her emotions. The very tears stopped rolling down her cheeks. "It's—it's everything. You don't know what it is," she went on more rapidly; "you never

can know—how should you—but if you were I, to see another girl ahead of you in everything—to have nothing, not one single thing, that you could feel any satisfaction in—and no matter how hard you tried, to have her do everything better without taking any trouble, and to know that if you worked night and day for people, you could not please them as well as she can without a moment's care or thought, just by being what she is—you would not like it. And the worst of it all is that I know I am mean and selfish and hateful to feel so about it, for it's not one bit Katie's fault."

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"Oh, come!" I said; "don't look at it so seriously. You exaggerate matters."

"I should not mind it," said Eleanor, gravely, "if I did not feel so badly about it. Now, I know that's nonsense. I mean that if I could only keep from having wrong feelings about it myself, it would not matter much if she were ever so superior in every way."

"Are you not a little bit morbid? If you were really as selfish as you think, you would not be so much concerned about it. It seems to me that we all have our own peculiar place in this world, and that if we fill it properly, we must have our own peculiar advantages; no one else can do just what we can, any more than we could do what they could; we must just try to do well what we have to do."

"It is very well for you to talk in that way," said Eleanor, simply.

"I?"—a little bitterly. "I am a very idle fellow, who has made but little effort to better himself or others. But we won't talk of efforts, for I am sure your conscience must acquit you there. I suppose you were thinking more of natural gifts—of pleasing, which is after all only another way of helping. One pleases one, and one another, and it is as well, perhaps, to be loved by a few as liked by a great many. Don't doubt, my dear Miss Beecher, that any man who truly loves you will find you more charming even than Katie Day."

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What there was in this harmless and well-meant speech to excite Eleanor's anger I could not imagine; but girls are queer creatures. She grew, if possible, redder than before, and her eyes fairly flashed. "No one—" she began, and stopped, unable to speak a word. I went on, as much for a sort of curious satisfaction I had in hearing my own words, as for any consolation they might be to her. "Beautiful as she is, she only pleases my eye; she does not touch my heart. I am not one particle in love with her, and sometimes I scarcely even like her."

"Stop!" cried Eleanor; "you must not say such things—I did very wrong to speak to you as I did. You mean to be kind, but you don't know how every word you say humiliates me. Surely, you can't think me so mean as to let it please me, and yet, perhaps, you know me better than I do myself. There is a wretched little bit of a feeling that I would not own if I could help it, that—that—" She was trembling like a leaf now, and so pale that I thought she was going to faint away. I did not know whether to feel more sorry for her or angry with myself for having made things worse instead of better by my awkwardness. There was only one way to get out of the scrape. I threw my arm around her shaking form, took her cold hand in mine, and said with what was genuine feeling at the time, "Dearest Eleanor!" Of course there was no going back after that.

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Eleanor, equally of course, made her escape at once from my arm, but I still held her hand as I went on. "Do—do believe me. I love you and no one else." She seemed too much astonished to say anything. "Could you not love me a little?"

She looked at me still surprised and incredulous. "You can't mean it—you don't know what you are saying."

I remember feeling well satisfied with myself, for doing the thing so exactly according to the models in all dramas of polite society; but Eleanor, it must be owned, was terribly astray in her part. I went on with increasing energy. "Plainly, Eleanor, will you be my wife? Will you let me show what it is to be loved?"

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Poor Eleanor twisted her damp little handkerchief round and round in her restless fingers without speaking for a moment, and then said in a frightened whisper, "I—I don't know."

I tried to take her hand again, but she drew it away, and said shyly, "Indeed I don't know. I never dreamed of any one's loving me, much less you. I don't know how I ought to feel."

"Have you never thought how you would feel if you loved anyone?" I asked, her childish simplicity making me smile, and I felt as if I were talking to a little girl; but, to my surprise, she blushed deeply, and then answered firmly, as if bound to be truthful, "Yes! I have felt—all girls have their dreams"; here a something in her tone made her seem to have grown a woman in a moment; "I thought I should never find any real person to make my romance about, and so for a long time I have loved Sir Philip Sidney."

"What?"

"Because he would have been too much of a gentleman to mind how plain and insignificant I was; it isn't likely he would have loved me—but I should not have minded his knowing that I loved him."

"And do you think that there are no gentlemen now?"

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As I looked at her, the surprise and interest roused by her words making me forget for a moment the position in which we stood, I saw a sudden eager look rise in her eyes, then fade away as

quickly as it came; but it showed that if no one could call Eleanor beautiful, it might be possible to forget that she was plain. She walked along slowly under the broad fir boughs, and I by her side, both silent. She was frightened at having said so much. But as we drew near the gate which opened to the public road, I said, "Will you not give me my answer, Eleanor?"

"I cannot," she murmured, "it is so sudden. Can you not give me a little time to think about it?"

"Till this evening?"

"No—no. I have no time before then. Come to-morrow morning—after church begins, and I will be at home—that is," she added apologetically, "if it is just as convenient to you."

Poor child! she did not know what it was to use her power, in caprice or earnest, over a lover. Every word she said was like a fresh appeal to me. I told her it should be as she wished, and but little else passed till we reached her father's door, which closed between us, to our common relief.

Instead of appearing at the Days' tea-table, which indeed I forgot, I walked straight to the darkest and remotest nook in the fir-wood, flung myself flat on the ground, and tried to face my utterly amazing position, and to realise what I had been about. It was evident that I had irrevocably pledged myself to marry Eleanor Beecher, but still I could hardly believe it. It seemed too absurd that I, who had been proof against the direct attacks of so many pretty girls, and the more delicate allurements of the prettiest one I knew, should have been such a fool as to blurt out a proposal because a plain one had shed a few tears, which, to do her justice, were shed utterly without the design of producing any effect on me.

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In this there lay a ray of hope. Eleanor, I had fully recognised, was transparently sincere; if she did not love me, I was sure she would tell me so frankly; and, after all, should I not be a conceited fool to think that every girl I saw must fall in love with me? If she refused me, as she very likely would, I should be very glad to have given her the chance; it would give her a little self-esteem, of which she seemed more destitute than a girl ought to be, and it would not diminish mine. I felt more interest in her than I could have thought possible two hours ago, but I did not love her, and did not want to marry her. I did not feel that we were at all suited to each other, and I hoped that she would have the good sense to see it too; and yet, would she—would she?

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Next day at a quarter past eleven I ascended the Beecher doorsteps in all the elegance of array that befitted the occasion, and, I hope, no unbecoming bearing. I had had a sleepless night of it, but had reasoned the matter out with myself, and decided that if I had done a foolish thing, I must take the consequences like a man, and see that they ended with me. Eleanor herself opened the door and showed me into the stiff little drawing-room, which had to be stiff or it would have been hopelessly shabby at once. The family were at church, and it was the only time in the week that she could have had any chance to see me alone. She had made, it was plain, a great effort to look well, and was looking very well for her. She had put on a fresh, though old, white frock, had stuck a white rose in her belt, and done up her hair in a way I had never seen it in before. She looked very nervous and frightened, but not unbecomingly so, I allowed, though with rather a sinking of the heart at the way these straws drifted. We got through the few polite nothings that people exchange on all occasions, from christenings to funerals, and then I said:

"Dear Eleanor, I hope you have thought over what I said to you yesterday, and that you know how you really feel, and can—that you can love me enough to let you make me—to let me try to make you—I mean—" I was blundering terribly now, and getting very red. Yesterday's fluency had quite deserted me. But Eleanor was thinking too much of what she had to say herself to heed it.

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"Oh!" she began, "I am afraid—I know I am not worthy of you. It was all so sudden and so unexpected yesterday. But I know now that I do not love you as much as I ought—as you deserve to be loved by the woman you love. I ought to say that I will not marry you—but—" she looked up beseechingly—"I can't—I can't."

She paused, then went on in a trembling voice, "You don't know how hard a time my father and mother have had. There has hardly a single pleasant thing ever happened to them. Ever since I was a little girl I have longed and longed to do something for them—something that would really make them happy—and I never could. I never dreamed I should have such a chance as this! and then all the others! I have thought so what I should like to give them, and I never had the smallest thing; and then myself—I don't want to make myself out more unselfish than I am—but you don't know how little pleasure I have had in my life. I never thought of such a chance as this—all the good things in life offered me at once—and I cannot—cannot let them go by."

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She stopped, breathless, only for a moment, but it was a bitter one for me. I had one of those agonising sudden glimpses such as come but seldom, of the irony of fate, when the whole tragedy of our lives lies bare and exposed before us in all its ugliness. So then even she, for whom I was giving up so much, could not love me, and I was going to be married for my money after all! Then with another electric shock of instant quick perception, it came across me that I was getting perhaps a better, certainly a rarer, thing than love. Many women had flattered my vanity with hints of that; but here was the only one I had ever met whom I was sure was telling me the absolute, unflattering truth. The sting of wounded pride grew milder as Eleanor, unconsciously swaying toward me in her earnestness, went on:

"Will you—can you love me, and take my friendship, my gratitude and admiration—more than I can tell you—and wait for me to love you as well as you ought to be loved? I know I shall—how

As things in our family were always done with the strictest attention to etiquette, I informed my mother, as was due to her, during our usual stroll on the terrace, after our early Sunday dinner, that I was paying my addresses to Eleanor Beecher, and intended to apply for her father's consent that afternoon. It was a great and not a pleasant surprise for her. My mother was celebrated for never saying anything she would be sorry for afterwards—an admirable trait, but one which frequently interfered with her conversational powers; and unfortunately, on this occasion, to say nothing was almost as bad as anything she could have said. It was rather hard for both of us, but after it was over, she could go to her room and have a good cry by herself, while I was obliged to set off for an interview with my intended father-in-law, whom I found in his little garden, in shirt-sleeves and old slippers, cutting the ripest bunches from his grape-vines. It was the blessed hour sacred to dawdle—the only one the poor old fellow had from one week's end to the other. He was evidently not accustomed to have it broken in upon by young men visitors in faultless calling trim, and starting, dropped his shears, which I picked up and handed to him; dropped them again, shuffled about in his old slippers, and muttered something of an apology. Evidently I must plunge at once into the subject, but I was getting practised in this, and began boldly: "Mr. Beecher, may I have your consent to pay my addresses to your daughter Eleanor?"

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"Eleanor at home? Oh, yes, she's in. Perhaps you'll kindly excuse me?" and he looked helplessly toward the house door.

"I don't think you quite understand me. I spoke to Eleanor last night about my wishes—hopes—my love for her, and she promised to give me an answer this morning. She has consented to become my wife—of course, with your approval."

"Lord bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Beecher, throwing back his head, and looking full at me over the top of his spectacles; "who would ever have thought it? I mean—you seem so young, such a boy."

"I am twenty-six, and Eleanor, I believe, is twenty."

"True, true; yes, she was twenty last June—but—but—why, of course, she must decide for herself—that is, if you are sure you love her."

I felt myself growing red; but Mr. Beecher seemed to interpret this as a sign of my ardent devotion, and anger at its being doubted, for he went on: "Yes, yes! I beg your pardon. I never heard anything about you but in your favour. Of course, I have nothing to say but that I am very happy. Of course," more quickly, "it's a great honour; that is, of course you know my daughter has no fortune to match with yours."

"I am perfectly indifferent to that."

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"Of course—of course—well, it must rest with Eleanor. She is a good girl, and I can trust her choice. Will you not go in and see my—Mrs. Beecher?" he added with relief, as if struck with a bright idea; and I left him slashing off green bunches and doing awful havoc among his grape-vines. He did not appear so overwhelmed with delight at the prospect of an alliance with me as Eleanor had seemed to expect. Mrs. Beecher, on her part, took the tidings in rather a melancholy way; she wept, and said Eleanor was a dear good child, and she hoped we would make each other happy, but there was more despondency than joy in her manner; either she was accustomed to look at every new event in that light, or, as I suspected, this piece of good fortune was rather too overwhelming. I thought many times in the next two months of the man who received the gift of an elephant. I played the part of elephant in the Beecher *ménage*, and was sometimes terribly oppressed by my own magnificence. Perhaps an engagement may be a pleasant period of one's life under some circumstances; decidedly mine was not. I insisted on its being as short as possible, thinking that the sooner it was over the better for all parties. Mr. and Mrs. Beecher might have had some comfort in getting Eleanor ready to be married to some nice young man with a rising salary and a cottage at Roxbury; but to get her ready to be married to me was a task which I was afraid would be the death of both of them. Poor Eleanor herself was worn to a shadow with it all, and I remember looking forward with some satisfaction to bringing her up again after we were married.

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My mother, of course, could not interfere with their arrangements, even to offer help. She asked no questions, found no fault, but was throughout unapproachably courteous and overpoweringly civil. Once, and once only, did she speak out her mind to me. The evening after the wedding-day was fixed, she tapped late at my door, and when I opened it, she walked in in her white wrapper, candlestick in hand—for the whole house was long darkened—her long, thick, still bright brown locks hanging below her waist, and a look of determination on her features—looking like a Lady Macbeth, who had had the advantages of a good early education.

"Roger!" she began, and paused.

"Well."

"Roger," as I placed a chair for her, and she sat down as if she were at the dentist's, "there is one thing I must say to you. I hope you will not mind. I must be satisfied on one point, and then I will never trouble you again about it."

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"Anything, dearest, that I can please you in."

"Roger, did you ever—did you never care for Katie Day?"

"I always liked her."

"I mean, Roger, did you ever want to marry her? And, oh, Roger! I hope, I do hope that if you did not, you have never let her have any reason to think you did."

"Never! I have never given her any reason to think I cared for her more than as a very good friend."

"I felt sure you would never wilfully deceive any girl," said my mother, with a sigh of relief; "but I am anxious about you yourself. Did you and Katie ever have any quarrel—any misunderstanding? I have heard of people marrying some one else from pique after such things. Do forgive me, Roger, dear; but I should be so glad to know." My poor mother paused, more disconcerted than she usually allowed herself to be, and her beautiful eyes brimming over with tears.

"Don't worry about me, dearest mother," I said, kissing her tenderly; for my heart was touched by her anxiety. "I can tell you truly that I have never really wanted to marry Katie, though once or twice I have thought of it. I have always admired her, as every one must. She is a lovely girl; and seeing so much of her as I have, it might have come to something in time, if it had not been for Eleanor."

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"If it had not been for Eleanor!" My mother was too well-bred to repeat my words, but I saw them run through her mind like a lightning flash. She looked for a moment as if she thought I was mad, then in another moment she remembered that she had heard love to be not only mad but blind. Her own Cupid had been a particularly wide-awake deity, with all his wits about him; but she bowed to the experience of mankind. From that hour to this she has never breathed a word which could convey any idea that Eleanor was anything but her own choice and pride as a daughter-in-law.

The Beechers got up a very properly commonplace wedding, after all, though nothing to what my wedding ought to have been. Eleanor herself, like many prettier brides, was little but a peg to hang a wreath and veil on. Her younger sisters did very well as bridesmaids. The only will I showed in the matter was in refusing to ask Phil Day to act as best man, though I knew it was expected of me. I asked Herbert Riddell; and the good fellow performed his part admirably, and made the thing go off with some life. I verily believe he was the happiest person there. They only had a very small breakfast for the nearest relations, my mother remarking that we could have something larger afterwards; but the church was crammed. The thing I remember best of that day, now fifteen years ago, was the expression on Mrs. Day's and Katie's faces. It was not pique—they were too well-bred for that—nor disappointment—they were too proud for that, even had they felt it. And I don't believe that there was any deep disappointment, at least on Katie's part. I had made no undue advances; and she was far too sensible and sunny-tempered a lassie to let herself do more than indulge in a few day-dreams, or to wear the willow for any man, even if he were a good match, and had pleased her fancy. She married, as every one knows, Herbert Riddell, and made him a very good wife. But neither mother nor daughter could quite keep out of their faces, wreathed in smiles as befitted the occasion, the look of uncomprehending, unmitigated amazement, too overpowering to dissemble. I suppose it was reflected on many others, and I remembering overhearing Aunt Frances severely reproving Aunt Grace for so far forgetting herself as to utter the vulgar remark that she "would give ten thousand dollars to know what Roger was marrying that little fright for."

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The Roger Greenway and Eleanor Beecher of ten years ago are so far past now that I can talk of them like other people. That Roger Greenway ranked so low in his class at college is only remembered to be cited as a comfort to the mothers of stupid sons—Roger Greenway, now the coming man in Massachusetts. Have I not made a yacht voyage round Southern California, and is not my book on the deep-sea dredgings off the coasts considered an important contribution to the Darwinian theory, having drawn, in his later days, a kind and appreciative letter from the great naturalist? Do I not bid fair to revolutionise American agriculture by my success in domesticating the bison on my stock-farm in Maine? Have I not come forward in politics, made brilliant speeches through the State, and am I not now sitting in Congress for my second term? The world would be incredulous if I told them that all this was due to Eleanor. She did not, indeed, know exactly what deep-sea dredging was; but she said I ought to do something with my yacht, and had better make a voyage, and write a book about it. She is as afraid, not only of a bison, but of a cow, as a well-principled woman ought to be; but she said I ought to do something with my stock-farm, and had better try some experiments. She is no advocate of women's going into politics; but she said I was a good speaker, and ought to attend the primary meetings. And when I said the difficulty was to think of anything to say, she said if that were all, she could think of twenty things. So she did; and when I had once begun, I could think of them myself. I have had no military training; but if Eleanor were to say that she was sure I could take a fort, I verily believe I could and should.

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Not less is Eleanor Beecher of the old days lost in Mrs. Roger Greenway. As she grew older she grew stouter, which was very becoming to her, as she had always been of a good height, though no one ever gave her credit for it. Her complexion cleared up; her hair was better dressed, and looked a different shade; and she developed an original taste in dress. She developed a peculiar manner, too, very charming and quite her own. She showed an organising faculty; and after

getting her household under perfect control, and starting her nursery on the most systematic basis, she grew into planning and carrying out new charities. The name of Mrs. Roger Greenway at the head of a charity committee wins public confidence at once, and, seen among the "remonstrants" against woman's suffrage, has more than once brought over half the doubtful votes in the General Court. Every one says that I am unusually fortunate in having such a wife for a public man, and my mother cannot sufficiently show her delight in the wisdom of dear Roger's choice.

Eleanor would never let me do what she called "pauperise" her family; but I found Mr. Beecher a good place on a railroad, over which I had some control, which he filled admirably, and built a new house to let to him. I helped the boys through college, letting them pay me back, and gave them employment in the lines they chose. The girls, under pleasanter auspices, turned out prettier than their eldest sister, and enjoyed society; and one is well married, and another engaged.

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Katie Day, as I said before, married Herbert Riddell. She was an excellent wife, and made his means go twice as far as any one else could have done. She and Eleanor are called intimate friends with as much reason as Phil and I had been. I don't believe they ever have two words to say to each other when alone together, but then they very seldom are. Eleanor is always lending Katie the carriage, and sending her fruit and flowers when she gives one of her exquisite little dinners; and Katie looks pretty, and sings and talks at our parties, and so it goes on to mutual satisfaction.

We all have our youthful dreams, though to few of us is it given to find them realities. Perhaps we might more often do so, did we know the vision when we met it in mortal form. I had had my ideal, a shadowy one indeed—and never, certainly, did I imagine that I was chasing after it when I followed Eleanor down the fir-tree walk. "An eagerness to share the overflowing gifts of fortune with others—a respectful tenderness for those who had but little—a yearning sweetness of sympathy that should disarm even envy, and give the very inequalities of life their fitness and significance." Had I ever clothed my fancies in words like these? I hardly knew; but as I watched my wife in the early days of our married life, shyly and slowly learning to use her new powers, as the butterfly, fresh from the chrysalis, stretches its cramped wings to the sun and air, they took life and shape before me—and I felt the charm of the "ever womanly" that has ever since drawn me on, as it must draw the race.

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Did Eleanor's love for me spring from gratitude for, or pleasure in, the wealth that was lavished on her with a liberal hand? Who shall say? A girl's love, if love it be, is often won by gifts of but a little higher sort. But if it be worthy of the name, it finds its earthly close in loving for love's sake alone; and then it matters not how it came, for it can never go, and the pulse of its life will be giving, not taking. To Eleanor herself, sure of my heart because so sure of her own, it would matter but little to-day if I had loved her first from pity. That I did not is my own happiness, not hers.

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THE STORY OF A WALL-FLOWER

It would never have occurred to anyone on seeing Margaret Parke for the first time, that she was born to be a wall-flower,—plainness, or at best insignificance of person, being demanded by the popular mind as an attribute necessary to acting in that capacity, whereas Margaret was five feet eight inches in height, with a straight swaying figure like a young birch tree, a head well set back upon her shoulders—as if the better to carry her masses of fair hair—an oval face, a straight nose, blue eyes so deeply set, and so shaded by long dark eyelashes, that they would have looked dark too, but for the sparkles of coloured light that came from them, an apple-blossom skin, and thirty-two sound teeth behind her ripe red lips. With all these disqualifications for the part, it was a wonder that she should ever have thought of playing it; and to do her justice, she never did,—but some have "greatness thrust upon them."

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Margaret's father, too, was a man of some consequence, having a reputation great in degree, though limited in extent. He was hardly known out of medical circles, but within them everyone had heard of Dr. Parke of Royalston. His great work on "Tissues," which afterwards established his fame on a secure basis, lay tucked away in manuscript, with all its illustrations, for want of funds to publish it; but even then there were rooms in every hospital in Europe into which a king could hardly have gained admittance, where Dr. Parke might have walked in at his pleasure. So brilliant had been "Sandy" Parke's career at college, and in the Medical School, that his classmates had believed him capable of anything; and when he married Margaret's mother, a beauty in a quiet way, both young people, though neither had any money, were thought to have done excellently well for themselves. Alas! they were too young. Dr. Parke's marriage spoiled his chances of going abroad to complete his medical education. When he launched on his profession,

it was found that many men were his superiors in the art of getting a lucrative practice in a large city; and, at last, he was glad to settle down in a country town, where he had a forty-mile circuit, moderate gains, and still more moderate expenses. His passion was study, which he pursued unremittingly, though time was brief and subjects were scanty.

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Mrs. Parke was a devoted wife and mother, who thought her husband the greatest of men, and pitied the world for not recognising the fact. She managed his affairs wisely, and they lived very comfortably and cheaply in the pleasant semi-rural town. Could the children have remained babies forever, Mrs. Parke's wishes would never have strayed beyond the limits of her house and garden; but as they grew older, and so fast! ambition began to stir in her heart. It was the great trial of her life that with all her economy, they could not find it prudent to send the two oldest boys to Harvard, but must content themselves with Williams College. She bore it well; but when Margaret bloomed into loveliness that struck the eyes of others than her partial parents, she felt here she must make an effort. Margaret should go down to Boston to see and be seen in her own old set, or what remained of it. Mrs. Parke was an orphan, with no very near relations, but her connections were excellent, and her own first cousin, Mrs. Robert Manton, might have been a most valuable one had things been a little different. Unfortunately, Mrs. Manton, being early left a widow, with a neat little property and no children, and having to find some occupation for herself, had chosen the profession of an invalid, which she pursued with exclusive devotion. She had long ceased to follow the active side of it—that of endeavouring to do anything to regain her health; having exhausted the resources of every physician of reputation in the New England and Middle States, among them Dr. Parke, who, like the others, did not understand her case, and indeed had never been able to see that she had any. She had now passed into the passive stage, trying only to avoid anything that might do her harm. She never went to Royalston, as there was far too much noise in the house there to suit her, but she felt kindly towards her cousin's family, and when she was able would send them pretty presents at Christmas. More often she would simply order a box of confectionery to be sent them, which they ate up as fast as possible, Dr. Parke being inclined to growl when he saw it about.

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Cousin Susan had rather dropped out of society, though the little she did keep up was of a very select order; and Mrs. Parke knew better than to expect her to take any trouble to introduce Margaret into it. The bare idea of having a young girl on her hands to take about would have sent her out of her senses. But she lived in her own very good house on West Cedar Street, and though she had let most of it to a physician, reserving rooms for herself and her maid, surely there was some little nook into which she could squeeze Margaret, if the girl, who had a pretty talent for drawing, could be sent to Boston to take a quarter at the Art School. Mrs. Manton assented, because refusing and excusing were too much trouble. Mrs. Parke had also written to an old school friend, now Mrs. David Underwood; a widow, too, but still better endowed, who had kept up with the world, and went out and entertained freely; the more, because her son, Ralph Underwood, a rising young stockbroker, was a distinguished member of the younger Boston society. Mrs. Underwood had visited the Parkes in her early widowhood, when Ralph was a little boy and Margaret a baby, and had been most hospitably entertained. Of course she would be only too glad to do all she could to show her friend's pretty daughter the world, and show her to it.

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Now, if Mrs. Parke had sent Margaret down to Boston a year sooner or a year later, things would doubtless have taken quite another turn, and this history could never have been written. But the year before she was still feeding her family on stews and boiled rice, to lay up the money for Margaret's expenses, and working early and late to get up an outfit for her; which objects she achieved by the autumn of 188-. What baleful conjunction of planets was then occurring to make Mrs. Underwood mutter, as she read the letter, that she wished Mary Pickering had chosen any other time to fasten her girl upon them, while Ralph growled across the breakfast-table under his breath, "At any rate, don't ask her to stay with us," must be left for the future to disclose. Mrs. Underwood eagerly promised anything and everything her son chose to ask, and as he sauntered out of the house leaving his breakfast untouched, and she watched anxiously after him from the window, the important letter dropped unheeded from her hand, and out of her mind.

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Margaret came down in due season, bright and expectant. Cousin Susan was rather taken aback at the girl's beauty, partly frightened at the responsibilities it involved, partly relieved by the thought that it would make Mrs. Underwood the more willing to assume them all. Margaret went to the Art School, and got on very well with her drawing. She was much admired by the other girls, who were never weary of sketching her. They were nice girls, though they did not move in the sphere of society in which they seemed to take it for granted that Margaret must achieve a distinguished success; and even though she was modest in her disclaimers, she could not help feeling that she might have what they called "a good time" under Mrs. Underwood's auspices.

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Mrs. Underwood for more than a week gave no sign of life; then made a very short, very formal call, apologising for her tardiness by reason of her numerous engagements, and proffering no further civilities; and when Margaret, in a day or two, returned the call, she found Mrs. Underwood "very much engaged." But in another day or two there came a note from her, asking Margaret to a small and early dance at her house, and a card for a set of Germans at Papanti's Hall, of which she was one of the lady patronesses, and which Cousin Susan knew to be the set of the season. In her note she rather curtly stated that she had settled the matter of Margaret's subscription to the latter affairs, and that she would call and take her to the first, which was to come off three days after her own dance. Margaret was pleased, but a little frightened; there was something not very encouraging in the manner of Mrs. Underwood's note; though perhaps it was silly to mind that when the matter was so satisfactory,—only she did hate to go to her first dance

alone. She longed even for Cousin Susan's chaperonage, though she knew her longings were vain; Mrs. Manton never went out in the evening under any circumstances, and told Margaret that there was no need of a chaperon at so small an affair at the house of an intimate friend, and that she should have that especially desirable cab and cabman that she honoured with her own custom, whenever she could make up her mind to leave the house. It would, of course, be charged on her bill; after which piece of munificence she washed her hands of the whole affair.

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Margaret set out alone. It was a formidable ordeal for her to get herself into the house and up the staircase, and glad was she when she was safely landed in the dressing-room, though there was not a soul there whom she knew. Her dress was a pink silk that had been a part of her mother's trousseau; a good gown, though not at all the shade people were wearing now; but Mrs. Parke had made it over very carefully, and veiled it with white muslin. It had looked very nice to Margaret till it came in contact with the other girls' dresses. She hoped they would not look at it depreciatingly; and they did not,—they never looked at it at all, or at her either. She stood in the midst of the gayly greeting groups, less noticed than if she were a piece of furniture, on which at least a wrap or two might have been thrown. She found it easy enough, however, to get downstairs and into the reception-room in the stream, and up to Mrs. Underwood, who looked worried and anxious, said she was glad to see her, and it was a very cold evening; and then, as the waiting crowd pushed Margaret on, she could hear the hostess tell the next comer that she was glad to see him, and that it was a very warm evening. Margaret was softly but irresistibly urged on toward the door of the larger room where the dancing was to be; but that she had not the courage to enter alone, and coming across a single chair just at the entrance, she sat down in it and sat on for two hours without stirring. The men were bustling about to ask the girls who had already the most engagements; the girls were some of them looking out for possible partners, some on the watch for the men by whom they most wished to be asked to dance; but no one asked Margaret. The music struck up, and still she sat on unheeded.

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The loneliness of one in a crowd has often been dwelt upon, as greater than that of the wanderer in the desert; but all pictures of isolation are feeble compared to that of a solitary girl in a ballroom. Margaret's seat was in such a conspicuous position that it seemed as if all the couples who crushed past her in and out of the ballroom must take in the whole fact of her being neglected. There were a few older ladies in the room, but these sat together in another part of it, and talked among themselves without paying any heed to her.

At first she hardly took in the situation in all its significance; but as dance after dance began and ended, she began to feel puzzled and frightened. Did the Underwoods mean to be rude to her, or was this the way people in society always behaved, and ought she to have known it all along? Ought she to feel more indignant with them, or ashamed of herself? If she could only know what the proper sentiment for the occasion might be, it would be some relief to feel miserable in the proper way. Miserable her condition must be, since she was the only girl in it.

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At last Mrs. Underwood brought up her son and introduced him. He was a tall, dark, well-grown young fellow, who might have been handsome but for a look of gloomy sulkiness which made his face repulsive. He muttered something indistinguishable and held out his arm, and Margaret, understanding it as an invitation to dance, mechanically rose, and allowed herself to be conducted to the ballroom. She made one or two remarks to which he never replied, and after pushing her once or twice round the room in as perfunctory a manner as if he were moving a table, watching the door over her head, meanwhile, with an attention which made him perpetually lose the step, he suddenly dropped her a little way from her former seat, on which she was glad to take refuge. She thought she must have made a worse figure on the floor than sitting down, and then a terrible fear rushed over her like a cold chill. Was there something very much amiss with her appearance? Had anything very shocking happened to her gown? She looked at it furtively; but just then the bustle of a late arrival diverted her thoughts a little, as a short, plump, black-eyed girl came laughing in, followed by a quiet, middle-aged lady, and a rather bashful-looking young man. Margaret thought her only rather pretty, not knowing that she was Miss Kitty Chester, the beauty of Boston for the past two seasons; however, she did observe that she had the most gorgeous gown, the biggest nosegay, and the highest spirits in the room. She hastened up to Mrs. Underwood, with an effusive greeting, which that lady seemed trying, not quite successfully, to return in kind. Half of the girls in the room, and most of the men, gathered round her in a moment; and a confused rattle of lively small talk arose, of which Margaret could make out nothing. She noticed, however, that the other girls, many of them momentarily deserted, appeared to regard the sensation with something of a disparaging air, and she heard one of them say, that it was a little too bad, even for Kitty Chester. What "it" might be remained a mystery, but there was no doubt that it contributed amazingly to the success of Mrs. Underwood's dance, which went on, Margaret thought, with redoubled zest, for all but herself; nor, indeed, did Ralph Underwood appear enlivened, for she caught a glimpse of him across the room, sulkier than ever. To her surprise, as he looked her way, a sort of satisfaction, it could not be called pleasure, suddenly dawned on his face. Surely she could never be the cause! And then for the first time she perceived that someone was standing behind her; and, as one is apt to do in such a consciousness, she turned sharply and suddenly around, the confusion which came too late to check her movement coloring her face. It was a relief to find that it was a very insignificant person on whom her glance fell, a small, plain man of indefinite age, who looked, as the girls phrase it, "common." He was dressed like the other men, but his clothes had not the set of theirs, and he had the air, if not of actual ill-health, of being in poor condition. In that one glance her eyes met his, which sent back a look, not of recognition, but of response. There was nothing which she could notice as an assumption of familiarity, but if anyone else had seen it they

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might have thought that she had been speaking to him. Of course, she could do nothing but turn as quickly back; but she was conscious that he still kept his place, and somehow it seemed a kind of protection to have him there. He stood near, but not obtrusively so; a little to one side, in just such a position that she could have spoken to him without moving, and they might have been thought to be looking on together, too much at their ease to talk. When people paired off for supper and nobody came for her, he waited till everyone else had left the room, so that he might have been thought her escort. He then disappeared; but in a moment Margaret was amazed by the entrance of a magnificent colored waiter, who offered her a choice of refreshments with the finest manners of his race. His subordinates rushed upon each other's heels with all the delicacies she wished, and more that she had never heard of, and their chief came again to see that she was properly served. Not a young woman at the ball had so good a supper as Margaret; but that is the portion of the entertainment for which young women care the least.

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Just before the crowd surged back from the supper-room, her protector, as she could not help calling him to herself, had slipped back into his old place, so naturally that he might have been there all the time during the supper, whose remains the waiters were now carrying off with as much deference as they had brought it. Margaret wondered how a person who looked, somehow, so out of his sphere, could act as if he were so perfectly in it. Very few people seemed to know him, and though when one or two of the men spoke to him it was with an air of being well acquainted, he seemed rather to discourage their advances, and Margaret was glad, for she dreaded his being drawn away from her neighbourhood. While she was puzzling over the question as to whether he were a poor relation, or Ralph's old tutor, the wished-for, yet dreaded hour of her release sounded,—dreaded, for how to say her good-by and get out of the room. But somehow the unknown was close behind her, and one or two of a party who were going at the same time were speaking to him, so she might have been of, as well as in, the group. Mrs. Underwood looked worried and tired and had hardly a word for her, but seemed to have something to say to her companion of a confidential nature, by which, however, he would not allow himself to be detained, but excused himself in a few murmured words, which seemed to satisfy his hostess, and passed on, still close behind Margaret, to the door, where they came full against Ralph Underwood, who barely returned Margaret's bow, but exclaimed: "What, Al, going? Oh, come now, don't go."

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"Al" said something in a low voice, as inexpressive as the rest of him, of which Margaret could only distinguish the words "coming back," and followed her on, waiting till she came down the stairs and out of the house. He did not offer to put her into the carriage, but somehow it was done without any exertion on her part, and as she drove off, she saw him on the steps looking after her.

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Margaret had a fine spirit of her own, and could have borne the downfall of her illusions and hopes as well as ninety-nine young women out of a hundred. She could even, when her distresses were well over, have laughed at them herself, and turned over the leaf in hopes of a better. But what was she to write home about it? how satisfy her father, mother, and Winnie, eager for news of her? how bear their disappointment? There lay the sting. "If it were not for them," she thought, "I should not mind so very much." She was strictly truthful both by nature and education, and though she did feel that if ever a few white lies were justifiable, they would be here, she dismissed the notion as foolish, as well as wicked, and lay awake most of the night, trying to diplomatically word a letter which should keep to the facts and still give a cheerful impression. "Mrs. Underwood's dance was very pretty," she said, and she described the decorations and dresses. She had "rather a quiet time" herself, not knowing many people, and did not dance more than "once or twice." Here was a long pause, until she decided that "once or twice" might literally stand for one as well as more. She did not see much of Mrs. Underwood or Ralph, as they were busy receiving, but "some of the men were very kind." Here again conscience pricked her; but to say one man would sound so pointed and particular—it would draw attention and perhaps inquiry which she could but ill sustain; and then luckily the devotion of the black waiters darted into her mind, and she went off peacefully to sleep, her difficulties conquered for the present, and a feeling of gratitude toward the unknown warm at her heart. Of course "a man like that" could only have acted out of pure good-nature, and couldn't have expected that she should dream of its being anything else. She wished she could have thanked him for it.

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The lesser trial of having to tell Cousin Susan about it was fortunately averted. Mrs. Manton never left her room the next day, and when Margaret saw her late the day after, the party was an old story, and Margaret could say carelessly that it had been rather slow, and her host not particularly attentive, without exciting too much comment. Cousin Susan said it was a pity, but that it would be better at the next, as she would know a few people to start with. Margaret did not feel so sure of that, and wished she could stay away; but she had no excuse to give without telling more of the truth than she could bring herself to do; and then, she reasoned, things might be different next time. Mrs. Underwood might have more time or inclination to attend to her, when she was not occupied with her other guests; and there were other matrons, some of whom might be good-natured,—perhaps some of the men might notice her at a second view, and ask her to dance; at any rate, she thought, it could not well be worse than the first. She wished she had another gown to wear than that pink silk, which might be unlucky, but the white muslin prepared as an alternative was by no means smart enough. So she put on the gown of Monday, trying to improve it in various little ways, and waited with something that might be called heroism.

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Mrs. Underwood called at the appointed hour. She bade Margaret good evening, and asked if she minded taking a front seat, as she was going to take up Mrs. Thorndike Freeman; and that, and

Margaret's acquiescence, was about all that passed between them till the carriage stopped, and a faded-looking, though youngish woman, plain, but with an air of some distinction got in, and acknowledged her introduction to Margaret with a few muttered indistinguishable words.

"Dear Katharine, I am so glad!" said Mrs. Underwood; "I thought you would certainly have some girl to take, and I should have to go alone." [Pg 140]

"I'm not quite such a fool, thank you," said Mrs. Freeman, in a quick little incisive voice that somehow brought her words out; "I told them I'd be a patroness, if I need have no trouble, and no responsibilities; but you needn't expect to see me with a girl on my hands."

"Oh, but any girl with you would be sure to take."

"You can never tell—unless a girl happens to hit, or her people are willing to entertain handsomely, you can't do much for her. A girl may be pretty enough, and nice enough, and have good connections, too, and she may fall perfectly flat. I had such a horrid time last winter with Nina Turner; I couldn't well refuse them. Well, thank Heaven, she's going *in* this winter;—going to set up a camera and take to photography."

"I wish more of them would go in," said Mrs. Underwood with a groan. "Here has Bella Manning accepted, if you will believe it. I should think she had had enough of sitting out the German. Well—I shan't trouble myself about her this winter. She ought to go in and be done with it."

"The mistake was in her ever coming out," said Mrs. Freeman, with a laugh at her own wit. [Pg 141]

"It is a mistake a good many of them have made this year. Did you ever see a plainer set of debutantes?"

"Never, really; it seems to have given Mabel Tufts courage to hold on another year. I hear she's coming."

"Yes," said Mrs. Underwood scornfully. "It's too absurd. Why, her own nephews are out in society! They go about asking the other fellows, 'Have you met my aunt?' Ned Winship has made a song with those words for a chorus, and the boys all sing it. And yet, Mabel is very pretty still—I wonder no one has married her."

"Mabel Tufts was never the sort of girl men care to marry."

Margaret wondered in her own mind at the sort of girl Mr. Thorndike Freeman had cared to marry. She tried to keep her courage up, but it grew weaker as she followed the other ladies upstairs and took off her wraps and pulled on her gloves as fast as she could, while Mrs. Underwood stood impatiently waiting, and Mrs. Freeman looked Margaret over beginning with her feet and working upward.

"Have you a partner engaged, Miss Parke?" asked Mrs. Underwood suddenly.

"No"—faltered Margaret, unable to add anything to the bare fact. [Pg 142]

"I am afraid you won't get one then, there are so many more girls than men."

The "so many more" turned out, in fact, to be two or three, but Margaret had no hope. She felt that whoever got a partner, it would not be she. The dancers paired off, the seats were drawn, the music began, and she found herself sitting by Mrs. Underwood on the back row of raised benches, with a quarter view of that lady's face, as she chatted with Mrs. Thorndike Freeman on the other side. There were only two other girls, as far as Margaret could make out, among the chaperons. Some of the latter were young enough, no doubt, but their dress and careless easy manner marked the difference. A pretty, thin, very fashionable-looking elderly young lady sat near Margaret;—perhaps the luckless Mabel Tufts; but she seemed to know plenty of people, and was perpetually being taken out for turns. She laughed and talked freely, as if defying her position, and Margaret wished she could carry it off so well, little guessing how fiercely the other was envying her for the simplicity that might not know how bad her plight was, and the youth that had still such boundless possibilities in store. Another small, pale girl in a dark silk sat far back, and perhaps had only come to look on,—too barefaced a pretence for Margaret in her terribly obtrusive pink gown. She could not even summon resolution to refuse young Underwood when he asked her for a turn, though she wished she had after he had deposited her in her chair again and stalked off with the air of one who has done his duty. [Pg 143]

The griefs of a young woman who has no partner for the German, though perhaps not so lasting as those of one who lacks bread and shelter, are worse while they do last, for there may be no shame in lacking bread, and one can, and generally does, take to begging before starving. As the giraffe is popularly supposed to suffer exceptionally from sore throat, owing to the length of that portion of his frame, so did Margaret, as she sat through one figure, and then through another, feel her torture through every nerve of her five feet, eight inches. What would she not have given to be smaller, perhaps even plainer,—somehow less conspicuous. Man after man strolled past her, and lounged in front of her, chatting and laughing with Mrs. Thorndike Freeman; but it was not possible they could help seeing her, however they might ignore her.

"*Le jour sera dur, mais il se passera.*"

Margaret could have looked forward to all this being over at last, and to night and darkness, and bed for relief; but—here rose again the spectre—what could she write home about it? She could [Pg 144]

not devise another evasive letter; she must tell the whole truth, and had better have done so at first—for of course she should never, never come to one of these things again. The hands of the great clock crept slowly on; would they never hurry to midnight before the big ball in her throat swelled to choking, and her quivering, burning, throbbing pulses drove her to do something, she could not tell what, to get away and out of it all?

The second figure was over, and she looked across the great hall, wondering if she could not truthfully plead a headache, and go to the cloak-room. But how was she to get there? and what could she do there alone? She would have died on the spot rather than make any appeal to Mrs. Underwood. No, she must go through with it; and then as she looked again, a great, sudden sense of relief came over her, for she saw in the doorway the slouching figure of her friend of Monday. He did not look at her, and she doubted if he saw her; but it was something to have him in the room. In a moment more, however, she saw him speak to Ralph Underwood; and then the latter came up to her and asked if he might present a friend of his, and at her acquiescence, moved away and came up again with "Miss Parke, let me introduce Mr. Smith."

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"I am very sorry to say I don't dance," Mr. Smith began, "but I hear that there are more ladies than men to-night; so perhaps if you have not a partner already, you won't mind doing me the favour of sitting it out with me."

Margaret hardly knew what he meant, but she would have accepted, had he asked her to dance a *pas de deux* with him in the middle of the hall. She took his arm and they walked far down to a place at the very end of the line of chairs; but it did not matter; it was in the crowd.

Mr. Smith did not say much at first; he hung her opera cloak over the back of her chair carefully, so that she could draw it up if she needed it, and somehow the way he did so made her feel quite at home with him, and as if she had known him for a long time; even though she perceived, now that she had the opportunity to look more closely at him, that he was by no means so old as she had at first taken him to be. His hair was thin, and there were one or two deeply-marked lines on his face, but there was something about his figure and motions that gave an impression of youthfulness. Without knowing his age, you would have said that he looked old for it. He was rather undersized than small, having none of the trim compactness that we associate with the latter word, and his face had the dull, thick, sodden skin that indicates unhealthy influences in childhood.

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"That was a pleasant party at Mrs. Underwood's the other evening," he began at last.

"Was it?" said Margaret, "I never was at a party before—I mean a party like that."

"And I have been to very few; parties are not much in my line, and when I do go I am generally satisfied with looking on; but I like that very well, sometimes."

"Perhaps," said Margaret ingenuously, "if I had gone only to look on, I should have thought it pleasant too; but I did not suppose one went to a party for that."

"You do not know many people in Boston?"

"Oh, no! I live in the country—at Royalston. I don't know anyone here but Mrs. Underwood; but I thought—mamma said, that she would probably introduce me to some of her friends; but she didn't—not to one. Don't people do so now?"

"Well, it depends on circumstances. I certainly think she might have; but then she has so much to think about, you know."

"I suppose I was foolish to expect anything different, but I had read about parties, and I thought—I was very silly—but I thought I didn't look so very badly. I thought I should dance a little—that everybody did. Perhaps my gown doesn't look right. Mamma made it, and took a great deal of pains with it. Of course, it isn't so new or nice as the others here, but I can't see that it looks so very different; do you?"

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"It looks very nice to me," said Mr. Smith, smiling. He had a pleasant, rather melancholy smile, which gave his face the sole physical attraction it possessed, and would have given it more, if he had had better teeth. "It looks very nice to me, and as you are my partner, I am the one you should wish most to please."

"Oh, thank you! it was so kind in you to ask me. I can tell them when I write home that I had a partner at any rate; and you can tell me who some of the others are."

"I am afraid not many," said Mr. Smith, "I go out but very little. I only went to the Underwoods because Ralph is an old friend of mine, and I came here because—" He checked himself suddenly.

"I am sorry, since he is your friend, but I must say that I do think him very disagreeable. I did not know a man could be so unpleasant. I had rather he had not danced with me at all than to do it in that terribly dreary way, as if he were doing it because he had to."

"You mustn't be hard on poor Ralph. He's a very good fellow, really, but he's almost beside himself just now. The very day of their dance, Kitty Chester's engagement came out. She had been keeping him hanging on for more than a year, and at one time he really thought she was going to have him; and not only that, but she and Frank Thomas actually came to his party, and they are here to-night. Ralph acts as if he had lost his senses, and his mother is almost wild about him. Why, after their dance, I was up all the rest of the night with him. He can't make any fight

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about it, and I think it would be better if he were to go away; but he won't—he just hangs about wherever she is to be seen. We all do all we can to get him to pluck up some spirit, but it's no go—yet."

"I am very sorry for him," said Margaret, with all a girl's interest in a love story; and she cast an awe-struck glance toward the spot where Miss Chester was keeping half a dozen young men in conversation; "but he need not make everyone else so uncomfortable on account of it—need he?"

"He needn't make himself so uncomfortable, you might say, for a girl who could treat him in that way; but it doesn't do to tell a man that. It doesn't seem to me that I should give up everything in the way he is doing; but then I was never in his place; of course, things are different for Ralph and me."

"Yes, I am sure, you are different. I don't believe you would ever have behaved so ill to one girl in your own mother's house, because another hadn't treated you well." [Pg 149]

"I have had such a different experience of life; that was what I meant. It made me sympathise with you when you felt a little strange; though of course, it was only a mere accident that things happened so with you. Now, I was never brought up in society, and always feel a little out of place in it."

"I don't know much about society either; we live very quietly at home, and when we do go out, why it is at home, you know, and that makes it different."

"I suppose you live in a pretty place when you are at home?"

"Oh, Royalston is lovely!" said Margaret, eagerly; "there are beautiful walks and drives all round it, and the streets have wide grass borders, and great elms arching over them, and every house has a garden, and our garden is one of the prettiest there. The place was an old one when father bought it, and the flower-beds have great thick box edges and they are so full of flowers; and there is a long walk up to the front door, between lilac bushes as big as trees, some purple and some white; and inside it is so pleasant, with rooms built on here and there, all in and out, and stairs up and down between them. Of course we are not rich at all, and things are very plain, but mamma has so much taste; and then there are all the old doors and windows, and the big fireplaces with carved mantel-pieces, and so much old panelling and queer little cupboards in the rooms—mamma says it is the kind of house that furnishes itself." [Pg 150]

"I see—it is a good thing to have such a home to care about. Now I was born in the ugliest village you can conceive of in the southern part of Illinois; dust all summer, and mud all winter, and in one of the ugliest houses in it; and yet, do you know, I am fond of the place; it was home. We were very poor then—poorer than you can possibly conceive of—and I was very sickly when I was a boy, and had to stay in most of the time. I was fond of reading, though I hadn't many books, but I never saw any society—what you would call society. When I was old enough to go to college, father had got along a little, and sent me to Harvard. I liked it there, and some of the fellows were very kind to me, especially Ralph Underwood, though you might not think it. I tried to learn what I could of their ways and customs, but it was rather late for me, and I never cared to go out much; and then—there were other reasons." A faint flush rose on his sallow face and he paused. Margaret fancied he alluded to his poverty, and felt sorry for him. She hoped he was getting on in the world, though he did not look very well fitted for it. By this time they were on a footing of easy comradeship, such as two people of the same sex and on the same plane of thought sometimes fall into at their first meeting. It is not often that a young man and a girl of such different antecedents slide so easily into it; but as Margaret said to herself, this was a peculiar case. He had told his little story with an apparent effort to be strictly truthful and put things in their proper position at the outset. There could be no intentions on his part, or foolish consciousness or any reason for it on hers, and she asked him with undisguised interest: [Pg 151]

"Where do you live now,—in Illinois?"

"Not that part of it. Father and mother live in Chicago when they are at home. I am in Cambridge, just now, myself; it is a convenient place for my work"; and then as her eyes still looked inquiry, he went on, "I am writing a book."

"Oh! and what is it about?"

"The Albigenses—it is a historical monograph upon the Albigenses."

"That must be a very interesting subject."

"It is interesting. It would be too long a story to tell you how I came to think of writing it, but I do enjoy it very much indeed. It's the great pleasure of my life. It isn't that I have any ambition, you know," he said in a disclaiming manner. "It's not the kind of book that will sell well, or be very generally read, for I know I haven't the power to make it as readable as it ought to be; but I hope it may be useful to other writers. I am making it as complete as I can. I have been out twice to Europe to look up authorities, and spent a long time in the south of France studying localities." [Pg 152]

"Oh, have you? how delightful it must be! Father writes too," with a little pride in her tone, "but it's all on medical subjects; we don't understand them, and he doesn't care to have us. He hates women to dabble in medicine, and he says amateur physicians, anyhow, are no better than quacks."

Mr. Smith made no answer, and they sat silent, till Margaret, fancying that perhaps he did not like the conversation turned from his book, asked another question on the subject. She was a well-taught girl, fond of books, and accustomed to hear them talked over at home, and made an intelligent auditor. The evening flew by rapidly for both of them, though their tête-à-tête was seldom disturbed. The man who sat on Margaret's other side, after staring at her for a long time, asked to be introduced to her, and took her out once; but it was not very satisfactory, for he had nothing to talk of but the season, and other parties of which she knew nothing. However, the figure brought a group of the ladies together for a moment in the middle of the hall; and a smiling girl who had been pretty before her face had taken on the tint of a beetroot, made some pleasant remark to Margaret on the excessive heat of the room, but was off and away before the answer. Margaret thought the room comfortably cool—but then she had been sitting still, while the other had hardly touched her chair since she came. Almost at the end of the evening too, it dawned upon good-natured, short-sighted, absent-minded Mrs. Willy Lowe, always put into every list of patronesses to keep the peace among them, that the pretty girl in pink did not seem to be dancing much; and she seized and dragged across the room, much as if by the hair of the head, the only man she could lay hold of—a shy, awkward undergraduate, of whose little wits she quickly deprived him, by introducing him as Warner, his real name being Warren. She addressed Margaret as Miss Parker; but she meant well, and Margaret was grateful, though they interrupted Mr. Smith in his account of the Roman Amphitheatre at Arles, and the "Lilies of Arles." But it was well that she should have something to put into her letter home besides Mr. Smith—it would never do to have it entirely taken up with him. By the by, what was his other name? Mr. Smith sounded so unmeaning. She had heard Ralph Underwood call his friend "Al," which it would not do for her to use. It might be either Alfred or Albert, and with that proneness to imagine we have heard what we wish, it really seemed to her as if she had heard that his name was Albert; she would venture on it, and if she were mistaken it would be very easy to correct it afterwards; and she wrote him down as "Mr. Albert Smith." His story she considered as told in confidence and nobody's affair but his own.

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Cousin Susan had never heard the name, but thought of course he must be one of the right Smiths, or he wouldn't have been there; there were plenty of them, and this one, it seemed, had lived much abroad. She would ask Mrs. Underwood when they next met; but this did not happen soon, and Cousin Susan never took any pains to expedite events—she was not able. The world did not make allowance for this habit of hers, but went on its determined course, and the very next day but one, as Margaret was lightly skimming with her quick country walk across the Public Garden on her way to the Art School, Mr. Smith, overtaking her with some difficulty, asked if he might not carry her portfolio? he was going that way. She did not know how she could, nor why she should, refuse and they walked happily on together. People turned to look after them rather curiously, and Margaret thought it must be because she was so much taller than Mr. Smith and wondered if he minded it. She should be very sorry if he did—she was sure she did not if he did not; and she longed to tell him so, but of course that would never do; and then the little worry faded from her mind, her companion had so much to say that was pleasant to hear.

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After that he joined her on her way more and more frequently. She did not think it could be improper. The Public Garden was free to everybody, and after all he didn't come every day, and somehow the meetings always had an accidental air, which seemed to put them out of her control. He could hardly call on her in the little sitting-room, where Cousin Susan was almost always lying on her sofa by the fire in a wrapper, secure from the intrusion of any man but the reigning physician. Sometimes Mrs. Swain, below, asked Margaret to sit with her, but the Swain sitting-room was full of their own affairs, the children and servants running in and out by day, and Dr. Swain, when at home, resting there in the evening. Margaret felt herself in the way in both places, and preferred her own chilly little bedroom. A man calling would be a sad infliction, and have a most tiresome time of it himself. The winter was a warm and bright one, and it was far pleasanter to stroll along the walks when it was too early for the school.

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Their acquaintance during this time progressed rapidly in some respects, more slowly in others. They knew each others' opinions and views on a vast variety of subjects. On many of these they were in accordance, and when they differed, Mr. Smith usually brought her round to his point of view in a way which she enjoyed more than if she had seen it at first. Sometimes she brought him round to hers, and then she was proud and pleased indeed. He told her all about his book, what he had done on it, what he did day by day, and what he projected. On her side, Margaret told him a world about her own family,—their names, ages, characters, and occupations,—but on this head he was by no means so communicative. She supposed the subject might be a painful one, after she had found out that he was the only survivor of a large family. He spoke of his parents, when he did speak, respectfully and affectionately, casually mentioning that his father had been very kind to let him take up literature instead of going into business. Margaret conjectured that they were not very well-to-do, and probably uneducated, and that without any false shame, of which, indeed, she judged him incapable, he might not enjoy being questioned about them; and she was rapidly learning an insight into his feelings, and a tender care for them. But one day a sudden impulse put it into her head to ask his Christian name, as yet unknown to her, and he quietly answered that it was Alcibiades.

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Margaret did not quite appreciate the ghastly irony of the appellation, but it hit upon her ear unpleasantly, and yet not as entirely unfamiliar. She was silent while her mind made one of those plunges among old memories, which, as when one reaches one's arm into a still pool after something glimmering at the bottom, only ruffles the water until the wished-for treasure is entirely lost to view; then she frankly said. "I was trying to think where I had heard your name

before, but I can't."

Mr. Smith actually colored, a rare thing for him, and Margaret longed to start some fresh topic, but could think of none. He did it for her in a moment, by asking her whether she meant to go to the German next Thursday.

"I don't think I shall. I don't know anyone there, and it doesn't seem worth while."

"I was going to ask you," said Mr. Smith, still with a slight confusion which she had never noticed in him before, "if you would mind going, and sitting it out with me as we did the other night?"

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"No, but—oh, yes, I should enjoy that ever so much, but—would you like it? You wouldn't go if it were not for me, would you?"

"I certainly should not go if it were not for you; and I shall like it better than I ever liked anything in my life."

It was now Margaret's turn to blush, and far more deeply. They had reached the corner of West Cedar Street, and parted with but few words more, for he never went further with her, and she went home in a happy dream, only broken by a few slight perplexities. What should she wear? She could not be marked out by that old pink silk again; she must wear the white, and make the best of it. And how was she to get there? She knew that it would not have been the thing for Mr. Smith to ask her to go with him. She was so urgent about the matter that she brought herself to do what she fairly hated, and wrote a timid little note to Mrs. Underwood, asking if she might not go with her. Mrs. Underwood wrote back that she was sorry, but her carriage was full; she would meet Miss Parke in the cloak-room. Even Cousin Susan was a little moved at this, and said it was too bad of Mrs. Underwood, though she had no suggestion to make herself but her former one of a cab. Margaret was apprehensive; but she knew that when she once got there, Mr. Smith would make it all right and easy for her, and her little troubles faded away in the light of a great pleasure beyond. The old white muslin looked better than might have been expected, and Cousin Susan gave her a lovely pair of long gloves; and she came down into the sitting-room to show off their effect, well pleased. On the table stood a big blue box with a card bearing her name attached to it. Mrs. Swain, who had come in to see her dress, was regarding it curiously, and Jenny, who had brought it up, was lingering and peering through the half-open door.

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"Your partner has sent you some flowers, Margaret," said Cousin Susan with unusual animation. "Do open that immense box, and let us see them!"

Margaret had never thought of Mr. Smith sending her any flowers. She wished that Jenny had had the sense to take them into her own room; she would have liked to open them by herself; but it was of no use to object, and slowly and unwillingly she untied the cords, and lifted the lid. Silver paper, sheet upon sheet, cotton wool, layer upon layer; and then more silver paper came forth. An ineffable perfume was filling her senses and bringing up dim early memories. It grew stronger, and they grew weaker, as at last she took out a great bunch of white lilacs, the large sprays tied loosely and carelessly together with a wide, soft, thick white ribbon.

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"Ah!" said Mrs. Swain, in a slightly disappointed tone; "yes, very pretty; I suppose that is the style now; and they are raised in a hothouse, and must be a rarity at this season."

"Where's his card?" asked Cousin Susan. But the card was tightly crushed up in Margaret's hand; she was not going to have "Alcibiades" exclaimed over. She need not have been afraid, for it only bore the words, "Mr. A. Smith, Jr." A pencil line was struck through "14,000 Michigan Avenue, Chicago," and "Garden Street, Cambridge," scribbled over it.

Margaret wondered how she should ever get her precious flowers safely upstairs and into the hall—the box was so big; but the moment the carriage stopped an obsequiously bowing servant helped her out, seized her load, ushered her up and into the cloak-room, and set down his burden with an impressiveness that seemed to strike even the chattering groups of girls. Mrs. Underwood was nowhere to be seen, and Margaret was glad to have time to adjust her dress carefully. She took out her flowers at last; but on turning to the glass for a last look, saw that one of the knots of ribbon on her bodice was half-unpinned, and stopped to lay her nosegay down, while she secured it more firmly.

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"Oh, don't!" cried a voice beside her; "don't, pray don't put them down"; and Margaret turned to meet the pretty girl, very pretty now, whose passing word at the last dance had been the only sign of notice she had received from one of her own sex. "You'll spoil them," she went on; "do let me take them while you pin on your bow."

Margaret, surprised and grateful, yielded up her flowers, which the other took gingerly with the tips of her fingers, tossing her own large lace-edged bouquet of red rosebuds on to a chair.

"You will spoil your own beautiful flowers," said Margaret.

"Oh, mine are tough! And then—why, they are very nice, of course, but not anything to compare to yours"—handling them as if they were made of glass.

Margaret, astonished, took them back with thanks, and wished a moment later, that she had asked this good-natured young person to let her go into the ballroom with her party. But she had already been swept off by a crowd of friends, throwing back a parting smile and nod, and Margaret, left alone, and rather nervous at finding how late it was getting, walked across the

room to the little side door that led into the dancing hall, and peeped through. There sat Mrs. Underwood at the further end, having evidently forgotten her very existence; and she drew back with a renewed sensation of awkward uncertainty.

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"They must have cost fifty dollars at least," said the clear, crisp tones of Miss Kitty Chester, so near her that she started, and then perceived, by a heap of pink flounces on the floor, that the sofa against the wall of the ballroom, close by the door, was occupied, though by whom she could not see without putting her head completely out, and being seen in her turn.

"One might really almost dance with little Smith for that," went on the speaker.

"Ralph Underwood says he isn't anything so bad as he looks," said the gentler voice of Margaret's new acquaintance.

"Good heavens! I should hope not; that would be a little too much," laughed Kitty.

"He is very clever, I hear, and has very good manners, considering—and she seems such a thoroughly nice girl."

"Why, Gladys, you are quite in earnest about it. But now, do you think that you could ever make up your mind to be Mrs. Alcibiades?"

"Why, of course not! but things are so different. A girl may be just as nice a girl, and,"—she stopped as suddenly as if she were shot. Margaret could discern the cause perfectly well; it was that Mr. Smith was approaching the door, looking out, she had no doubt, for her, and unconsciously returning the bows of the invisible pair. She had the consideration to wait a few moments before she appeared, and then she passed the sofa without a look, taking in through the back of her head, as it were, Miss Kitty's raised eyebrows and round mouth of comic despair, and poor Gladys's scarlet cheeks. Her own affairs were becoming so engrossing, that it mattered little to her what other people thought or said of them; and she crossed the floor on her partner's arm as unconsciously as if they were alone together, and spoke to the matrons with the ease which comes of absolute indifference. She did not mind Mrs. Underwood's short answers, or Mrs. Thorndike Freeman's little ungracious nod, but the long stare with which the latter lady regarded her flowers troubled her a little. What was the matter with them? Somehow, Mr. Smith had given her the impression of a man who counts his sixpences, and if he had really been sending her anything very expensive, it was flattering, though imprudent. Margaret was now beginning to feel a personal interest in his affairs, and its growth had been so gradual and so fostered by circumstances, that she was less shy with him than young girls usually are in such a position. She felt quite equal to administering a gentle scolding when she had the chance; and when they were seated, and the music made it safe to talk confidentially, she began with conciliation.

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"Thank you so much for these beautiful flowers."

"Do you like the way they are put up?"

"Oh, yes, they are perfect; but they are too handsome for me to carry. You ought not to have sent me such splendid ones, nor spent so much upon them. I did not have any idea what they were till I came here and everybody—"

"I am very sorry," said Mr. Smith, apologetically, "to have made you so conspicuous; but really I never thought of their costing so much, or making such a show. I wanted to send you white lilacs, because somehow you always make me think of them; don't you remember telling me about the lilac bushes at Royalston? And when I saw the wretched little bits at the florist's I told them to cut some large sprays, and never thought of asking how much they would be." Then, as Margaret's eyes grew larger with anxiety, he went on, with an air of amusement she had seldom seen in him, "Never mind! I guess I can stand it for once, and I won't do so again. I'll tell you, Miss Parke, you shall choose the next flowers I give you, if you will. Will you be my partner at the next German, and give me a chance?"

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"I wish I could," said Margaret, "but I shall not be here then. I am going home."

"What—so soon?"

"Yes, my term at the Art School will be over, and I know Cousin Susan won't want to have me stay after that. She hates to have anyone round. Mother thought that if I came down, Mrs. Underwood would ask me to visit her before I went home, but she hasn't, and," with a little sigh, "I must go. Never mind! I have had a very nice time."

Mr. Smith seemed about to say something, but checked himself; perhaps he might have taken it up again, but just then Ralph Underwood approached to ask Margaret for a turn. Something in her partner's manner had set her heart beating, and she was glad to rise and work off her excitement. As she spun round with young Underwood, she felt that his former frigid indifference was replaced by a sort of patronising interest, a mood that pleased her better, for she could cope with it; and when he said, "I'm so glad you like Al Smith, Miss Parke; he is a thorough good fellow," she looked him full in the face, with an emphatic, "Yes, that he is," which silenced him completely.

The men Margaret had danced with the last time asked her again; and she was introduced to so many more, that she was on the floor a very fair share of the time. Her reputation as a wall-flower seemed threatened; but it was too late, for she went home that night from her last girlish

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gayety. The attentions which would have been so delightful at her first ball were rather a bore now. They kept breaking up her talks with Mr. Smith, making them desultory and fitful; and then she had such a hurried parting from him at last! It was too bad! and she might not have such another chance to see him before she left. Their talks were becoming too absorbing to be carried on with any comfort in the street,—it would be hateful to say good-by there. Perhaps he felt that himself, and would not try to meet her there again. She almost hoped he would not; and yet, as she entered the Public Garden a little later than usual the next morning, what a bound her heart gave as she saw him, evidently waiting for her! As he advanced to meet her, he said at once,—

"Miss Parke, will you walk a little way on the Common with me? There are not so many people there, and I have something I wish very much to say to you."

Simple as Margaret was, it was impossible for her not to see that Mr. Smith "meant something"; only he did not have at all the air that she had supposed natural to the occasion. He looked neither confident nor doubtful, but calm, and a little sad. Perhaps it was not the great "something," after all, but an inferior "something else." She walked along with him in silence, her own face perplexed and doubtful enough. But when they reached the long walk across the loneliest corner of the Common, almost deserted at this season, he said, without further preface,

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"I don't think I ought to let you go home without telling you how great a happiness your stay here has been to me. I never thought I should enjoy anything—I mean anything of that kind—so much. It would not be fair not to tell you so, and it would not be fair to myself either. I must let you know how much I love you. I don't suppose there is much chance of your returning it, but you ought to know it."

Margaret's downcast eyes and blushes, according to the wont of girls, might mean anything or nothing; but her eyes were brimming over with great tears, that, in spite of all her efforts to check them, rolled slowly over her crimson cheeks.

"Don't, pray, feel so sorry about it," said her lover more cheerfully; "there is no need of that. I have been very happy since I first saw you,—happier than I ever was before. I knew it could not last long; but I shall have the memory of it always. You have given me more pleasure than pain, a great deal."

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For the first and last time in her life, Margaret felt a little provoked with Mr. Smith. Was the man blind? Then, as she looked down at his face, pale with suppressed emotion, a great wave of mingled pity and reverence at their utmost height swept over her, and made her feel for a moment how near human nature can come to the divine. Had he, indeed, been blind, light must have dawned for him; though, as it was never his way to leave things at loose ends, he had probably intended all along to say just what he did. He stopped short, and said in tones that were now tremulous with a rising hope,—

"Margaret, tell me if you can love me ever so little?"

"How can I help it, when you have been so good to me?" Margaret contrived to stammer out, vexed with herself that she had nothing better to say. Her words sounded so inadequate—so foolish.

"Oh, but you mustn't take me merely out of gratitude," said he, rather sadly.

"Merely out of gratitude!" cried Margaret, her tongue loosened as if by magic, and exulting in her freedom as her words hurried over each other. "Why, what is there better than gratitude, or what more would you want to be loved for? If I had seen you behave to another girl as you have to me, I might have admired and respected you more than any man I ever saw; but I shouldn't have had the right to love you for it, as I do now. Oh!" she went on, all radiant now with beauty and happiness, "how I wish I could do something for you that would make you feel for one single moment to me as I feel to you, and then you would never, never talk of mere gratitude again!"

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"Darling, forgive me—only give yourself to me, and I'll feel it all my life."

There was no Art School for Margaret that day, nor any thought of it, as she and Mr. Smith walked up and down the long walk again and again, until she was frightened to find how late it was, and hurried home; but now he proudly walked with her to the very door. They had so much to say about the past and the future both, and it was hard to tell which was most delightful; whether they laughingly recalled their first meeting, or more soberly discussed their future plans. How fortunate it was, after all, that she was going back so soon, as now Mr. Smith could follow her in a few days to Royalston. Margaret said she must write to mamma that night—she could not wait; and Mr. Smith said he hoped that her parents would not want to have their engagement a very long one. Of course he had some means besides his books on which to marry. It was asking a great deal of her father and mother, but perhaps he need not take her so very much away from them. Would it not be pleasant to have their home at Royalston, where he could do a great deal of his work, and run down to Boston when necessary? Margaret was charmed with the idea, and said that living was so cheap there, and house rent—oh, almost nothing.

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Margaret found Cousin Susan up and halfway through her lunch. She apologised in much confusion, but her cousin did not seem to mind. She, as well as Margaret, was occupied with

some weighty affair of her own, and both were silent till Jenny had carried off the lunch tray, when both wanted to speak, but Margaret, always the quicker of the two, began first. Might not Mr. Smith call that evening? He had been saying—of course it could not be considered anything till her father and mother had heard—but she thought Cousin Susan ought to know it before he called at her house—only no one else must know a word till she had written home.

This rather incoherent confession was helped out by the prettiest smiles and blushes; but Mrs. Manton showed none of an older woman's usual prompt comprehension and pleasure in helping out a faltering love-tale. She listened in stolid silence, the most repellent of confidantes, and when it ended in an almost appealing cadence, she broke out with, "Margaret Parke, I am astonished at you!"

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Margaret first started, then stared amazedly.

"I would not have believed it if anyone had told me!" went on Mrs. Manton. "I would never have thought that your mother's daughter could sell herself in that barefaced way."

"What do you mean?"

"As if you did not know perfectly well that you were taking that—that Smith—" she paused in vain for an epithet; but the mere name sounded more opprobrious than any she could have selected—"for his money!"

"What do you mean? Mr. Smith hasn't much money; he may have enough to live on; but I can't help that."

"Margaret, don't quibble with the truth. You know well enough that he will have it all. Who else is there for the old man to leave it to?"

"What old man?"

"Why, old Smith, of course! You can't pretend you don't know who he is, and you have been artful enough to keep it all from me! You knew if I heard his Christian name it would all come out! I don't know what your father and mother will say! Mrs. Champion Pryor has been calling here to-day, and told me the whole story, and how you have been seen walking the streets with him for hours. I would scarcely credit it."

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"His Christian name! what's that got to do with it? He can't help it!" Margaret's first words rang out defiantly enough; but her voice faltered on the last, as her mind made another painful plunge after vanished memories. Cousin Susan rose, and rang the bell herself; more wonderful still, she went out into the entry, closing the door after her while she spoke to Jenny, and when the girl had run rapidly upstairs and down again, returned with something in her hand.

"I knew Jenny had some of the vile stuff," she said triumphantly; "she was taking it last Friday, when I tried to persuade her to send for the doctor, and be properly treated for her cough." And she thrust a large green glass bottle under Margaret's eyes with these words on the paper label:

"ERIGERON ELIXIR.

"An Unfailing cure for

"Ague. Asthma. Bright's Disease. Bronchitis.

Catarrh. Consumption. Colds. Coughs.

Diphtheria. Dropsy.

"(We spare our readers the remainder of the alphabet.)"

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"All genuine have the name of the inventor and proprietor blown on the bottle, thus:

"ALCIBIADES SMITH."

A sudden light flashed upon poor Margaret, showing her forgotten piles of bottles on the counters of village stores, and long columns of unheeded advertisements in the country newspapers. She stood silent and shamefaced.

"What will your father say?" reiterated Cousin Susan. Dr. Parke's reputation with the general public was largely founded on a series of letters he had contributed to a scientific journal exposing and denouncing quack medicines.

"I didn't know," said Margaret, helplessly, wondering that the truth could sound so like a lie, but unable to fortify it by any asseveration.

"Why, you must have heard about the Smiths: everybody has. They have cut the most ridiculous figure everywhere. They came to Clifton Springs once while I was there; and they were really too dreadful; the kind of people you can't stay in the room with." Cousin Susan had not talked so much for years, and began to feel that the excitement was doing her good, which may excuse her merciless pelting of poor Margaret. "You were too young, perhaps," she went on, "to have heard

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about Ossian Smith, the oldest son, but the newspapers were full of him—of the life he led in London and Paris, when he was a mere boy. The American minister got him home at last, and a pretty penny old Smith had to pay to get him out of his entanglements. He had delirium tremens, and jumped out of a window, and killed himself, soon after—the best thing he could do. But you must have heard of Lunetta Smith, the daughter; about her running away with the coachman; it happened only about three or four years ago. Why, the New York *Sun* had two columns about it, and the *World* four. All the family were interviewed, your young man among the rest, and the comic papers said the mésalliance appeared to be on the coachman's side. She died, too, soon after; you must have heard of it."

"No, I never did. Father never lets me read the daily papers," said Margaret, a little proudly.

"Well!" said Cousin Susan, with relaxing energy, "I don't often read such things myself; but one can't help noticing them; and Mrs. Champion Pryor has been telling me a great deal about it."

"And did Mrs. Pryor tell you anything about my—about young Mr. Smith?"

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"Oh, she said he was always very well spoken of. He was younger than the rest and delicate in health, and took to study; and his father had a good deal of money in time to educate him. They say he's rather clever, and the old man is quite proud of him; but he can't be a gentleman, Margaret—it is not possible."

"Yes, he can!" burst out Margaret; "he's too much of a man not to be a gentleman, too!"

"Well," said Cousin Susan, suddenly collapsing, "I can't talk any longer. I have such a headache. If you have asked him to call, I suppose he must come; but I can't see him. What's that? a box for you? more flowers? Oh, dear, do take them away. If there is anything I cannot stand when I have a headache, it is flowers about, and I can smell those lilacs you carried last night all the way downstairs, and through two closed doors."

Poor Margaret escaped to her own room with her flowers to write her letter, the difficulty of her task suddenly increased. Mrs. Manton threw herself back on the sofa to nurse her headache, but found that it was of no use, and that what she needed was fresh air. She ordered a cab, and drove round to see Mrs. Underwood, unto whom, in strict confidence, she freed her mind. She found some relief in the dismay her recital gave her hearer. Ralph Underwood was slowly recovering from the fit of disappointment in which he had wreaked his ill-temper on whoever came near him, as a younger, badly trained child might do on the chairs and tables; and his mother, his chief *souffre douleur*; who in her turn had made all around her feel her own misery, was now beginning ruefully to count up the damages, of which she felt a large share was due to the Parkes. She had been wondering whether she could not give a little lunch for Margaret; she could, at least, take her to the next German, and find her some better partner than Al Smith. Nothing could have been more disconcerting than this news. She could not with any grace do anything for Margaret now to efface the memories of the first part of her visit, and the Parkes must blame her doubly for the neglect which had allowed this engagement to take place. Why, even Susan Manton put on an injured air!

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She craved some comfort in her turn, and after keeping the secret for a day and a night, told it in the strictest confidence to her intimate friend, Mrs. Thorndike Freeman, whose "dropping in" was an irresistible temptation.

"What!" cried Mrs. Freeman, "is it that large young woman with red cheeks, whom you brought one evening to Papanti's? I think it will be an excellent thing; why, the Smiths can use her photograph as an advertisement for the Elixir."

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"Yes—but then her parents—you see, she's Mary Pickering's daughter."

"Mary Pickering has been married to a country doctor for five and twenty years, hasn't she? You may be sure her eyes are open by this time. Depend upon it, they would swallow Al Smith, if he were bigger than he is. The daughter seems to have found no difficulty in the feat."

"Well," said Mrs. Underwood, with a sigh, "perhaps I ought to be glad that poor Al has got some respectable girl to take him for his money. I never dreamed one would."

"It isn't likely that he ever asked one before," said Mrs. Freeman, with a double-edged sneer.

The door-bell rang, and the butler ushered in Margaret, who had come to make her farewell call. Mrs. Underwood looked at her in astonishment. Was this the shy, blushing girl who had come from Royalston three short months ago? With such gentle sweetness did she express her gratitude for the elder lady's kind attentions, with such graceful dignity did she wave aside a few awkwardly hinted apologies, above all, so regally beautiful did she look, that Mrs. Underwood felt more than ever that she would be called to account by the parents of such a creature. Margaret had quite forgiven Mrs. Underwood, for, she reasoned, if that lady had done as she ought to have done by her, she would never have had the chance of knowing Al, a contingency too dreadful to contemplate; and her forgiveness added to the superiority of her position. Mrs. Underwood could only reiterate the eternal useless regret of the tempted and fallen: "If things had not happened just when, and how, and as they did!" She envied Mrs. Freeman, who was now in the easiest manner possible plying the young girl with devoted attentions, with large doses of flattery thrown in. Mrs. Freeman, meanwhile, was mentally resolving to call on Margaret before she left town, in which case they could hardly avoid sending her wedding-cards. She foresaw that, as two negatives make an affirmative, Mr. and Mrs. Alcibiades Smith, Jr., might yet be worthy of the

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Margaret's engagement was no primrose path. It was easier for her when her lover was away, for he wrote delightful letters, but they rarely had one happy and undisturbed hour together. Dr. and Mrs. Parke, of course, gave their consent to the marriage; but they did not like it, and did not pretend to. Dr. Parke, who, as is the wont of his profession, placed a high value on physical attractions, and who cared as little for money as any sane man could, hardly restrained his expressions of dislike. "What business," he growled, "had the fellow to ask her?" Mrs. Parke, while trying hard to keep her husband in order, was cold and constrained herself. Being a woman, she thought less of looks, and had learned in her married life to appreciate the value of money. She would have liked Margaret to make a good match; but here was more money by twenty times than she would have asked, had it only been offered by a lover more worthy of her beautiful daughter! And yet, if Margaret would only have been open with her! If she would have frankly said that she was tired of being poor, and could not forego the opportunity of marrying a rich man, who was a good sort of man enough, Mrs. Parke could have understood, and pitied, and forgiven; but to see her put on such an affectation of attachment for him drove her mother nearly wild. Why, she acted as if she were more in love than he was!

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The boys had been duly respectful on hearing that their sister's betrothed was a "Harvard man," but grew contemptuous when they found him so unfit for athletics. Relations and friends, and acquaintances of every degree, believed, and still believe, and always will believe, that Margaret's was one of the most mercenary of mercenary marriages. Some blamed her parents for allowing it; others thought that their opposition was feigned, and that they were really forcing poor Margaret into it.

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The two younger children, Harry and Winnie, at once adopted their new brother, and stood up staunchly for him on all occasions, and their sister was eternally grateful to them for it. Her only other support came, of all the people in the world, from Ralph Underwood. He could not be best man at the wedding, as he was going abroad with his mother, who was sadly run down and needed change; but he wrote Margaret a straightforward, manly letter, in which he said that he trusted, unworthy as he was, she would admit him to her friendship for Al's sake. He spoke of all he owed to his friend in such a way that Margaret perceived that more had passed in their college days than she ever had been or ever should be told.

The family discomfort came to a climax on the day before the wedding, when the great Alcibiades Smith himself and his wife made their appearance at Royalston. They stayed at the hotel with their suite, but spent the evening with the Parkes to make the acquaintance of their new connections. Old Mr. Smith pronounced Margaret "a bouncer." He had always known, he said, that Al would get some kind of a wife, but never thought it would be such a stunner as this one. It naturally fell to him to be entertained by Dr. Parke, or rather to entertain him, which he did by relating the whole history of the Elixir, from its first invention to the number of million bottles that were put up the last year, winding up every period with, "As you're a medical man yourself, sir." Mrs. Smith was quieter, and though well pleased, a little awe-struck, as her French maid, her authority and terror, had told her, after Mrs. Parke's and Margaret's brief call at the hotel that afternoon, that these were, evidently, "*dames très comme il faut*." She poured into Mrs. Parke's ear, in a corner, the tale of all Al's early illnesses, and the various treatments he had had for them, till her hearer no longer wondered at their being so little of him; the wonder was, that there was anything left at all. Then, à propos of marriages, she grew confidential and almost tearful about their distresses in the case of their daughter "Luny." She did think Mr. Smith a little to blame for poor Luny's runaway match. There was an Italian count whom she liked, but her father could not be induced to pay his debts, and "a girl must marry somebody, you know," she wound up, with a look at Margaret.

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Margaret, in after years, could appreciate the comedy of the situation. It is no wonder if it seemed to her at the time the most gloomily tragical that perverse ingenuity could devise. Al's manner to his parents was perfect. He was very silent; not more, perhaps, than he always was in a room full, but she thought he looked fagged and tired, and wondered how he could bear it. She longed intensely to say something sympathetic to him; but, like most girls on the eve of their marriage, she felt overpowered with shyness. If this dreadful evening ever came to an end, and they were ever married, then she would tell him, once for all, that she loved him all the better for all and everything that he had to bear.

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"They will spoil the whole effect," said Mrs. Parke, despondently, as she put the last careful touches to Margaret's wedding-dress. It was a very simple but becoming one of rich plain silk, with a little lace, and the pearl daisies with diamond dewdrops, sent by the bridegroom, accorded with it well. But Mr. Smith, senior, had begged that his gift, or part of it, should be worn on the occasion, and Mrs. Parke now slowly opened a velvet box, in which lay a crescent and a cross. Neither she nor Margaret was accustomed to estimate the price of diamonds, and had they been, they would have seen that these were far beyond their mark.

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"They don't go with the dress," repeated Mrs. Parke, doubtfully.

"Oh, never mind; to please Mr. Smith," said Margaret, carelessly, as she bent forward to allow her mother to clasp round her neck the slender row of stones that held the cross, and to stick the long pins of the crescent with dexterous hand through the gathered tulle, of the veil and the thick wavy bands of hair beneath it.

As she drew herself up to her full height again before the mirror, it seemed as if the June day outside had taken on the form of a mortal girl. The gold and blue of the heavens, the pink and white of the blossoming fields, whose luminous tints rested so softly on hair and eyes, on cheek and brow, were reflected and intensified in the rainbow rays of light that blazed on her head and at her throat. It was not in human nature not to look with one touch of pride and pleasure at the vision in the glass. But the sight of another face behind hers made her turn quickly round, with, "O mamma! mamma! what is it?"

"Nothing, my dear; it's a very magnificent present; only I thought—"

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"Mamma! surely you don't think I care for such things! you don't, you can't think I am the least bit influenced by them in marrying Al. O mamma! don't, don't look at me so!"

"Never mind, my dear. We will not talk about it now. It is too late for me to say anything, I know, and I am very foolish."

"Mother!" cried the girl, piteously; "you *must* believe me! You *know* that when Al asked me to marry him, and I said I would, I had no idea, not the slightest idea, that he had a penny in the world!"

"Hush, Margaret! hush, my dear! you are excited, and so am I. Don't say anything you may wish afterwards that you had not. God bless you, and make you a happy woman, and a good wife; but don't begin your married life with a—" Mrs. Parke choked down the word with a great sob, and hastily left the room. It was high noon, and she had not yet put on her own array.

Margaret stood stiff and blind with horror. Had she really known, then? Had her hand been bought? Then she remembered her own innocence when she told her love. Not so proudly, not so freely, not so gladly, could it ever have been told to the millionaire's son. A rush of self-pity came over her, softening the indignant throbbing of her heart, and opening the fountains of tears. She was at the point where a woman must have a good cry, or go mad,—but where could she give way? Not here, where anyone might come in. Indeed, there was Winnie's voice at the door of the nursery, eager to show her bridesmaid's toilette. Margaret snatched up two white shawls which lay ready on the sofa, caught up the heavy train of her gown in one hand, and flew down the front staircase like a hunted swan, through the library to the sacred room beyond—her father's study, now, as she well knew, deserted, while its owner was above, reluctantly dressing for the festivity. She pushed the only chair forward to the table, threw one shawl over it, and laying the other on the table itself, sat down, and carefully bending her head down over her folded arms, so as not to crush her veil by a feather's touch, let loose the flood-gates. In a moment she was crying as only a healthy girl who seldom cries can, when she once gives up to it.

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Someone spoke to her; she never heard it. Someone touched her; she never felt it. It was only when a voice repeated, "Why, Margaret, dearest, what is the matter?" that she checked herself with a mighty effort, swallowed her sobs, and still holding her handkerchief over her tear-stained cheeks and quivering mouth, turned round to find herself face to face with her bridegroom, who having stopped to take up his best man, Alick Parke, was waiting till that young man tied his sixth necktie. She well knew that a lover who finds his betrothed crying her eyes out half an hour before the wedding has a prescriptive right to be both angry and jealous; but he looked neither; only a little anxious and troubled.

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"Darling, has anything happened?"

"No—not exactly; that is—O Al! they won't believe me!"

"They! who?"

"Not one single one of them. Not mother, even mother! I thought she would—but she doesn't."

"Does not what?"

"She does not believe," said Margaret, trying to steady her voice, "that when you asked me to marry you, and I said I would, that I did not know you were rich. I told her, but she won't believe me."

"Well," said Mr. Smith, quietly, though with a little flush on his face; "it's very natural. I don't blame her."

"Al!" cried Margaret, seizing both his hands; "O Al, you don't—you do—you believe me, don't you, Al? *don't* you?"

"Of course I do."

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POOR MR. PONSONBY

On a bright, windy morning in March, Miss Emmeline Freeman threw open the gate of her mother's little front garden on Walnut Street, Brookline, slammed it behind her with one turn of her wrist, marched with an emphatic tapping of boot-heels up the path between the crocus-beds to the front door, threw that open, and rushed into the drawing-room, where she paused for breath, and began before she found it:

"O mamma! O Aunt Sophia! O Bessie! What do you think? Lily Carey—you would never guess—Lily Carey—I was never so surprised in my life—Lily Carey is engaged!"

Mrs. Freeman laid down her pen by the side of her column of figures, losing her account for the seventh time; Miss Sophia Morgan paused in the silk stocking she was knitting, just as she was beginning to narrow; and Bessie Freeman dropped her brush full of colour on to the panel she was finishing, while all three exclaimed with one voice, "To whom?"

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"That is the queer part of it. You will never guess. Indeed, how should you?"

"To whom?" repeated the chorus, with a unanimity and precision that would have been creditable to the stage, and with the due accent of impatience on the important word.

"To no one you ever would have dreamed of; indeed, you never heard of him—a Mr. Reginald Ponsonby. It is a most romantic thing. He is an Englishman, very good family and handsome and all that, but not much money. That is why it has been kept quiet so long."

"So long? How long?" chimed in the trio, still in unison.

"Why, for three years and more. Lily met him in New York that time she was there in the summer, you know, when her father was ill at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. But Mr. Carey would never let it be called an engagement till now."

"Did Lily tell you all this?" asked Bessie.

"No, Ada Thorne was telling everyone about it at the lunch party. She heard it from Lily."

"I think Lily might have told us herself."

"She said she did not mean to write to anyone, it has been going on so long, and her prospects were so uncertain; she did not care to have any formal announcement, but just to have her friends hear of it gradually. But she sent you and me very kind messages, Bessie, and she wants you to take the O'Flanigans—that's her district family, you know—and me to take her Sunday-school class. She says she really must have her Sundays now to write to Mr. Ponsonby, poor fellow! She has been obliged to scribble to him at any odd moment she could, and he is so far off."

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"Where is he—in England?"

"Oh, dear, no! In Australia. He owns an immense sheep-farm in West Australia. He belongs to a very good family; but he was born on the continent, and has no near relations in England, and has rather knocked about the world for a good many years. He had not very good luck in Australia at first, but now things look better there, and he may be able to come over here this summer, and if he does they will perhaps be married before he goes back. Mr. Carey won't hear it spoken of now, but Ada says she has no doubt he will give in when it comes to the point. He never refuses Lily anything, and if the young man really comes he won't have the heart to send him back alone, for Ada says he must be fascinating."

"Lily seems to have laid her plans very judiciously," said Miss Morgan, "and if she wishes them generally understood, she does well to confide them to Ada Thorne."

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"And she has been engaged for years!" burst out Bessie, whose mental operations had meanwhile been going ahead of the rest; "why then—then there could never have been anything between her and Jack Allston!"

"Certainly not," replied Emmeline, confidently.

"Very likely he knew it all the time," said Bessie.

"Or she may have refused him," said Mrs. Freeman.

"What is Miss Thorne's version?" said Aunt Sophia. "I shall stand by that whatever it is. Considering the extent of that young woman's information, I am perpetually surprised by its accuracy."

"Ada thinks Lily never let it come to a proposal, but probably let Jack see from the beginning that it would be useless, and that is why they were on such friendly terms."

"Well!" said Aunt Sophia, "I am always glad to think better of my fellow-creatures. I always thought Jack Allston a fool for marrying as he did if he could have had Lily, and now I only think him half a one, since he couldn't. I am only afraid the folly is on poor Lily's side. However, we must all fulfil our destiny, and I always said she was born to become the heroine of a domestic drama, at least."

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"Oh, here's Bob!" said Emmeline, as her elder brother's entrance broke in upon the conversation. "Bob, who do you think is engaged?"

"You have lost your chance of telling, Emmie," replied the young man, with a careful carelessness of manner; "I have just had the pleasure of walking from the village with Ada Thorne."

"Really, it is too bad of Ada," said Emmeline, as she adjusted her hat at the glass. "She will not leave me one person to tell by to-morrow. Bessie, I think as long as we are going to five o'clock tea at the Pattersons', and I have all my things on, I will set out now and make some calls on the way. You might dress and come after me. I will be at Nina Turner's. Mamma and Aunt Sophy can"—but her voice was an indistinct buzz in her brother's ears, as he stood looking blankly out of the window at the bright crocus tufts. He had never had any intention of proposing to Lily Carey himself, and he knew that if he had she would never have accepted him, yet somehow a shadow had crept over the day that was so bright before.

Lily Carey was at that time a very conspicuous figure in Boston society; that is, in the little circle of young people who went to all the "best" balls and assemblies. She was also well known in some that were less select, for the Careys had too assured a position to be exclusive, and were too good-natured to be fashionable, so that she knew the whole world and the whole world knew her. To be exact, she was acquainted with about one five-hundredth part of the inhabitants of Boston and vicinity, was known by sight to about twice as many, and by name to as many more, with acquaintance also in such other cities and villages as had sufficiently advanced in civilisation to have a "set" which knew the Boston "set." She stood out prominently from the usual dead level of monotonous prettiness which is the rule in American ballrooms and gives piquant plainness so many advantages. Her nymph-like figure, dressed very likely in a last-year's gown of no particular fashion—for the Careys were of that Boston *monde* which systematically under-dresses—made the other girls look small and pinched and doll-like; her towering head, crowned with a great careless roll of her bright chestnut hair, made theirs look like barbers' dummies; and her brilliant colouring made one half of them show dull and dingy, the other faded and washed out. These advantages were not always appreciated as such—by no means; unusual beauty, like unusual genius, may fly over the heads of the uneducated; and it was the current opinion among the young ladies who only knew her by sight, and their admirers, that "Miss Carey had no style." Among her own acquaintance she reigned supreme. To have been in love with Lily Carey was regarded by every youth of quality as a necessary part of the curriculum of Harvard University; so much so that it was not at all detrimental to their future matrimonial prospects. Her old lovers, like her left-over partners, were always at the service of her whole coterie of adoring intimate friends. If she had no new ideas, these not being such common articles as is usually supposed, no one could more cleverly seize upon and deftly adapt some stray old one. She could write plays when none could be found to suit, and act half the parts, and coach the other actors; she made her mother give new kinds of parties, where all the new-old dances and games were brought to life again; and she set the little fleeting fashions of the day that never get into the fashion-books, to which, indeed, her dress might happen or not to correspond; but the exact angle at which she set on her hat, and the exact knot in which she tied her sash, and the exact spot where she stuck the rose in her bosom, were subjects of painstaking study, and objects of generally unsuccessful imitation to the rest of womankind.

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Why Lily Carey at one and twenty was not married, or even engaged, was a mystery; but for four years she had been supposed by that whole world of which we have spoken to be destined for Jack Allston. Jack was young, handsome, rich, of good family, and so rising in his profession, the law, that no one could suppose he lacked brains, though in general matters they were not so evident. For four years he had skated with Lily, danced with her, sung with her, ridden, if not driven, with her, sent her flowers, and scarcely paid a single attention of the sort to any other girl; and Lily had danced, sung, ridden, skated with him, at least twice as often as with any other man. Jack had had the *entrée* of the Carey house, where old family friendship had admitted him from boyhood, almost as if he were another son, and was made far more useful than sons generally allow themselves to be made. He came to all parties early and stayed late, danced with all the wall-flowers and waited upon all the grandmothers and aunts, and prompted and drew up the curtain, and took all the "super" parts at their theatricals. He was "Jack" to all of them, from Papa Carey down to Muriel of four years old. The Carey family, if hints were dropped, disclaimed so smilingly that everyone was convinced that they knew all about it, and that Mrs. Carey, a most careful mother, who spent so much time in acting chaperon to her girls that she saw but little of them, would never have allowed it to go so far unless there were something in it. Why this something was not announced was a mystery. At first many reasons were assigned by those who must have reasons for other people's actions, all very sufficient: Lily too young, Jack not through the law-school, the Allstons in mourning, etc., etc.; but as one after another exhibited its futility, and new ones were less readily discovered, the subject was discussed in less amiable mood by tantalised expectants, and the ominous sentence was even murmured, "If they are not engaged they ought to be."

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On October 17, 1887, Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fé stock was quoted at 90½, and the engagement of Mr. John Somerset Allston to Miss Julia Henrietta Bradstreet Noble was

announced with all the formality of which Boston is capable on such occasions. It can hardly be said which piece of news created the greater sensation; but many a paterfamilias who had dragged himself home sick at heart from State Street found his family so engrossed in their own private morsel of intelligence that his, with all its consequences of no new bonnets and no Bar Harbor next summer, was robbed of its sting. All was done according to the most established etiquette. Jack Allston had told all the men at his lunch club, and a hundred notes from Miss Noble to her friends and relatives, which she had sat up late for the two preceding nights to write, had been received by the morning post. Jack had sat up later than she had, but only one single note had been the product of his vigils.

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Unmixed surprise was the first sensation excited as the news spread. It was astonishing that Jack Allston should be engaged to any girl but Lily Carey, and it was not much less so that he should be engaged to Miss Noble. She was a little older than he was, an only child, and an orphan. Her family was good, her connections high, and her fortune just large enough for her to live upon with their help. She was of course invited everywhere, and received the attentions demanded by politeness; but even politeness had begun to feel that it had done enough for her, and that she should perform the social *hara-kiri* that unmarried women are expected to make at a certain age. She was very plain and had very little to say for herself. Her relatives could say nothing for her except that she was a "nice, sensible girl," a dictum expressed with more energy after her engagement to Jack Allston, when some of the more daring even discovered that she was "distinguished looking." The men had always, from her silence, had a vague opinion that she was stupid, but amiable; the other girls were doubtful on both these points, certain double-edged speeches forcibly recurring to their memory. Their doubts resolved into certainties after her engagement was announced, when she became so very unbearable that they could only, with the Spartan patience shown by young women on such occasions, hold their tongues and hope that it might be a short one. Their sole relief was in discussing the question as to whether Jack Allston had thrown over Lily, or whether she had refused him. Jack was sheepish and shy at being congratulated; Lily was bright and smiling, and in even higher spirits than usual; Miss Noble spoke very unpleasantly to and of Lily whenever she had the chance; but all these points of conduct might and very likely would be the same under either supposition. Parties were pretty evenly balanced, and the wedding was over before they had drifted to any final conclusion. As the season went on Lily looked rather worn and fagged, which gave the supporters of the first hypothesis some ground; but when, in the spring, her own engagement came out, it supplied a sufficient reason, and gave a triumphant and clinching argument to the advocates of the second. She looked happy enough then, though her own family gave but a doubtful sympathy. Mr. Carey refused to say anything further than that he hoped Lily knew her own mind; she must decide for herself. Mrs. Carey looked sad, and changed the subject, saying there was no need of saying anything about it at present; she was sorry that it was so widely known and talked about. The younger Carey girls, Susan and Eleanor, openly declared that they hoped it would never come to anything. Poor Mr. Ponsonby! His picture was very handsome, and the parts of his letters they had heard were very nice, but he did not seem likely to get on in the world, and he could not expect Lily to wait forever. "Would you like to see his picture?—an amateur one, taken by a friend; and Lily says it does not do him justice."

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The photograph won the hearts of all the female friends of the family, who saw it in confidence, and increased their desire to see the original. But Mr. Ponsonby was not able, as had been expected, to come over in the summer. Violent rains and consequent floods in the Australian sheep-runs inflicted so much damage upon his stock that the marriage was again postponed, at least for a year, in which time he hoped to get things on a better basis. Lily kept up her spirits bravely. She did not go to Mount Desert with her mother and sisters, but stayed at home, wrote her letters, hemstitched her linen, declaring that she was glad of the time to get up a proper outfit, and went to bed early, keeping a pleasant home for her father and the boys as they went and came, to their huge satisfaction, and gaining in bloom and freshness; so that she was in fine condition in the fall to nurse her mother through a low fever caught at a Bar Harbor hotel, also to wait upon Susan, nervous and worn down with late hours and perpetual racket, and Eleanor, laid up with a sprained ankle from an overturn in a buckboard.

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Eleanor, though not yet eighteen, was to come out next winter, Lily declaring that she should give up balls—what was the use when one was engaged? She stayed at home and saw that her sisters were kept in ball-gowns and gloves, no light task, taking the part of Cinderella *con amore*. She certainly looked younger than Susan at least, who since she had taken up the Harvard Annex course, besides going out, began to grow worn and thin.

One February morning Eleanor's voice rose above the usual babble at the Carey breakfast-table.

"Can't I go, mamma?"

"Where, dear?"

"Why, to the Racket Club german at Eliot Hall, next Tuesday. It's going to be so nice, you know, only fifty couples, and we ought to answer directly; and I have just had notes from Harry Foster and Julian Jervis asking me for it."

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"And which shall you dance with?" asked Lily.

"Why, Harry, of course."

"I would not have any *of course* about it," said Lily, rather sharply. Harry Foster was now

repeating Jack Allston's late role in the Carey family, with Eleanor for his ostensible object. "My advice is, dance with Julian; and I suppose I must see that your pink net is in order, if Miss Macalister cannot be induced to hurry up your new lilac."

"Shall we not go, mamma?"

"Why, mamma, how can we?" broke in Susan, who had her own game in another quarter. "It's the 'Old Men of Menotomy' night, and we missed the last, you know."

"Those old Cambridge parties are the dullest affairs going," said Eleanor; "I'd rather stay at home than go to them."

"That is very ungrateful of you," said Lily, laughing, "when I gave up my place in the 'Misses Carey' to you, for of course I don't go to either."

"Can't I go to Eliot Hall with Roland, mamma? He is asked, and Mrs. Thorne is a patroness; she will chaperon me after I get there."

"Roland will want to go right back to Cambridge, I know—the middle of the week and everything! He'll be late enough without coming here." [Pg 201]

"Then can't I take Margaret, and depend on Mrs. Thorne?" went on Eleanor, with the persistence of the youngest pet. "Half the girls go with their maids that way."

"Oh, I don't know, my dear," said poor Mrs. Carey, looking helplessly from Eleanor, flushed and eager, to Susan, silent, but with a tightly shut look on her pretty mouth, that betokened no sign of yielding. "I never liked it—in a hired carriage—and you can't expect *me* to go over the Cambridge bridges without James. And I hate asking Mrs. Thorne anything, she always makes such a favour of it, and the less trouble it is the more fuss she gets up about it. Do you and Susan settle it somehow between you, and let me know when it is decided."

"Let me go with Eleanor, mamma," said Lily. "Mrs. Freeman will probably go with Emmeline and Bessie, and she will let me sit with her. I will wear my old black silk and look the chaperon all over—as good a one, I will wager, as any there. It will be good fun to act the part, and I have been engaged so long that I should think I might really begin to appear in it."

Mr. Carey was heard to growl, as he pushed back his chair and threw his pile of newspapers on to the floor, that he wished Lily would stop that nonsensical talk about her engagement once for all; but the girls did not pause in their chatter, and Mrs. Carey was too much relieved to argue the point. [Pg 202]

"Only tell me what to do and I will do it," was this poor lady's favourite form of speech. She set off with a clear conscience on Tuesday evening with Susan for the assembly at Cambridge, where a promisingly learned post-graduate of good fortune and family was wont to unbend himself by sitting out the dances and explaining the theory of evolution to Miss Susan Carey, who was as mildly scientific as was considered proper for a young lady of her position. Lily accompanied Eleanor to more frivolous spheres, where chaperonage was an easier if less exciting task; for once having touched up her sister's dress in the ante-room, and handed her over to Julian Jervis, she bade her farewell for the evening, and herself took the arm of Harry Foster, who, gloomily cynical at the sight of Eleanor, radiant in her new lilac, with another partner, had hardly a word to say as he settled her on a bench on the raised platform where the chaperons congregated, except to ask her sulkily if she would not "take a turn," which she declined without mincing matters, and took the only seat left, next to Mrs. Jack Allston, who was matronising a cousin. [Pg 203]

"What, Lily! you here?" asked Mrs. Thorne.

"Oh, yes; mamma has gone to Cambridge with Susan, and said I might come over with Eleanor, and she was sure Mrs. Freeman,"—with a smile at that lady—"would look after us if we needed it."

"With the greatest pleasure," said Miss Morgan, who sat by her sister. "Here have Elizabeth and I both come to take care of our girls, as half-a-dozen elders sometimes hang on to one child at a circus. We both of us had set our hearts on seeing *this* german and would not give up, so you see there is an extra chaperon at your service."

"Doesn't your mother find it very troublesome to have three girls out at once?" asked Mrs. Allston of Lily, bluntly.

"Hardly three; I am not out this winter, you know."

"I don't see any need of staying in because one is engaged, unless, indeed, it were a very short one, like mine."

Mrs. Allston cast a rapid and deprecatory glance at the "old black silk," which had seen its best days, and then a still swifter one at her own gown, from Worth, but so unbecoming to her that it was easy for Lily to smile serenely back, though her heart sank within her at her prospects for the evening. [Pg 204]

At the close of the first figure of the german, a slight flutter seemed to run through the crowd, tending toward the entrance.

"Who is that standing in the doorway—just come in?" asked Lily, in the very lowest tone, of Miss

Morgan. Miss Morgan looked, shook her head decidedly, and then passed the inquiry on to Mrs. Thorne, who hesitated and hemmed.

"He spoke to me when he first came—but—I really don't recollect—it must be Mr.—Mr.—"

"Arend Van Voorst," crushingly put in Mrs. Allston, with somewhat the effect of a garden-roller. Both of the older ladies looked interested.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Thorne, "I sent him a card when I heard he was in Boston. I have not seen him—at least since he was very young—but his mother—of course I know Mrs. Van Voorst—a little."

"I don't know them at all," said Miss Morgan; "but if that's young Van Voorst, he is better looking than there is any occasion for."

"He was a classmate and intimate friend of Jack's," said Mrs. Allston, loftily.

"I never saw him before," said Lily, incautiously.

"He only went out in a very small set in Boston," said Mrs. Allston. "I met him often, of course." [Pg 205]

"You were too young, Lily, to meet any one when he was in college," said Miss Morgan, who liked "putting down Julia Allston."

"It's too bad the girls are all engaged," said the simple-minded Mrs. Freeman; "he won't have any partner."

"*He* wouldn't dance!" said Julia, too tough to feel Miss Morgan's light touches. "Very likely, as you asked him, Mrs. Thorne, he may feel that he *must* take a turn with Ada; and when he knows that Kitty Bradstreet is with me, very likely he will ask her out of compliment to me. He will hardly ask me to dance at such a very young party as this; I don't see any of the young married set here but myself."

Mr. Van Voorst stood quietly in the doorway, hardly appearing to notice anything, but when Ada Thorne's partner was called out, and she was left sitting alone, he walked across the room and sat down by her. He did not ask her to dance, but it was perhaps as great an honour to have the Van Voorst of New York sitting by her, holding her bouquet and bending over her in an attitude of devotion; and if what he said did not flatter her vanity, it touched another sentiment equally strong in Ada even at that early period of life. [Pg 206]

"Who is that girl in black, sitting with the chaperons?"

"Oh, that is Lily Carey."

"Why is she there?"

"She is chaperoning Eleanor, her youngest sister, that girl in lilac who is on the floor now. They look alike, don't they?"

"Why, she is not married?"

"No, only engaged. She has been engaged a great while, and never goes to balls or anything now—only she came here with Eleanor because Mrs. Carey wanted to go to Cambridge with Susan. There are three of the Careys out; it must be a dreadful bother, don't you think so?"

"To whom is she engaged?"

"To a Mr. Reginald Ponsonby—an Englishman settled in Australia somewhere. They were to have been married last summer, but he had business losses. She is perfectly devoted to him. He wrote and offered to release her, but she would not hear of it. She was very much admired; don't you think her pretty?"

"Will you introduce me to Miss Carey? I see Mr. Freeman is coming to ask you for a turn—will you be so kind as to present me first?"

There was a sort of cool determination about this young man which Ada, or any other girl, would have found it hard to resist. She did as she was bid, not ill-pleased at the general stir she excited as she crossed the floor with her two satellites and walked up the platform steps. [Pg 207]

"Mrs. Freeman, Miss Morgan, allow me to introduce Mr. Van Voorst. Miss Carey, Mr. Van Voorst;—I think you know my mother and Mrs. Allston." And having touched off her train, she whirled away with Robert Freeman, her observation still on the alert.

Mrs. Thorne and Mr. Van Voorst exchanged civilities; Mrs. Allston said Jack was coming soon and would be glad to see him, making room for him at her side.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Allston. Miss Carey, may I have the pleasure of a turn with you?"

"Oh, Mr. Van Voorst! You are quite out of rule—tempting away our chaperons—you should ask some of the young ladies; we did not come here to dance."

"I shall not dare to ask you, then, Mrs. Allston," he said, smiling, and offered his arm without another word to Lily. She rose without looking at him, with a quick furtive motion pulled off her left-hand glove—the right was off already—got out of the crowd about her and down the steps,

she hardly knew how, and in a moment his arm was around her and they were floating down the long hall. The quartette left behind looked rather blankly at each other.

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"Well," said Mrs. Thorne at last, "it really is too bad for Lily Carey to come and say she did not mean to dance, and then walk off with Arend Van Voorst, who has not asked another girl here —"

"And in that old gown!" chimed in Mrs. Allston.

"It is certainly very unkind in her to look so well in an old gown," said Aunt Sophia; "it is a dangerous precedent."

"Oh, auntie!" said Emmeline, who had come up to have her dress adjusted. "Poor Lily! She has been so very quiet all the winter, never going to anything, it would be too bad if she could not have a little pleasure."

"Very kind in you, my dear; but I don't see the force of your 'poor Lily.' I shall reserve my pity for poor Mr. Ponsonby—he needs it most."

It was long since Lily had danced, and as for Mr. Van Voorst, he was, as we have seen, supposed to be above it on so youthful an occasion; but perhaps it was this that gave such a zest, as if they were boy and girl together, to the pleasure of harmonious motion. Round and round again they went, till the dancing ranks grew thinner, and just as the music gave signs of drawing to a close, they passed, drawing all eyes, by the doorway. The line of men looking on opened and closed behind them. They had actually gone out to sit on the stairs, leaving a fruitful topic behind them for the buzz of talk between the figures. Eleanor Carey, a pretty girl, and not unlike her sister, bloomed out with added importance from her connection with one who might turn out to be the heroine of a drawing-room scandal.

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Meanwhile the two who were the theme of comment sat silent under the palms and ferns. No one knew better when to speak or not to speak than Lily, and her companion was looking at her with a curiously steady and absorbed gaze, to which any words would have been an interruption. It was not "the old black silk" which attracted his attention, except, perhaps, so far as it formed a background for the beautiful hands that lay folded together on her lap, too carelessly for coquetry. No such motive had influenced Lily when she had pulled off her gloves; it was only that they were not fresh enough to bear close scrutiny; but their absence showed conspicuous on the third finger of her left hand her only ring, a heavy one of rough beaten gold with an odd-looking dark-red stone in it. Not the flutter of a finger betrayed any consciousness as his eye lingered on it; but as he looked abruptly up he caught a glance from under her eyelashes which showed that she had on her part been looking at him. An irresistible flash of merriment was reflected back from face to face.

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"What did you say?" she asked.

"I—I beg your pardon, I thought you said something."

Both laughed like a couple of children; then he rose and offered his arm again, and they turned back to the ballroom.

"Good evening, Jack," said Miss Lily brightly, holding out her hand to Mr. Allston, who had just come in, and was standing in the doorway. Jack, taken by surprise, as we all are by the sudden appearance of two people together whom we have never associated in our minds, looked shy and confused, but made a gallant effort to rally, and got through the proper civilities well enough, till just as the couple were again whirling into the ranks, he spoiled it all by asking with an awkward stammer in his voice:

"How's—how's Mr. Ponsonby?"

"Very well, when I last heard," Lily flung back over her shoulder, in her clearest tone and with a laugh, soft, but heard by both men.

"What are you laughing at?" asked her partner.

"At the recollection of my copy-book—was not yours amusing?"

"I dare say it was, if it was the same as yours."

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"Oh, they are all alike. What I was thinking of was the page with 'Evil communications corrupt good manners.'"

"Yes—Jack was a very good fellow when we were in college together—but——"

But "what" was left unsaid. On and on they went, and only stopped with the music. Lily, having broken the ice, was besieged by every man in the room for a turn. One or two she did favour with a very short one, but it was Mr. Van Voorst to whom she gave every other one, and those the longest, and with whom she walked between the figures; and finally it was Mr. Van Voorst who took her down to supper. Eleanor and she had all the best men in the room crowding round them.

"Come and sit with us, Emmie," she asked, as Emmeline Freeman passed with her partner; and Emmeline came, half frightened at finding herself in the midst of what seemed to her a chapter from a novel. Never had the even tenor of her social experiences,—and they were of as unvarying and business-like a nature as the "day's work" of humbler maidens—been disturbed by such an

upheaval of fixed ideas; one of which was that Lily Carey could do no wrong, and another, that there was something "fast" and improper in having more than one man waiting upon you at a time.

"Do you mind going now, Eleanor?" asked Lily of her sister, as the crowd surged back to the ballroom. Eleanor looked rather blank at the thought of missing the after-supper dance, and such an after-supper dance; no mamma to get sleepy on the platform; no old James waiting out in the cold to lay up rheumatism for the future and to look respectfully reproachful at "Miss Ellis"; no horses whose wrongs might excite papa's wrath; nothing but that wretched impersonal slave, "a man from the livery stable" and his automatic beasts. But the Careys were a very amiable family, the one who spoke first generally getting her own way. The after-supper dance at the Racket Club german was rather a falling off from the brilliancy at the commencement, as Arend Van Voorst left after putting his partner into her carriage, and Julian Jervis and others of the men thought it the thing to follow his example. [Pg 212]

Two days after the german, "Richards's Pond," set in snowy shores, was hard and blue as steel under a cloudless sky, while a delicious breath of spring in the air gave warning that this was but for a day. The rare union of perfect comfort and the fascination that comes of transient pleasure irresistibly called out the skaters, and "everybody" was there; that is, about fifty young men and women were disporting themselves on the pond, and one or two ladies stood on the shore looking on. Miss Morgan, who was always willing to chaperon any number of girls to any amusement, stood warmly wrapped up in her fur-lined cloak and snow-boots, talking to a Mrs. Rhodes, a mild little new-comer in Brookline, who had come with her girls, who did not know many people, and whom she now had the satisfaction of seeing happily mingled with the proper "set"; for Eleanor Carey, who had good-naturedly asked them to come, had introduced them to some of the extra young men, of whom there were plenty; and that there might be no lack of excitement, Mr. Van Voorst and Miss Lily Carey were to be seen skating together, with hardly a word or a look for anyone else—a sight worth seeing. [Pg 213]

No record exists of the skating of the goddess Diana, but had she skated, Lily might have served as her model. Just so might she have swept over the ice with mazy motion, ever and ever throwing herself off her balance, just as surely to regain it. As for Arend Van Voorst, he skated like Harold Hardrada, of whose performances in that line we have not been left in ignorance. "It must be his Dutch blood," commented Miss Morgan.

Ada Thorne, meanwhile, was skating contentedly enough under the escort of the lion second in degree—Prescott Avery, just returned from his journey round the world, about which he had written a magazine article, and was understood to be projecting a book. His thin but well-preserved flaxen locks, whitey-brown moustache, and little piping voice were unchanged by tropic heats or Alpine snows, but he had gained in consequence and, though mild and unassuming, felt it. He had always been in the habit of entertaining his fair friends with a number of pretty tales drawn from his varied social experiences, and had acquired a fresh stock of very exciting ones in his travels. But his present hearer's attention was wandering, and her smiles unmeaning, and in the very midst of a most interesting narrative about his encounter with an angry llama, she put an aimless question that showed utter ignorance whether it took place in China or Peru. Prescott, always amiable, gulped down his mortification with the aid of a cough, and then followed the lady's gaze to where the distant flash of a scarlet toque might be seen through the thin, leafless bushes on a low spur of land. [Pg 214]

"That is Lily Carey, is it not?" he asked. "How very handsome she is looking to-day! She has grown even more beautiful than when I went away. By-the-by, is that the gentleman she is engaged to?"

"Oh, dear, no! Why, that is Arend Van Voorst! Don't you know him? She is engaged to a Mr. Ponsonby, an English settler in South Australia." [Pg 215]

"I see now that it is Mr. Van Voorst, whom I met several times before I left," said Prescott, with unflinching amiability even under a snubbing. Then, cheered by the prospect of again taking the superior position, he continued in an impressive tone: "But it is not astonishing that I should have taken him for Mr. Ponsonby. I believe I had the pleasure of meeting that gentleman in Melbourne when I was in Australia, and the resemblance is striking, especially at a little distance."

"Did you, indeed?" asked Ada, inwardly burning with excitement, but outwardly nonchalant. The remarkable extent of Miss Thorne's knowledge of everyone's affairs was not gained by direct questioning, which she had found defeated its own object. "It is rather odd you should have happened to meet him in Melbourne, for he very seldom goes there, and lives on a ranch in quite another part of Australia."

"But I did meet him," replied Prescott. "He had come to Melbourne on business, and I met him at a club dinner—a tall, handsome, light-haired man. He sat opposite to me and we did not happen to be introduced, but I am certain the name was Ponsonby. He took every opportunity of paying me attention, and said something very nice about American ladies, which made me feel sure he must have been here. Of course I did not know of Miss Carey's engagement, or I should certainly have made his acquaintance." [Pg 216]

"The engagement was not out then, and of course he could not speak of it. Now I think of it, Mr. Van Voorst does really look a great deal like Mr. Ponsonby's photograph."

"I will speak of it to Miss Carey when I get an opportunity," said Prescott, delighted. "The

experiences one has on a long journey are singular, Miss Thorne. Now as I was telling you—"

Ten minutes later the whole crowd were gathering round Miss Morgan, who made a kind of nucleus for those with homeward intentions, when Mr. Avery and Miss Thorne came in the most accidental way right against Mr. Van Voorst and Miss Carey. By what means half the crowd already knew what was in the wind, and the other half knew that something was, we may not inquire. It was not in human nature not to look and listen as the four exchanged proper greetings.

"Mr. Avery, Lily, has been telling me that he had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Ponsonby in Melbourne," said Ada, "and thought you would be glad to hear about it."

"Oh, thank you," said Lily, quietly, "I have had letters written since, of course. You were not in Melbourne very lately, Mr. Avery?" [Pg 217]

"Last summer—winter, I should say. You know, Miss Carey, it is so queer, it is winter there when it is summer here—it is very hard to realise it. But it is always agreeable to meet those who have really seen one's absent friends, don't you think so?"

"Oh, very!"

"Mr. Ponsonby was looking very well and in very good spirits. I fancied he showed a great interest in American matters, which I could not account for. I wish I had known why, that I might have congratulated him. I hope you will tell him so."

"Thank you," said Lily again. She spoke with ease and readiness, but her beautiful colour had faded, and there was a frightened look in her eyes, as of someone who sees a ghost invisible to the rest of the company.

"Mr. Avery was struck with Mr. Ponsonby's resemblance to you, Mr. Van Voorst," said Ada; "you cannot be related, can you?"

"Come," said Aunt Sophia, suddenly, "what is the use of standing here? I am tired of it, for one, and I am going to the Ripley's to get a little warmth into my bones, and all who are going to the Wilson's to-night had better come too. Emmie, you and Bessie *must*, Lily, you and Susie and Eleanor *had better*—you see, Mr. Van Voorst, how nice are the gradations of my chaperonage." [Pg 218]

"Let me help you up the bank, Miss Morgan," said Arend; "it is steep here."

"Thank you—come, Mrs. Rhodes. Mrs. Ripley isn't at home, but we shall find hot bouillon and bread and butter."

"I had better not, thank you. I don't know Mrs. Ripley," stammered, with chattering teeth, poor Mrs. Rhodes, shivering in her tight jacket and thin boots.

"You need not know her if you do come, as she is out," said Miss Morgan, coolly; "and if you don't, you certainly won't, as you will most likely die of pneumonia. Now Fanny may think you a fool for doing so, if you like, but I'm not going to have her call me a brute for letting you. So come before we freeze."

Mrs. Rhodes meekly followed her energetic companion, both gallantly assisted up the bank by Arend Van Voorst, who was devoted in his attentions till they reached the house. He never looked towards Lily, who, pale and quiet, walked behind with Emmeline Freeman, and as soon as she entered the Ripley drawing-room ensconced herself, as in a nook of refuge, behind the table with the big silver bowl, and ladled out the bouillon with a trembling hand. The young men bustled about with the cups, but Arend only took two for the older ladies, and went near her no more. [Pg 219]

Not a Ripley was there, though it was reported that Tom had been seen on the ice that morning and told them all to come in, of course. No one seemed to heed their absence; Miss Morgan pulled Mrs. Ripley's own blotting-book towards her and scribbled a letter to her friend; Eleanor Carey threw open the piano, and college songs resounded. Mrs. Rhodes was lost in wonder as she shyly sipped her soup, rather frightened at Mr. Van Voorst's attentions. How could Mrs. Ripley ever manage to make her cook send up hot soup at such an unheard-of hour? And could it be the "thing" to have one's drawing-room in "such a clutter"? She tried to take note of all the things lying about, unconscious that Miss Morgan was noting *her* down in her letter. Then came the rapid throwing on of wraps, rushing to the station, and a laughing, pell-mell boarding of the train. Mr. Van Voorst had disappeared, and Ada Thorne said he was going to walk down to Brookline and take the next train from there—he was going to New York on the night train and wanted a walk first. No one else had anything to say in the matter, certainly not Lily, who continued to keep near Miss Morgan and sat between her and the window, silent all the while. As the train neared the first station, she jumped up suddenly and hastened toward the door. [Pg 220]

"Why, Lily, what are you about?" "Lily, come back!" "Lily, this is the wrong station!" resounded after her; but as no one was quick enough to follow her, she was seen as the train moved on, walking off alone, with the same scared look on her face.

"There is something very odd about that girl," said Miss Morgan, as soon as she was with her nieces on their homeward path.

"It is only that she feels a little overcome," said Lily's staunch admirer. "You know what Prescott Avery said about Mr. Van Voorst looking like Mr. Ponsonby, and I'm sure he does. Don't you think

him very like his photograph?"

"There is a kind of general likeness, but I must say of the two Arend Van Voorst looks better fitted to fight his way in the bush, while Mr. Ponsonby might spend his ten millions, if he had them, pleasantly enough. Perhaps the idea is what has 'overcome' Lily, as you say."

"Now, auntie, I am sure the resemblance might make her feel badly. She has not seen Mr. Ponsonby for so long, and that attracted her to Mr. Van Voorst; and it was so unkind of people to say all the hateful things they did at the ball."

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"I must say myself, that she rather overdoes the part of Mrs. Gummidge. It looks as if there was something more in it than thinking of the 'old un.' If she really is so afraid of Mr. Ponsonby, he must look more like Arend Van Voorst than his picture does. Well—we shall see."

Late that afternoon Arend Van Voorst walked up Walnut Street westward, drawn, as so many have been, by the red sunset glow that struck across the lake beyond, through the serried ranks of black tree trunks, down the long vista under the arching elms. Straight toward the blazing gate he walked, but when he came to where the road parted, leaving the brightness high and inaccessible above high banks of pure new snow that looked dark against it, and dipping down right and left into valleys where the shade of trees, even in winter, was thick and dark, he paused a moment and then struck into the right hand road, the one that did not lead toward the Careys' house. It was not till two or three hours later that he approached it from the other side, warm with walking, and having apparently walked off his hesitation, for he did not even slacken his pace as he passed up the drive, though he looked the house, the place, and the whole surroundings over with attentive carefulness.

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The Careys lived in a fascinating house, of no particular style, the result of perpetual additions to the original and now very old nucleus. As Mr. Carey's father had bought it fifty years ago, and as his progenitors for some time further back had inhabited a much humbler dwelling, now vanished, in the same town, it was called, as such things go in America, their "ancestral home." It was the despair of architects and decorators, who were always being adjured to "get an effect something like the Carey house." The component elements were simple enough, and the principal one was the habit of the Carey family always to buy everything they wanted and never to buy anything they did not want. If Mr. and Mrs. Carey took a fancy to a rug, or a chair, or a picture, or a book, they bought it then and there, but they would go on for years without new stair-carpet or drawing-room curtains—partly because they never had time to go and choose them, partly because it was such a stupid way to spend money; it was easier to keep the old ones, or use something for a substitute that no one had ever thought of before, and everybody was crazy to have afterwards.

How much of all this Arend Van Voorst took in I cannot tell, but he looked about him with the same curiosity after the house door had opened and he was in the hall, and then as the parlour door opened, and he saw Lily rising from her low chair, before the fire afar off at the end of the long low room, a tall white figure standing out in pure, cool darkness against the blaze, like the snow-banks against the sunset. He did not know whether he wanted or not to see her alone, but on one point he was anxious—he wanted to know whether he was to be alone with her or not. The room was crowded with objects of every kind; two or three dogs and cats languidly raised their heads from the sofas and ottomans as he passed, and for aught he knew two or three children might be in the crowd. Lily had the advantage of him; she knew very well that her mother had driven into town with the other girls to the Wilsons' "small and early"; that the younger children had been out skating all the afternoon and had gone to bed; that the boys were out skating now and would not be home for hours yet; and that her father, shut into his study with the New York stock list, was as safe out of the way as if he had been studying hieroglyphics at the bottom of the Grand Pyramid. So she was almost too unconcerned in manner as she held out her hand and said, "Good evening."

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He took the offered hand absently, still looking round the room, and as he took in its empty condition, gave a sigh of relief. She sat down, with a very slight motion toward a chair on the other side of the fire. He obeyed mechanically, his eyes now fixed on her. If she was lovely in her "old black," how much more was she in her "old white," put on for the strictest home retirement. It was a much washed affair, very yellowish and shrunken, and clinging to every line of her tall figure, grand in its youthful promise. She had lost her colour, a rare thing for her, and she had accentuated the effect of her pale cheeks and dark eyelashes with a great spray of yellow roses in the bosom of her gown.

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"I thought you had gone to New York," she said, trying to speak lightly.

"No," slowly; "I could not go without coming here first. I must see you once at your own home." Then with an eager thrill in his voice, "He has never been here, I believe?"

"No," said Lily; "he was never here."

"I have come the first, then; let him come when he wants to; I shall not come again, to see him and you together."

Both sat silently looking into the fire for a few moments, which the clock seemed to mark off with maddening rapidity. Then Lily said in a low tone, but so clearly that it could have been heard all over the room, "If you do not wish to see him, he need never come at all."

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"For God's sake, Miss Carey!" burst out Arend, "show a little feeling in this matter. I don't ask you to feel for me. I knew what I was about from the first, and I took the risk. But show a little, feign a little, if you must, for him. You know I love you. If your Mr. Ponsonby were here to fight his own battles for himself, I would go in for a fair fight with him, and give and ask no quarter. But—but—he is far away and alone, keeping faith with you for years. If he has no claim on you, he has one on me, and I'll not forget it."

He paused, but Lily was silent. She looked wistful, yet afraid to speak. Something of the same strangely frightened look was in her eyes that had been there that afternoon. Arend, whose emotion had reached the stage when the sound of one's own voice is a sedative, went on more calmly:

"And don't think I make so much of a sacrifice. I am sure now you never loved or could have loved me. If you had, there would have been some struggle, some pleading of old remembrances. Your very feeling for me would have roused some pity, at least, for him. He has your first promise; I do not ask you to break it. You can give him all you have to give to anyone, and perhaps he may be satisfied."

"You need not trouble yourself about Mr. Ponsonby," said Lily, now cold and calm, "as no such person exists." [Pg 226]

"What!" exclaimed her hearer, in bewildered astonishment. Wild visions of the luckless Ponsonby, having heard by clairvoyance, or submarine cable, of his own pretensions, and having forthwith taken himself out of the way by pistol or poison, floated through his brain, and he went on in an awe-struck tone, "Is he—is he dead?"

"He never lived; Mr. Ponsonby, from first to last, is a pure piece of fiction. Oh, you need not look so amazed; I am not out of my senses, I assure you. Ask my father, ask my mother—they will tell you the same. And now, stop! Once for all, just once! You must hear what I have to say. I shall never ask you to hear me again, and you probably will never want to."

He looked blankly at her in a state of hopeless bewilderment.

"Oh," she broke out suddenly, "you do not know—how should you?—what it is to be a girl! to sit and smile and look pleasant while your life is being settled for you, and to see some man or other doing his best to make an utter snarl of it, while you must wait ready with your 'If you please,' when he chooses to ask you to dance with him or marry him. And to be a pretty girl is ten times worse. Everyone had settled ever since I was seventeen that I was to marry Jack Allston. Both his family and my family took it as a matter of course, and liked it well enough, as one likes matters of course. I liked it well enough myself. I cannot say now that I was ever in love with Jack Allston, but he seemed bound up in me, and I was very fond of him, and thought I should be still more so when we were once engaged. All the girls in my set expected to marry or be called social failures, and where was I ever to find a better match in every way than Jack? If I had refused him everyone would have thought that I was mad. I had not the least idea of doing so, but meanwhile I was in no hurry to be married. I thought it would be nicer to wait and have a little pleasure, and I did have a great deal, till I was eighteen, then till I was nineteen, and so on——" [Pg 227]

She stopped for a moment, for her voice was trembling, but with an effort recovered herself and went on more firmly:

"Just as people began to look and talk, and wonder why we were so slow, and why it did not come out, and just as I began to think that I had had enough of society, and that perhaps I ought to be willing to settle down, I began to feel, too, that my power over him was going, gone! The strings I had always played upon so easily were broken, and though I ran over them in the old way, I could not win a sound. I hardly had time to feel more than puzzled and frightened, when his engagement came out, and it was all over. But there! it was the kindest way he could have done it. I hate to think of some of the things I did and said to try if he had indeed ceased to care for me; but they were not *much*, and if I had had time I might have done more and worse. I was struck dumb with surprise like everybody else. My father and mother were hurt and anxious, but it was easy to reassure them, and without deception. I could tell them the truth, but not the whole truth. I did not suffer from what they supposed. My heart was not broken, or even seriously hurt, but oh! how much I wished at times that it had been! Had I really loved and been forsaken, I could have sat down by the wayside and asked the whole world for pity, without a thought of shame. But for what had I to ask pity? I was like a rider who had been thrown and broken no bones, in so ridiculous a way that he excites no sympathy. What if he is battered and bruised? If he complains, people only laugh. I held my tongue when my raw places were hit. I had the pleasure of hearing that Julia Noble had been saying—" and here Lily put on Mrs. Allston's manner to perfection—"I hope poor Miss Carey was not disappointed. Jack has, I fear, been paying her more attention than he ought; but it was only to divert comment from me; dear Jack has so much delicacy of feeling where I am concerned!"—No, don't say anything; let me have done, I will not take long. I could not get away from it all, and what was I to do? To go on in society and play the same game over with some one else was unendurable; I was getting past the age for that. Susan was out and Eleanor coming out, and I felt I ought to have taken myself out of their way, in the proper fashion. To take up art or philanthropy was not in my line. The girls I knew were not brought up with those ideas and didn't take to them unless they started with being odd, or ugly, or would own up to a disappointment. My place in the world had suited me to perfection, and now it was hateful and no other was offered me." [Pg 228]

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"It was just at this time that the devil—to speak plainly, as I told you I was going to—put the idea of poor Mr. Ponsonby into my head. An engaged girl is always excused from everything else. My lover was not here to take up my time, and as I could postpone my wedding indefinitely whenever I pleased, my preparations need not be hurried. I dropped society and all the hateful going out, and had delicious evenings at home with papa when I was supposed to be writing my long letters to Australia. I thought I could drop it whenever I liked. I did not know what I was doing."

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"You? Perhaps not!" exclaimed Arend, with an exasperating air of superior age; "but your father and mother—what in the name of common sense were they thinking about to allow all this?"

"Oh, you must not think they liked it; they didn't. To tell you all the truth, I don't think they half-understood it at first. I did not tell them until I had dropped a hint of it elsewhere, and I suppose they thought I had only given a vague glimpse of a possible future lover somewhere in the distance. Poor dears! things have changed since they were young, and they don't realise that if a man speaks to a girl it is in the newspapers the next day. I had not known what I was doing. I really have not told as many lies as you might think. Full half that you have heard about Mr. Ponsonby never came from me at all. You don't know how reports can grow, especially when Ada Thorne has the lead in them. Not that she exactly invents things, but a hint from me, and some I never meant, would come back all clothed in circumstance. I could not wear my old pink sash to save my others without hearing that that tea-rose tint was Mr. Ponsonby's favourite colour. Ponsonby grew out of my hands as this went on; and really the more he outgrew me the better I liked him, and indeed I ended by being rather in love with him. He had to have so many misfortunes, too, and that was a link between us."

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"But," said her hearer, suddenly, "did not Prescott Avery meet him at Melbourne?"

"Oh, if you knew Prescott, you would know that he meets everybody. If it had been a Mr. Percival of Java, instead of Ponsonby of Australia, he would have remembered him or something about him. Still, that was a dreadful moment. I felt like Frankenstein when his creature stalks out alive. Poor Mr. Ponsonby! I shall send him his *coup-de-grâce* by the next Australian mail. People will say that I did it in the hope of catching you, and have failed. Let them—I deserve it. And now, Mr. Van Voorst, please to go. I have humiliated myself before you enough. I said I would tell you the truth, and you have heard it all. If you must despise me, have pity and don't show it."

Lily's voice, so clear at first, had grown hoarse, and her cheeks were burning in a way that caused her physical pain. She rose to her feet and stood leaning on the back of her chair and looking at the floor.

"Go! and without a word? Do you think I have nothing to say? Sit down!"—as she made some little motion to go. "I have heard you, and now you must hear me."

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Lily sank unresistingly into her chair, while he went on, "You say girls have a hard time; so they do—I have always been sorry for them. But don't you suppose men have troubles of their own? You say a pretty girl has the worst of it. How much better off is the man, who, according to the common talk, has only to 'pick and choose'; who walks along the row of pretty faces to find a partner for the dance or for life, as it happens—it is much the same. The blue angel is the prettiest and the pink the wittiest; very likely he takes the yellow one, who is neither, while in the corner sits the white one, who would have suited him best, and whom he hardly saw at all. If he thinks he is satisfied, it is just as well. I was not unduly vain nor unduly humble. I knew my wealth was the first thing about me in most people's minds, but I was not a monster, and a girl might like me well enough without it. A woman is not often forced into marriage in this country. I had no notions of disguising myself, or educating a child to marry, as men have done, to be loved for themselves alone. What is a man's self? My wealth, my place in the world were part of me. I was born with them. I should probably find some nice girl who appreciated them and liked me well enough, and I felt that I ought to give some such one the chance—and yet—and yet—I wanted something more."

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"In this state of mind I met you at the ball. Very likely if I had seen you among the other girls, I might not have given you more than a passing glance; but I thought you were married, and the thrill of disappointment had as much pleasure as pain, for I felt I could have loved. But you were not married, only engaged. What's an engagement? It may mean everything or nothing. For the life of me I could not help trying how much it meant to you. What must the man be, I thought, as I sat by you on the stairs, whom this girl loves? He should be a hero, and yet, as such things go, he's just as likely to be a noodle. You laughed—I could have sworn you knew what I was thinking."

"Yes! I remember. I was thinking how nicely you would do for a model for my Ponsonby," Lily said. Their eyes met for a moment with a swift flash of intelligence, but the light in hers was quenched with hot, unshed tears.

"No laugh ever sounded more fancy free! I felt as if you challenged me; and if he had been here I would have taken up the challenge—he or I, once for all. But he was alone and far away, and I could not take his place. Why did I meet you on the pond, then? why did I come here to-night? Because I wanted to see if I could not go a little further with you. I wanted something to remember, a look, a tone, a word, that ought not to have been given to any man but your promised husband; something I could not have asked if I had hoped to be your husband. My magnanimity toward Ponsonby, you see, did not go the length of behaving to his future wife with the respect I would show my own."

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"You have shown how much you despise me," said Lily, springing to her feet, her hot tears dried with hotter anger, but her face white again. "That might have been spared me. I suppose you think I deserve it. Very well, I do, and you need not stay to argue the matter. Go!"

"Go! Why I should be a fool to go now, and you would be—well, we will call it mistaken—to let me. After we have got as far as we have, it would be absurd to suppose we can go back again. We know each other now better than nine tenths of the couples who have been married a year. I don't ask you to say you love me now; I am very sure you can, and I know I can love you—infinity—"

"Oh, but—but you said you would not take his place—Mr. Ponsonby's. Can you let everyone think you capable of such an act of meanness? And if you could not respect me as your wife, how can you expect others to? Can we appear to act in a way to deserve contempt without despising each other?"

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"There will be a good deal that is unpleasant about it, no doubt; but everyone's life has some unpleasantness. It would be worse to let a dream, even a dream of honor, come between us and our future. You made a mistake and underestimated its consequences, but it would be foolish to lose the substance of happiness because we have lost the shadow. We will live it down together and be glad it is no worse."

"But I have been so wrong, so very wrong—I have too many faults ever to make anyone happy."

"Of course you have faults, but I know the worst of them and can put up with them. I have plenty of my own which you may be finding out by this time. I am very domineering—you will have to promise to obey me, and I shall keep you to it; and then I can, under provocation, be furiously jealous."

"You are not jealous of Jack Allston?" she whispered.

"Jealous of old Jack? Oh, no! I shall keep my jealousy for poor Mr. Ponsonby."

Society had been so often agitated by Lily Carey's affairs that it took with comparative coolness the tidings that she was to be married to Arend Van Voorst in six weeks. Miss Morgan said she supposed Lily was tired of "engagements," and wanted to be married this time. Her niece Emmeline shed tears over "poor Mr. Ponsonby," and refused to act as bridesmaid at his rival's nuptials; and in spite of her aunt's scoldings and Lily's entreaties, and all the temptations of the bridesmaids' pearl "lily" brooches and nosegays of Easter lilies, arranged a visit to her cousins in Philadelphia to avoid being present. Miss Thorne had no such scruples, and it is to her the world owes a lively account of the wedding; how it was fixed at so early a date lest "poor Mr. Ponsonby" should hurry over to forbid the banns, and how terribly nervous Lily seemed lest he might, in spite of the absolute impossibility, and though Ponsonby, true gentleman to the last, never troubled her then or after.

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"Poor Mr. Van Voorst, I should say!" exclaimed Mrs. Jack Allston. "I am sure he is the one to be pitied. But do tell me all the presents that have come in, for Jack says that I must give them something handsome after such a present as he gave me when we were married."

Mrs. Van Voorst received the tidings of her son's approaching marriage rather doubtfully. "Yes—the Careys were a very nice family; she knew Mrs. Carey was an Arlington, and her mother a Berkeley, and his mother—but—Miss Carey was very handsome, she had heard—with the Berkeley style of beauty and the Arlington manner, but—but—she did not mind their being Unitarians, for many of the very best people were, in Boston, but—but—but—indeed, my dear Arend, I have heard a good deal about her that I do not altogether like. I hope it may not be true—about her keeping Jack Allston hanging on for years, as *pis-aller* to that young Englishman she was engaged to all the while—and finally throwing him over—and now she has thrown over this Mr. Ponsonby too!"

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"Will you do just one thing for me, dear mother," asked her son; "will you forget all you have *heard* about Lily, and judge her by what you *see*?"

Mrs. Van Voorst had never refused Arend anything in his life, and could not now. By what magic Lily, in their very first interview, won over the good lady is not known, but afterwards no mother-in-law's heart could have withstood the splendid son and heir with which she enriched the Van Voorst line. The young Van Voorsts were allowed by all their friends to be much happier than they deserved to be. Long after the gossip over their marriage had ceased, and it was an old story even to them, Arend was still in love with his wife. Lily was interesting; she had that quality or combination of qualities, impossible to analyse, which wins love where beauty fails, and keeps it when goodness tires. Her own happiness was more simple in its elements. She was better off than most women, and knew it—the last, the crowning gift, so often lacking to the fortunate of earth. She thought her husband much too good for her, though she never told him so. Nay, sometimes when she was a little fretted by his exacting disposition, for Arend was a strict martinet in all social and household matters and, as he had said, would be minded, she would sometimes more or less jestingly tell him that perhaps after all she had made a mistake in not keeping faith with "poor Mr. Ponsonby."

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MODERN VENGEANCE

"Well, Lucy, I must say I never saw anything go off more delightfully!"

"It would hardly fail to, with such interesting people," said Mrs. Henry Wilson.

"Why, every one said they thought it would be most difficult to manage; a sort of half-public thing, you know, to entertain those delegates or whatever they call them; they said it was well you had it, for no one else could possibly have made it go so well."

"I have no doubt most of them could, if they had all the help I had—from you, especially! I only wish I could have made it a dinner, instead of a lunch; but Henry is so very busy, just now, and I dared not attempt a dinner without him."

"Oh, my dear!" said her mother-in-law, "a doctor's time is always so occupied; they all know that. And dear Henry, of course, is more occupied than most."

"Perhaps it is as well," said the younger lady, "that they could come by daylight, as it is so far out of town; Medford is pretty, even in winter." [Pg 240]

"Oh, yes! so they all said. Lady Bayswater thinks it is the prettiest suburb of Boston she has yet seen; and she admired the house, too, and you, and everything. 'Mrs. Wilson,' she said to me, 'your charming daughter-in-law is the prettiest American woman I have seen yet.'" And Mrs. Wilson, senior, a little elderly woman, to whom even her rich mourning dress could not impart dignity, jerked her heavy black Astrachan cape upon her shoulders, and tied its wide ribbons in a fluttering, one-sided way.

"She is very kind."

"And they all said so many things—I can't remember them."

"I am glad if they were pleased," said Mrs. Henry Wilson, rousing herself; "to tell the truth, I have not been able to think much of the lunch, or how it went off."

"Why, dear Henry is well, isn't he?"

"Yes, as well as usual, but a good deal troubled about——"

"Oh, the poor little Talbot boy! how is he?"

"I do not know. Henry, of course, gives no opinion; but I am afraid it is a very serious case. Membranous croup always is alarming, you know." [Pg 241]

"Yes, indeed! sad—very sad; and their only boy, too, now. To be sure, if any one can save him, dear Henry can; but then, what with losing the other, and so much sickness as they have had, and Mabel expecting again, I really don't see how they are to get along," said Mrs. Wilson, fussing with her pocket handkerchief.

"It is very hard," assented her daughter-in-law, with a sigh.

"I do pity poor Eugene. What can a man do? I saw all those children paddling in the wet snow only last week; very likely that brought it on. If I had let mine do so when they were little, I should have expected them to have croup, and diphtheria, and everything else. I would not mention it to any one but you, but I do think Mabel has always been very careless of her children."

"Poor Mabel!" said Mrs. Henry Wilson, with a look of angelic compassion. "Remember how many cares and troubles she has had, and all her own ill-health. We all make mistakes sometimes in the care of our children, with the very best intentions. I let Harry play out in that very snow. I feared then that you might not approve; but you were not here, and he was so eager!"

"Oh, but, my dear, you always look after Harry so well! Those Talbot children had no rubbers on; and then, Harry is so much stronger than his father was. I do think your management most successful. I only wish poor Eugene had a wife like you." And as her hearer was silent: "I must go. Darling Harry is still at gymnasium, isn't he? and I suppose it is no use waiting for dear Henry," [Pg 242]

now. My love to them both; and do come round when you can, dear, won't you?" And after a little more fuss in looking for her muff and letting down her veil, and a prolonged series of embraces of her daughter-in-law, she departed.

Young Mrs. Wilson, left alone, sat down in front of a glowing fire to review her day; but earlier memories appealed so much more powerfully, that in another moment she was reviewing her whole past life—an indulgence she rarely allowed herself.

If the poet in the country churchyard was struck with the thought of greatness that had perished unknown for lack of opportunity, how doubly he might have pointed his moral with renown missed by being of the wrong sex. In clear perception of her ends, and resistless pursuit of them, Lucy Morton had not been inferior in her sphere to Napoleon in his; and if, after all, she was not so clever as she thought herself, why, neither was he. To begin with, she was born in a *cul-de-sac* ending at a cow pasture. But what is that to genius? "This lane," she thought, "shall never hem me in"; and from earliest childhood she struggled to grow out of it, like a creeper out of a hole, catching at every aid.

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She was early left an orphan, and lived with her grandfather, a well-to-do retired grocer, and her grandmother, and a maiden aunt. There was one other house in the lane, and in it lived a great-aunt, widow of the grocer's brother and partner, and a maiden first cousin once removed. They were a contented family, and liked the seclusion of their place of abode, which was clean and quiet, and where the old gentleman could prune his trees, and prick out his lettuces unobserved. He read the daily paper, and took a nap after his early dinner. The women made their own clothes, and dusted their parlours, and washed their dishes, and as the *cul-de-sac* was loathed of servants, they often had the opportunity of doing all their own work, which they found a pleasant excitement, and in their secret souls preferred. They belonged to the Unitarian church, which marked them as slightly superior to the reigning grocer, who went to the "Orthodox meeting," but did not give them the social intercourse they would have found in churches of inferior pretensions. The elite of Medford, in those early days, was chiefly Unitarian, and it respected the Mortons, who gave generously of their time and money whenever they were asked. Its men spoke highly of "old Morton," and were civil to him at town and parish meetings; and its women would bow pleasantly to his female relatives after service and speak to them at sewing circles; and would inquire after the rest of the family when they could remember who they were. More, the Mortons did not ask or wish. They knew enough people on whom to make formal calls, gave or went to about six tea-parties a year, and exchanged visits with cousins who lived in Braintree.

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Lucy was sent to the public school, and taught sewing and housework at home. She proved an apt pupil at both, and showed no discontent with her daily routine. She was early allowed to sit up to tea, even when company came; and had she asked to bring home any little girl in her school to play with her, her grandmother would not have objected. But she did not ask, nor was she ever seen with her schoolmates in the shady, rural Medford roads.

Perhaps she might have pined for companions of her own age, but that fortune had provided her with some near by. At the entrance of the lane where she lived, but fronting on a wider thoroughfare, was the house of Mrs. Wilson, a widow of good means and family, who filled less than her proper space among her own connections, for she went out but little, being engrossed with the care and education of her two delicate little boys to a degree which rendered her fatiguing as a companion—the poorness of their physical constitutions, and the excellence of their moral natures, being her one unending theme. They were not strong enough for the most private of schools, and were too good to be exposed to its temptations, and always had a governess at home.

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"Henny" and "Cocky" Wilson—their names were Henry and Cockburn, and their light red hair, combed into scanty crests on top of their heads, had suggested these soubriquets—were the amusement of their mother's contemporaries, and the scorn of their own. A hundred tales were told of them: as, how when Mrs. Wilson first came home from abroad, where she had lived long after her husband's death there, she brought her boys to Sunday-school, with the audible request to the superintendent that as they were such good little children, they might, if possible, be placed among those of similar, if not equal, qualities; thereby provoking the whole school for the next month to a riotous behaviour which poor Mr. Milliken found it difficult to subdue.

Mrs. Wilson's friends made some efforts to induce their boys to be friendly with hers, with the result that one July evening, Eugene Talbot, a bright-eyed, curly-haired little dare-devil, who led the revels, patronisingly invited them to join a swimming party after dark in the reservoir which supplied Medford with water—one of those illegal, delicious sprees which to look back on stirs the blood of age. Henny and Cocky gave no answer till they had gone, as in duty bound, to consult their mother, who replied: "My dears, I think this would be a very uncomfortable amusement. Should you not enjoy much more taking a bath in our own bathroom, with plenty of soap and hot-water?" It required a great effort of self-control on Eugene's part not to knock the heads of the two together when they reported their mother's opinion to him *verbatim*; but he had the feeling that it would be as mean to hit one of the Wilsons as to hit a girl, and he only sent them to Coventry, where they grew up, apparently careless. They were content at home, and they could now and then play with Lucy Morton, who had contrived to make their acquaintance through the garden fence, and who, though three years younger than Cocky, the youngest, was quite as advanced in every way.

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When Mrs. Richard Reed, the social leader of the town, tired of taking her children into Boston to Papanti's dancing-class, prevailed upon the great man to come out and open one in Medford, she

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could not be over-particular in her selection of applicants, the requisite number being hard to make up; but when she opened a note signed, "Sarah C. Morton," asking admission for the writer's granddaughter, she paused doubtfully. "It is a queerly written note, but it looks like a lady's somehow," she said, consulting her privy council.

"Oh, that is old Mrs. Morton, who comes to our church, don't you know? They are very respectable, quiet people. I don't believe there's any harm in the little girl," said adviser number one.

"She is a pretty, well-behaved child. I have noticed her at Sunday-school," added councillor number two.

"She is a sweet little thing," said Mrs. Wilson, who was present, though not esteemed of any use in the matter. "My dear boys sometimes play with her, and are so fond of her, and they would not like any little girl who was not nice."

"Oh, well, she can come!" said Mrs. Reed, dashing off a hasty consenting line, and thinking, "She will do to dance with Henny and Cocky; none of the other girls will care to, I imagine, and I don't want to hurt the old lady's feelings. What can have made her think of asking?"

It will easily be guessed that Miss Lucy had been the instigator of this daring move. She had begun by asking her grandfather, who never refused her anything, and backed by his sanction had succeeded in persuading her grandmother, who wrote an occasional letter, but who hardly knew what a note was, to sit down and write one to Mrs. Reed. So to the dancing-school she went, alone; for neither grandmother, aunts, nor cousin ever dreamed of accompanying her. But she felt no fears. She was a pretty little girl, and took to dancing as a duck to water; but she did not presume on the popularity these qualities might have won her with the older boys, but patiently devoted herself to Henny and Cocky and the younger fry, whom Mr. Papanti was only too glad to consign to her skilful pilotage. Their mothers approved of her, especially after she had asked Mrs. Reed, with many blushes, "if she might not sit near her, when she was not dancing?" "I have to come alone," she added shyly, "for my dear grandmamma is so old, you know, and my aunt is far from strong." Both of these women could have done a good day's washing, and slept soundly for nine hours after it; but of this Mrs. Reed knew nothing, and pronounced Lucy a charming child, with such sweet manners, took her home when it rained, and asked her to her next juvenile party.

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It was an easy step from this to Lucy Morton at one-and-twenty, where her quick backward glance next lighted, the popular favourite of the best "set" of girls in Medford, and extending her easy flight beyond under the drilling chaperonage of their mammas. She pleased all she met of whatever age or sex, though to more dangerous distinctions she made no pretensions. She had early learned the great secret of popularity, so rarely understood at any age, that people do not want to admire you—they want you to admire them. No one called Lucy Morton a beauty; but it was wonderful how many beauties were numbered among her intimate friends, how many compliments they received, what hosts of admirers they had, and how brilliant, clever, and full of promise were these admirers. Indeed, after a dance or a talk with Miss Morton, the young men could not help thinking so themselves.

As for Lucy, she was early consigned by public opinion to one or other of the Wilsons. Henny and Cocky had miraculously survived their mother's coddling and clucking, and had kept alive through college and professional training, though looking as if it had been a hard struggle. Henny had, at the period on which his wife was now dwelling, returned from his medical studies at Vienna, while Cocky still lingered in Paris studying architecture.

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There was very little opening for Dr. Henry Wilson in his native town; but his mother would have been wretched had he gone anywhere else. He set up an office in her house, and his friends said it was a good thing he had money enough to live on, for really none of them could be expected to call him in. He practised among the poor, who seemed to like him; but of course they could not afford to be particular.

He would be a very good match for Lucy Morton, if not for any girl of his own circle. They lived close by each other and had always been intimate; and she was such a sweet, amiable girl, just the one to put up with Mrs. Wilson's tiresome ways! If her relations were scarcely up to the Wilson claims, at least they were quiet and harmless, and would probably leave her a little money.

With such reasoning did all the neighbouring matrons allay their anxieties as to their favourite's future. Their daughters dissented. The latter had gradually come to perceive that Lucy had no intentions of the kind. Not one of them but thought her justified in looking higher, and not one envious or grudging comment was spoken or even thought when they began to regard her as destined for Eugene Talbot—not even by those, and they were many, who themselves cherished a budding preference for Eugene, a flirt in a harmless, careless way. Everyone allowed that his attentions this time were serious. How naturally, how irresistibly, the pleasing conviction stole upon Lucy's own heart!

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Mrs. Wilson, a wife of many years, here sprang to her feet, with her heart beating hard, and her cheeks flushing scarlet with shame. So would they flush on her death-bed, if the remembrance of that time came to disturb her then—the only time when her prudence had for once failed, the only time when she had trusted any one but herself, when she had really, truly, been so sure that Eugene Talbot loved her, that she had let others see she thought so. She had disclaimed, indeed,

all knowledge of his devotion, but she had disclaimed it with a blushing cheek and conscious smile, like a little—little—oh, *what* a little fool!

There was no open wound to her pride to resent. He had never spoken out plainly, and no mere attentions from an emperor would have won a premature response from Miss Morton; nor was it possible for her to betray her preference to anyone else. How she found out, as early and as surely as she did, that his hour for speaking was never to come, was marvellous even to herself; but she was clairvoyant, so to speak, so fully did she extract from those who surrounded her all they knew, and much they did not know. Before Eugene's engagement to Mabel Andrews was a fixed fact, before Mabel herself knew it was to come, she did, and took her measures accordingly.

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One terrible, long afternoon she spent in her own room behind closed shutters, seeing even then, in the darkness, Eugene, proud and handsome, breathing words of love in the Andrews's beautiful blossoming garden among all the flowers of May, while a glow of rapturous surprise lighted up Mabel's sweet, impassive face. It might have been some consolation to another girl to know her own superiority, and to feel sure that Eugene was marrying the amiable, refined, utterly commonplace Miss Andrews with the view to the push her highly placed relatives could, and doubtless would, give him in his business; but the knowledge only added a sting to Lucy's sufferings. She bore them silently, tasting their full bitterness, and then left the room, the very little bit of girlishness in her composition gone forever, but still ready to draw from life the gratifications proper to maturer years. She could imagine that revenge might not lose its taste with time, and she had already some faint conception of the form hers might take.

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She walked down the lane and far enough along the street to turn about and be overtaken by Dr. Wilson on his way home. Of course he stopped to speak to her, and then walked a little way up the lane with her; and when Miss Morton once had Dr. Wilson all to herself in a *cul-de-sac*, it was impossible for him to help proposing to her if she were inclined to have him. Indeed, he was much readier at the business than she had expected. In an hour both families knew all about it; and the next day the engagement was "out," to the excitement of their whole world. It was such a romantic affair—childish attachment—Henry Wilson so deeply in love, and so hopeless of success, his feelings accidentally betrayed at last! On these details dilated all Lucy's young friends. They did not think they could ever have loved him themselves, but they admired her for doing so. When, some time after, the grander but less interesting match between the Talbot and Andrews clans was announced, it chiefly roused excitement as having doubtless been the result of pique on Eugene's part—an idea to which his subdued appearance gave some colour; and he was pitied accordingly.

His wedding was a quiet one, overshadowed by the glories of Lucy's. No one would have dreamed of her grandparents doing the thing with such magnificence; but they were so surprised and pleased, for to them the Wilson connection was a lofty one; and Mrs. Wilson was so flatteringly eager and delighted, that Lucy found them pliant to her will. Her grandfather unhesitatingly put at her disposal a larger sum than his yearly expenditure had ever amounted to; and her exquisite taste in using it made her wedding a spectacle to be remembered, and conferring distinction on everyone who assisted in the humblest capacity, while still each one of these had the flattering conviction that without his or her presence the whole thing would have been a failure. The bride of ten years back could not but recall with approval her own demeanour on the occasion, when, "as one in a dream, pale and stately she went," the very personification of feeling too deep to be stirred by the unregarded trifles of her wedding pomp.

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The tale of the ensuing years she ran briefly over, for it was one of uncheckered prosperity. Dr. Wilson's reputation had steadily grown. Hardly a year after his marriage he had successfully performed the operation of tracheotomy upon a patient almost *in articulo mortis*; and although it was only on the ninth child of an Irish labourer, it got into all the newspapers, and ran the rounds of all circles. It was wonderful how such cases came in his way after that, till no one in town dreamed of calling in anyone else for a sore throat; the other physicians being, as Mrs. Henry Wilson was wont to say, "very good general practitioners, *but*—" At thirty-five he had an established fame as a specialist, with an immense consulting practice extending all over and about Boston, his personal disadvantages forgotten in the prestige of his marvellous skill, indeed, rather enhancing it.

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He took his successes very indifferently; but his wife showed a loving pride in them, too simple and too well controlled to excite envy, gently checking his mother's more outspoken exultation, and backing him up in his refusal of all solicitations to move into Boston, well knowing his constitution could never stand a town life. Money was now less of an object to him than ever. Lucy's grandfather had died in peace and honour, leaving a much larger estate than any one had dreamed possible. The lane had been extended into a road, and the cow pasture had been cut up into building lots. All the Morton property had risen in value, and all was one day to be Lucy's; and on the very prettiest spot in it she now lived, in a charming house designed (with her assistance) by her brother-in-law, that rising young architect, Cockburn Wilson, so strikingly original, and so delightfully convenient, that photographs and plans of it were circulated in every direction, bringing the architect more orders than he wanted or needed; for though with not much more to boast of in the way of looks than his brother, he had made another amazing stroke of Wilson luck in marrying that great heiress, Miss Jenny Diman. She was a heavy, shy young person, who had been educated in foreign convents, and had missed her proper duty of marrying a foreign nobleman by being called suddenly home to settle her estate. She had taken a fancy to the clever, amusing Mrs. Wilson, had visited her, and found the little *partie carrée* at her pretty house delightful, she hardly knew why; but it was evident that her hostess's married life was

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most successful, and Lucy told her that dear Cockburn had in him the making of as devoted a husband as dear Henry.

Dear Cockburn for some time showed no eagerness to exercise his latent powers; but his delicacy in addressing so great an heiress once overcome, swelled into heroic proportions, and made the love affairs of two extremely plain and quiet people into a wildly romantic drama. They seemed surprised, but well content, when they found themselves settled in their pretty home, still prettier than Dr. Wilson's, because it showed yet newer ideas; and Mrs. Cockburn Wilson, who had never known society, developed a taste for it, which her sister-in-law well knew how to direct.

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Lucy's active mind had just run down the stream of time to the present, and was boldly projecting itself forward into the future, and the throbbing pulses her one painful memory had raised were subsiding in the soothing task of planning the decorations for a dinner party for which Jenny's invitations were already out. She had just decided that it would make a good winter effect to fill all Jenny's lovely Benares brass bowls with red carnations, when her husband entered the room.

The crest of sandy locks, which had won Dr. Wilson his boyish title, had thinned and faded now. It was difficult to say of what colour it had been; and his face was of no colour at all. He had no salient points, and won attention chiefly by always looking very tired. This evening he looked doubly so. "Dear Henry, I am so glad!" cried his wife, springing up to give him an affectionate embrace. "You will have something to eat?" and, as he nodded silently, she rang the bell twice, the only signal needed at any hour to produce an appetising little meal at once; and she herself waited on him while he ate.

"How is the little boy?" she asked timidly.

"Very low."

"Are you going back?"

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"Directly. I am going to operate as soon as Stevens gets there. I have telephoned for him."

"Is there any hope?"

"Can't say."

"Can I do anything?"

"You might come and take the other children home with you—all but the baby."

"I can just as well have her too."

"I would rather have her there; her mother needs her."

"Yes, I suppose you don't want Mabel in the room while the operation is going on."

"I don't want her there at all. She's of no use."

"Poor thing!"

"She can't help it."

"Could I do anything there? If I can, Jenny will take the children, I know."

"No, there's no need of that." The doctor threw out his sentences between mouthfuls of food automatically taken from a plate replenished by his wife.

"What nurse have they?"

"They've had Nelly Fuller—she is a very fair one; but of course they need two now, and one of them first rate, so I got Julia Mitchell for them."

"Julia! but how ever could you make Mrs. Sypher give her up?"

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"I had no trouble."

"And how can the Talbots ever manage to pay her?"

"That will be all right. I told them she would not expect her full price for such a short engagement, in a gap between two others. I settled it with her myself beforehand, of course."

"I am very glad you did," said Lucy, with another loving caress, which he hardly seemed to notice. He looked at his watch, and told her she had better hurry and change her dress. In five minutes they walked together down the street under the beautiful arch of leafless elms, where the snowy air brought glowing roses into Lucy's cheeks, and an elastic spring into her tread. Her husband shrank up closer inside his fur-lined coat, and slipped a case he had taken from his study from one cold hand to another.

"I hope the children will be ready," from her; "Julia will see to that," from him,—were all the words that passed between them on their way.

The Talbot house was but a few streets off. Lucy did not often enter it; but the picture of battered, faded prettiness it presented, taken in at a few glances, and heightened each time it was seen, was deeply stamped on her mind. There was no spare money to keep up appearances here. Mabel's father had been unfortunate in his investments and extravagant in his

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expenditures, and died a poor man, while her relations had grown tired of helping Eugene, whose business talents had not fulfilled their early promise. He always seemed, somehow, to miss in his calculations.

What little order there now was in the place was due to the energetic rule of Julia Mitchell, already felt from garret to cellar. By her care the three little girls were dressed and ready, and were hanging, eager and excited, round their mother, who sat, her baby on her lap, with tear-washed cheeks and absent gaze, all pretence to the art of dress abandoned. She hardly looked up as her beautiful, richly clad visitor entered; but when she felt the tender pressure of the hand that Lucy silently extended, she gave way to a fresh burst of grief.

"Stevens here? asked Dr. Wilson, aside, of Miss Mitchell.

"Yes, sir; he's upstairs; and Miss Fuller, and Mr. Talbot—*he's* some use, and the boy wants him. I don't believe you'll ever get him to take the ether unless his papa's 'round; and I thought, if Miss Fuller would stay outside and look after *her*?"

"Certainly."

"Then, if Mrs. Wilson will take the others off, why, the sooner the better."

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The doctor looked at his wife, who was quick to respond, though with her whole soul she longed to stay. She wanted to see Eugene; to know how he was taking it; to hear him say something to her, no matter what; to give him the comfort and support his wife was evidently past giving; and then, she wanted to see her husband as nearly as possible at the moment he had saved the child's life. She did not let the thought that he might fail enter her mind,—not in this case, the crowning case of his life! For this alone he had toiled, and she had striven. She gave his hand one hard squeeze, as if to make him catch some of the passionate longing of her heart, and then drew back with the fear that it might weaken rather than strengthen his nerve. He looked as immobile as ever; and she turned to take the children's little hands in hers.

"Oh, Lucy!" faltered out her successful rival, "how good of you! I can't tell you—it does not seem as if it could be true that my beautiful Eugene—" Here another burst of sobs shook her all over. Lucy's own tears, as she kissed the poor mother, were bright in her eyes, but they did not fail. She led the two older girls silently away, and young Dr. Walker, who had been standing in the background, followed with the third in his arms, his cool business air, just tempered by a proper consideration for the parents' feelings, covering his inward excitement at this first chance of assisting the great physician at an operation. As he helped the pretty Mrs. Wilson, adored of all her husband's pupils, into her handsome carriage, which had come for her, and settled his little charge on her lap, he was astonished, and even awe-struck, to see that she was crying. "I never thought," he said to himself, "that Mrs. Wilson had so much feeling! but to be sure she has a boy just this little fellow's age!"

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At nine o'clock, the Talbot children, weary of the delights of that earthly paradise, Harry Wilson's nursery, had been put to bed, and Lucy was waiting for her husband. She looked anxiously at his face when he came, but it told her nothing.

"How—is he?" she faltered out at last.

"Can't tell as yet."

"Was the operation successful?"

"Yes, that was all right enough."

"And how soon shall you know if he's likely to rally?"

"Impossible to say."

"Any bad signs?"

"No, nothing apparent as yet."

"You must be very tired," she said, with a tender, unnoticed touch of her hand to his forehead.

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"Not very."

"Have you been there all this time?"

"No, I have made one or two other calls. I was there again just now."

"Do have some tea," said Lucy, striking a match and lighting the alcohol lamp under her little brass kettle, to prepare the cup of weak, sugarless, creamless tea, the only luxury of taste which the doctor, otherwise rigidly keeping to a special unvaried regimen, allowed himself; and while he sipped it languidly, she watched him intently. If only he would say anything without being asked! But she could not wait.

"How is Mabel?"

"Very much overcome."

"She has no self-control."

"She is fairly worn out."

"I am glad Julia is there."

"Yes, I should not feel easy unless she were. But Talbot himself behaved very well. He is more of a hand with the boy than the mother is. He seems bound up in him."

"Poor fellow!" said Lucy, sympathetically. Her husband did not respond. "You had better go to bed, dear, and get some sleep," she went on. "You must need it."

"I told Julia I would be there before six," said Dr. Wilson, rising. "She must get some rest then. So if you'll wake me at five—"

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"Of course," said Lucy, who was as certain and much more agreeable than an alarm clock; "and now go to sleep, and forget it all. You have had a hard day, you poor fellow!"

The doctor threw his arm round his wife, as she nestled closer to him, and they turned with a common impulse to the next room, where their own only child lay sleeping. Father and mother stood long without a word, looking at the bright-haired boy, whose healthy breathing came and went without a sound or a quiver; but when the mother turned to go, the father lingered still. She did not wait for him, for her exquisite tact could allow for shyness in a husband as well as in anyone else, and she had no manner of jealousy of it. If he wanted to say his prayers, or shed a few tears, or go through any other such sentimental performance which he would feel ashamed to have her witness, why, by all means let him have the chance; and she kept on diligently brushing her rich, dark hair, that he might not find her waiting.

There was no dramatic scene when little Eugene Talbot was declared out of danger; it came gradually as blessings are apt to do; but after Dr. Wilson had informed his wife day after day for a week that the child was "no worse," he began to report him as "a little better," and finally somewhat grudgingly to allow that with care there was no reason why he should not recover. By early springtime the little fellow was playing about in the sun and air; his sisters had been sent home all well and blooming, with many a gift from Mrs. Wilson, and their wardrobes bearing everywhere traces of her dainty handiwork; the mother had overflowed in tearful thanks, and the father had struggled to speak his in vain.

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"I wish I knew how small I could decently make Talbot's fee," said Dr. Wilson, as he sat at his desk, in a half-soliloquising tone, but still designed to catch his wife's ear, and win her judicious advice.

But it was not till after he had repeated the words, that she said without raising her head from her work, while her fingers ran nervously on, "I will tell you what I should do."

"Well?" as she paused.

"I should make out my bill for the usual amount, and send it in receipted. Won't you, Henry? I wish you would, so very, very much!" she went on, surprised at the dawning of a look she had never seen before on his face.

"That would be hardly treating him like a gentleman," he began; and then suddenly, "Lucy, how can you keep up such a grudge against Eugene Talbot?"

Lucy's work dropped, and she sat looking full at him, her pretty face white as ashes, and her eyes dilated as if she had heard a voice from the grave.

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"I know," he resumed, "that he has injured you on the tenderest point on which a man can injure a woman, but surely you should have got over thinking of that by this time. Is it noble, is it Christian to bear malice so long? Can't you be satisfied without crowding down the coals of fire so very hard upon his head? I never," went on Dr. Wilson, reflectively, "did like that passage, though it is in the Bible."

"Oh, Henry!"

"Put it on a lower ground. Is it just to me? Do you owe me nothing? I don't forget how much I owe you. You have made the better part of what little reputation I have; you are proud of it; you would like to have me more so. But do you suppose I can feel pride in anything earthly, while another man has the power so to move my wife? You may think you do not love him now; but where you make a parade of forgiveness, resentment lingers; and where revenge is hot, love is still warm."

"Then you knew it all?" gasped Lucy; "but how—how could you ever want to marry me?"

"Because, my dear, I loved you—all the time—too well not to be thankful to get you on any terms. I gave you credit for too much good sense and high principle to let yourself care for him when you were once married; and—I am but a poor creature, God knows! but I hoped I could win your love in time. There, my dear, don't! I knew I could! I am very sure I did."

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He raised her head from where she had buried it among the sofa pillows, and let her weep out a flood of the bitterest tears she had ever shed, on his shoulder. It was long before she could check

them enough to murmur, "Forgive me—only forgive me!"

"Dearest, we will both of us forget it."

"Mr. Talbot wants to see you, ma'am."

"Is the doctor out?"

"Yes, ma'am. He did not ask for the doctor. He said he wanted to speak to you for a minute."

"Show him into the library, and tell anyone else who calls that I am engaged for a few moments."

Mrs. Wilson hastened downstairs, to find her visitor rather nervously turning over the books on her table. Eugene's once bright chestnut curls were as thin now as Henry Wilson's sandy locks, and his attire was elegant with an effort, though he still kept his fine eyes and winning smile. [Pg 268]

"Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you. I only came—I have not much time—I came on business—if you are not too much engaged?"

"Not at all," said Lucy, quietly seating herself, which seemed to soothe her companion's nerves.

He sat down, too, and began abruptly, "I cannot begin to tell you how much we owe to your husband!"

"We have both sympathised so much in your sorrow and anxiety! If he could do anything at all, I am sure he is only too glad, and so am I."

"It was not only his saving our child's life, but he has done—I can't tell you what he has done for us in every way, as if he had been a brother—"

Lucy raised her head proudly, with a glad light in her eyes. Eugene looked at her a moment, and then went on with a sigh; "I couldn't say this to him, but I must to you, though of course you don't need any praise I can give him to tell you what he is."

"No," said Lucy, "it is the greatest happiness of my life to know it—it would be if no one else did; not but what it is very pleasant to have him appreciated," she added, smiling.

"I know," said Eugene, now growing red and confused, "that no recompense could ever express all we felt. Such services as his are not to be bought with a price, but I could not feel satisfied if I did not give him all that was in my power. I shall never rest till I have done so,—but—the fact is," he hurried on desperately, "I know his charges are very small—they seem ridiculously so for a man of his reputation—but the fact is, I am unable just now to meet all my obligations; the ill-health of my family has been terribly expensive—I must ask a little time—I am ashamed to do so, but I can do it better from him than from anyone else—and from you." [Pg 269]

"Oh, don't mention it!" cried Lucy, eagerly, "the sum is a mere trifle to us; it would not matter if we never had it. To whom should you turn to be helped or understood, if not to old friends like us?"

"I hope to be able to pay all my just debts, and this among the first."

"Oh, of course! but don't feel the least bit hurried about it! Henry will never think of it till the time comes. He always forgets all about his bills when they are once out. Wait till it is perfectly convenient."

"Thank you," said Eugene huskily; "you are all goodness. I have not deserved this of you." He had already risen to go: but as he drew near the door he turned back: "Oh, Lucy, don't believe I was ever quite as heartless as I seemed. I know I treated you in a scoundrelly way, but I loved you all the time—indeed, indeed, I did." [Pg 270]

"Stop, Mr. Talbot! This is no language for you to use! If you have no regard for me, recollect at least what is due to your wife."

"I have nothing to say against Mabel. She's a dear good girl, a great deal too good for me. It isn't her fault that things have gone against me. I always felt it was to pay me up for my conduct to you. I loved you as well as I ever could love anyone; but I was a selfish brute, and thought to better myself in the world—"

"Stop, Mr. Talbot! I ought not to hear any more of this! I was too much overcome by surprise at first to check you, but now I must ask you to leave me at once if you cannot control yourself."

"I haven't a word to say that need offend you," said Eugene, humbly. "I only wanted to ask you to forgive me for old time's sake."

"There is nothing I know of for me to forgive. I am sorry, for your own sake, to hear that you ever had such feelings. I never dreamed of them."

"It seemed to me as if you could not help knowing."

"Indeed? I don't remember," said Mrs. Wilson, smiling. "I was so engrossed with my own affairs then, you see," she added with engaging candour; "and if I thought about you, I supposed you were the same. You can understand, after what you have seen of Henry, how little attention a girl who loved him would have to spare for anyone else."

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Eugene assented absently. He was unable to discipline his wandering memory, which just then was vividly picturing Lucy Morton at her prettiest, as with a sparkle in her eye and a curl on her lip she had, for the amusement of them both, flung some gentle sarcasm at "Henny Wilson." He could still hear her ringing laugh at his affected jealousy of her neighbour. But those days were past, and there before him sat Mrs. Wilson, her face lighted up with earnest emotion, grown more lovely still, and her voice thrilling with a deeper music. He allowed with a pang of mortification that he was not as clever as he had supposed himself in sounding the depths of womankind; and then with keener shame he stifled his incredulous doubts of Dr. Wilson's being able to win and keep love. "He deserves it all," he said aloud, while still a secret whisper told him that love does not go by desert.

"Does he not?" said Lucy. "And now we will not talk of this any more. You must know how glad we are to be able to give you any little help, and you must be willing to take it as freely as it is given. I am very sure that brighter days are coming for Mabel and you; and when they do, we will all enjoy them together, will we not?"

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"You are an angel," said Eugene, taking the hand she held out; and then he let it go and turned away without another word. Lucy stood looking after him a longer time than she usually allowed herself to waste in revery; and then, starting, hastened off intent on household duties.

"Why are these boots in such a condition?" she asked, in a more emphatic tone than was her wont to use to her servants, as a muddy pair in her back entry caught her eye.

"I am very sorry, ma'am. I brought them down here to be cleaned, but Crossman has gone, as you ordered, to take Mrs. Talbot a little drive, and James is out with the doctor somewhere, and there are two clean pair in his dressing-room. Shall I black these, ma'am?" inquired the highly trained parlour maid, who would have gone down on her very knees to scrub the stable floor at a hint that such a proceeding might be agreeable to Dr. Wilson.

"Oh, no; never mind," said her mistress, carelessly; but when the girl had gone, she stooped and, picking up the boots, bore them to her own room, and bringing blacking also, cleaned and blacked them all over in the neatest manner, with her own delicate hands.

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"I know I'm not worthy to black Henry's boots," she thought to herself, as a tear or two, which she made haste to rub away, dropped on their polished surface; "but I can do them well, at least. No one shall ever say that I have not made him a good wife!"

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THREE CUPS OF TEA

"Mrs. Samuel N. Brackett, at home Wednesday, December Tenth, from four to seven, 3929 Commonwealth Avenue."

"Miss Caldwell, Wednesdays, Mount Vernon Street, December 10th, 4.30-6.30."

"100 CHARLESGATE, EAST.

"DEAREST CARRIE:

"I am obliged to give up the Bracketts'. Mother went and asked Dr. Thomas if I could go, and he said, of course not. I was so provoked, for if she hadn't spoken of it, he would never have dreamed of forbidding me to go out—he never does. Most likely he never imagines that anybody will go anywhere if they are not obliged to.

Now that I am not going, mother won't go herself. She wants to go to Cousin Jane's little tea. She says they are so far apart she can't do both. So stupid in Cousin Jane to put hers the same day as the Bracketts'—but I dare say she will have a sufficient number of her own set to fill up. I doubt if she gets many of the girls. You are so soft-hearted that I dare say you will struggle for both. Do get through in time to drop in here any time after half-past six. I am going to have a few girls to tea in my room to cheer me up and tell me all about the Bracketts'. They have asked everyone they possibly can, and I dare say everyone will go to see what it is like. I am sure I would if I could. Remember you must come.

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"Ever your
"GRACE G. D.

"Tuesday P.M."

As Miss Caroline Foster, after lunch on the tenth of December, inspected the cards and notes which encircled her mirror in a triple row, she selected these three as calling for immediate attention. Of course she meant to go to all: when was she ever known to refuse an invitation? Though young and pretty, well connected and well dowered, and far from stupid, she occupied in society the position of a down-trodden pariah or over-worked galley-slave, for the reason that she never could say no to anyone. She had nothing—money, time, sympathy—that was not at the service of anyone who chose to beg or borrow them. At parties she put up with the left-over partners, and often had none—for even the young men had found out that she could always be had when wanted. Perhaps this was the reason why, with all her prettiness and property, she was not already appropriated in marriage. Of course she had hosts of friends, who all despised her; but one advantage she did enjoy, for which others might have been willing to barter admiration and respect; no one, man, woman, or child, was ever heard to speak harshly to Caroline Foster, or to say anything against her. Malice itself must have blushed to say that she was too complying, and malice itself could think of nothing else.

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This tenth of December marked an uncommon event in her experience, for on it she had, for the first time in her life, made up her mind to refuse an asked-for gift; and the consciousness of this piece of spirit, and of a beautiful new costume of dark-blue velvet trimmed with otter fur, which set off her fair hair and fresh face to perfection, gave her an air of unwonted stateliness as she stepped into a handsome coupé and drove off alone. She was by no means an independent or unguarded young woman; but her aunt, with whom she lived, had two committee meetings that afternoon, and told Caroline that she might just as well go to Miss Caldwell's little tea for ladies only, alone. They would meet at Mrs. Brackett's; and if they didn't they could tell everyone they were trying to—which would do just as well.

Miss Caldwell lived in an old house on Mount Vernon Street which gave the impression that people had forgotten to pull it down because it was so small; but within it looked spacious, as it sheltered only one lady and two maids. Everything about it had an air of being fresh and faded at once. The little library in front was warm dull olive-green; and the dining-room at the back soft deep grey-blue; and the drawing-room, up one flight of an unexpected staircase, was rich dark brick-red—all very soothing to the eye. They were full of family portraits, and old brass and pewter, and Japanese cabinets, and books bound in dimly gilded calf-skin, and India chintzes, all of which were Miss Caldwell's by inheritance. Even sunlight had a subdued effect in these rooms; and now they were lighted chiefly by candles, and none too brilliantly.

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Miss Caldwell had been receiving her guests in the drawing-room; but there were not many, and being a lady accustomed to do as she pleased, she had followed them down to the dining-room, which was just comfortably full. Conversation was, as it were, forced to be general, and the whole room heard Mrs. Spofford remark that "Malcolm Johnson would be a very poor match for Caroline Foster."

"Caroline Foster and Malcolm Johnson, is that an engagement?" asked the stout, good-natured Mrs. Manson, who was tranquilly eating her way through the whole assortment of biscuits and bonbons on the table. "Well, Caroline is a dear, sweet girl—just the kind to make a good wife for a widower."

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"With five children to start with, and no means that I know of!" said Miss Caldwell, scornfully. "I am sure I hope not!"

"I have heard it on the best authority," said the first speaker.

"It will take better authority than that to make me believe it."

"If he proposes to her," said Mrs. Manson, "I should say she would take him. I never knew Caroline to say no to anyone."

"Well," said Miss Caldwell, "I suppose it's natural for a woman to be a fool in such matters—for most women," she corrected herself; "but if Caroline marries Malcolm Johnson I shall think her *too* foolish—and she has never seemed to me to be lacking in sense."

"Perhaps," said the pourer out of tea, a pretty damsel with large dark eyes, a little faded to match the room—"perhaps she wants a sphere."

"As if her aunt could not find her fifty spheres if she wanted them!"

"Too many, perhaps," said a tall lady with a sensible, school-teaching air. "I have sometimes

thought that Mrs. Neal, with managing all her own children's families and her charities, had not much time or thought to spare for poor little Caroline. She is kind to her, but I doubt if she gives her much attention."

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"A woman likes something of her own," said Mrs. Manson.

"Her own!" said Miss Caldwell. "How much good of her own is she likely to have if she marries Malcolm Johnson?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Spofford, "his motives would be plain enough; I dare say he's in love with her. Caroline is a lovely girl, but of course in such a case her money goes for something."

"But she has not so very much money," said Mildred, dropping a lump of sugar into a cup—"plenty, I suppose, for herself, but it would not support a large family like Mr. Johnson's."

"It would pay his taxes, my dear, and buy his coal," said Miss Caldwell, "and he has kept house long enough to appreciate the help *that* would be."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Manson, "coal is so terribly high this winter!"

"It would be a saving for him to marry anybody," said a thin lady with a sweet smile, slightly soiled gloves, and her bonnet rather on one side. "He tells me that his housekeepers are no end of trouble. He is always changing them, and his children are running wild with it all. He's a very old friend of mine," she added with a conscious air.

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"They are very troublesome children," said Miss Caldwell. "I hear them crying a great deal."

"Poor little things!—they need training," said Mrs. Manson.

"Caroline would never train them; she is too amiable."

"They have so much illness," said Mrs. Eames, the "old friend." "Poor Malcolm tells me he is afraid that little Willie has incipient spine complaint; he is in pain most of the time. The poor child was always delicate, and his mother watched him most carefully. She was a most painstaking mother, poor thing, though I don't imagine there was much congeniality between her and Malcolm. I wish I could do something for them, but I have *such* a family of my own."

"Someone ought to warn Caroline," said Miss Caldwell. "I wonder he has the audacity to ask her. If he wasn't a widower he wouldn't dare to."

"If he wasn't a widower," said Miss Mildred, "her loving him in spite of all his drawbacks would seem more natural."

"If he wasn't a widower," said Mrs. Manson, "he wouldn't have the drawbacks, you know."

"If he wasn't a widower," said Mrs. Eames, "he might not be so anxious to marry her. Good-by, dear Miss Caldwell. Such a delightful tea! I may take some little cakes to the dear children?"

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"Good-by," said Mrs. Manson, swallowing her last macaroon. She turned back as she reached the doorway; and her ample figure, completely filling it up, gave opportunity for a young lady who had been standing in the shadow of the staircase to dart across the hall unseen. Miss Caroline Foster had sought her hostess in the drawing-room, but finding it empty, had come downstairs again, and had been obliged to listen to the conversation, which she had not the courage to interrupt; and she now threw on her wrap and rushed past the astonished maid out of the house before Mrs. Manson's slow progress could reach the cloak-room.

At half-past five o'clock the Brackett tea was in full swing. The occupants of the carriages at the end of the long file were getting out and walking to the door, and some of the more prudent were handing in their cards and departing, judging from the crush that if their chance of getting in was but small, their chance of getting away was none at all. The Bracketts were at home; but of their home there was nothing to be seen for the crowd, except the blazing chandeliers overhead, the high-hung modern French pictures in heavy gilded frames, the intricate draperies of costly stuffs and laces at the tops of the tall windows, here and there the topmost spray of some pyramid or bank of flowers, and the upper part of the immense mirrors which reflected over and over what they could catch of the scene. The hostess was receiving in the middle drawing-room; but it was a work of time and pains to get so far as to obtain a view of the sparkling aigret in her hair. A meagre, carefully dressed woman had accomplished this duty, and might now fairly be getting off and leaving her place for someone else; yet she lingered near the door of the outer room, loath to depart, looking with an anxious eye for familiar faces, with an uneasy incipient smile waiting for the occasion to call out. Sometimes it grew more marked, and she made a tentative step forward; and if the person went by with scant greeting or none at all, she would draw back and patiently repair it for future use. For the one or two who stopped to speak to her she kept it carefully up to, but not beyond, a certain point, while still her restless eye strayed past them in search of better game. Just as she had exchanged a warmer greeting than her wont with a quiet, lady-like woman who was forced on inward by the crowd, she was startled by a smart tap on her shoulder, and as she turned sharp round towards the wall, the rich brocade window-curtains waved, and a low voice was heard from behind them.

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"Come in here, won't you, Miss Snow?"

Miss Martha Snow, bewildered, drew aside the heavy folds, and found herself face to face with a richly arrayed, distinguished-looking, though *passée* woman, who had settled herself comfortably on the cushioned seat between the lace curtains without and the silk within.

"My dear Mrs. Freeman! how do you do? How you did frighten me!"

"I have been trying to get at you for an age," said Mrs. Thorndike Freeman, laughing. "I thought you would never have done falling into the arms of that horrid Hapgood woman."

"I could not help it. She would keep me. She is one of those people you can't shake off, you know."

"I! I don't know her."

"But why are you here, out of sight of everyone? Are you waiting for a chance to get at Mrs. Brackett?" hurried on Miss Snow.

"I'm waiting for a chance to get away from her. I would not be seen speaking to her for any consideration whatever."

"I—I was surprised to meet you here!"

"I came because I wanted to see what it would be like, but I had no conception it would be so bad. Did you ever see such a set as she has collected?" [Pg 284]

"It does seem mixed."

"Unmixed, I should call it. I have been waiting for half an hour to see a soul of my acquaintance. Sit down here, and let us have a nice talk."

A nice talk with Mrs. Thorndike Freeman foreboded a dead cut from her the next time you met her; for she never took anyone up without as violently putting them down again—and then there was no one now to see and envy. However, Miss Snow dared not refuse, and seating herself with a conciliatory, frightened air, somewhat like a little dog in the cage of a lioness, asked in timid tones:

"Why do you stay? Is not your carriage here?"

"I want to get something to eat first," said Mrs. Freeman, "for I suppose their spread is something indescribable."

"Oh, quite! The whole middle of the table is a mass of American Beauty roses as large as—as cabbages, and around that a bank of mignonette like—like small cauliflowers, and all over beneath it is covered with hothouse maiden-hair ferns, and——"

"And what's the grub?"

"I—did not eat much; I only wanted to see it; but I had a delicious little *paté*—chicken done in cream, somehow; and I saw aspic jelly with something in it handed round; and the ices—they are all in floral devices, water lilies floating on spun sugar, and roses in gold baskets, and cherries tied in bunches with ribbons, and grapes lying on tinted Bohemian glass leaves—and——" [Pg 285]

"It sounds appetising. I'll wait till I see a man that doesn't know me, and he shall get me some. I don't want it known that I ever entered their doors."

"Shall I not go back to the dining-room and send a waiter to you?"

"No, indeed—he would be sure to know me, and I should get put on the list."

"The stationers who sent out the invitations will do that."

"Oh, well—I can only say I never came. But the waiter would swear to me, and very likely describe my dress. No, I shall wait a little longer. Stay here and keep me company."

"Oh, it will be delightful!" quavered Miss Snow, though worrying at the prospect of getting away late on foot, and ill able to afford cab-hire.

"You've heard of the engagement, I suppose?"

"Which of them?" asked Miss Snow, skilfully hedging. [Pg 286]

"Why, the only one, so far as I know. Why, haven't you heard? Ralph Underwood and Winnie Parke."

"Oh, yes! has that come out? I have been away from home for a few days, and had not heard. Very pleasant, I'm sure."

"Very—for her. It was her sister who did it, Mrs. Al Smith. She's a very clever young woman; fished for Al herself in the most barefaced way, and now she's caught Ralph for her sister; and she's not nearly so good-looking, either, Winnie Parke, though I should say she had a better temper than Margaret. You know Margaret Smith of course?"

"Not very well," said Miss Snow, deprecatingly. "I thought when you spoke of an engagement you

meant Malcolm Johnson and Caroline Foster."

"That never will be an engagement!" said Mrs. Freeman scornfully.

"Oh! I am very glad to hear you say so—only I have met him so much there lately, and it quite worried me; it would be such a bad thing for dear Caroline; she is a sweet girl."

"You need not worry about it any longer, for I know positively that she has refused him."

"I am very glad. I was so afraid that Caroline—she is so amiable a girl, you know, and so apt to do what people tell her to—I was afraid she might say yes for fear of hurting his feelings." [Pg 287]

"She would never dream of his having feelings—her position is so different. Why, Caroline is a cousin of my own."

"Oh, yes, of course—only he would doubtless be so much in love; and many people think him delightful—he *was* very handsome."

"Before Caroline was born, maybe. No, no, Caroline has plenty of sense, though she looks so gentle—and then the family would never hear of it. His affairs are in a shocking condition. Why, you know what he lost in Atchison—and I happen to know that his other investments are in a very shaky condition."

"He has that handsome house."

"Mortgaged, my dear, mortgaged up to its full value. No, he's badly off—and then there are such discreditable rumours about him; Thorndike knows all about it."

"Dear me! I never heard anything against his character."

"I could tell you plenty," said Mrs. Freeman, with a little shrug. "And then he drinks, or at least he probably will end in drinking—they always do when they are driven desperate. Oh, no, Caroline is a cousin of mine, and a most charming girl. Don't for heaven's sake hint at such a thing." [Pg 288]

"Oh, I assure you, I never have. I am always so careful."

"Yes, I never say a thing that I am not certain is true," said Mrs. Freeman, yawning. "Why, where do all these lovely youths come from? Ah! I see; past six o'clock; the shop is closed, and they have turned the clerks on duty here. Well, now, I can get something to eat, for I never buy anything of them. Tell that one over there to come to me, the light-haired one, I mean; he looks strong and good-humoured."

As Miss Snow rose to obey this order, a fair-haired girl in a dark-blue velvet gown, who on entering had been pinned close against the wall within hearing by the crowd, made a frantic struggle for freedom, and succeeded in reaching the entrance hall, to the amazement of the other guests, who did not look for such a display of strength in so gentle-looking and painfully blushing a creature.

At half-past six a select party was assembling in Miss Grace Deane's own room, the prettiest room, it was said, in Boston, in the handsomest of the new Charlesgate houses; a corner room, with a bright sunny outlook over the long extent of waterside gardens. The high wainscot, the chimney-piece, the bed on its alcoved and curtained *haut pas* were of cherry wood, the natural colour, carved with elaborate and unwearied fancy; and its rich hue showed here and there round the Persian rugs on the floor. At the top of the wall was a painted frieze of cherry boughs in bloom, with now and then one loaded with fruit peeping through, and the same idea was imitated in the chintzes. The wall space left was papered in a shade of spring green so delicate and elusive that no one could decide whether it verged on gold or silver, almost hidden with close-hung water colours and autotypes; and the ceiling showed between cherry beams an even softer tint in daintily stained woods. The Minton tiles around the fireplace and lining the little adjoining bathroom were all in different designs of pale green and white sparingly dashed with coral pink. There were sofas and low chairs and bookcases and cabinets and a tiny piano and a writing-desk and a drawing-table, and a work-table and yet more tables, all covered with smaller objects. Useless, and especially cheap, bric-à-brac was Miss Deane's abomination, but everything she used was exquisite. The bed and dressing-table were covered with finest linen, drawn and fretted by the needle, into filmy gossamer; and from the latter came a subdued glitter of a hundred silver trifles of the toilet, beaten and chiselled like the fine foamy crest of the wave. [Pg 290]

Miss Deane, the owner of this pretty room, for whom and by whom it had been devised and decked with abundant means held well in check by taste, was very seldom in it. The Deanes had two country houses, and they spent a great deal of time abroad, and in the winter they often went to California or Florida or Bermuda; and when they were at their town houses they were usually out. But Miss Deane did sometimes sleep there, and when she had a cold and had to keep in she could not but look around it with gratification. It certainly was a pleasant room to give a little tea in. Its being her bedroom only made the effect more piquant. She believed the ladies of the last century used to have tea in their bedrooms; and this was quite in antique style—yes, the tea-table and some of the chairs were real antiques. By the time she had arranged the flowers to her taste and sat down arrayed in a tea-gown of rose-coloured China crape and white lace to make tea in a

Dresden service with little rosebuds for handles, she felt quite well again, and ready to greet a dozen or so of her dearest friends, who ran upstairs unannounced and threw off their own wraps on the lace-covered bed.

Some of these young women were beautiful, and all looked pretty, their charms equalised by their clothes and manners. They had all been on the most intimate terms with each other from babyhood, and they had the eagerness to please anyone and everyone, characteristic of the American girl. Each talked to the other as if that other were a lover, and they had the sweetest smiles for the maid. [Pg 291]

"So it was pleasant at the Bracketts'?" asked Grace, beginning to fill her cups.

"Oh, delightful!" exclaimed the whole circle; "that is"—with modified energy—"it was crowded of course, and very hot, and it was hard to get at people, and there was no time to talk when you did; but everybody was there," they concluded with revived spirit.

"I was not there," sighed Mildred; "I had to make tea for Miss Caldwell—mother said I must—and some of the people stayed so late that it was no use thinking of the other place, though I put on this gown to be all ready. I thought it would do to pour out at such a little tea"—surveying her pale fawn cloth gown dashed with dark velvet worked in gold.

"Oh, perfectly! most appropriate!" said the others.

"Who else poured out?" said Grace.

"Why, she told me that Caroline Foster was coming, and I was so delighted; but when I got there I found Mrs. Neal had sent a note saying she could not allow Caroline to give up the Bracketts' altogether; and Miss Caldwell had invited that Miss Leggett, whom I hardly know—wasn't it unpleasant? And she wore regular full dress, pink India silk and chiffon, cut very low—the effect was dreadful!" [Pg 292]

"Horrid!" murmured her sympathising friends.

"Caroline was there, I suppose?" queried one.

"No—she never came at all."

"Probably she went to the Bracketts' first, and couldn't get away," said Grace. "I wonder she isn't here by this time. Who saw her there?" General silence was the sole answer, and she looked round her only to have it re-inforced by a more emphatic "I didn't."

"Why, she must have been there! She told me she should surely go. How odd—" but her words died away, and the group regarded each other with looks of awe, till one daring young woman broke the spell with, "Do you think—can it be possible—that she's really engaged?"

"To Mr. Johnson?" broke out the whole number. "Oh! I hope not! It would be shocking—dreadful—too bad!"

"We shouldn't see a thing of her; she would be so tied down," murmured Dorothy Chandler, almost in tears.

"Everyone who marries is tied down, for that matter," cheerfully remarked a blooming young matron, who had been the rounds of the teas. "I assure you," she went on, nibbling a chocolate peppermint with relish, "I am doing an awful thing myself in being here at this hour; aren't you, Anna?"—addressing a mate in like condition, who blushed, conscience-stricken as she said, "Perhaps Caroline is in love with Mr. Johnson." [Pg 293]

"I don't see how any one can fall in love with a widower," said Mildred.

"That depends on the widower," said the pretty Mrs. Blanchard. "I do think Mr. Johnson is rather too far gone."

"Oh, yes," said Mildred; "he looks so—so—I don't know how to express it."

"What you would call dowdy if he were a woman," said her more experienced friend. "He looks as if he wanted a wife; but I don't see why someone else would not do as well as Caroline—some respectable maiden lady who could sew on his buttons and make his children stand round. I don't think Caroline would be of the least use to him."

"It would be almost impossible to keep her up," said Grace.

"Yes," said Mrs. Blanchard; "I'm very fond of Caroline, but I'm afraid I could never get Bertie up to the point of intimacy with Malcolm Johnson; he thinks him underbred—says his hats show it." [Pg 294]

"Is your tea too strong, Harriet, dear? There is no hot water left," said Grace, ringing her little silver bell with energy. But no one came. "I told Marguerite to keep in the sewing-room, in hearing," she went on, ringing it again.

"I thought I heard her at the door just now," said the outermost of the circle.

"*Would* you mind looking, dear? If she's not there I'll ring the other bell for someone from downstairs."

No Marguerite was at the door, the sounds laid to her charge having been caused by the

precipitate retreat of a young lady who had come late and, running quickly upstairs unannounced, had paused at the room door to recover her breath, and had just time to do so and to fly downstairs again and out of the house without encountering anyone.

Caroline—for it was she—hurried round the corner; for her home was so near that she had dismissed her carriage. The house was empty and dark. Mrs. Neal had gone to spend the evening with one of her married daughters and had not thought it necessary to provide any dinner at home. There was no neglect in this. There were plenty of cousins at whose houses Caroline could have dined and welcome; or if she did not choose to do so, there was abundance in the larder, and if her teas had left her any appetite she had but to give the order herself and sit down alone to her cold meat and bread and butter. As we know, her teas had been feasts of Tantalus; but she did not feel hungry—for food. She hastened up to her room without a word to the maid, lighted her gas, took a key from her watch-chain, opened her writing-desk, and took out a letter which she read, not for the first time, with attention.

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"MOUNT VERNON STREET.

"MY DEAR MISS FOSTER:

"You will, I am afraid, be surprised at what I am going to say. Perhaps you will blame me for writing it, and perhaps you will blame me for saying it at all. I know it is an act of presumption in me to ask one so beautiful, so young and untrammelled by care, to link her fortunes with mine: but I do it because I cannot help it. I love you so much that I am unable to turn my thoughts to my most pressing duties till I have at least tried my fate with you; and yet my hopes are so faint that I cannot venture to ask you in any way but this.

"Don't think I love you less because I have so many other claimants for my affections; any more than I love them less because I love you. My poor children have no mother; I could never ask any woman to take that place to them unless we could both feel sure that ours was no mere match of convenience; but I could not love anyone unless she had the tenderness of nature which belongs to a true mother. I never saw any girl in whom it showed so plainly as in you. Your angelic sweetness and gentleness are to me, who have seen something of the rough side of life, unspeakably beautiful. I know I am not worthy of you in any way; but it sometimes seems to me that appreciating you so thoroughly as I do must make me a little so.

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"Your family will very likely object to me on the score of want of means. I am fully aware that I cannot give you such advantages in that respect as you have a right to expect, even if I were much richer than I am ever likely to be; but I am not so poorly off as they may suppose. I own the house in which I live, free of encumbrance, and I should like to settle it upon you. I do not know whether your property is secured to your separate use or not; but I should wish to have it so in any case. If my life and health are spared, I have no fears that I shall not be able to support my family in comfort. I know you will have to give up a great deal in the way of society; and I cannot promise that you shall have no cares, but I can and do promise that you will make us all very happy.

"I still fear my chances are but small; but do, I entreat you, take time to think over this. No matter what your answer may be, I am and ever shall be

"Your faithful and devoted
"MALCOLM JOHNSON.

"December 8, 189-."

After Caroline had read this letter twice, she drew out another, spotless and freshly written, and breaking the seal, read:

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"BEACON STREET.

"MY DEAR MR. JOHNSON:

"I was very sorry to receive your letter this morning. Pray don't think I blame you for writing—but indeed you think much too highly of me. I am not at all fitted to assume such serious duties as being at the head of your family would involve, and it would only be a disappointment to you if I did. I have had no experience, and I should feel it wrong to undertake it, even if I could return your generous affection as it deserves. Indeed, I don't value money, or any of those things; but I do not want to give up my friends and all my own ways of life, unless I loved you. I am so sorry I can't—but surely you will not blame me, for I never dreamed of this, or I would have tried to let you know my thoughts sooner.

"I am sure my aunt would disapprove. Highly as she esteems you, she would think me too young, and not at all the right kind of wife for you. I shall not breathe a word to her or to anyone, and I hope you will soon forget this, and find some one who will really be a good wife to you and a devoted mother to your children. No one will be more delighted at this than

"Your sincere friend,

"December 9, 189-."

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This letter, which Caroline had spent three hours in writing, and copied six times, she now tore into small pieces and threw them into the fireplace. The fire was out, and the grate was black, so she lighted a match and watched till every scrap was consumed to ashes, when she sat down at her desk and, heedless of the chilly room, wrote with a flying pen:

"BEACON STREET.

"MY DEAR MR. JOHNSON:

"Pray forgive me that I have been so long in answering your letter. I could not decide such an important matter in haste. Indeed you think more highly of me than you ought; but if such a foolish, ignorant girl as I am can make you happy, and you are sure you are not mistaken, I will try to return your love as it deserves. I have not much experience with children; but I will do my best to make yours love me, and it will surely be better for the dear little things than to have no mother at all.

"I dare say my aunt will think me very presumptuous to undertake so responsible a position; but she will not oppose me when she knows my heart is concerned,—and I am of age, and have a right to decide for myself. I shall be so glad of some real duties to make my idle, aimless life really useful to someone. I don't care for wealth, and as for society, I am heartily tired of it. The only fear I have is that you are over-rating me; but it is so pleasant to be loved so much that I will not blame you for it.

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"I am ever yours sincerely,
"CAROLINE ALICE FOSTER.

"December 10, 189-."

If Caroline, by writing this letter, constituted herself a lunatic in the judgment of all her friends, it must be allowed, as Miss Caldwell had said, that she was not quite lacking in sense. Unlike either a fool or the heroine of a novel, she rang the bell for no servant, sent for no messenger, but when she had sealed and stamped her letter she tripped downstairs with it and, having slipped back the latch as she opened the door, walked as far as the nearest post-box and dropped it in herself.

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THE TRAMPS' WEDDING

"They know no country, own no lord.
Their home the camp, their law the sword."

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Reed, as her husband entered her sitting-room; with some curiosity, pardonable in view of the fact that a stranger had for some time been holding an interview with him in his study.

"Why," replied the Reverend Richard Reed, looking mildly absent, as was his custom when interrupted of a Saturday morning, "it is a Mr. Perley Pickens—the man, you know, who has taken the Maynard place for the summer."

"Indeed! what did he want?" cried the lady, interested at once. The Maynard house was the great house of the place, and the Maynard family the magnates of the First Parish, and the whole town of Rutland. Their going abroad for a year or two had been felt as a public loss, and when, somewhat to the general surprise, it transpired that their house was let, it was at once surmised that it could only be to "nice" people, though the new occupants had never been heard of, and were rarely seen.

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"Oh, his daughter is to be married, and he wants the ceremony to take place in our church."

"You don't say so? and he wants you to marry them?"

"Certainly."

"Why, we haven't had a wedding in the church for quite a while! It will be very nice, won't it?"

"Yes, my dear; but excuse me, I am in a hurry just now. Mr. Pickens is waiting. He wants you to give him a few addresses. I gave him the sexton's——"

"It will be a good thing for poor Langford," said Mrs. Reed, benevolently.

"Yes——" drawled the Reverend Richard, still abstractedly, "very good; and he wants a Boston caterer, and a florist. I know nothing about such things, and I told him I'd ask you, though I did not believe you did, either."

"Oh, yes, I do! Mrs. Maynard always has Rossi, and as for a florist, they must have John Wicks, at the corner here. He's just set up, and it will be such a chance for him."

"Do you think he will do? Mr. Pickens said that expense was no object—that everything must be in style, as he phrased it."

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"Oh, he'll do! Anyone will do, at this season. Why, they could decorate the church, and house too, from their own place; but I shan't suggest that."

"Very well, my dear—but I am keeping Mr. Pickens waiting."

"I'll go and speak to him myself," said the lady, excitedly; and she tripped into the study, where the guest was sitting, with his hat on his knees; a tall, narrow-shouldered man, with a shifty eye. Somehow the sight of him was disappointing, she could hardly tell why, for he rose to greet her very politely, and thanked her effusively.

"My wife will be most grateful, I am sure—most grateful for your kindness. It will save her so much trouble."

"Here are the addresses you want," said Mrs. Reed, hastily scratching them off at her husband's desk, "and if Mrs. Pickens wants any others, I shall be happy to be of use to her."

"Thank you! thank you! You see, she's a stranger here, and doesn't know anything about it."

"You have not been in this part of the country before?"

"No—oh, no, I come from Clarinda, Iowa. At least, I always register from there, though I haven't any house there now; and my present wife was a Missouri woman, though she's never lived in the State much. I had to be in Boston on business this summer, so thought I'd take a place outside, and Mr. Bowles, the real estate agent, said this was the handsomest going, and the country first-rate; but my wife's a little disappointed."

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"I suppose, if she has travelled so much, she has seen a great deal of fine scenery—but this is generally thought a pretty place."

"Yes, certainly—very rustic, though, ain't it?"

"I suppose so," said his hearer, a little puzzled, while for the first time her husband looked up, alert and amused. "I will call on Mrs. Pickens," she hastened to say, "if she would like to see me."

"Yes, certainly; delighted, I'm sure; yes, she'd be delighted to see you, and so would Miss Minnie, too."

"What a very queer man!" thought Mrs. Reed. But she only smiled sweetly, and made a little move, as if the interview were fairly over. Her visitor, however, did not seem inclined to depart, and after a moment's silence began again.

"And there's another thing; if you would be so very kind as to recommend—I mean, introduce—we know so few people here, and Miss Minnie wants everything very stylish; perhaps you know some nice young men who would like to be ushers; I believe that is what they are called. It would be a good thing for them to be seen at; everything in first-class style, you know."

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The Reverend Richard, whose attention was now thoroughly aroused, beamed full on the speaker a guileless smile, while his wife thoughtfully murmured, "Let me see; do you expect a great many people?"

"Oh, no, we don't know many round here; but if you and your family, and the ushers and their families, would come to the house, it would make quite a nice little company. As to the church—anyone that liked—it would be worth seeing."

"I can find some ushers," said Mrs. Reed, still musing; "two at least; that will be enough, I should think."

"And then," murmured Mr. Pickens, as if checking off a mental list, "there is a young man to go with the bridegroom, I believe. I never had one, but Miss Minnie says it's the fashion."

"Oh, yes, a 'best man!'" explained his hostess, "but—the bridegroom usually selects one of his intimate friends for that."

"I don't believe Mr. MacJacobs has any friends; round here, that is. He came from Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, but he's never been there since he was a boy. He's been in New Orleans, and then in Europe, as travelling agent for MacVickar & Company. I suppose you've heard of *them*."

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"I dare say I can find a best man."

"Thank you. You are very kind; yes, very kind indeed, I'm sure."

"I presume," interposed the host, in bland accents, "you wish to give away the bride yourself?"

"Yes!" said Mr. Pickens, starting; "oh, yes, I suppose I can, if there's not too much to do. Should I have to say anything?"

"Scarcely," replied the clergyman, reassuringly. "I ask a question to which you are supposed to reply, but a nod will be quite sufficient. The bridegroom is generally audible, and sometimes the bride, but I have never heard a sound proceed from the bride's father."

"Very good—very good; it will be very pleasant to join in your service, I am sure. Many thanks to you for your kind advice. I will now take my leave," and after a jerking bow or two he departed, with a sort of fluttering, bird-like step. The pastor laughed, but his wife looked sober.

"Our friend is as amusing a specimen as I ever encountered," he began.

"Amusing! I call him disgusting, with his 'Miss Minnie' and 'take his leave.' He can't be a gentleman; there is something very suspicious about the whole affair." [Pg 306]

"Indeed! and what do you suspect?"

"I don't believe there's a wedding at all. Perhaps he's an impostor who wants to get in here to steal."

"Do you miss anything?"

"No," said the lady, after a peep into her dining-room. "I can't say I do. But he may come back on this pretended wedding business. Are you sure that he really is Mr. Perley Pickens?"

"Why, yes. I have never spoken to him before, but I have seen him at the post-office, opening his box, and again at the station. I cannot be mistaken in that walk of his."

"Well, he may be the head of a gang of thieves, and have taken the house and got up this scheme of a wedding for some end of his own."

"Such as what?"

"Why, to cheat somebody, somehow. I am sure you will never get a wedding fee for it; and he may not pay any of the bills, and the people may bother us."

"He gave me the name of his Boston bankers, May & Maxwell, to whom he said I could refer the tradespeople, if they wished it, 'being a stranger here himself,' as he justly remarked. But whom, my dear, do you expect to provide for ushers or best man?" [Pg 307]

"Oh, for ushers, the Crocker boys will do. They will be glad of something to amuse them in vacation."

"Are they not rather young? Fred can hardly be eighteen yet."

"Well! he is six feet and over. One needn't tell his age; and as for best man, I think William Winchester wouldn't mind it—to oblige me."

"But why, my love, since you are so distrustful, are you so anxious to be of use in this matter?"

"Why!" echoed his wife, triumphantly; "it's the best way to encourage them to go on, and then, don't you see? if they have any dishonest designs, they'll be the sooner exposed; and then—I do want to see what the end of it all will be—don't you?"

In pursuance of these ideas, Mrs. Reed, next afternoon, put on her best bonnet, and went to call on the ladies of the Pickens family. The gardens and shrubberies of the Maynard house, always beautiful, yet showed already the want of the master's eye. The servant who opened the door was of an inferior grade, and the drawing-room, stripped of Mrs. Maynard's personal belongings, looked bare and cold. Mrs. Reed sat and sighed for her old friend full quarter of an hour, before a pale, slim, pretty girl, much dressed, and with carefully crimped locks, came in with, "It's very kind in you to call. Aunt Delia's awfully sorry to keep you waiting, but she'll be down directly." [Pg 308]

"I am very glad to see you," said Mrs. Reed, looking with some attention at the probable bride-elect.

"Aunt Delia was sitting in her dressing-sack. She generally does, day-times. It's so much trouble to dress, she thinks. Now I think it's something to do; there isn't much else, here."

"This is a lovely place. I always admire it afresh every time I come here."

"It's lonesome; but then, it's pleasant enough for a little while. I never care to stay long in any one place. I've lived in about a hundred since I can recollect; and I wouldn't take a house in any one of 'em for a gift, if I had to live in it."

"Perhaps you may feel differently when you have a house of your own."

"Well, that's one of the things Mr. MacJacobs and I quarrel about. I want to board, and he wants to take a flat. I tell him I'll do that, if he'll get one where we can dine at the table d'hôte. That's

about as easy as boarding. As like as not, when we get settled, he'll have to go off somewhere else; but if he is willing to pay for it himself, why, let him! Here's Aunt Delia," she suddenly added, as a fresh rustle announced the entrance of a stout lady, also very handsomely attired, and carrying a large fan, which she waved to and fro, slowly but steadily, gazing silently over it at her visitor, whom Minnie introduced with some explanation, after which she remarked that it was "awfully hot."

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"It is warm; but I have not found it unpleasant. I really enjoyed my walk here."

"Did you walk?" asked her hostess, with more interest.

"Oh, yes; it is not more than a mile here from the church; and the parsonage is but a step farther."

"A mile!"

"I am very glad," said Mrs. Reed, well trained, as became her position, in the art of filling gaps in talk, and striking out on new lines, "to find you at home, and Miss—I beg your pardon, but I have not heard your niece's name. Mr. Reed thought she was your daughter."

"Oh, Minnie isn't my niece!" exclaimed the hostess, laughing, as if roused to some sense of amusement, which Minnie shared; "she's an adopted daughter of Mr. Webb's second wife!"

"My name's Minnie Webb, though pa never approved of it, and when he married again, we thought it would be easier to say Aunt Delia, to distinguish her from ma, you know."

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Mrs. Reed paused before these complicated relationships, and skilfully executed another tack; "I hope you find it pleasant here."

"It's a pretty place here, but it's awful dull," said Mrs. Pickens, "and it's so much trouble; I never kept house before. I've always boarded, and mostly in hotels."

"I am afraid it may seem quiet here to a stranger," said Mrs. Reed, apologetically. "You see when anyone takes a house here for the summer, people are rather slow to call; they suppose that you have your own friends visiting you, and that you don't care to make new acquaintances for so short a time. I am sorry I have not been able to call before. I was not sure that you went to our church."

"I don't go much to church; it is so much trouble. But Minnie says yours is the prettiest for a wedding," said Mrs. Pickens, smiling so aimlessly that it was impossible to suppose any rudeness intended. Mrs. Reed could only try to draw out the more responsive Minnie. "Is there anything else that I can do to help you about the wedding?"

"Why, yes—only, you've been so kind. I most hate to ask you for anything more."

"Don't mention it!"

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"Well, then, if you could think of any girl that would do for a bridesmaid."

"A bridesmaid?"

"Oh, yes, there ought to be *one* bridesmaid; a pretty one I should want, of course, and just about my size. You see, I have her dress all ready, for when I ordered my own gown in Paris, Madame Valerie showed me the proper bridesmaid's gown to go with it, and it looked so nice I told her I would take it. I thought, if the worst came to the worst, I could wear it myself; but it would be a shame not to have it show at the wedding. Of course," said Minnie, impressively, "I mean to *give* the young lady the dress—for her own, to keep!"

Mrs. Reed, at last, was struck fairly speechless, and her resources failed. "Suppose," said the bride, in coaxing tones, "you just step up and look at the gowns; if it would not be too much trouble."

The sight of the dresses was a mighty argument. At any rate, people with such garments could be planning no vulgar burglary. It might be a Gunpowder Treason, or an Assassination Plot, and that was romantic and dignified, while at the same time it was a duty to keep it under observation.

"I think," said Mrs. Reed, slowly, "I know a girl—a very pretty one—who would just fit this dress."

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"What's her name?"

"Muriel Blake."

"Oh, how sweet! I wish it was mine! Who is she?"

"She—she teaches school—but they're of very good family. She's very pretty—but they're not at all well off. She's a very sweet girl." Mrs. Reed balanced her phrases carefully, not knowing whether it would be better to present her young friend in the light of a candidate for pity or admiration. But Minnie smiled, and said she had no doubt it would do, and that Mrs. Reed was very good; and even Mrs. Pickens wound herself up to remark that it was very kind in her to take so much trouble.

Mrs. Reed hastened home overwhelmed with business. The Crocker boys were easily persuaded to take the parts assigned them, and even her elegant and experienced friend, William

Winchester, though he made a favour of his services, gave them at last, "wholly to oblige her."

"Any bridesmaids?" asked Reggie Crocker.

"She wants me to ask Muriel Blake."

"What, the little beauty of a school teacher! Well, there will be sport!" cried his brother, and even William Winchester asked with some interest, if she supposed Miss Blake would consent. "I think so," said Mrs. Reed; but her hopes were faint as she bent her way to the little house where Mrs. Blake, an invalid widow with scarce a penny, scraped out a livelihood by taking the public-school teachers to board, while her Muriel did half the housework, and taught, herself, in a primary school, having neither time nor talents to fit herself for a higher grade. Never was there a girl who better exemplified the old simile of the clinging vine than she; only no support had ever offered itself for her to cling to, and she had none of that instinctive skill which so many creepers show in striking out for, and appropriating, an eligible one. Mrs. Blake, a gentlewoman born and bred, gave at first a most decided refusal to her daughter's appearance in the character proposed. But Mrs. Reed, warming as she met with obstacles, pressed her point hard. She said a great deal more in favour of the respectability of the Pickenses than she could assert from her own knowledge, dwelt with compassion on their loneliness, and touched, though lightly, on the favour to herself; both ladies knowing but too well that the claims to gratitude were past counting. Mrs. Blake faltered, perhaps moved somewhat by a wistful look, which through all doubts and excuses, would rise in her daughter's eyes. As for Muriel's own little childish objections, they were swept away by her patroness like so many cobwebs. There was a gown ready and waiting for her, and Mrs. Reed would arrange about her absence from school.

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"But, if I am bridesmaid, I ought to make her a present," she said at last, "and I am afraid——"

"*That* need not matter," said her mother, loftily, "I will give her one of my India China plates. That will be present enough for anybody; and I have several left."

This, Mrs. Reed correctly augured, was the preface to surrender; and she walked Muriel off to call on Miss Webb, before any more objections should arise.

"Well!" cried that young lady at the first sight of her bridesmaid, "Well! I beg your pardon, but you *are*—" and even Mrs. Pickens regarded the young girl with languid admiration. Muriel Blake's golden curls, and azure eyes, and roseate bloom flashed on the eye much as does a cardinal flower in a wayside brook. No one could help noticing her charms; but no one had ever gone farther than to notice them, and they were about as useful in her daily duties as diamonds on the handle of a dustpan. Minnie looked at her rather doubtfully for a moment; but her good humour returned during the pleasing task of arraying the girl in her costume, and she even insisted on Miss Blake's assuming the bridal dress herself.

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"Well, I'm sure! What a bride you would make! You aren't engaged, are you?"

"No."

"You ought to travel. You'd be sure to meet someone. Well, we'll take it off. I'm glad I'm going to wear it, and not you. You look quite stunning enough in the other."

"It is lovely—too handsome for me."

"I had a complete outfit made in Paris this spring, though I wasn't engaged then; but I guessed I should be before the things went out of fashion."

"You knew Mr. MacJacobs very well then?"

"No—oh, no. I'd never seen him. Ma was anxious I should marry a foreign gentleman."

"Does your mother live abroad?"

"Yes—that is, she's not my real mother. I never knew who my real father and mother were. Ma wanted to adopt a little girl, and, she took me from the Orphan Asylum at Detroit, because I had such lovely curls. They were as light as yours, then, but they've grown dark, since. Is there anything you put on yours to keep the colour?"

"No—nothing."

"Well, pa was very angry when he found out what ma had done. He didn't want to adopt a child; but ma said she would, and she could, because she had money of her own. But he was always real kind to me. They were both very nice, only they would quarrel. Well, when I was sixteen, ma said she would take me abroad to finish my education. We'd travelled so much, I never had much chance to go to school. Pa said it was nonsense, but she would go. But I didn't go to school there, either. We went to Germany to look at one we'd heard of, and there a German gentleman, Baron Von Krugenstern, proposed to me. He thought I was going to be awfully rich. But when he found out how things really were, and that ma had the money, he changed about and proposed to her. They are so fond of money, those foreigners, you know!"

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"Did your father die while you were abroad?"

"Oh, dear, no! He wasn't dead! He was over here, all right. But ma got a divorce from him without any trouble. She and I and the Baron came over and went to Dakota, and it was all arranged, and they were married in six weeks. She got it for cruelty. I could testify I'd seen him

throw things at her. She used to throw them back again, but no one asked me about that. Well, pa never heard about it till it was all over, and then he was awfully mad; but I guess he didn't mind much, for he soon married Aunt Delia, and they always got along very pleasantly. I made them a visit after they were married, and then I went abroad with ma and the Baron. But pa told me if I wasn't happy there, I could come back any time."

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"Were you happy there?"

"No, I can't say I was. They lived in an awfully skimpy way, in a flat, three flights up, and no elevator. Baron Von Krugensstern didn't like ma's having brought me, till pa died, and that made a change. Pa left half his money to Aunt Delia, and the other half to me. Now, don't you call that noble of him?"

Muriel assented.

"As soon as they found that out, the whole family were awfully polite to me; they wanted me to marry his younger brother, Baron Stanislaus. But I wrote to Aunt Delia; she'd married Uncle Perley by that time, and come to Europe for a wedding tour. They were in Paris; and Uncle Perley was very kind, and sent back word for me to come to them, and I set off all alone; all the Von Krugenssterns thought it was perfectly dreadful. I bought my trousseau in Paris, for I hadn't quite decided I wouldn't have Baron Stanislaus, after all. But Uncle Perley advised me strongly against it; he said American husbands were a great deal the best, and I conclude he was right. And then, on the voyage home, we met Mr. MacJacobs."

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"I suppose you are very glad you came away?"

"Oh, yes, I am quite satisfied—quite. Baron Stanislaus was six feet three and a half inches high; but I don't think height goes for so much in a man; do you?"

Muriel looked at the little nomad with some wonder, but without the reprobation which might have been expected from a young person carefully brought up under the teachings of the Reverend Richard Reed. She rather regarded Minnie in the aspect of—to quote the hymn familiar to her childhood—"a gypsy baby, taught to roam, and steal her daily bread;" and no matter how carefully guarded the infant mind, the experiences of the gypsy will kindle a flame of interest. She, too, like Mrs. Reed, felt eager to see the end of the story.

The wedding preparations went on apace. The tradesmen worked briskly, for they had received information, on the application of some of the doubting among them to Messrs. May & Maxwell, that Mr. Pickens's credit was good for a million at least, not counting the very handsome banking accounts of his two ladies. Miss Webb made all the arrangements for her bridal, as Mr. MacJacobs could not come till the evening before.

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"I only hope he'll come at all," carelessly suggested William Winchester, one evening at the Parsonage.

"Why! do you think there is any danger of his giving it up?" cried Mrs. Reed, in consternation.

"I rather begin to think that there is no such person. MacJacobs! What a name! Can it possibly be real?"

"The name has a goodly ring of wealth about it," said the parson. "Scotch and Hebrew! 'tis a rich combination, indeed! Still, if it were as you suggest, it is a comfort to know that the remedy is at hand. You have done so much for them, Emma, my dear, that you cannot fail them now. They will ask you to find some nice young man for a bridegroom, rather than have the whole thing fall through, and I hope William is prepared to see it in the proper light, and offer his services 'purely to oblige you.'"

"I shall have an answer ready," said William, coolly, "I shall say that I am already bespoken."

"And can you produce the proof? It will have to be a pretty convincing one."

"Perhaps in such an emergency I might find a *very* convincing one," said William, with a glance at Muriel, who had been looking confused, and who now coloured deeply. It was more with displeasure than distress; but then it was, for the first time, that she struck him as being something more than a merely pretty girl.

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MacJacobs, came, punctual to his time, a small but sprightly individual, with plenty to say as a proof of his existence. He brought neat, if not over-expensive, scarf-pins for his gentlemen attendants, and a bracelet in corresponding style for Miss Blake. The wedding went off to general admiration. The church was full, and if the company at the house was scanty, there was no scarcity in the banquet. And when the feast was over, and Mrs. MacJacobs, on the carriage-step, turned to take her last farewell; while Muriel's handkerchief was ready in her hand, and the Crocker boys were fumbling among the rice in their pockets, and William Winchester himself was feeling in his for the old shoe—"I am sure," she said, "it has gone off beautifully, and I shall never, never forget your kindness, as long as I live! I *did* so want to have a pretty wedding—such as I've read about!"

If these last words roused dismal forebodings in the minds of the bridal train, to be verified by a perusal of the next day's Boston papers, they were forgiven as soon as they were uttered; for the light patter of Minnie's voice died away in a quaver of genuine feeling; and a shower of real tears threw for once a veil of sweetness over her little inexpressive face.

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