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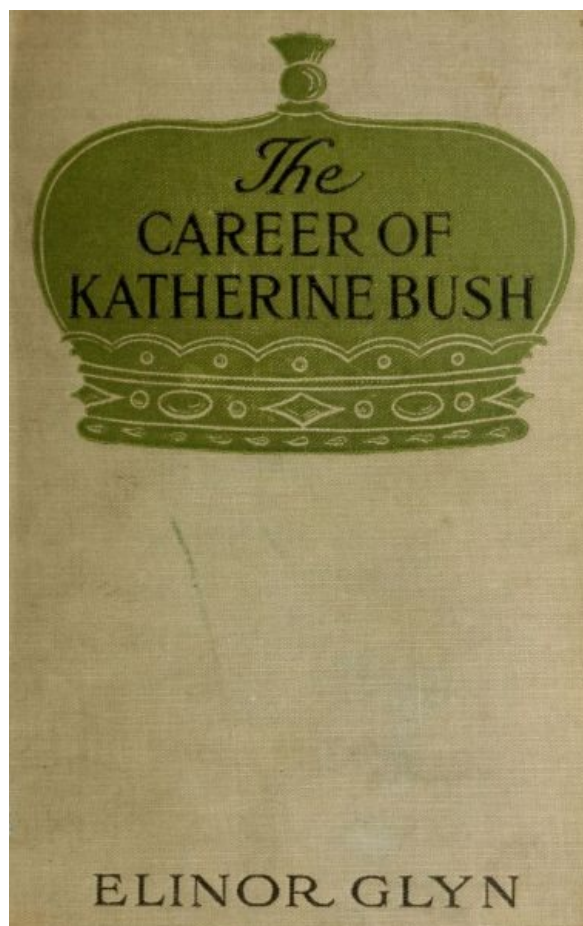
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CAREER OF KATHERINE BUSH ***



***The* CAREER *of* KATHERINE BUSH**



"After all, I understand you—and I forgive you."

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THE CAREER OF KATHERINE BUSH

BY
ELINOR GLYN

AUTHOR OF
THE MAN AND THE MOMENT, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
EDMUND FREDERICK



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THE CAREER OF KATHERINE BUSH

CHAPTER I

Dusk was coming on when Katherine Bush left the office of the Jew money lenders, Livingstone and Devereux, in Holles Street. Theirs was a modest establishment with no indication upon the wire blind of the only street window as to the trade practised by the two owners of the aristocratic names emblazoned upon the dingy transparency. But it was very well known all the same to numerous young bloods who often sought temporary relief within its doors.

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Katherine Bush had been the shorthand typist there since she was nineteen. They paid her well, and she had the whole of Saturday to herself.

She sat clicking at her machine most of the day, behind a half-high glass screen, and when she lifted her head, she could see those who came to the desk beyond—she could hear their voices, and if she listened very carefully, she could distinguish the words they said. In the three years in which she had earned thirty shillings a week sitting there, she had become quite a connoisseur in male voices, and had made numerous deductions therefrom. "Liv" and "Dev," as Mr. Percival Livingstone and Mr. Benjamin Devereux, were called with undue familiarity by their subordinates, often wondered how Katherine Bush seemed to know exactly the suitable sort of letter to write to each client, without being told. She was certainly a most valuable young woman, and worth the rise the firm meant to offer her shortly.

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She hardly ever spoke, and when she did raise her sullen greyish-green eyes with a question in them, you were wiser to answer it without too much palaver. The eyes were darkly heavily lashed and were compelling and disconcertingly steady, and set like Greek eyes under broad brows. Her cheeks were flat, and her nose straight, and her mouth was full and large and red.

For the rest she was a colourless creature, with a mop of ashen-hued hair which gleamed with silvery lights. She was tall and slight, and she could at any moment have been turned by a clever dressmaker and hairdresser into a great beauty. But as it was, she gave no thought to her appearance, and looked unremarkable and ordinary and lower middle-class.

She had wonderful hands—Where they came from the good God alone knew! with their whiteness and their shape. They were strong, too, and perhaps appeared boyish rather than feminine. She did not inherit them from that excellent mother, retired to a better world some ten years before; nor from that astute auctioneer father, who, dying suddenly, had left that comfortable red-brick semi-detached villa at Bindon's Green, Brixton, as a permanent home for his large family.

But from whence come souls and bodies and hands and eyes?—and whither do they go?—Katherine Bush often asked herself questions like these, and plodded on until she could give herself some kind of answer.

Not one single moment of her conscious hours had ever been wasted. She was always learning something, and before she had reached sixteen, she had realised that power to rule will eventually be in the grasp of the man or woman who can reap the benefit of lessons.

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She had enjoyed her work at the night schools, and the wet Sundays, curled up with a book in the armchair in the tiny attic, which she preferred to a larger bedroom, because she could have it alone unshared with a sister.

Her mind had become a storehouse of miscellaneous English literature, a good deal mispronounced in the words, because she had never heard it read aloud by a cultivated voice. She knew French grammatically, but her accent would have made a delicate ear wince. Her own voice was singularly refined; it was not for nothing that she had diligently listened to the voices of impecunious aristocrats for over three years!

For the moment, Katherine Bush was in love. Lord Algy had happened to glance over the glass screen upon his first visit to Liv and Dev to be accommodated with a

thousand pounds, and his attractive blue eyes had met the grey-green ones.

He had spoken to her when she came out to luncheon. But he had done it really intelligently, and Katherine was not insulted. Indeed, accustomed as she was to weigh everything in life, she accorded him a mead of praise for the manner in which he had carried out his intention to make her acquaintance. She had flouted him and turned him more or less inside out for over a month, but she had let him give her lunch—and now she had decided to spend the Saturday to Monday with him.

For the scheme of existence which she had planned out for herself, she decided her experience must be more complete. One must see life, she argued, and it was better to make a first plunge with a person of refinement, who knew the whole game, than with one of her own class who would be but a very sorry instructor.

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Heavens! To spend a Saturday to Monday with the counterpart of her brothers Fred and Bert! The idea made her shudder. She disliked them and their friends enough as it was—and the idea of marriage in that circle never entered her level head. Of what use would be all her studies, and the lessons she had mastered, if she buried herself forever at Brixton with Charlie Prodggers or at Clapham with Percy Watson?

At this stage no moral questions troubled her at all, nor had she begun really to apply the laws of cause and effect in their full measure—although she was quite aware that what she proposed to do was the last thing she would have considered wise or safe for another woman to attempt. Rules of conduct were wisely made for communities she felt, and must be kept or disaster must inevitably follow. But in her own case she was willing to take risks, thoroughly believing in her own cool discrimination.

The outlook for her should always be vast.

Lord Algy was passionately devoted, and it was wiser early in life to know the nature of men. Thus she argued to herself, being totally unaware that her point of view was altogether affected because her heart and her senses pleaded hard, being touched for the first time in her twenty-two years.

She was quite untroubled by what the world calls morality—and she had no scruples. These were for a later date in her career.

The path looked clear and full of roses.

She had not been in the habit of consulting her family as to her movements, and had many times gone by herself for holidays to the seaside. No questions would be asked her when she returned on the Monday. If the matter could have created scandal, she would not have gone—to create scandal was not at all part of her game.

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Lord Algy had arranged to take her to Paris by that Friday night's train. They would have all Saturday and Sunday, and then return on Monday night. Liv and Dev had granted her a holiday until the Tuesday. She had put on her best blue serge suit that morning, and had taken a small valise with what she considered necessary things. And now her heart beat rather fast as she turned into Oxford Street in the gathering October dusk.

For a few moments she wondered what it would have been like if she had been going to marry Lord Algy—before all the world. Quite a great pleasure no doubt for a month or two—But then?—He was the fourth son of a stingy Welsh marquis, and nothing would ever induce his family to pardon such a mésalliance. Of this she was well aware. It was the business of "Liv" and "Dev" to make themselves acquainted with a good deal about the peerage, and whatever her employers knew, Katherine Bush knew.

Life for her held no illusions. Her studies had convinced her that to be strong and perfectly honest were the only two things of any avail, and to acquire a thorough knowledge of human beings, so as then to be able to manipulate these pawns.

Lord Algy she believed was only a most agreeable part of her education, but of no vital importance. She would have been horrified if anyone had told her that she was mixing up sentiment in the affair!

To get everything down to its bedrock meaning had been her endeavour, ever since she had first read Darwin and Herbert Spencer.

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"I shall have the experience of a widow," she said to herself, "and can then decide what is next to be done."

Lord Algy was a Guardsman—and knew, among other things, exactly how to spend an agreeable Saturday to Monday! He was piqued by Katherine Bush, and almost in love. He looked forward to his brief honeymoon with delight.

He was waiting for her in a taxicab at the corner of Oxford Circus, and when she got in with her little valise, he caught and kissed her hand.

"We will go and dine at the Great Terminus," he told her in his charming voice, "and don't you think it would be much nicer if we stayed there to-night, and went on by the morning train?—It is such a miserable hour to arrive in Paris otherwise—you would be knocked up for the day."

He was holding her hand, and the nearness of him thrilled her, in some new and delicious way. She hesitated, though, for a moment—she never acted on impulse. She crushed down a strange sensation of gasp which came in her throat. After all, of what matter if she stayed—or started to-night?—since she had already cast the die, and did not mean to shirk the payment of the stakes.

"Very well," she said, quite low.

"I hoped you would agree, pet," he whispered, encircling her with his arm, "I meant to persuade you, and I am going to make you so awfully happy—I sent my servant this afternoon to take the rooms for us, and everything will be ready."

This sounded agreeable enough, and Katherine Bush permitted herself to smile, which was a rare occurrence; she would spend hours and days without the flicker of one coming near her red lips.

In the uncertain light, Lord Algy felt it more than he actually saw it, and it warmed him. She was, as he had confessed to his best friend in the battalion, an enigma to him—hence her charm.

"She treats me as though I were the ground under her feet at times," he recounted to Jack Kilcourcy. "I don't think she cares two damned straws for me really, but, by Jove! she is worth while! She has no nonsense about her, and she is so awfully game!"

He had taken good care never to let Jack see her, though—or tell him her name!

It was not long before they reached the hotel, and Katherine Bush was a little angry with herself because she felt a quiver of nervousness when they were in the big hall.

Lord Algy knew all the ropes, and his air of complete insouciance reassured her. A discreet valet stepped forward and spoke to his master, and they were soon in the lift, and so to a well-lighted and warmed suite.

"These colours and this imitation Chippendale are rather awful, aren't they," Lord Algy said, looking round, "but we must not mind, as it is only for one night; the Palatial in Paris will be different—I am glad Hanson saw to the flowers."

Huge bunches of roses stood upon the table and mantelpiece. Katherine Bush thought it a splendid place, but if it appeared rather "awful" to him, she must not show her admiration.

"Tea will come in a moment—I mean chocolate, pet—and I think we shall be as jolly as can be. In there is your room; they will have brought up your valise by now, I expect."

Katherine Bush moved forward and went through the door. A cheery fire was burning, and the curtains were drawn, and on a chair there was a big cardboard box. She looked at it, it was addressed "Mrs. Rufus."

"Who—is that—?—and what is it for?" she asked, in a voice deep as a well.

"It is just a fur-lined coat, darling," Lord Algy answered, as he pulled undone the string, "and a little wrap—I thought you would be so awfully cold on the boat—and probably would not have been able to bring much luggage."

A slight flush came into the young woman's white cheeks, something in her loathed taking presents.

"Thanks awfully—I'll be glad to have you lend them to me for this trip—but why is it addressed 'Mrs. Rufus'?—Mr. Devereux has got a sister of that name."

Lord Algy laughed.

"Well, you see, I could not have it 'Fitz-Rufus,' because every one knows that is the Merioneth name, given us poor devils by the Normans, because we were such a red-headed lot, and I bet they found our own too difficult to pronounce!" He began pulling out the coat and a soft pink silk dressing-gown from the box. "I always am just 'Rufus' when I come out like this." He laughed again a little constrainedly; it had just struck him that the latter part of his sentence was perhaps not very felicitously expressed—since he knew Katherine Bush was no chorus lady, accustomed to temporary wedded appellations!

She looked him straight in the eyes with her strange, disconcertingly steady grey-green ones—and then she smiled again—as the Sphinx might have done before being set in eternal immobility of stone.

Lord Algy felt stupidly uncomfortable, so he folded her in his arms with a fond caress, a far better plan he had always found than any argument or explanation with women.

Katherine Bush realised the joy of it. She was ready for every grade of pleasure as well as experience. This was how things were done in Lord Algy's world, then—So be it.

Together they looked at the coat and wrap, and he helped her to take off her hat and jacket, and try them on. They were very friendly, and Lord Algy suggested that as the

dressing-gown was almost a teagown and was fairly pretty, she might wear it for dinner, which they would have in the sitting-room.

"You'll look sweet in pink, darling," he lisped, as he kissed her ear, "and it will be so soft and cosy."

Then the waiter knocked at the door and said the chocolate was ready, so they went back to the sitting room.

He was quite adorable as he assisted her to pour in the cream—but Katherine Bush now decided she would keep him at arm's length for a while; the game was really so entertaining, and its moves must be made to last as long as possible.

Lord Algy enjoyed fencing, too, so they talked in a more matter-of-fact way for an hour or more, and then she told him she would go and change for dinner, as it would be ready in twenty minutes.

"I'll have to be your maid, darling—I make an awfully good maid—I never bungle with the beastly hooks—and I should love to brush your hair!"

His eyes shone with light-hearted passion, and his good-looking face was close to her own.

"You shall perhaps—to-morrow," Katherine Bush retorted—and slipping into the room beyond she shut the door.

Lord Algy flung himself into an armchair, lit a cigarette and laughed softly. He had never had such an experience as this.

"She is a wonder!" he said to himself. "Astonishing for her class—for any class—She reminds me of some French heroine—what's her name—fellow wrote jolly nice stuff—oh—er—*Mademoiselle de Maupin*, of course! By Jove! I believe I am going to have a time like that chap had—only she won't go off into limbo on Monday night!—Confound it, I believe I'm in love!"

Then he threw away his cigarette end, and went round through the outer passage to his room beyond hers, where he found his servant turning on his bath in the bathroom which divided their apartments.

"Madame did not seem to require it—yet," Hanson said respectfully, "so I have turned on Your Lordship's first."

And in a few minutes Lord Algy was splashing in the Lubin scented water, while he gaily whistled a tune.

And Katherine Bush heard him as she was sponging her white face—and stopped and listened surprisedly.

"Whatever can he be having a bath for at this time of day," she said to herself, "and it is not Saturday!"

Then the thought came, it might be the custom of his class to bathe before dinner! A scarlet spot grew in each cheek—she must never forget to learn and profit by her lessons, so she deliberately went and knocked on the communicating door and called out:

"Algy! you are mean to take the first!—When you have finished, turn on mine."

And then she stood and trembled for a minute, while she piled up her great mass of ashen hair.

"All right, darling!" he called back. "Only I must have my reward!"

"When *I* please!" the young woman said to herself. "And not until."

At dinner, she looked quite pretty, the pink suited her pale skin, and the unusual feminine fluffiness of the garment altered her rather stern appearance. She had not yet begun to employ any art whatever, or to alter the rough bundling up of her hair, but now, out to enjoy herself under the most propitious and rose-coloured circumstances, her strange, sullen eyes shone with a subtle fascination, and her deep voice had tones in it which seduced the ear.

She had never dined with him before, only lunched, and now it behooved her to observe the ways of things, as she was quite ignorant of the art of dining out. Mr. Benjamin Devereux had made advances to her in her first year at Liv and Dev, but she had annihilated him, and withered his proposals for unlimited dinners and a generous settlement with scorn. There had never been a moment when she had contemplated her charms being wasted upon anything but an aristocrat, from whom she could acquire "tone."

No denizen of Bindon's Green—no friend of the family—no companion in the morning train had ever had so much as a kind word, much less the tip of one of her strong white fingers. She was as a bunch of grapes with perfect bloom retained.

She was taking in every line of Lord Algy as she sat there sipping her soup. She had refused oysters, and had watched him as he devoured his with the joy of an epicure. She had not been quite certain as to which was the right implement to employ. She supposed it was that little fork with the three prongs—but she determined to make

no mistakes.

It was easy enough to gobble oysters soused in vinegar and red pepper, with huge slices of bread and butter, and a bottle of stout, as her brother Fred was wont to enjoy them at supper on Saturday nights. Or they could be pulled about in the mincing fashion in which his fiancée, that genteel Mabel Cawber, treated them, with little finger daintily curved, and the first and the thumb only in use! but before she, Katherine Bush, swallowed one, she would ascertain exactly how they were eaten in Lord Algy's world! No good out of this trip should be wasted.

As dinner advanced, he began to make more ardent love to her—and the champagne elevated both their spirits. He reproached her for her hardness in not having allowed him to play the part of maid, after all. She was a capricious little darling, but surely did not mean to go on being unkind?

No; she did not—but she had suddenly realised, while dressing, that some of her garments were not fine enough for the situation, and must be kept out of sight!

She did not tell him this, however, but continued to enact the rôle of condescending queen, while quietly she watched him as a cat watches a mouse.

She loved the way his hair was brushed—how different from Charlie Prodgers!—she loved the finely cut back of his head. She was perfectly aware that he showed outwardly every mark of breeding in his weak, handsome face, and lean well-drilled figure. These things pleased her—especially the breeding; it was so very far from what she ever saw at Bindon's Green!

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Lord Algy had the easy, pleasant manner of his kind, with a strong personal attraction, amply balancing absence of brain for general purposes, and he was versed in every art for the cajoling of women.

The dinner grew more and more agreeable, until when coffee and liqueurs came, Katherine Bush felt exalted into a strange heaven. She had analysed almost all emotions in the abstract, but not their possible effects upon herself. She found the ones she was experiencing now peculiarly delightful! To be twenty-two and in love for the first time in life, with an extremely delectable specimen of manhood—to be free as air—answerable to no one—untroubled by backward or forward thoughts, unworried by tormenting speculations as to whether the affair was right or wrong—wise or unwise—This was a state of things which made the cup worth drinking, and Katherine Bush knew it.

No possibility of bitter dregs to follow the last sip entered her calculations.

The imp gods laughed, no doubt, and Lord Algy's blue eyes were full of passionate delight!

Thus with all things *couleur de rose*, Katherine Bush began her brief honeymoon.

CHAPTER II

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"And I shall not see you for a whole month, my precious pet!" Lord Algy whispered, as the train was approaching Charing Cross, at about eleven o'clock on the Monday night of the return journey. "I don't know how I shall bear it, but you will write every day, won't you?—Promise me, darling—I wish now that I had not taken first leave and arranged to shoot with my brother-in-law next week."

His arm still encircled her, and her ashen-hued head leaned against his shoulder, so that he could not see the expression in her sombre eyes. It was that of an animal in pain.

"No, I shall not write, Algy, and you must not, either—we have had a divine time, and I shall never forget it. But it is stupid to write—what good would it be to either of us?"

He pleaded that he would not be able to live without a word—after the three days of perfect bliss they had enjoyed—and, of course, they would enjoy many more, when he returned from Wales—!

Katherine Bush did not argue with him—of what use since her own mind was entirely made up? She just let him kiss her as much as he desired without speaking a word, and then she arranged her hat and veil, and was demurely ready to get out when the train should draw up at the platform.

Lord Algy could not have been more loverlike. He was really feeling full of emotion and awfully sorry to part. She had been so wonderful, he told himself. She had enjoyed the whole thing so simply, and was such a delightful companion. She had not asked any silly questions or plagued him with sentimental forever-and-ever kinds of suggestions, as lots of girls might have done with her limited experience of these transitory affairs. She had accepted the situation as frankly as a savage who had never heard that there could be any more binding unions. He really did not know

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how he was going to stand a whole month of separation, but perhaps it was just as well, as he was on the verge of being ridiculously in love, and to plunge in, he knew, would be a hopeless mistake. She was a thousand times nicer and more interesting than any girl he had ever met in his life. If she had only been a lady, and there would not be any row about it, he could imagine any fellow being glad to marry her.

She was not at all cold either—indeed, far from it—and seemed instinctively to understand the most enchanting passion—He thought of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* again—and felt he had been as equally blessed as *D'Albert*. She would make the sweetest friend for months and months, and he would rush back from Wales the moment he could break from his family, and seek solace in her arms—he would have got himself in hand again by then, so as not to do anything stupid. He always meant to be very, very good to her, though. Thus he dreamed, and grew more demonstrative, clasping her once again in a fond farewell embrace, during the last available moment, and his charming blue eyes, with their brown curly lashes, looked half full of tears.

"Say you love me, darling," he commanded, wishing, like all lovers, to hear the spoken words.

Katherine Bush was very pale, and there was concentrated feeling in her face which startled him. Then she answered, her voice deeper than usual:

"Yes—I love you, Algy—perhaps you will never know how much. I do not suppose I will ever really love anyone else in the same way in my life."

Then the train drew up at the station.

The people all looked unreal in the foggy October air under the glaring lights—and the whole thing appeared as a dream indeed when, half an hour later, Katherine sped through the suburban roads to Bindon's Green, alone in the taxi. Lord Algy had put her in and paid the man liberally, and with many last love words had bidden her good-night and—*au revoir!*

So this chapter was finished—she realised that. And it had been really worth while. An outlook had opened for her into a whole new world—where realities lived—where new beings moved, where new standpoints could be reached. She saw that her former life had been swept from her—and now, to look back upon, appeared an impossible tedium. She had mastered all the shades of what three days of most intimate companionship with a *gentleman* could mean, and the memory contained no flaw. Algy's chivalry and courtesy had never faltered; she might have been a princess or his bride, from the homage he had paid her. Dear, much-loved Algy! Her passion for him was tinged with almost a mother love—there was something so tender and open-hearted about him. But now she must take stern hold of herself, and must have pluck enough to profit by what she had learned of life—Though to-night she was too tired to do more than retrospect.

Oh! the wonder of it all!—the wonder of love, and the wonder of emotion! She clenched her cold hands round the handle of her little valise. She was trembling. She had insisted upon his keeping the fur-lined coat for the present. How could she account for it to her family, she had argued? But she never meant to take it again.

No one was awake at Laburnum Villa when she opened the door with her latchkey, and she crept up to her little icy chamber under the roof, numb in mind and body and soul—and was soon shivering between the cotton sheets.

Oh! the contrast to the warm, flower-scented bedroom at the Palatial! And once she had not known the difference between linen and cotton!

She said this over to herself while she felt the nap—and then the tears gathered in her eyes one by one, and she sobbed uncontrollably for a while—Alas! to have to renounce all joy—forever more!

She fell asleep towards morning, and woke with a start as her alarm clock thundered. But her face was set like marble, and there was not a trace of weakness upon it when she appeared at the family scramble, which did duty for breakfast.

There had been a row between Fred and Gladys, the sister a year older than herself, who was a saleswoman at a fashionable dressmaker's establishment. Matilda, the eldest of the family, was trying to smooth matters while she sewed up a rent in the skirt which Ethel, the youngest, would presently wear to the school "for young ladies" which she daily attended. This, the most youthful Miss Bush, meanwhile sat in a very soiled Japanese quilted dressing gown, devouring sausages. There were bloaters on the table, too, and treacle—and the little general servant was just bringing in the unsavory coffee in the tin coffeepot.

Tea had been good enough for them always in the father's time, and Matilda for her part could not see why Fred had insisted upon having coffee, on the strength of a trip to Boulogne on bank holiday.

But there it was! When Fred insisted, things had to be done—even if one hated coffee!

Katherine Bush loathed most of her family. She had not an expansive nature, and was

quite ruthless. Why should she love them just because they were her brothers and sisters? She had not asked to be born among them! They were completely uncongenial to her, and always had been. It was obviously ridiculous and illogical then to expect her to feel affection for them, just because of this accident of birth, so she argued. Matilda, the eldest, who had always been a mother to the rest, did hold one small corner of her heart.

"Poor old Tild," as she called her, "the greatest old fool living," and Matilda adored her difficult sister.

How doubly impossible they all appeared now to the unveiled eyes of Katherine!

"This is simply disgusting stuff, this coffee!" she said, putting her cup down with a grimace. "It is no more like French coffee than Ett looks like a Japanese because she has got on that dirty dressing-gown."

"What do you know of French coffee, I'd like to ask—What ho!" Bert, the brother just younger than herself, demanded, with one of his bright flashes. "Have you been to 'Boulong for a bit of a song,' like the Gov'nor?"

"I wish you'd give over calling me the Gov'nor, Bert!" Mr. Frederick Bush interposed, stopping for a moment his bicker with Gladys. "Mabel strongly objects to it. She says it is elderly and she dislikes slang, anyway."

But Albert Bush waved half a sausage on his fork, and subsided into a chuckle of laughter. He was the recognised wit of the family, and Ethel giggled in chorus.

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Katherine never replied to any of their remarks, unless she wished to; there was no use in throwing down the gauntlet to her, it remained lying there. She did not even answer Matilda's tentative suggestion that she had always drunk the coffee before without abusing it!

If they only knew how significant the word "before" sounded to her that morning!

She finished her bit of burnt toast, and began putting on her hat at a side mirror preparatory to starting. She did not tell Gladys that she would be late if she did not leave also; that was her sister's own affair, she never interfered with people.

As she left the dining-room, she said to Matilda:

"I want a fire in my room when I come back this evening, please. I'll have one every day—Make out how much it will be, and Em'ly's extra work, and I'll pay for it."

"Whatever do you want that for, Kitten?" the astonished Matilda demanded. "Why, it is only October yet. No one ever has a fire until November, even in the drawing-room—let alone a bedroom. It is ridiculous, dearie!"

"That aspect does not matter at all to me," Katherine retorted. "I want it, and so I shall have it. I have some work to do, and I am not going to freeze."

Matilda knew better than to continue arguing. She had not lived with Katherine for twenty-two years for nothing.

"She takes after father in a way," she sighed to herself as she began helping the little servant to clear away the breakfast things, when they had all departed to the West End, where it was their boast to announce that they were all employed—they looked down upon the City!

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"Yes, it's father, not mother or her family; father would have his way, and Fred has got this idea, too, but nothing like Kitten's! How I wish she'd look at Charlie Prodggers and get married and settled!"

Then she sighed again and sat down by the window to enjoy her one great pleasure of the day, the perusal of the *feuilleton* in the *Morning Reflector*. In these brief moments she forgot all family worries, all sordid cares—and revelled in the adventures of aristocratic villains and persecuted innocent governesses and actresses, and felt she, too, had a link with the great world. She was a good sound Radical in what represented politics to her, so she knew all aristocrats must be bad, and ought to be exterminated, but she loved to read about them, and hear first-hand descriptions of the female members from Gladys, who saw many in the showrooms of Madame Ermantine. "Glad *knows*," she often said to herself with pride.

Meanwhile, Katherine Bush—having snubbed Mr. Prodggers into silence in the train—where he manœuvred to meet her every morning—reached her employers' establishment, and began her usual typing.

There was work to be done by twelve o'clock in connection with the renewal of the loan to Lord Algernon Fitz-Rufus—the old Marquis would be obliged to pay before Christmas time, Mr. Percival Livingstone said.

Miss Bush, to his intense astonishment, gave a sudden short laugh—it was quite mirthless and stopped abruptly—but it was undoubtedly a laugh!

"What is amusing you?" he asked with a full lisp, too taken off his guard to be as refined and careful in tone as usual.

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"The old Marquis having to pay, of course," Katherine responded.

Never once during the whole day did she allow her thoughts to wander from her work, which she accomplished with her usual precision. Even during her luncheon hour she deliberately read the papers. She had trained herself to do one thing at a time, and the moment for reflection would not come until she could be undisturbed. She would go back as soon as she was free, to her own attic, and there think everything out, and decide upon the next step to be taken in her game of life.

A few burnt sticks, and a lump of coal in the tiny grate, were all she discovered on her return that evening to her sanctuary. The maid-of-all-work was not a talented fire-lighter and objected to criticism. Katherine's level brows met with annoyance, and she proceeded to correct matters herself, while she muttered:

"Inefficient creature! and they say that we are all equal! Why can't she do her work, then, as well as I can mine!"

Her firm touch and common sense arrangement of paper and kindling soon produced a bright blaze, and when she had removed her outdoor things, she sat down to think determinedly.

She loved Lord Algy—that was the first and most dominant thing to face. She loved him so much that it would never be safe to see him again, since she had not the slightest intention of ever drifting into the position of being a man's mistress. She had tasted of the tree of knowledge with her eyes open, and the fruit that she had eaten was too dangerously sweet for continuous food. Love would obtain a mastery over her if things went on; she knew that she might grow not to care about anything else in the world but only Algy. Thus, obviously, all connection with him must be broken off at once, or her career would be at an end, and her years of study wasted. Even if he offered to marry her she could never take the position with a high hand. There would always be this delicious memory of illicit joys between them, which would unconsciously bias Algy's valuation of her. She had learned things of consequence which she could not have acquired in any other way, and now she must have strength to profit by them. She utterly despised weaklings and had no pity for lovesick maidens. For a woman to throw over her future for a man was to her completely contemptible. She probed the possible consequences of her course of action unflinchingly; she believed so in her own luck that she felt sure that no awkward accident could happen to her. But even if this should occur, there were ways which could be discovered to help her—and since the moment had not yet come, she would defer contemplating it, but would map out her plans regardless of this contingency. So she argued to herself.

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She could not endure living under the family roof of Laburnum Villa any longer, that was incontestable; she must go out and learn exactly how the ladies of Lord Algy's world conducted themselves. Not that she wished to dawn once more upon his horizon as a polished Vere de Vere—but that for her own satisfaction she must make herself his equal in all respects. There had been so many trifles about which she had felt she had been ignorant, almost every moment of the three days had given her new visions, and had shown her her own shortcomings.

"There are no bars to anything in life but stupidity and vanity," she told herself, "and they at least shall not stand in my way."

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The temptation to have one more farewell interview with him was great, but there was nothing the least dramatic about her, so that aspect did not appeal to her as it would have done to an ordinary woman who is ruled by emotional love for dramatic situations; she was merely drawn by the desire for her mate once more, and this she knew and crushed.

It would mean greater pain than pleasure to her afterwards, and would certainly spoil all chance of a career. She gloried in the fact that she had had the courage to taste of life's joys for experience, but she would have burned with shame to feel that she was being drawn into an equivocal position through her own weakness.

Katherine Bush was as proud as Lucifer. She fully understood—apart from moral questions which did not trouble her—that what she had done would have been fatal to a fool like Gladys, or to any girl except one with her exceptional deliberation and iron will. She truly believed that such experiments were extremely dangerous, and on no account to be adopted as a principle of action in general. The straight and narrow path of orthodox virtue was the only one for most women to follow; and the only one she would have advocated for her sisters or friends. The proof being that as a rule when women erred they invariably suffered because they had not the pluck or the strength to know when to stop.

Katherine Bush was absolutely determined that she should never be hampered, in her game, by her own emotions or weakness.

Before Lord Algy would return from Wales, she would have left Liv and Dev's. She had never given him her home address, and there would be no trace of her. She would look in the *Morning Post* for information, and then endeavour to secure some post as companion or secretary to some great lady. There she would pick up the rest of the necessary equipment to make herself into a person in whom no flaws could be found. And when she had accomplished this, then fate would have opened up some

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path worth following.

"Some day I shall be one of the greatest women in England," she told herself, as she looked unblinking into the glowing coals.

Then, having settled her plans, she allowed herself to go over the whole of her little holiday, incident by incident.

How utterly adorable Algy had been! She found herself thrilling again at each remembrance—How refined and how considerate! How easy were his manners; he was too sure of himself, and his welcome in life, ever to show the deplorable self-consciousness which marked the friends who came on Sundays, or the humptious self-assertion of her brothers, Fred and Bert.

If only she had been born in his world, and had by right of birth those prerogatives which she meant to obtain by might of intelligence, how good it would have been to marry him—for a few years! But even now in her moment of fierce, passionate first love, which in her case was so largely made up of the physical, her brain was too level and speculative not to balance the pros and cons of such a situation. And while she felt she loved him with all her being, she knew that he was no match for her intellectually, and that when the glamour faded he would weary her.

But the wrench of present renunciation was none the less bitter—Never any more to feel his fond arms clasping her—never again to hear his caressing words of love!

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If a coronet for her brow shone at the end of the climb, her heart at all events must turn to ice by the way, or so she felt at the moment.

He had talked so tenderly about their future meetings. How they would go again to Paris when he returned from Wales. How she must let him give her pretty clothes and a diamond ring, and how she was his darling pet, and his own girl. She knew that he was growing really to love her; Katherine Bush never deceived herself or attempted to throw dust in her own eyes. She had eaten her cake and could not have it. If she had held out and drawn him on, no doubt she could have been his wife, but it was only for one second that this thought agitated her. Yes, she could have been his wife—but to what end? Only one of humiliation. She was not yet ready to carry off such a position with a certainty of success; she knew she was ignorant, and that the knowledge of such ignorance would destroy her self-confidence and leave her at the mercy of circumstance. So all was for the best. She had not guessed that it would be so very painful to part from him—dear, attractive Algy! She could not sit still any longer. A convulsion of anguish and longing shook her, and she got up and stamped across the room. Then she put on her outdoor things again and stalked down into the gathering night, passionate emotion filling her soul.

But when she came back an hour later, after tramping the wet roads round the common, the battle was won.

And this night she fell asleep without any tears.

CHAPTER III

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It was about a fortnight later that Katherine got Matilda to meet her at a Lyons' popular café for tea on a Wednesday afternoon. Livingstone and Devereux had given her a half holiday, being on country business bent; and having matured her plans, and having set fresh schemes in train, she thought she might as well communicate them to the one sister who mattered to her. Matilda loved an excuse to "get up to town," and had come in her best hat, with smiling face. Katherine was always very generous to her, though she was no more careless about money than she was about other things.

"It is all very well, Tild," she said, in her deep voice, after they had spoken upon indifferent subjects for a while. "But I am tired of it. I am absolutely tired of it, so there! I am tired of Liv and Dev—tired of the hateful old click of the machine with no change of work—I am tired of seeing the people of another class through the glass screen—and I mean to get out of it."

"Whatever are you talking of, Kitten!" the elder Miss Bush exclaimed, as she stirred her cocoa. "Why, Liv and Dev's as good a berth as you'd get—thirty bob a week, and a whole holiday on Saturday—to say nothing of off times like this—you must be mad, dearie!" Then something further in her sister's remark aroused comment.

"And what do you mean by people of 'another class'? Why, aren't we as good as anyone—if we had their money?"

Katherine Bush put down her empty cup before she replied:

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"No, we're not—and if you weren't as ignorant as you are, dear old Tild, you'd know it. There are lots and lots of classes above us—they mayn't be any cleverer—indeed, they are often fools, and many aren't any richer—but they're ladies and gentlemen."

Matilda felt personally insulted.

"Upon my word, Kitten!—If you are such a poor thing that you don't consider yourself a young lady—I am not. I always did say that you would pick up rubbishy ideas bothering after those evening lectures and French classes—instead of coming with Glad and Bert and me to the cinema, like a decent Christian—it was a low sort of thing to do, I think, and looked as if we'd none of us had a proper education—and all they have done for you is to unsettle your mind, my dear—so I tell you."

Katherine Bush smiled complacently and looked at her sister straight in the eyes in her disconcerting way, which insured attention. Matilda knew that she would now have to listen probably to some home truths. She could manage Gladys very well in spite of her giggles and irresponsibility, but she had never been able to have the slightest influence upon Katherine from the moment of their mother's death, years before, when she had taken her place as head of the orphaned household. Katherine had always been odd. She had a vile temper as a child, and was silent and morose, and at constant war with that bright boy Bert, loved of the other sisters: Matilda remembered very well many scenes when Katherine had puzzled her. She was so often scornful and disapproving, and used to sit there with a book scowling at them on Sundays when a rowdy friend or two came in to tea, and never once joined in the chorus of the comic songs they sang, while she simply loathed the gramophone records.

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"You say awfully silly things sometimes, Tild," Katherine announced calmly. "There would not be any good in my considering myself a young lady, because at my present stage anyone who really knew would know that I am not—but I mean to become one some day. You can do anything with will."

Matilda bridled.

"I don't know what more of a lady you could be than we all are—Why, Mabel Cawber always says that we are the most refined family of the whole lot at Bindon's Green—and Mabel ought to know surely!"

"Because her father was a solicitor, and she has never done a stroke of work in her life?" Katherine smiled again—it made Matilda feel uncomfortable.

"Mabel is a perfect lady," she affirmed indignantly.

"I will be able to tell you about that in a year's time, I expect," Katherine said, reflectively. "At present, I am not experienced enough to say, but I strongly feel that she is not. You see, Tild, you get your ideas of things from the trash you read—and from the ridiculous nonsense Fred and Albert talk after they come home from those meetings at the National Brotherhood Club—fool's stuff about the equality of all men —"

"Of course we are all equal!" broke in Matilda, still ruffled.

Katherine Bush smiled again. "Well, I wish you could see the difference between Fred and Bert and those gentlemen I see through the glass screen! They have all got eyes and noses and legs and arms in common, but everything else is different, and if you knew anything about evolution, you'd understand why."

"Should I!" indignantly.

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"Yes. It is the something inside the head, something in the ideas, produced by hundreds of years of different environment and a wider point of view—and it is immensely in the little customs and manners of speech and action. If you had ever seen and spoken to a real gentleman, Tild, you would grasp it."

Matilda was quite unmollified and on the defensive.

"You can't have two more honourable, straightforward young fellows than our brothers in no family in England, and I expect lots of your gents borrowing money are as crooked as can be!"

Katherine became contemplative.

"Probably—the thing I mean does not lie in moral qualities—I suppose it ought to—but it doesn't—We had a real sharp last week, and to look at and to hear him talk he was a perfect gentleman, with refined and easy manners; he would never have done anything in bad taste like Fred and Bert often do."

"Bad taste!" snorted Matilda.

"Yes—we all do. No gentleman ever tells people in words that he is one—Fred and Bert say it once a week, at least. They lay the greatest stress on it. No real gentlemen get huffy and touchy; they are too sure of themselves and do not pretend anything, they are quite natural and you take them as they are. They don't do one thing at home at ease, and another when they are dressed up, and they aren't a bit ashamed of knowing anyone. Fred does not speak to Ernie Gibbs when he is out with Mabel, although they were at school together!"

"Ernie Gibbs! Why, Kitten, he is only a foreman in the Bindon Gas Works! Of course not! Mabel *would* take on!"

Matilda thought her sister was being too stupid!

"Yes, I am sure she would—that is just it——"

"And quite right, too!"

Katherine shrugged her shoulders. There was not much use in arguing with Matilda, she felt, Matilda who had never thought out any problem for herself in her life—Matilda who had not the privilege of knowing any attractive Lord Algys!—and who therefore could not have grasped the immeasurable gulf that she, Katherine, had found lay between his class and hers!

"They say Fred is a capable auctioneer because father and grandfather were—you hear people saying 'it is in the blood'—Well, why is it, Tild?—Because heredity counts just as it does in animals, of course. So why, if a man's father and grandfather, and much further back still, have been gentlemen commanding their inferiors, and fulfilling the duties of their station, should not the traits which mean that show as plainly as the auctioneer traits show in Fred——?"

Matilda had no answer ready, she felt resentful; but words did not come, so Katherine went on:

"You can't jump straight to things; they either have to come by instinct through a long line of forebears, or you have to have intelligence enough to make yourself acquire the outward signs of them, through watching and learning from those who you can see for yourself have what you want."

Matilda called for another cup of cocoa—she disliked these views of Katherine's.

"You see," that young woman went on, "no one who is a real thing ever has to tell people so in words. Liv and Dev don't have to say they are two of the sharpest business men in London—anyone can realise it who knows them. You, and all of us, don't have to tell people we belong to the lower middle class, because it is plain to be seen, but we would have to tell them we were ladies and gentlemen, because we are not. Lord Al—oh! any lord who comes to our office—does not have to say he is an aristocrat; you can see it for yourself in a minute by his ways. It is the shams that always keep shouting. Mabel Cawber insists upon it that she is a tip-top swell; Fred thinks he is deceiving everyone by telling them what a gentleman he is, and by not speaking to Ernie Gibbs, who is an awfully good fellow. Emily says she is a splendid general, and can't even light a fire, and won't learn how to. George Berker in our office says he is a first-class clerk, and muddles his accounts. Everything true speaks for itself. I always mean to be perfectly true, and win out by learning."

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Matilda, though somewhat crushed, was still antagonistic.

"I'm sure I hope you'll succeed then, my dear!" she snapped.

"Yes, I shall." Katherine fired her bomb. "It may take me some time, but that does not matter, and the first step I have already taken is that I am leaving Liv and Dev's on Friday—and, I hope, going to be secretary to Sarah Lady Garribardine, at a hundred and ten Berkeley Square, and Blissington Court, Blankshire!"

"Well, there! You could have knocked me over with a feather!" as Matilda told Gladys later in the evening. "And wasn't it like Katherine never telling us a thing about it until everything was almost settled!" But at the moment, she merely breathed a strangled:

"Oh, my!"

"If I get it, I go to my new situation next week. I had a tremendous piece of luck coming across it."

"Well, however did you do it, Kitten?" Matilda demanded.

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"I saw an advertisement in the *Morning Post*—it was quite a strange one, and seemed to be advertising for a kind of *Admirable Crichton*—someone who could take down shorthand at lightning speed, and typewrite and speak French—and read aloud, and who had a good knowledge of English literature, and thoroughly knew the duties of a secretary."

"Oh! My!" said Matilda again, "but you can't do half of those things, Kitten—we none of us know French, do we!"

Katherine smiled; how little her family understood her in any way!

"I wrote first and said they seemed to want a great deal, but as I had been with Livingstone and Devereux for three years, and accustomed to composing every sort of letter that a moneylender's business required, I thought I could soon become proficient in the other things."

"Well, I never! What cheek!"

"Then I got an answer saying Lady Garribardine liked my communication, and if I proved satisfactory in appearance, and had some credentials, she would engage me immediately, because her secretary, who had been with her for years, had gone to be married—the salary would be ninety pounds a year with a rise, so it's a slight move up, anyway, as I am to be kept, and live in the house."

"You are cocksure of getting it, Katherine?"

"Yes—I mean to—I am going to see her on Saturday."

"And what are your references besides Liv and Dev? Some folks don't like moneylenders."

"I wrote and said I had no others—but they would testify to my capacity. Liv nearly had a fit when I gave my notice—he almost cried to get me to stay on. I like the old boy—he is a good sort, and will tell the truth about me."

"And did they answer?"

"Yes—just to say I was to come for the interview on Saturday."

"They want to see you, anyway—what is the family, I wonder?"

Here Katherine recited the details from Debrett, in which volume she was very proficient.

"An old lady, then," Matilda commented, "and with no children except a married daughter! That will be easier for you—but why is she called 'Sarah'? I often have wondered about that, when I read names in the *Flare*. Why 'Sarah Lady Something'—and not plain Lady Something?"

"It's when the man in possession is married and you are not his mother," Katherine told her, "and if you are, and still have your Christian name tacked on, it is to make you sound younger. Dev says dowagers are quite out of fashion. Every widow is 'Sarah' or 'Cordelia' now in the high society, and when he first went to business, there were only two or three. Queen Victoria never stood any nonsense."

Matilda was very interested.

"Whatever will you do about your clothes, Kitten? You have nothing nobby and smart like Gladys. She could lend you her purple taffeta if you weren't so tall."

"Oh, I manage all right. I'll have a talk with Gladys to-night; she sees the right sort of people at Ermantine's, and can tell me what to get—and I'll buy it to-morrow in my lunch hour."

"Well, I am just rattled," Matilda admitted. "Then you'll be leaving home quite, dearie?"

"Yes, Tild—and I shan't be sorry except to be parted from you—but I daresay I shall be able to come and see you now and then."

Matilda looked tearful.

"You never were one of us, Katherine."

"No, I know I never was. I often have wondered what accident pitchforked me in among you, always the discordant note and the wet blanket. I hark back to someone, I suppose—I've always determined to get out, when I was ready."

"You never did care for us—never, Kitten."

Katherine Bush remained quite unmoved.

"No, never for the others—but always for you, Tild—and I'll never forget you, dear. There, don't be a donkey and cry—the people at the next table are looking at you."

This argument she knew would calm her sister—who was intensely sensitive to everyone's opinion.

"And supposing they don't take you?" Matilda suggested, in a still quavering voice, "and you've given notice to Liv and Dev—I call it awfully risky."

"Then I will look out for something else—I am determined to make a change, and see a new world, whatever happens."

After supper that evening, Gladys was invited up to the warmed attic with Matilda, an honour she duly appreciated. They all stood in irritated awe of Katherine.

"I want to talk about clothes, Glad," she said, when they neared the tiny fireplace. "I have told Tild I am going about a new berth on Saturday."

This caused the same astonishment and exclamations as Matilda had already indulged in—and when calm was restored, Gladys was only too pleased to show her superior knowledge.

"I don't want to hear about any of those actresses you dress, or those ladies who look like them, I want to know what a real, quiet, well-bred countess, say, would have, Glad."

Miss Gladys Bush smiled contemptuously.

"Oh, a regular frump, you mean—like the ones we can't persuade to have tight skirts when they are first the fashion, or loose ones when it changes—that is easy enough—it is to get 'the look' that is difficult."

"They probably would not engage me if I had 'the look,'" Katherine remarked cynically.

"You'd better have something like we made for Lady Beatrice Strobridge last week, then," Gladys suggested. "One of our hands can copy it at home, but there won't be time by Saturday. You'd better wear your best blue serge and get a new hat for the first meeting."

"Lady Beatrice Strobridge must be the Hon. Gerard Strobridge's wife, my new employer's late husband's nephew. Strobridge is the Garribardine name." Katherine had looked up diligently the whole family, and knew the details of each unit by heart.

"She only got married two years ago," Gladys continued. "She was Thorvil, before—Lady Beatrice Thorvil."

"Wife of the present man's younger brother," quoted Katherine, remembering Debrett. "He is about thirty-five; the present man is forty."

"She is a regular dowdy, anyway," Gladys remarked. "One of those—we have a bunch of them—that wants the things, and yet with their own touch on them, spoiling the style. They come together generally, and do make a lot of fuss over each other—calling 'darlings' and 'precious' all the time—fit to make me and the girls die laughing with their nonsense."

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"What is she like—good-looking?" Katherine asked. She only questioned when she wanted specific information, never idly, and it was as well to know everything about her possible new employer's family.

"She would not be bad if she did not stoop so. She hasn't got 'the walk' neither, no more than the 'look'; sometimes she's all right—at least, the things are all right when they go home, but she adds bits herself afterwards, and spoils them."

Here Matilda interrupted.

"Anyway, she is one of the ladies you'll see in your new place, Kitten. I'd certainly have that same dress, it will just show them you are as good as they, if you have an Ermantine model."

But Katherine thought differently. She agreed she would have something in the same subdued style as Lady Beatrice would have chosen, but not the actual copy, and after settling details the other two sisters left her for bed.

When they had gone, she sat by the fire and looked deeply into it, while she thought for a few moments. Then she drew a letter from her blouse and reread it. It was from Lord Algy. A sweet little love epistle. Just to tell her he could not possibly wait for the whole month before seeing her—and was coming up to town the following week—and would not she lunch with him at the old place—and perhaps stay with him again at the Great Terminus? It ended with protestations of passionate devotion.

No—never again—she had tasted of the cup of bliss, and Fate was asking her to pay no price. She must have courage now to renounce all further pleasure. Once was an experience, twice would be weakness—which could grow into a habit—and thence lead to an abyss which she shuddered to think of.

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Katherine Bush had never read Théophile Gautier's masterpiece—but there was something in her character, as Lord Algy had remarked, which resembled *Mademoiselle de Maupin's*.

She went to her little writing-case and got out a sheet of paper, and then, in her firm round hand which looked like a man's, she wrote him these few lines:

Dear Algy,

I want you to forget all about me—I loved our little trip, but I am never going on another. I shall have left Liv and Dev's before you get back, and you won't see me again. With best love always.

K. B.

She folded it, put it in the envelope—addressed it and stamped it—then she put it ready to post in the morning.

Her face was white and set. It takes a strong will to renounce tangible present happiness, however profound the beliefs in the future may be.

CHAPTER IV

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Sarah Lady Garribardine said to her nephew, Gerard Strobridge, who had been lunching with her on that Saturday:

"You must go now, G. I am expecting a new secretary."

"How will you get on without Miss Arnott, Seraphim? I thought she was irreplaceable."

"So she is—I am interviewing quite a new type—she has been a moneylender's

shorthand typist."

Mr. Strobridge raised his eyebrows—and smiled his whimsical smile. His Aunt Sarah always was original.

"Then I'll leave you—Beatrice has at last made up her mind not to chuck the Arberrys, so we motor down at three o'clock."

"Has Beatrice been unusually tiresome?"

"N-no—she has been writing odes all the morning."

"You ought never to have married, G.—You would not have if Alice Southerwood had not become a widow—a man can't always face his obvious obligations."

Gerard Strobridge laughed.

"Then I shall kiss your hand and say farewell until next week—wisest of aunts!"

He suited the action to the word, and left the room just as the butler was about to open the door and announce:

"Miss Bush, Your Ladyship."

He glanced quickly at Katherine—this was the young person who would take the estimable Miss Arnott's place, he supposed. She was quite ordinary looking.—He went on down the stairs.

"Come and sit here in the light, please," Lady Garribardine said, as Katherine Bush came towards her.

It was a very well-arranged Katherine, in the best blue serge—and a new hat—not of Gladys' choosing. The mop of hair was twisted tight without the least pretension to express "the look,"—some grey suede gloves—bought in Paris by Lord Algy—were on the wonderful hands which remained perfectly still in their owner's lap.

"How old are you?" asked Lady Garribardine by way of a beginning.

"I was twenty-two last September." There was not a trace of nervousness in Katherine Bush's deep voice—indeed she felt none.

"And what does your family consist of—what is your status in life?" Lady Garribardine felt perhaps she ought to ascertain this before going further.

"We are just middle class. My father was an auctioneer at Bindon's Green where we live. He and my mother are both dead. I have a sister who is a saleswoman at Madame Ermantine's, the others are at home. My eldest brother has taken father's place, the younger one is in a bank."

"And how long have you been at this business?"

"Since I was nineteen—before that I kept the accounts at a pork butcher's."

"Indeed!—And what makes you think you would be capable of filling my situation?"

"It is not very easy to be a competent moneylender's secretary and a shorthand writer."

"No—perhaps not."

"Mr. Livingston and Mr. Devereux will tell you that I did not make a failure of it."

"Really?"

Katherine was silent.

"*Really*," Lady Garribardine repeated again. "You mean that you think you can pick up things quickly."

"Yes."

"It is certainly an advantage. I hoped to find something exceptional when I advertised."

"Yes, I noticed that—and it was because your advertisement was unusual that I applied for the post."

She rather wondered if she ought to have put in any "Ladyships"; she remembered Hanson, Lord Algy's valet, was very prodigal of such marks of respect—that is what had deterred her. Liv and Dev often used them, too—to new and prosperously connected clients—but she did not wish to be subservient more than was necessary. She would watch and listen—as she had watched about the oysters.

"Can you read aloud?"

Lady Garribardine was fixing her with her flashing brown eyes, which contrasted so unfavourably with the bronze-gold wig she wore so bravely.

"I have never tried. If I did it wrong the first time and you corrected me, I expect I wouldn't do it twice."

"That is something—and your voice is refined—you did not acquire that at the—er—pork butcher's?"

"No, I acquired it by listening to members of the upper classes who came to borrow money—I had a cockney twang like my sisters, I daresay, in the beginning."

"That shows you can learn things."

"Yes, it is only stupid people who can't."

"You are not stupid, then?"

"No, but Mr. Livingston or Mr. Devereux can tell you; either will speak for me."

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Lady Garribardine was amused; she digressed a little from her cross-examination.

"You found Jews agreeable to work with?"

"Very. You know where you are with them. They do not pretend, and they are very generous."

"In-deed!"

"Yes—people have a preconceived notion of Jews, I find—quite faulty as a rule—they know what to pay for—they are far less fools than other races. I respect them."

"That is most interesting."

Katherine was silent again.

"Why did you leave them?"—after a pause in which Lady Garribardine was pitilessly scrutinising her possible secretary.

"Because I had learned all that I could there, and I wanted a new vista——"

"And you think you would find it with me?"

"With any lady in your world—you can learn things wherever you go, if you wish to."

"Very true. And how about French—you speak that?"

Katherine Bush reddened a little. A memory came to her of the profound shock that the French of Paris had been to her ear.

"I can write it quite correctly—but I have discovered that my pronunciation is ridiculous." She confessed it quite frankly.

"How did that happen?"

"I taught it to myself—mostly—and then I heard it spoken—and I knew mine would sound wrong."

"Do you think you could overcome that?"

"Yes, if I were in France long enough."

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"Have you travelled?"

"No—not really. I have been to Paris for a holiday once—I have only learnt about places."

"And English literature?"

"It is the thing I care most for—I have read a great many books. I read usually until about one in the morning."

"Have you a good temper? You are not uppish, eh?"

"I suppose it depends—I know that when you take money to do a thing you have got to do it, and put up with orders and manners that you would not stand for one second if you were the person paying."

"That is quite a good definition of respectful service."

"It is common sense."

"You appear to have some of that."

Again silence.

"I have not a good temper!" Lady Garribardine laughed—she was greatly diverted.

"I guessed not."

"How?"

"I had to read characters quickly at Livingston and Devereux's——"

"You are observant?"

"I think so——"

"Can you play the piano?"

"I could once, and I had a queer gift for reading the notes—but I have never practised since we had a gramophone—I grew to loathe music."

"That is hopeful——"

Then Her Ladyship got up and went to her writing-table, terribly littered with all sorts of papers. She dived among a conglomerate mass—and picked up two letters.

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"Would you oblige me by answering these, Miss—er—Bush? I could then better judge of your capabilities."

Katherine took them; on one envelope was written in a spidery hand in pencil, "Refuse gracefully;" upon the other, "Get out as best can."

She looked for a portion of the blotting pad which was clear enough to use, then she sat down and selected a pen, while she glanced up with her steady wise eyes.

"Has Your Ladyship any particular paper for this sort of thing?" Here was a suitable moment for the use of the honorific she felt.

"Yes, that white paper with the coronet in plain black and the address."

Lady Garribardine sat down by the fire and stared into it. She had not been so interested in a specimen of humanity for years.

Katherine Bush read the letters through carefully and the first one a second time, then she began to write:

To the Secretary of the League for Discouraging Polygamy among the Mohammedans of India:

Dear Sir,

I am asked by Sarah Lady Garribardine, to tell you that while sympathising deeply with the admirable object of your League, she thinks the field over which it must obviously be spread is too vast for a small contribution to be of much avail, and therefore, while thanking you for your interesting papers upon the subject, she is sorry that she is unable to forward you any more substantial help.

I am, dear sir,
Yours faithfully,
KATHERINE BUSH (Secretary).

The other letter ran:

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To the Matron of the Nonconformist Detention and Penitential Hostel for Lost Women:

Madam,

I beg to inform you that Sarah Lady Garribardine is leaving town shortly and therefore cannot avail herself of the pleasure and honour of visiting your useful institution. She desires me to express to you her thanks for your invitation.

I remain, madame,
Yours faithfully,
K. BUSH (Sec.).

She looked carefully to see what style of address was necessary and wrote out the envelope—and when all was ready she rose and took them to the young-old lady by the fire.

She stood quite still while they were perused, and then smiled inwardly when Lady Garribardine gave a cynical chuckle.

"I think you will do very well, Miss Bush! Please find some stamps, and put them in that basket to be posted—and—er—you can ring the bell—I shall expect you—bag and baggage—on Wednesday next."

This was abrupt, but Katherine Bush felt it was what it should be.

"You do not require the testimony of Mr. Livingston or Mr. Devereux?"

"No—I can judge for myself—er—Good morning."

The bell had been answered almost instantly and so, bowing, Katherine Bush followed the servant down the stairs, and soon found herself in the street, a strange sense of content in her heart.

She knew the West End very well—and walked briskly along Hill Street and so on past Dorchester House—into the Park. All the leaves were off the trees. The November day was beautifully fine and bright and movement was a pleasure.

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So the first part of her new game was won at all events.

She reviewed the whole set of impressions she had taken. Firstly, that the house was a fine one—it had "the look," if houses could be said to show this quality. That is, it was beautifully kept and filled with what she guessed from study at the Wallace Collection must be rare and costly furniture. There were some things she thought ugly—but "the look" was often ugly, she knew by experience—from Gladys' verbose descriptions to Ethel and Matilda.

Apart from "the look" it had an air of distinction. It was the abode of denizens of Lord Algy's world—that was evident. The man she had met on the threshold of the

morning room door was certainly of his class—and rather nice-looking.

As for her future employer, she was a new specimen to her. Katherine meant what the French call a *type*, but she did not know this expression.

"She is certainly over sixty," she said to herself. "She is a dark woman naturally, and her hair ought to be grey. The whole thing is spoilt by that silly golden wig—curled tight like Royalty's. She would have quite a nice figure for her age if she were not all pushed up by those old-fashioned corsets. Why had she such big ears and such red hands for so great a lady? Her rings were buried in fat. The circulation was evidently wrong somewhere. As for her voice—it was one of *the* voices! The female counterpart of the echoes from over the glass screen—and the manner was quite as casual.

"Just as insolent as I shall be when I hold the same sort of place. She was born to it—I shall have acquired it—we both when we are dead will be said to have well filled our situations."

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Thus mused Katherine Bush on a November day in Hyde Park—and turning out of Albert Gate suddenly she almost walked into the arms of Lord Algy.

CHAPTER V

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"Darling pet! What a delightful surprise!"

"Algy! Where did you spring from?"

Then they both drew quick breaths.

"Come back towards the Serpentine, I must talk to you. Your horrid little note made me feel quite wretched, and I have been to Liv and Dev's to-day, and they refused to give me your address—why were you such a little cat, darling?"

"I was not a cat, Algy."

They had turned and were walking towards the Row.

"I meant what I wrote—I want you to forget all about me. Joys can't go on—I have other things to do, dear."

"But it is perfectly brutal of you, Katherine, when I love you so—and you love me—at least you told me that you did!"

Katherine Bush's heart was beating very fast—would she have courage to keep to her determination now that she saw him face to face?

He looked so extremely delectable, here in the lowering sunshine. He was everything that a woman could desire in the way of a lover.

"I am in the hell of a mess, too," he sighed. "My father has cut up awfully rough about my transactions with Liv and Dev—and I had a bad week at Doncaster. I am in for a regular facer and am obliged to agree to be transferred to the Egyptian army for three years. Everything, even you, are against me."

"No, I am not, Algy." There was quick sympathy and distress in her deep voice. "I hate to think that you are unhappy, and you know that I would help you in any way I could."

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"Then be kind to me, darling—and don't say you never want to see me again."

Katherine Bush felt this was a supreme occasion—and that she must not waver. She so longed to comfort him, to let him kiss her and forget all his cares. The cynical side of her character, even at this moving moment, whispered that it was fortunate that they were out of doors!

"When do you start for Egypt?"

"As soon as I can get ready—my mother and sisters are going to winter out there, but probably I shall be sent to the Soudan!"

Katherine had heard that they killed lions or something in that part of the world, she knew that sport meant a great deal in Lord Algy's life.

"You will get some kind of shooting, won't you?" she suggested by way of consolation.

But Lord Algy looked full of misery. They had walked on, taking a side path and were now in sight of two chairs.

"Let us go and sit down," he pleaded. "I want to look at you. I can't, I won't believe, that you don't mean ever to be my own girl any more."

"Algy, I do mean it—just as much for you as for myself."

They had reached the chairs and sat down, Lord Algy pushed his hat to the back of his head; his immaculately brushed hair glistened bronze in the setting sun, and his forehead was puckered with distress. His attractive eyes sought hers with a fond persistence. Katherine Bush was obliged to clench her hands tight in the pockets of

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her coat.

"Why, what in Heaven's name for? Why must we part?" he demanded fiercely. "Katherine, I have missed you awfully—I have not known what to do with myself—and before this bother fell upon me, I had determined to come up to ask you to marry me—we'd be awfully happy married, darling—like we were in Paris. I have never loved anything half so much as our time together."

"It is dear of you to say that, but I would not marry you for anything in the world, it would spoil everything, destroy a memory that has not got any flaw in it.—Listen to me, Algy—I went with you because I wanted to—I wanted to understand life, and find out what is worth while, and what men are like. I am only at the beginning of existence and I intend to learn most of its meaning before I die. I thought that whatever cold, tiresome path I might have to follow afterwards, to carry out my scheme of things, I would at least have some good hours to remember with you, so I went deliberately—but I never meant to do it again. Let's both be grateful for what we have had and part friends."

"I simply can't," protested Lord Algy, growing more and more full of emotion, as he felt the attainment of his desires receding from him. "I call it awfully cold-blooded of you, Katherine, and I can't and won't consent to it. I want you—I want you now—to-night," and he stretched out his arms. "I am sick with longing for you—I mean it, darling. I have been away with other girls often before, Jack Kilcourcy and I stayed down the river with Laure de Laine and Mary Green this June. Laure was my friend, and she simply wasn't a patch on you, pet, in any way, and I didn't care a straw when it was over, although they are such celebrities, and it did make Berty Aberhams so mad, and was such a score off the bounder. I have never felt anything like I feel for you, darling—I want you to be my wife."

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As he spoke, something withered a little in Katherine Bush; his unconscious placing of the affair galled her, although she knew that it was perfectly just; she had gone with him under no other pretence than had gone those ladies of the Frivolity Theatre. She analysed his simple directness, and appreciated the triumph conveyed to her in the final expression of his feelings, but it made her task rather easier. She saw so plainly what a renewal of their relations would mean. She looked and looked at him, seated dejectedly there beside her, and then she spoke, and her voice was full of quiet determination and very deep.

"You must be a man, Algy, dear, and go on and make something of your life, as I mean to do. You must be a great soldier. You come of such a grand old family, you ought to remember what all your ancestors have done, and try to be as fine as they were—It's so paltry to drift—You can remember me if you want to—as someone who wasn't weak, even though I am only a common girl, and much beneath you in class. If I was of your class I should now be tempted to marry you, and then I expect with my sort of nature I'd just shove you on into doing something great. But I couldn't as it is, all my time would be taken up with trying to educate myself to keep my own head above water, and trying to suppress my humiliation at the contempt of your friends. You are only a younger son, and they would never forgive you, and we would just lead a hole and corner sort of existence in wretched poverty, and grow to have quarrels and not love at all."



"You must ... go on and make something of your life, as I mean to do."

He was going to interrupt her but she put her grey gloved hand across his lips. "No, dear, don't say anything—I want to go away from you with the memory that you have asked me to be your wife—I cannot be that for both our sakes, and it would cut me to the heart to hear you say words, now that you know this, which would mean that you want me, failing that, to go on with the other relation."—She paused, for a second, and leaning forward, looked straight into his face—"Algy, I want to remember you as a really perfect gentleman."

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She had gained her point with this last appeal. She saw that in an instant; he straightened himself and raised his handsome head, while the pride of race looked forth from his eyes for a moment, and then was quenched by the mist of tears.

"You are a splendid girl, Katherine," he said in a choking voice, "a far greater lady than the rotters I have to dance with at balls and see as my sisters' friends. You—by Jove! you have taught me to respect women. I should be honoured if you would marry me, and my family ought to be jolly glad to get such a good sort among them!"

"Thank you, Algy!" her voice now trembled, too. "Then you understand, dear, and I want you to do just as well as you can in Egypt—and, and—Algy, do try not to spend so much money, and when they have paid up for you, don't go and get back into any moneylender's hands. They are not all so honest as Liv and Dev. And now I want to say good-bye! I don't want to be silly and—cry—"

"Oh! it's too cruel!" he exclaimed, clasping his hands. "Katherine, you are like—only I think you mean to be kinder than she was—*Mademoiselle de Maupin!*"

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She stiffened, and her eyes, which were growing very misty, became hard and bright. She thought he was referring to another lady of the half-world—of Paris, perhaps, this time. He saw that she had misunderstood him, and he added quickly:

"Darling, she is in a book—by a fellow called Théophile Gautier—she was a wonder and so are you—I've always thought you were like her, but—Oh! why do we talk such bosh about books in our few moments, I want to tell you that I love you. Oh! Katherine, if you knew how much!"

The hardness all melted from the young woman's grey-green eyes and was replaced by a divine sweetness.

"Algy," she whispered, "it is good to hear that, and you know that I love you, too, and now good-bye, my dear—I can't bear any more."

She rose quickly and drew her hand away. She passionately longed for him to take her in his arms.

He got up also, he was extremely pale, and more than a suspicion of mist hung upon his eyelashes. As a young, splendid lover, he could not have looked more desirable,

but Katherine Bush never lost her head.

"Good-bye, Algy, and God bless you, dear."

Two people were approaching or he certainly would have kissed her—as it was they only wrung each other's hands and Katherine Bush turned and walked into the gathering twilight.

He watched her until she had disappeared and then sat down again. He felt quite wretched. She seemed to him to be a wonderful character.

"What an impotent wretch I am beside her," he said to himself. "But I should never be able to make the family see it. My mother would rather I married Elaine Percival with her five thousand a year—" then he laughed contemptuously—"Elaine Percival!"

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For the first time in his life he began to reason about things. Katherine Bush was of course perfectly right. Marriage would have been madness, as he had always known before he became too much in love to think; and he knew he had been lately only entirely influenced by selfish desire, and had never so much as faced what the consequences would be either to himself or to her. He had been quite ready to make a hash of both their lives just because he wanted her so badly for the moment. What an incredible fool—and she, this fine girl, had pulled them both on to firm land. He was not of the type who could contemplate asking a woman to wait for him while he worked to obtain a home for her; such an idea, of course, never entered his head. He had no romantic illusions of this sort, and once having realised the hopelessness of the case he had stoicism enough to accept it. But the things she had said affected him deeply. He would try not to drift.—He would pull himself together and do his best to become a fine soldier. They should not say he had grumbled over going to Egypt. Oh! if there could only be a war, that he might go out and fight! But wars would never happen again at this time of the world's day!

The present pleasant, easy stage of his life had come to an end, and unpleasant realities must be dealt with, but he would keep ever the memory of this splendid girl in his heart, the memory that she had not been weak or permitted him to make a fool of himself or of her.

And as he walked on out of the Park he felt a new self-reliance and determination.

Meanwhile, Katherine Bush had got into an omnibus and was on the way to Victoria, and once arrived at Laburnum Villa and her attic, she carefully wrote down on the little book which she kept for jottings, "*Mademoiselle de Maupin*," in a book by Théophile Gautier," while her thoughts ran:

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"He did not say what was the name of the story, but I can read the whole lot this man wrote. I'll go to a French library on Monday."

Then she sat down in her armchair by the fire and reviewed the entire chain of events.

She was embarked upon a new current which would help to carry her to some definite goal—she was out of the backwater. It was not a voyage to Cythera, but youth was at the prow, and ambition, not pleasure, at the helm; and there live philosophers who say these two things bring more lasting good than all the bliss that is to be snatched from the other combination.—Who knows!—They may be right!

Matilda was nervous with excitement when after supper she was told of the definite settlement of her sister's affairs.

"So you are really engaged, Kitten!" she exclaimed. "Now, do tell me all about it. There's a dear—and what was she like, and is it a grand house and are you going to be properly treated as a real lady?"

"Yes, I am engaged. I am to go in on Wednesday, 'bag and baggage,' as Lady Garribardine said."

"My! what a vulgar expression for a lady to use, Kitten—are you sure she's all right?"

Matilda hated what was not genteel.

"Oh! yes, Tild—she's all right—and the house is beautiful—and, yes, what you'd call grand—and you may be sure they will treat me exactly in the way I deserve to be treated. If you aren't respected it's your own fault—people don't make a mistake as to whom they are with a second time, even if they do the first. If anyone gets put upon continually, or gets snubbed, it's her own fault."

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Matilda totally disagreed.

"There you are quite wrong. Why, look at Gladys! Bob treats her anyhow sometimes of a Sunday, and her as good as gold."

"Well, she has made him think that he can by not stopping it in the beginning. It is never a question of goodness as I often tell you about things, it is a question of force. Goodness does not count unless it is so perfect that it is a force, too—like Christ's."

"Oh, my! What awful things you do say, Katherine!"

Matilda felt so uncomfortable when her sister spoke of what she thought ought only

to be mentioned in church!

"No, I merely tell the truth, it is the weaklings who do all the harm in the world, never the bad or good."

"Well, what was Lady Garribardine like?" Matilda was tired of abstract speculations.

"She was tall and rather stout, and had a golden wig—and black eyes—and she understood things. She knows how to order her house, because the servants had the same awe for her as the office-boy has for Liv. Her writing-table was awfully untidy, though. I expect she has not much method, and it is just personality and temper which causes her to be obeyed."

"You won't stand being ordered about ever, Kitten?"

"It will depend on how much good I feel I am getting out of it. If the place and people in it are being lessons for me, I shan't mind what she says—I shall stick it out and try never really to deserve a scolding."

"Was there anyone else there?" Matilda was still curious.

"Yes—a man left when I was going in. He had a clever face. I shall like him, I believe, if he comes there often."

"You won't go falling in love with any of them gentlemen, Kitten," Matilda pleaded affectionately.

She felt that things might develop as they did in the cases of the innocent actresses and governesses and the villains in her serials.

"Have I ever been given to falling in love?" Katherine asked with a humorous flash in her eyes.—"You have not seen me tumble into the arms of Charlie Prodggers or Percy Watson—have you?"

"No, dearie, but these gentlemen in your new biz might be different and might not mean so honest by you. I do wish I could hope to see you settled with Charlie some day. He is such a dear fellow, and very rising. He'll be head clerk at the estate agent's he is in very soon, and could give you a comfortable home like this is for your own; and no need to be hanging on for years like Glad and Bob."

"Can you picture me settled in a comfortable home with Charlie Prodggers, Tild!" Katherine laughed out at the idea, it seemed so comic to her. "He is as great a snob as Fred, and even more ignorant. I would not let him button my boots, much less call himself my husband! I'd as soon be dead as tied to that! At Brixton, too! With the prospect of being the mother of numbers of sandy-haired little Prodggers. What an outlook!"

Matilda was hurt. They had never spoken in words upon this secret hope of hers, but she had often hinted at it, and Katherine had been silent and seemingly preoccupied, but not actually scornful, and to have the scheme denounced with derision and the happy picture scoffed at was a blow to her which she could not bear in silence. She felt indignant.

"Charlie Prodggers is good enough for any young lady. Mabel herself thinks highly of him. He is one of the few of Fred's gentlemen friends that she thinks worthy to be asked into her mother's house—and I would have liked to have seen you married into her set safely before she becomes our sister-in-law, and can patronise you."

"Then I am afraid I must disappoint you, dear," Katherine now tried to hide her smile. "I have quite another game to play in life. But why don't you keep him for Ethel—she is nearly sixteen and will soon be looking out for a young man—or take him yourself?"

This was a new idea for Matilda. She had always been too loyal to dream of turning her eye in the direction of one whom she regarded as exclusively her sister's property.

She bridled a little—the picture was so glorious—if it only could be hers! Charlie Prodggers who scorned to be seen in anything but a frock coat, unless, of course, he went golfing—Charlie Prodggers who each Sunday attended the church parade in Hyde Park as a matter of course! But would he ever look at her? Proud, haughty fellow! and she not so pretty as Katherine—and not half so nobby as Gladys. But stranger things than that happened in her serials, and she need not feel that it was quite hopeless. But how could Kitten willingly relinquish such triumph? There must be something of a suffragette in her after all, since no girl in her senses could ask more of fortune!

The Sunday was spent by Katherine in packing up all her belongings and in selecting the books she meant to take with her, a volume or two of Voltaire, Bacon's Essays, Kant and Bergson, and a new acquisition, Otto Weininger's "Sex and Character." This latter had interested her deeply. There was a great deal of biting truth in his analysis of women, and it was probably also true that they did not possess souls; but she totally disagreed with his ending of the matter that the solution of the problem lay in a voluntary annihilation of the human species through abstinence from procreation. She, for her part, thought that it was taking things out of the Hand of God, or the

Divine Essence, or whatever the great Principle should be called—and her eminently practical mind failed to see the use of such far-reaching speculations. "The poor man was mad, of course," she said, as she closed the book again before packing it. "But I will try to watch the feminine traits in myself and crush them. He has taught me that amount, in any case. And if I have no soul, I have a brain and a will, and so I am going to obtain as much as a woman can get with those two things. As for the infinite, men are welcome to that, as far as I am concerned!"

She looked forward with deep interest to perusing the story with *Mademoiselle de Maupin* in it. What could it be about? She had hardly thought that Lord Algy had read at all, he never spoke of books—but it was perhaps not surprising; they had been always too occupied in more agreeable converse. How good it was to remember all that, even though never in her life she should have such foolish sweetness again!

She had not the slightest sentiment about "leaving home"; she would have found such a thing quite ridiculous. On the contrary, a sense of exaltation filled her. She was going forever from this cramped, small attic and the uncongenial environment of the house. And she must hold herself in stern command and never waste an opportunity to improve herself in manner and mind. Of course, she might be liable to make a few mistakes at first, and the work might be hard, but if will was strong and emotions were checked, the road to success and development of her personality could not be a long one. And when she had gained freedom—how splendidly would she use it! There should be no false values for her!

Her new dress, the one in the style of Lady Beatrice Strobbridge, would be home by the Tuesday night, and she had got a "dressy" blouse from Oxford Street, in case she should ever have to appear in the evenings. She would do very well, she felt.

The family, with the exception of Matilda, were not sorry that she was departing. The father had left Laburnum Villa and a certain sum to keep it up for the benefit of the whole bunch of them; and when Mr. Frederick Bush would move into a house of his own with the refined Mabel Cawber, Gladys and Bert and Ethel looked forward to an uninterrupted time of jollity, unclouded by Katherine's aloofness and contempt.

Matilda alone grieved in secret. She thought Katherine was superior to them all in spite of her reserve, and the last evening, while she sat with her by the attic fire, she told her so.

"No, I am not, Tild—I am not superior. I am just different—all our aims are as wide apart as the poles. Glad and Ethel and the boys never want to learn anything—they resent the thought that there could be anything that they do not know. Their whole attitude is resentful towards any knowledge. They like to browse on deceiving themselves over every question and aspect of life. So they will all just stay where they are. Fred, an auctioneer, henpecked by Mabel; Bert, a clerk. Poor Glad, the downtrodden drudge of Bob Hartley, and Ethel probably something of the same. You, dear old Tild, will be a sentimental old maid looking after the others' children—because you are entirely a 'mother woman'—unless you take Charlie Prodggers, as I said the other day, and have heaps of little Prodggers! Oh! it is all just respectable, comfortable squalor—and words won't express how glad I am to get out of it!"

Matilda was quite incensed.

"I'd rather be a lady, however poor, in my own circle, and treated as such there, than a servant in a grand house as you're going to be, Kitten. I'd let them see I'd be above taking their orders!"

She hoped this taunt would tell, but Katherine only smiled.

"Poor, dear old Tild," she said. "You do not know, perhaps, that it is a wise man who understands how to obey those placed over him, and to exact the same obedience from those beneath. When I have learned my lessons and have obtained a place of command, then I shall not only enforce obedience, but I shall remove from my path anyone who crosses my will."

"Oh, my!" gasped Matilda.

"Do you suppose I argued with Liv and Dev and showed them that I would not take their orders? No, of course not; they valued me and raised my salary because I did what I was told to do. They were paying me money and were in a position to command. No one forced me to take their money; I went there of my own free will, and was to do specified things for a specified remuneration. I did them to the best of my ability, and so I am going on to something better. Lady Garribardine is paying me ninety pounds a year with a rise; and I am to be hers to command for certain things. When I have learned all that that situation can teach me, I shall get a larger and higher position, and so on until I reach my goal, when I shall rule—do not fear, Tild. *I shall rule.*"

"I daresay you will," Matilda admitted, awed.

Katherine's face had a strange, compelling force when she spoke thus.

"But we aren't all the same, Kitten. Glad, for instance, has more pride; look how she left Brown and Melbury's, where she was getting more than at Ermantine's, because

she would not take orders from the new manager they put over her department."

"That sort of pride was entirely worthy of Gladys' intelligence, and it had landed her with a less salary, no one's added respect, and not much to look forward to in the future." And then, with a burst of feeling, "Oh! Tild, if I only could make laws, I would enforce education to such an extent that there could not be left any fools like Gladys!"

Then she said good-night to Matilda and gently pushed her from the room, where she looked as though she meant to stay for another half-hour, and returning to her armchair, she began to read that book of Théophile Gautier's which she had bought on the Monday morning, and discovered that its title was simply "Mademoiselle de Maupin."

CHAPTER VI

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Lady Garribardine was having a tea-party with some good music, when Katherine Bush arrived. She realised immediately that it was stupid of her to have chosen the afternoon for her entrance into her new post, and Bronson, the dignified butler, left her in no doubt as to his view of the matter, as he directed the hurried transport of her luggage through the hall.

"Her Ladyship expected you this morning, miss," he said, severely.

"Then she should have told me at what hour I was to come," Katherine answered, quietly; "she mentioned none."

Bronson stared. Miss Arnott, clergyman's daughter though she was, would never have said a thing like that; she would have been nervous and apologetic in a minute, poor thing! But this young woman, whom Bronson had very good reason to believe, from what he had been able to gather, belonged merely to the lower middle class, had yet the audacity to give herself all the airs and calm assurance appertaining to a lady of the world!

Here the entrance of two guests took up his attention, a man and a woman.

Katherine stood back and waited for directions, while she watched closely. The man was the same that she had seen on the former occasion. The woman interested her; she was tall and droopy, with wide vague eyes, and a wisp of buffish chiffon about her neck inside her furs, which Bronson assisted her to remove. Then Katherine saw that she wore the dress which Gladys had described, and which in its general features had been taken more or less as the model for her own.

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This must be Lady Beatrice Strobridge.

"Gerard," the lady said, rather querulously, "I don't mean to stay for more than ten minutes—so don't get away into some difficult corner with Lăo, if you mean to leave with me."

The man answered with polite indifference.

"Bronson will see you safely to the motor; I promised my aunt to stay to hear Venzoni; he is sure to be late."

Then they went on up the marble stairs and a young footman was sent with Katherine Bush in the lift at the back of the hall.

"'Gerard'—it is a nice name—and he looks a nice man," she mused, while they were carried aloft, "and he is bored with his wife. Gladys was quite right; why did she have that rag of chiffon? It spoilt the whole dress."

The housekeeper met her when they arrived in the top passage, and took her under her wing.

"Some tea will be sent to your room, miss," she informed her, "and Her Ladyship said she would not have time to see you this evening, but you would doubtless have things to unpack and arrangements to make for yourself. Your trunks will be up in a minute."

And then she opened the door into a back room which faced west, so the afterglow of the setting sun made it not quite dark. There was a fire burning, and it all appeared gay when the housekeeper turned on the lights, with its old-fashioned rose-flowered chintz on a bright parrot-green ground. There was a scent of lavender, too, and Katherine Bush was pleasantly impressed; nothing looked cheap and gimcrack like the bedrooms in Laburnum Villa, she thought, or still more those at the house of Mabel Cawber, which were the envy of Matilda's soul. The furniture here was solid mahogany of early Victorian make, and the armchair gave the impression that it would be a pleasant place to rest in.

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When she was alone, Katherine Bush made herself take in every detail. Lady Garribardine had suggested that she was observant; she must remember that and

always cultivate this faculty, for she realised that every trifling thing would be different from anything she had ever known.

She liked the space of the place, she would not feel that she was tumbling over things. There was an empty bookcase awaiting her books, no doubt, and a big sensible writing-table there in the window where there would be plenty of light. The wardrobe was a monster, ample room in it for any amount of clothes! How pleasant not to have to put most things away in cardboard boxes under one's bed—often to find them discoloured by dust when taking them out again! And how pretty and quaint was the china on the washstand, matching the chintz. And the towels! Of finer quality—and nearly as many as there had been at the Palatial in Paris, which she had supposed was a case of French hotel extravagance and not what would be the custom in private life.

She fingered them softly. They were arranged peculiarly, too, with the top fold turned back so that one could pick them up in a second. Katherine Bush smiled cynically when she remembered her two coarse huckabacks, changed only every Saturday at Laburnum Villa!

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Everything gave the impression of spotless cleanliness and order. The brass hot-water can and the fender and the fire-irons all shone with superlative polishing.

Presently her tea was brought up by a housemaid in neatest black, with a cap and apron which would have made Em'ly snort with indignation had she been asked to wear them, so unmodish was their style! It was a joy to have a perfectly arranged tea-tray with shining silver and pretty porcelain, a tray all to herself, too, instead of a breakfast cup already poured out and mixed with milk and sugar, and probably a little of the contents upset into the saucer, which also contained a thick slice of bread and butter and a piece of cake! This is what she had always been accustomed to at the office, or on Saturday afternoons at home, while she read her books and a sister brought her tea up to her attic. And with the exceptions of a Lyons or an A. B. C. restaurant, and the brief time of glory in Paris, when chocolate was the order of the day, this one unappetizing cup had represented to her what many women look forward to as the most delightful meal of all.

The housemaid's manner had been quiet and respectful, as she drew the curtains and shut out the dying light, the muffin was done to a turn, and, above all, the tea tasted as tea had never tasted before. She was too ignorant as yet to know that it was China, not the rankest Ceylon which she was accustomed to, but she found it particularly nice, though rather weak. The whole room and the service and the atmosphere spoke of inhabitants who, somehow she knew, belonged to the same class as those whose voices she had always admired from beyond the half-high glass screen.

She sat and dreamed for a while before beginning her unpacking. Her heart ached underneath for Lord Algy—but aches are possible to bear when there is an element of triumph and self-glorification about them. She was quite aware that she had behaved remarkably well, and in a manner which Lord Algy could never look back upon but with respect. And to renounce happiness and union when the other person is clamouring for a continuance of relations, brings a great measure of consolation, because there is no wound to the self-love, no disastrous feeling that but for personal stupidity the ache need not be. There is even a melancholy pleasure in it, giving a pensive sadness not all pain.

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After a while, she began to arrange her clothes and books, and it had struck seven o'clock before all was complete and she had sat down again to finish "Mademoiselle de Maupin," which had so thrilled her far into the night.

She read French quite easily, but she was not accustomed to judge of its style, and as yet hardly appreciated *nuances*, but the story, the cynical, enchanting, wonderful story, seized hold of her imagination. As she read the last words, the book dropped into her lap and she stared in front of her. She saw what Lord Algy had meant—and it flattered her greatly. She understood entirely *Théodore's* feelings. How wise she had been to go! How she had grasped the salient points of life! And she, Katherine Bush, no great lady, but a daughter of the lower middle class, had evolved some such instincts herself—had played her game with equal coolness, and had lived through some such joys.

She thrilled and thrilled. The subtle, whimsical, polished wit of the book seemed to open some new vista of comprehension to her. She did not perceive its immorality. She would read it over again and again—and everything else this man had written. It seemed that she was newly awakened to a sense of power that she had not known she possessed. If only she could have read this before she had gone to Paris, what a help it would have been!

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"So Algy was not so ignorant, after all," she mused. "Of course, he must have thought I was, and so did not let me see that he himself was more than a fool—darling Algy." But, at all events, he had thought she was like *Théodore*, only kinder—that was good enough! Well, she would make that true some day, and meanwhile she was away from stultifying squalor—away from minds only interested in petty local affairs—

away from sham gentility, away from gramophones and cinemas—away from pretence, away among the real things where she could learn to understand every shade of the meaning of life step by step! And at this stage of her musings, after a gentle knock the same housemaid opened the door with a can of hot water.

"Your dinner will be served in the secretary's room at eight o'clock, miss; it is half-past seven now. When would you like me to return to fasten you up?"

The two red spots appeared in Katherine Bush's cheeks. So she had been expected to change her dress—and she had not thought of doing so! She had not even imagined that she would go again downstairs or have any dinner after that wonderful tea! A little supper probably on a tray later on, or something like that.

But here was dinner! perhaps the same kind of meal as she had had with Lord Algy. Of course, she ought to have known that she must change her dress. She felt very angry with herself, and after the exaltation over her own instincts this was a fall! But she would never err again, and fortunately the housemaid would not know that she had been ignorant.

"My things fasten in the front, thank you, so that I need not trouble you," she answered, graciously; "but will you tell me, please, where I shall find the secretary's room?"

The housemaid gave directions—but one of the footmen would be certain to be in the hall and would show her. Thomas, the one who had brought her up, would wait on her.

"When you are ready, miss, will you please ring, and I will whistle down to say you are coming. We always did for Miss Arnott, and then they serve the dinner at once. This bell rings up and this one down; it is the upstairs one for me. I am Martha, the second housemaid, miss, and will be pleased to do anything I can for you."

Katherine Bush thanked the girl again and quickly began to dress, and at a minute or two to eight was on her way. This upper staircase she found descended to the ground floor independently of the stately, shallow marble one she had walked up on to the sitting-room on her former visit and which went no farther than the first floor.

Thomas was waiting for her and conducted her to a room down the corridor, whose windows she discovered later looked out on a dull, blank wall. It had comfortable, solid, leather-covered furniture, the relic possibly of some country smoking-room, and faded crimson silk brocade curtains, the discarded splendour of a salon, perhaps. These were cosily drawn, and there was plenty of electric light, and she saw that there would be space to do her typing on the solid, large table, and to keep all records in those capacious cupboards which lined the walls. The feeling that she was in space again gave her satisfaction; she had so often longed to break down the partition of her attic, or stretch out and push away the glass screen at Liv and Dev's. The room was very high, too—another advantage.

"I shall always have large, high rooms when I have won my game," she said to herself.

A small table by the fire was laid for one. She made herself notice the silver and the glass and the cloth, and almost immediately Thomas brought in a large tray with her dinner. There was soup in a quaint covered cup with two handles, and some hot silver dishes.

He placed them all with regularity within her reach, and then asked respectfully if she would please to ring when she was ready for her sweet. Miss Arnott was wont to take claret, he informed her, but what would she, Miss Bush, desire to drink?

"A cup of tea," almost escaped from the tip of Katherine's tongue—but she stopped herself. Probably one did not take tea with one's dinner even alone like this, and if she had it, Thomas would know that she was not accustomed to the regulation things. Water would be safest. So she indicated her wishes and Thomas left the room.

A sense of strangeness, almost of awe, stole over her, a sensation she had not felt even when with Lord Algy in the gilded luxury of the Paris hotel. She had known then that those surroundings were just part of any *demi-mondaine's* life, and could be had by the lowest for money—but these were quite different. These were rather shabby, but were the expression of people who had had them for countless years, and were, of course, ordinary and everyday in their existences—the whole atmosphere affected her.

She was glad that Thomas had gone out of the room. She knew that at the present stage she should hate to be watched, while she ate, by a silent servant.

"But I must accustom myself to that," she told herself, for Algy, she remembered, had never seemed to remark servants at all, and would go on talking to her, while his coat was being handed or his boots put on, as though Hanson did not exist.

She was hungry and began to break her bread. She wished she felt quite sure whether or no she was expected to turn the soup out into the soup plate or drink it as it was? She decided to try the former course, since of what use was the soup plate if it had not been brought for that purpose?

The food proved to be excellent; and the sweet and fruit just to her taste, and when all was finished, Thomas removed everything and folded up the small table and put it back into its, evidently, accustomed corner, and bringing her the evening papers, he made up the fire and left her alone.

This, she supposed, would be the time she would have to herself. She hardly noticed the headlines as she glanced at the news; her mind was too full of herself and her new life to take interest in outside things.

Where did that door lead to? she wondered—a heavy mahogany door; but she was soon to know, for it opened suddenly, and the man she had already twice seen came in, leaving it open after him, so that she could perceive that the room he had left was a dim, vast library; it was lined with books.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I have come for some large-sized paper. My aunt used to have it kept in this drawer, I think."

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Katherine Bush rose while he went to get it out for himself—he was not her employer, and she did not yet know where things were kept, so she did not offer to help him. He was in evening dress, and his hair was as well groomed as Lord Algy's, but not cut quite so short, and it was brushed straight back from his forehead and was brown and thick. His face was tired and humorous and very distinguished, but for the moment he looked cross and impatient. The paper was evidently not where he had thought that it would be.

"Confound it!" he muttered, almost inaudibly, and then aloud, "I am in a great hurry. Will you please look in those cupboards while I look in these?"

Katherine Bush did as she was asked, and chanced upon the paper immediately. She handed it to him without a word. She noticed that he hardly looked at her, and did not take in her personality at all. She was just his aunt's new secretary and typist; and more important matters pressed.

"Thanks, awfully;" then he glanced at the table, where the typing machine used by Miss Arnott stood. "Oh!—er—I was wondering if you would be so awfully kind as to type this when I have written it; it is a letter I must send to the *Times*, and I shall have to go in to dinner in a minute.'

"I have not seen how this machine works yet," Katherine Bush answered, "but if you care to dictate, I can take it down in shorthand and then write it out very quickly afterwards."

"That is most kind of you—will you come into the library then?—my notes are there."

She followed him silently, and when he had found some scribbled words written on the back of an envelope, he went to the hearth-rug, and, leaning against the mantelpiece, began to speak. Katherine had taken up a block and pencil and was waiting ready.

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He was not coherent at first; he had neither Mr. Livingstone's precise, oily slowness, nor Mr. Devereux's crisp fluency. She took down exactly what he had said. Then he asked her to read it aloud.

"That is frightful English!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "I never can dictate properly, I must always write myself or my ideas do not flow."

"If the substance is all right and it is just the English you want regulated, I can do that when I copy it out."

He looked at her in doubt, and Katherine smiled to herself—this flattered her.

"It would be awfully kind of you if you would, though," he went on, hesitatingly. "I have kept them waiting a quarter of an hour as it is. Could you do it immediately and send it in to the dining-room by one of the footmen? I have my fountain-pen with me, I will sign it there. It is to be addressed to the Editor of the *Times*."

"Yes, I will."

Mr. Strobridge thanked his aunt's new secretary courteously as he went towards the door, and then he left the room. At the moment of his exit, Katherine Bush heard the sound of voices, male and female; they were evidently going in to dinner without waiting for him. She looked up at the clock, it was ten minutes to nine; then she smiled again and, going to the writing-table, she began her task, a very simple one to her who was accustomed to frame euphonious sentences. And when she had completed it, she went back into the secretary's room and rang the bell.

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"This is to be taken to Mr.—is his name Strobridge?—Lady Garribardine's nephew," she told the astonished Thomas.

"Yes, miss. *Her Ladyship's* nephew is *the Honourable* Mr. Gerard Strobridge—if you mean him."

"Yes, I do—he is dining here and wants it at once."

She made no further explanation, but took up the paper and reseated herself in her chair by the fire; and Thomas could but obey orders.

"A cool card," he whistled to himself, as he disappeared.

Meanwhile, Gerard Strobridge was saying to the lady at his side:

"I had to repudiate Warrington's insolence in the *Central Gazette* to-night. I have written to the *Times*—that is what made me keep even you waiting, dearest lady. My aunt's new shorthand typist took it down, and I shall send it off in a few minutes. I hope it will not be too late."

"You look quite serious, G.," the lady laughed. "It is too attractive to see you in earnest over something!"

"I am always in earnest—especially when I tell you that I love you—why did you not come this afternoon, Lăo, I stayed late on purpose and you never turned up."

"I knew I should meet you to-night, G.—and I do not want soon to grow bored!"

Mr. Strobridge looked at her reproachfully. She was extremely pleasant to the eye, with her marvellous skin and dark hair, and her curly affected mouth. He was a cynic and an epicurean. He was not in the least disenchanted by his knowledge that the whole woman was a mass of affectation, from the conscious pouting of her red lips to the way she held her soup spoon. He rather admired the skill she showed in it all. She pleased his senses, had just enough wit to chirp like a parrot good things others had said, and was full of small talk—while she knew the game to her finger-tips. He did not want the repetition of a serious affair since he had so happily escaped by the skin of his teeth from Alice Southerwood. Lăo Delemar, widowed and rich and circumspect, promised an agreeable winter to him, with few complications.

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Women were more or less necessities to Gerard Strobridge's life; they were his choruses, his solaces, his inspirations.

In a few minutes a footman brought the large envelope, and amidst general chaff he read aloud the letter, his astonishment momentarily growing at the apt rearrangement of his words.

"She is no fool, your new secretary, Seraphim," he called down the table to his aunt. "I do thank you for her services to-night."

Sarah Lady Garribardine laughed complacently.

"I told you, G., I had found a treasure in Miss Katherine Bush!"

CHAPTER VII

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Over a week had gone by and Katherine Bush had completely fallen into her duties; they were not difficult, and she continued to keep her eyes and her intelligence on the alert, and by the second Sunday when she was to have the afternoon to meet Matilda, she had begun to feel that a whole ocean had rolled between the present Katherine and the creature of the days before the outing in Paris with Lord Algy!

She had made one or two annoying mistakes and had had one or two surprises, some pleasant ones. It was agreeable to have a cup of tea when one woke, and one's curtains drawn back by an attentive housemaid every morning, and a deep hot bath, instead of a scramble in a small tin tub on Saturday nights. There was a bathroom in Laburnum Villa, but during the week Matilda used it for keeping all sorts of things in, and there were such a number of them to have the bath in turns on Saturday and Sunday, that Katherine had preferred the indifferent comfort of a makeshift in her own attic. It seemed on looking back, after ten days of modest luxury, that it never could have been possible that she had gone on month after month, and year after year, in the family circle.

Her heart swelled with gratitude to Lord Algy; but for him she might never have known that there was anything different. At these moments she knew that she could easily slip into sentiment about him again, and so she invariably crushed her emotion and began some active work.

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At nine o'clock in the morning it was her duty to go to Lady Garribardine in her bedroom, where she would find her propped up upon lacy pink silk pillows, a saucy cap and ribbons covering the greater part of a more coquettish and rather lighter golden wig than the one she wore in the day. Her face had not yet been arranged, and presented a sad contrast to these youthful allurements. Her temper was often very precarious.

Katherine stood by the bed, block in hand, and took down all instructions. Lady Garribardine's voluminous correspondence was only attended to in the morning; the accumulations of the later part of the day before were heaped up in one basket tray, and the early posts in another. While a third empty one awaited those communications which were to be answered either in type or in handwriting.

Now, after ten days of service, Katherine had mastered most of Lady Garribardine's affairs. She knew the wages of her servants, the expenditure of the house, the

phrasing of her friends' letters, their points of views, little hatreds and little loves, their want or possession of good English and powers of expressing themselves—she fancied she could almost picture the faces, so vivid were these pen portraits of the writers that the notes showed. Lady Garribardine seldom answered even the most private with her own hand and Katherine had grown quite accustomed to signing "Sarah Garribardine" as "yours affectionately" or "yours sincerely." She even derived a cynical amusement from the fictions she was instructed to invent to one and another.

The life of a great lady, she saw, would be a very complicated affair to a novice, and each day she felt glad she was having the opportunity of learning its intricacies. She meant to make no mistakes when her own turn should come.

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Lady Garribardine had not continued to exploit her for her personal diversion as she had done on the occasion of their initial meeting, she had been too occupied, perhaps; on the contrary, she kept strictly to her rôle of employer and hardly spoke except on business. Katherine realised that she looked upon her much as Lord Algy had looked upon Hanson, and far from its arousing the rageful resentment which it would have done in Matilda's feminine breast, she saw the justice of it, and considered it a proper arrangement.

"Some people have the luck to be born to high station," she reasoned to herself, "and those who would attain it for themselves must make themselves fitted for it first—besides there would be no good in it to me, if after I had obtained it I should have to hobnob with my own secretary. It is the distinctions and barriers that make the thing worth having."

As yet she had only rarely come across other members of the world beyond her employer on such occasions as, for instance, if she were sent for suddenly to the drawing-room to take down some instruction, or bring some charity list; but whenever she had the chance she observed them carefully. Some of them were far from what had been her ideal of what high birth and breeding would certainly show, but they all had that ease of manner which polished their casualnesses, and once she was still receiving instructions by the bedside when Stirling, the maid, came to know if Lady Beatrice Strobridge might come up.

"Confound the woman!" Her Ladyship exclaimed in her angelic voice, its refinement of pronunciation always a joy to Katherine's ear—whatever the bluntness of the words might be—"No, certainly not—my face is not done—but stay, Stirling, it may be something to do with to-night—give me the rouge and powder and a looking-glass. Don't go, Miss Bush—it is nothing private and she won't stay for more than a minute."

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Katherine discreetly turned her eyes from the bed to the window, and when she looked round again, two blooming rose-coloured cheeks balanced the girlish curls, and Lady Garribardine was reposing languidly upon her pillows.

"Dearest Aunt Sarah, I had to come," cried Lady Beatrice in her plaintive discontented voice, "Gerard has been perfectly impossible, actually has refused to let me go to the Artist Model's ball as Ganymede, and I have got the most ducky dress, a pendant to Hebe Vermont's Iris."

"A few rags of chiffon, a cup and bare legs, I suppose," Lady Garribardine retorted not unkindly, as her niece sat upon the bed.

"You may describe it like that if you want to, Aunt Sarah! I assure you, though, it is most becoming, and it is too ridiculous when everyone we know is going, and all the Thorvils have such tiny ankles, too."

"The more reason for you not to expose them to the common herd. Go naked if you so desire to a ball in a private house among your own class—you'll lay yourself open only to criticisms of your charms there—but to let hoi polloi gaze at you undressed is to lower your order; I am with Gerard about that."

Lady Beatrice pouted.

"I really thought you were so up to date, Aunt Seraphim, darling, that you would be sure to side with me—of course I shall go, all the same; I should not think of paying any attention to Gerard—only it would be so much nicer if you had consented to scold him for me."

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"I am up to date, I hope, in so far as I try to move with the times"—Lady Garribardine's face was good-naturedly contemptuous—"only, I consider that all of you who throw your bonnets over the windmills are cutting your own throats—You are destroying values, cheapening pleasures, breaking down hedges, and letting in the swine to feed upon your grapes—you are often very vulgar, you modern people."

Lady Beatrice got off the bed.

"Then there is no use talking, Aunt Sarah—I dare say we are—but what matter? I wish I knew what *does* matter? I am bored all the time; I get some momentary pleasure out of my poetry, and some out of my dear precious friends—but the rest of the day is one long yawn. You ought not to grudge my being Ganymede; every sort of

quaint creature is at this ball, and I get quite amused each year when I go."

"Why don't you take a box, then, and watch them? I could quite understand that, and intend to do so myself—Miss Bush, by the way, did you write to say I would have number five?"

Katherine replied in the affirmative and Lady Beatrice suddenly became aware of her presence as she resumed her place on the bed.

"Oh, this is your new secretary, Aunt Sarah! I am sure you have a frightfully difficult time—er—Miss Bush!" And she laughed, "Her Ladyship expects perfection."

"Her Ladyship has quite a right to as good as can be got—since she pays for it."

Katherine's voice was deep and level, and contained no impertinence, only a grave statement of fact.

Lady Garribardine chuckled among her pillows.

"Miss Bush is much nearer the truth of things than any of you so-called psychological philosophers, Bee—analysing matters with little dilettante methods all day to the laughter of the gods. Miss Bush realises her obligations as a secretary, but you very often don't perceive yours as a duke's daughter, and a rising Foreign Office official's wife."

Lady Beatrice was not the least crushed. She laughed frankly.

"Dear, sweet Aunty! There never has been a scandal about me in my life—I am a model of circumspectness, demureness and present-day virtuous wifeliness. Why, I never interfere with Gerard—we hardly meet in the whole week—and I merely like my own simple friends, my own simple clothes, and my own simple pleasures!"

"Artless creature!" And the youthful curls shook. "Well, what did you come for, in so many words? To try to get me to influence Gerard not to play for once the ineffectual part of husband in authority, and so let you disgrace the name of Thorvil and Strobridge in peace?"

Lady Beatrice seized and stroked the fat hand lying upon the pink silk coverlet.

"You darling, ducky Aunt Seraphim! Just that! I want to wear my enchanting boy's dress—I must be Ganymede, the cupbearer!"

"Well, I'll be no party to it—be off with you. I have serious affairs to settle with Miss Bush and have no further time to waste."

Lady Beatrice saluted her obediently and got off the bed once more; she was laughing softly.

"Gerard is coming to lunch," Lady Garribardine called to her, "and Lăo Delemar, and they are going to see a winter exhibition afterwards."

"I can't stand Lăo," Lady Beatrice cooed from the doorway; "she pretends to be so full of sex and other dreadful natural things, she makes my innocent aesthetic flesh creep—Gerard always had fruity tastes—Bye-bye, dear Aunt Sarah!" And kissing her finger-tips she was at last gone, leaving Katherine wondering.

They had said very severe things to each other and neither was the least angry really—Gladys and Fred were not wont to bicker so.

"Call up Mr. Strobridge, Miss Bush—he will not have left home yet—you know his number—ask him to speak to me at once."

Katherine obeyed—she was an expert with the telephone and never raised her voice. Mr. Strobridge was soon at the other end of it, and she was about to hand the receiver to her employer when that lady frowned and told her to give the message herself.

"My right ear is troublesome to-day," she said, "you must do the business for me, Miss Bush."

"Hello! Her Ladyship wishes me to give you a message—will you wait a moment until I take it?"

"Hello! Yes."

"Say he is to come half an hour earlier to lunch to-day. I have things to talk over with him about to-night—He is to go to this ridiculous ball in my box—tell him so."

Katherine repeated the exact message.

"Tell her I am very much annoyed about the whole thing," Mr. Strobridge returned, "and have decided not to be present myself."

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Lady Garribardine, when she was told, and, seizing the receiver from Katherine's hand, she roared:

"Don't be a fool, G.—it is too late in the day to stand upon your dignity—I'll tell you the rest when you come to lunch."—Upon which she closed the communication and called for Stirling.

"Take all this rubbish of letters away, Miss Bush—I must get up and cope with the

humiliating defects of old age—you may go."

Katherine had a very busy morning in front of her. She sat steadily typing and writing in the secretary's room, until her lunch was brought and even then she hardly stopped to eat it, but on her own way to the dining-room Lady Garribardine came in. She looked at the hardly tasted food and blinked her black eyes:

"Tut, tut! You must eat, child—*pas trop de zèle*—Finish your pudding—and then bring me those two letters upon the report of the Wineberger charity—into the dining-room—You can have your coffee with us—Mr. Strobridge and I are alone, Mrs. Delemar is not coming, after all—By the way, do you have everything you want? The coffee they give you is good, eh? Servants always skimp the beans when left to themselves."

"I have everything I want, thank you—but I have not been offered coffee," Katherine replied.

Lady Garribardine's face assumed an indignant expression, and she sharply rang the bell.

"These are the things that happen when one does not know of them—you ought to have complained to me before, Miss Bush!"

Thomas answered the bell and whitened perceptibly when he saw his mistress's face. He was asked why Miss Bush had not been served with coffee, in a voice which froze his tongue, and the only excuse he could give was a stammering statement that Miss Arnott had not taken any, which aroused further wrath.

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"Pampered wretches!" Lady Garribardine exclaimed. "Anything to save themselves trouble! I will speak to Bronson about this—but see that it never happens again, Thomas!" And the trembling footman was allowed to leave the room.

"I am glad you did not try to defend them, as the foolish Arnott would have done," Her Ladyship flashed. "She was always standing between my just wrath and the servant's delinquencies, always shielding them—one would have thought she was of their class. The result was no one in the house respected her—good creature though she was. See that you are respected, young woman, and obeyed when obedience is your due."

"I will try to be"—and an inscrutable expression played round Katherine's full red mouth. "I would never shield anyone from what he deserved."

"It seems to me you understand a good deal, girl!—Well, come into the dining-room in half an hour," and, smiling her comprehending smile, Lady Garribardine left the room.

"G., that is a wonderful creature, that new secretary of mine—have you noticed her yet?" she said later on to her nephew when they had finished the serious part of their luncheon, and she had rung her enamelled bell for the automatic entrance of the servants from behind the screen—they were only allowed in the room to change the courses at this meal. Numbers of politicians and diplomats frequently dropped in and preferred to discuss affairs with their hostess alone.

"No—not much," Mr. Strobridge admitted when they were again by themselves and coffee had come. "I thought she did my letter to the *Times* remarkably well, though."

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"She has not done anything badly yet—when she makes a mistake in social trifles she always realises it, and corrects herself. Her reading aloud was grotesque at first, but I have never had to tell her how to pronounce a word twice. I lay traps for her; she is as smart as paint and as deep as a well."

"A treasure indeed—" but Mr. Strobridge's voice was absent, he was uninterested and was still smarting under the annoyance of the situation created by his wife.

Of course he could not make her stay at home by force—and he hated the idea of Ganymede and the bare legs. He reverted to the topic once more.

"I would really rather not go to see the freakish crew to-night," he said. "Beatrice is doing it merely from obstinacy; she is not like Hebe Vermont, a ridiculous *poseuse*, crazy for notoriety; she is a refined creature generally, though wearying. This is just to defy me."

"As I have always told you, G., you should never have married, you are made for an ardent and devoted lover, with a suitable change of innamorata every six months. In the rôle of husband you are—frankly—a little ridiculous! You have no authority. As Miss Bush put it just now about something else, you usually act from good nature, not from a sense of justice; and Beatrice snaps her fingers at you and goes her own way."

"I don't mind as a rule—indeed, I am grateful to her for doing so. Can there be anything more tedious and bourgeois than the recognised relation of husband and wife? The only things which make intimacy with a woman agreeable are difficulty and intermittency. Bee fortunately expects nothing from me, and I expect nothing from her, beyond acting in a manner suitable to her race and station, and I don't think Ganymede in his original costume at an Artist Models' ball a harmonious part for my wife or a Thorvil to adopt."

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"You don't know how to manage her, and you are too indifferent to try—so you had better swallow your outraged dignity and come with me in my box after all. Lăo will be there and you can sit and whisper in the back of it." And Lady Garribardine lit her cigarette, but Mr. Strobridge protested in whimsical distress:

"Heaven forbid! Would you kill this dawning romance, Seraphim? If Lăo and I are to be drafted off like a pair of fiancés, the whole charm is gone. I wish to *ménager* my emotions so that they may last over the Easter recess; after that I shall be too busy for them to matter. Don't be ruthless, sweet Aunt!"

Lady Garribardine laughed and at that moment Katherine Bush came in, the finished letters in her hand.

"Give Miss Bush some coffee, G., while I look over them," and Her Ladyship indicated the tray which had been placed by an attentive Bronson close to her hand.

Mr. Strobridge did as he was asked. His thoughts were far away, and beyond displaying the courtesy he used to all women, he never noticed Katherine at all. She was quite ordinary looking still—with the screwed up mop of ashen-hued hair, and her plain dark blouse, unless you chanced to meet her strange and beautiful eyes.

For some reason she felt a little piqued, the man's manner and phrasing attracted her, his voice was superlatively cultivated, and his words chosen with polished grace. Here was a person from whom something could be learned. She would have wished to have talked with him unrestrainedly and alone. She remained silent and listened when aunt and nephew again took up the ball of conversation together. How she would love to be able to converse like that! They were so sparkling—never in earnest seemingly, all was light as air, while Mr. Strobridge made allusions and quotations which showed his brilliant erudition, and Katherine hearkened with all her ears. Some of them she recognized and others she determined to look up, but his whole pronunciation of the sentences sounded different from what she had imagined they would be when she had read them to herself.

This was the first time she had heard a continued conversation between two people who she had already decided were worthy of note, and this half-hour stood out as the first milestone in her progress.

Presently they all rose—and she went back to her work with the sense of the magnitude of her task in climbing to the pinnacle of a great lady and cultivated woman of the world.

For a few moments she felt a little depressed—then a thought came to her.

"He could help me to knowledge of literature and art—he could teach me true culture—and since he is married there can be no stupid love-making. But for this he must first realise that I exist and for that when my chance comes I must arrest his attention through the ears and the eyes. He must for once look at me and see not only his aunt's secretary—and then I can learn from him all that I desire to know."

That this course of action could possibly cause the proposed teacher pain in the future never entered her head.

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CHAPTER VIII

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Matilda had been told to meet her sister, if it should be fine on this Sunday, in the Park by the Serpentine; they would walk about and then go and have an early tea at Victoria Station, whence Matilda could take a train back to Bindon's Green.

They met punctually at the time appointed on the bridge, and the elder Miss Bush was filled with joy. She had missed Katherine dreadfully, as browbeating husbands are often missed by meek wives, and she was full of curiosity to hear her news.

"You look changed somehow, Kitten!" she exclaimed, when they had greeted each other. "It isn't because you'd done your hair differently; you had it that way on the last day—it isn't a bit 'the look', but it suits you. No, it's not that—but you are changed somehow. Now tell me everything, dearie—I am dying to hear."

"I like it," began Katherine, "and I am learning lots of things."

This information did not thrill Matilda. Katherine's desire to be always learning was very fatiguing, she thought, and quite unnecessary. She wanted to hear facts of food and lodging and people and treatment, not unimportant moral developments.

"Oh—well," she said. "Are they kind to you?"

"Yes—I am waited on like a lady—and generally the work isn't half so heavy as at Liv and Dev's."

"Tell me right from the beginning. What you do when you get up in the morning until you go to bed."

Katherine complied.

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"I am waked at half-past seven and given a cup of tea—real tea, Tild, not the stuff we called tea at home." (A slight toss of the head from Matilda.) "The second housemaid waits on me, and pulls up my blind, and then I have my bath in the bathroom across the passage—a nice, deep hot bath."

"Whatever for—every day?" interrupted Matilda. "What waste of soap and towels and things—do you like it, Kitten?"

"Of course, I do—we all seem to be very dirty people to me now, Tild—with our one tub a week; you soon grow to find things a necessity. I could not bear not to have a bath every day now."

Matilda snorted.

"Well—and then—?"

"Then I go down and have my breakfast in the secretary's room—my sitting-room, in fact. It is a lovely breakfast, with beautiful china and silver and table-linen, and when I have finished that I take my block and pencil and go up to Lady Garribardine's bedroom to take down my instructions for the day in shorthand."

"Oh, Kitten, do tell me, what's her room like?" At last something interesting might be coming!

"It is all pink silk and lace and a gilt bed, and numbers of photographs, and a big sofa and comfortable chairs—and when she has rheumatism she stays there and has people up to tea."

"What! Folks to tea in her bedroom? Ladies, of course?"

"Oh! dear no! Men, too! She has heaps of men friends; they are devoted to her."

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"Gentlemen in her bedroom! I do call that fast!" Matilda was frankly shocked.

"Why?" asked Katherine.

"Why? My dear! Just fancy—gentlemen where you sleep and dress! Mabel would not dream of doing such a thing—and I do hope she'll never hear you are in that kind of a house. She'd be sure to pass remarks."

"Lady Garribardine is over sixty years old, Tild! Don't you think you are being rather funny?" and Katherine wondered why she had never noticed before that Matilda was totally devoid of all sense of humour. And then she realised that the conception was new even to herself, and must have come from her book reading, though she was conscious that it was a gift that she had always enjoyed. No one had spoken of the "senses of humour" in their home circle, and Matilda would not have understood what it meant or whether she did or did not possess it!

Things were things to Matilda, and had not different aspects, and for a lady to receive gentlemen in her bedroom if she were even over sixty years old and suffering from rheumatism was not proper conduct, and would earn the disapproval of Mabel Cawber and, indeed, of refined and select Bindon's Green in general.

"I don't see that age makes a difference; it's the idea of tea in a bedroom, dearie—with gentlemen!"

"But what do you think they would do to her, Tild?" Katherine with difficulty hid her smile.

"Oh! my! what dreadful things you do say, Katherine!" Matilda blushed. "Why, it's the awkwardness of it for them—I'm wondering whatever Fred and Bert and Charlie Prodggers would feel if Mabel had them up to hers of a Sunday, supposing she had a cold—and what *would* anyone say!"

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"Yes, I am sure Bindon's Green would talk its head off, and Fred and Bert and Charlie Prodggers would be awfully uncomfortable and get every sort of extraordinary idea into their heads, and if a person like Mabel did do such a thing, as to have them up there, she would be fidgety herself—or she would be really fast and intend them to go ahead. But Lady Garribardine is always quite sure of herself, and her friends are, too, and they don't have to consider convention—they are really gentlemen, you see, and not worried at all as to what others think or say, and it seems quite natural to them to come up and see an old rheumatic lady anywhere they want to see her. That is just the difference in the class, Tild—the upper are perfectly real, and don't pretend anything, and aren't uncomfortable in doing natural things."

Matilda was still disapproving, and at once became antagonistic when her sister made reflections upon class.

"I call it very queer, anyway," she sniffed. "And wherever do they find room to sit—in a bedroom, dearie?"

Katherine laughed—she wondered if she had never had a glimpse of life and space and comfort with Lord Algy, should she, too, have been as ignorant and surprised at everything in her new sphere as Matilda was at the description of it. She supposed she would have been equally surprised, but would certainly have viewed it with an open mind. After ten days of peeps at a world where everything new and old was looked at and discussed with the broadest toleration, the incredible narrowness of

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the Bindon's Green outlook appalled her—the forces of ignorance and prejudice and ridiculous hypocrisy which ruled such hundreds of worthy people's lives!

She came back from these speculations to the reality of her sister's voice, reiterating her question as to where the visitors found place, and she answered, still smiling:

"It is a great big room, Tild, twice as big as the drawing-room at home—no—bigger still, and twenty people could sit in it without crowding."

"Goodness gracious!" ejaculated Matilda; "it must be grand."

"You see, you are such an old goose, Matilda. You think the whole world must be like Bindon's Green, although I have told you over and over again that other places, and other grades of life, are different, but you and Mabel and Fred and Bert, and the whole crew of you, measure everything with your own tiny measure. You make me gasp at your outlook sometimes."

Matilda bridled—and Katherine went on.

"Lady Garribardine's house does not seem to be a bit grand to her, nor to any of the people who come there. They are not conscious of it; it is just everyday to them, although some of them live in quite small houses themselves and aren't at all rich. She has two cousins—elderly ladies, who live in a tiny flat—but oh! the difference in it to Mabel's villa! I had to take them a message last week and waited in their mite of a drawing-room—it was exquisitely clean and simple, and they are probably poorer than we are."

Matilda felt too ruffled to continue this conversation; she always hated the way Katherine argued with her; she wanted to get back to the far more interesting subject of carpets and curtains and arrangements in the rooms of Lady Garribardine's house. Numbers of the people in her serials, of course, were supposed to own such places, and she had often seen bits of them on the stage, but until she found Katherine really lived now in one, somehow she had never believed in them as living actualities, or rather their reality had not been brought home to her. So she questioned Katherine, and soon had an accurate description of her ladyship's bedroom, and the rest of the house, then she got back to the happenings of her sister's day.

"Well, when you have got up there, you take down orders, and then?"

"I sort everything that has come by the post and mark on the envelopes how I am to answer them, and I sometimes read her the papers aloud if her eyes are tired."

"Yes?"

"And then I go down and write the letters; she hardly ever answers any herself, and I have to write them as if I were she. Her friends must wonder how her hand and style have changed since Miss Arnott left!"

Here was something thrilling again for Matilda.

"Oh, my! What a lot you must get to know about the smart set, Kitten; isn't it interesting!"

"Yes, as I told you, I am learning lessons."

"Oh, bother that! Well, what do they write about, do tell me—?"

"All sorts of things; their movements, their charities—invitations, little witticisms about each other—politics, the last good story—and, some of them, books."

"And you have to answer as if you were her? However do you do it, Kitten?"

"She gives me the general idea—she showed me the first time for the private letters, and now I know, but sometimes perhaps I write as if it were me!"

"And don't they know it is not her hand?"

"Of course, but they don't care. She is a great lady and a character, and she is very powerful in their circle of society, and it is worth everyone's while to be civil to her."

"It is all funny. Well, what else do you do?"

"Sometimes I have to do errands—shopping and so on—and then my luncheon comes—the food is lovely, and I am waited on by a footman called Thomas; he is the third; and on Wednesday Lady Garribardine took his and the butler's heads off because I had not been given coffee. She means me to be perfectly treated, I can tell you!"

"Coffee after your lunch, how genteel! And my! what a lot of servants. Whatever do they all do?"

"Their work, I suppose. You forget it is a big house and everything is splendidly done and beautifully clean, and regular and orderly."

Here Matilda insisted upon a full list of all the retainers, and an account of their separate duties; her domestic soul revelled in these details, and at the end of the recital her awe knew no bounds. Katherine was able to give her a very circumstantial set of statements, as all accounts passed through her hands.

"Well, your old lady must spend pints of money," Matilda said, with a sigh, "but we've not got to your afternoons yet, dearie. Do you work all them, too?"

"When I am very busy—it depends how much I have to do; if I am not very occupied and I have not been out in the morning, I go for a walk before tea. I have to take her ladyship's two fox-terriers, Jack and Joe; they are jolly little fellows, and I love them. We scamper in the square, or go as far as the Park."

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"And your tea? They bring you up a cup, I suppose, every day—regular?"

"Not a cup—a whole tray to myself, and lovely muffins and cream, Tild. Lady Garribardine has a Jersey herd of cows at her place in Blankshire, and the cream comes up each day from there."

"My! how nice!" Matilda sighed again. Her imagination could hardly take in such luxury. It seemed to her that Katherine must be living in almost gilded vice!

"Then after tea, if I am not sent for to do any special thing, I read to myself. I look up anything that I don't know about that I have chanced to hear spoken of by the people who come—I am allowed to take books from the library."

"Then you do see people sometimes?" Matilda's interest revived again. "What are they like, Kitten?"

"Sometimes I do, but not often—only when I chance to be sent for, but next week Her Ladyship has got a big charity tableaux entertainment on hand, that she is arranger and patroness of, and I shall come across lots of people of society, some of the ones you know the names of so well in the *Flare*."

"The Duchess of Dashington and the Countess of Blanktown—really, Kitten!"

This was fashion, indeed!

"Probably—but I don't know about the Duchess of Dashington. I don't think Lady Garribardine approves of her."

"Not approve of the Duchess of Dashington!" Matilda exclaimed, indignantly. "Her that has gentlemen to tea in her bedroom to give herself airs like that! Well, I never!"

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This particular Duchess' photographs were the joy of the halfpenny illustrated papers, and Matilda was accustomed to see her in skating costume waltzing with her instructor, and in golf costume and in private theatrical costumes, almost every other week.

"No—she speaks of her very cheaply—but I will tell you all about it on Sunday fortnight. I'll have heard everything by then, because the tableaux will be over."

Matilda returned to her muttons.

"Then you have supper, I suppose?"

"No—I go up and dress myself and put on my best blouse and have my dinner at eight o'clock; after that I generally read the paper or French books—and at ten I go to bed."

"Gracious! what's the good of dressing if you don't see anyone? How you'll use up your blouse!"

Matilda was aghast at such folly!

"I am supposed to be a lady, Tild, and a lady is expected to dress in the evening if she is alone on a desert island."

"What stuff! Whatever for?"

"Self-respect."

"Fiddlesticks."

Presently Katherine grew reflective, her catechism over. "I wish you could see it all, Tild; it would enlarge your brain—it is all so different from Bindon's Green. If you could only hear their point of view, I assure you, dear, it might be two different nations—those barefoot urchins climbing on the rails are much nearer their level than we are."

But Matilda could not stand this; her wrath rose.

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"Those dirty boys nearer your new people than a real lady like Mabel Cawber, and your own brothers and sisters! Katherine, how dare you! Horrid little guttersnipes with no pride of themselves; why, they aren't even ashamed to be here of a Sunday among decent people—they'd do anything!"

"That is just it, Tild—so would the aristocrats if they wanted to, and wouldn't be a bit ashamed or even think of it, and they have 'no pride of themselves,' either—but you'll never understand, Tild, not if you live to be a hundred years old."

"And I don't want to, there!"

"Then it is perfectly useless my talking, I see that. We had better go and have some tea."

And so they turned out of Albert Gate and walked to Victoria.

Matilda, when she had smoothed her ruffled feelings, began now to relate the home news. Gladys and her fiancé were not happy together; they had not been so since that visit which Katherine would remember they had taken to Brighton to stay with his aunt—it was nearly six weeks ago now and both grew more and more gloomy.

"And so uppy as Glad is with Fred, too, and never a bit back on Bob Hartley!"

Matilda felt things would be better for her sister if a little more spirit were shown. Mabel and her betrothed had been up for church parade as usual in the Park that morning, and this lady had also supped with them at Laburnum Villa the night before, and they had had oysters and a jolly time.

Katherine felt a strange emotion when she heard of this. She seemed to see a picture of Lord Algy enjoying oysters, and all the reflections this action had called up—oh! how long ago it all appeared!

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"And have you met that gentlemen you spoke of?" Matilda asked, before they parted at the station.

"Mr. Strobridge, you mean—Lady Garribardine's nephew. Yes—he is husband of the lady Glad dresses, the one who had the model she wanted me to have. He is a clever man—we have not really spoken yet, but I mean to know him very well some day."

"Oh! Kitten, do be careful! And him a married man, too!"

"For what I want of him, it does not matter whether he is married or single," Katherine reassured her, and soon the train moved off.

How good Matilda was! Katherine thought, as she walked briskly back to Berkeley Square—an unselfish, worthy, honest, hopelessly stupid creature, whom somehow she was fond of. But what could it be that made her herself so utterly different from them all? Nothing could be chance—everything had its reason, only we were generally too blind to perceive it. So was there some truth in that vague story of the great-grandmother having been someone of high family fallen low in the world and married to the auctioneer great-grandfather, whom her own father remembered very well? Could it be that some drop of gentle blood flowed in her veins, transmitted from this source and concentrated in her, having escaped the others—or was it simply from the years of her reading that her mind had developed? But it could not be altogether that, because she remembered instincts and tastes in uneducated early childhood completely aloof from the family's.

"Father gave me this business capacity," she mused, "but something beyond must have given me this will to achieve—and I *shall* achieve—all I desire—in time! Only I must be ruthless and have no emotions. I must follow what Bacon asserts about great spirits," and she quoted softly: "There is not one that hath been transported to the mad degree of love, which shows that great spirits and great business do keep out this weak passion."

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Yes, she would keep out this weak passion! She had tasted its joys, and that memory must last her a lifetime.

On the doorstep she encountered Gerard Strobridge just coming out—he raised his hat and said politely that it was an abominably cold day—then he passed on down the steps and so towards Hill Street.

And Katherine Bush went up to her room.

CHAPTER IX

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The week of the tableaux had come and gone, and had opened yet another window for Katherine Bush to peep at the world from. She already knew many of the people who came to the luncheons and rehearsals, from their letters, and now she judged of them face to face. She had been in great request to take down innumerable orders, and arrange business details, and had listened and inwardly digested what she heard.

Her contempt for some of the company was as great as for Miss Mabel Cawber—she discovered a few with titles and positions who were what she disdainfully dubbed, "Middle class underneath!"

"Only that they have been more used to things, they are as paltry as Mabel," she said to herself, and set about, as was her custom, to find out why—and from what families they had sprung—and obtained some satisfaction in the confirmation of her theory of heredity, in discovering that most of these could lay small claim to blueness of blood. The insolence of others she approved of.

Many of the American peeresses who were posing as queens, and nuns, and Greek goddesses, she truly admired—they must have been at one time like herself—out to learn—and now were conscious that they had made good.

"But I mean to have more repose of manner when I am there," she told herself.

Of Sarah Lady Garribardine's sayings and views, she kept a great store in her mind. This was a real aristocrat she felt. A human, faulty, strong woman, incapable of meanness or anything which could lower the flag of her order. She was supremely insolent, too, but then she never did anything which could impair people's respect.

She was hard and generous—and acted up to the doctrine that "*noblesse oblige*" and entirely believed in the divine right of kings and of Sarah Lady Garribardine! She had not been a thirteenth century Baron's daughter for nothing! Katherine Bush shared every one of Her Ladyship's views and moulded all her ideals upon them.

Each day she was enlarging her vocabulary of words to use—adapting sentences which she had read of fine English to modern requirements, pruning colloquialisms, cultivating pronunciation, polishing her critical faculties. She was perfectly conscious that she had often employed homely phrases in the past, and had not always paid enough attention to grammar in speaking, though for some time she had not used "whatever for," or "of a Sunday," as poor Matilda always did.

She learned as much comparatively of the general world of society in that one week, as she had learned of the nature of man in her three days with Lord Algy. He was her first step—these women were her second. Lady Garribardine was her head master, and Gerard Strobridge should be her tutor—when the moment she was ready for him came.

Her suspicions as to her employer's disapproval of the Duchess of Dashington were realised fully one day, in the beginning of the week. The poor young-old lady's rheumatism was very painful, and she remained in her room having her favourite nephew and Mrs. Delemar up with her there to lunch, on a little table close to her gilt bed.

Katherine was writing at an escritoire near, having finished her own meal downstairs.

"You need not go, Miss Bush, if you can continue those invitations with our chatter."

So Katherine stayed.

The three talked of many things at first and Katherine hardly noticed them, but presently her attention was caught by a name. Mr. Strobridge was saying:

"Seraphim, it will be very difficult to refuse Dulcie Dashington, she has written to Beatrice this morning—she is quite determined to play the part of Nell Gwyn as the orange-girl."

"Then she can play it in some other *tableaux vivants*—but not in these that I am arranging." Her Ladyship's voice was acid.

"But why, dearest Sarah, are you so down on poor Dulcie?" Mrs. Delemar protested. "She is really a very good sort, and looks so splendid in these short-skirted, rather common clothes."

"I am not hard on her, Lăo; I am sure, had she been the wife of a jolly young stockbroker addicted to low practical jokes and rowdy sport, she would have been a most admirable creature. It is not the woman I am down on; there is just such another at Blissington, she helps me with the bazaars and the school treats, her husband is a local brewer, and we are capital friends. It is the Duchess of Dashington I ostracise, as I consider she has done more to degrade her order in these socialistic days than any other member of our sadly humbled peerage."

The other two laughed amusedly, but Lady Garribardine went on, raising her voice a little. It was a subject upon which she felt so deeply, that it overcame for the moment her usual dryly humorous handling of any matter.

"Let her have her lovers—we have all had lovers—No one in the least objects to them, arranged suitably, and of one's own class. I am not concerned with her or any other woman's physical morality.—Such morality is a question of temperament and geography and custom—but I am profoundly concerned to endeavour to keep up some semblance of dignity in the aristocracy, and Dulcie Dashington has lowered the whole prestige of Duchesses because she is of gentle birth—though Heaven knows what her father was with poor dear Susan's irresponsible ways!"

Gerard Strobridge smiled as he lit a cigarette.

"There is a great deal in what you say, Seraphim; she has certainly dragged the title down a good deal, with her fancies for professional gamblers of all sorts for friends, and her total disregard of tradition at Dashington—but you forget that she has had a good deal to put up with from Toni, who is an impossible husband."

"No man is an impossible husband if he is a Duke; at least no Duchess ought to find him so—and if he were, that is not the slightest excuse. When a woman undertakes a great position she should realise that personal feelings have ceased to count. She has, so to speak, accepted the responsibility of guarding the safety of an order, just as a sentry is responsible when he is on duty. He would be shot in war time if he fell asleep on duty—however pitiful his case might be from hardship and want of rest. He

would be shot as an example to the others not to allow even nature to overcome them and endanger the post."



"No man is an impossible husband if he is a Duke."

"It seems very cruel," piped Mrs. Delemar.

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"Not at all!" Lady Garribardine flashed while her voice vibrated with scorn. "We are at war now with the Radical masses and cannot afford to jeopardise positions—either keep up prestige, or throw up the game and let the whole thing go by the board, but while we pretend there is still an aristocracy in England we, the members of it, should defend it. Dulcie Dashington and her ways and her photographs in the papers, and her vulgarity, and the flaunting of her unsavoury domestic affairs, are a byword and as long as I have a voice in society, and can lay some claim to power, I shall let it be known what my opinion is, and why I will not receive her. To me there is no sin like betraying an order."

"I suppose you are quite right," Mrs. Delemar now agreed meekly, "but there are such lots of odd people in society who do unheard-of things; it is these boys marrying these wretched actresses or Americans which has changed everything."

"Not at all!" contradicted her ladyship. "Boys have always married actresses from time to time, and some of them have proved very decent creatures, and if they do err, what does it matter? No one expects better from them, they are making no real breach in the wall.—And as for Americans, they are often very pretty and so clever that they seldom disgrace their new station; they are like converts to Rome, more zealous than the born papists. The only evil which can lie at their door is that they have too much money, and have given false values to entertaining, and perhaps have encouraged eccentric amusements.—No, my dear child, it is the English-women themselves who have lost self-respect, and have lowered the flag, and when one of really high birth does it, like Dulcie Dashington, she should be made to pay the price."

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This was unanswerable, Katherine Bush thought as she listened, and she wondered why the other two should chaff lightly, as though it were just one of Lady Garribardine's notions. That is what generally astonished her a good deal; no one appeared to have any convictions or enthusiasm, they seemed to her to be a company of drifters, so little energy appeared to be shown by any of them. They were unpunctual and unpractical, but they were amusing and deliciously happy-go-lucky. If they had any real feelings none appeared upon the surface; even Lady Beatrice and her coterie of highly evolved poetesses and other artistic worldings, flew from theme to theme, turning intent faces upon new fads each week.

Most people's manners were casual, and their attitudes, too, would often have shocked Mabel Cawber, so far were they from being genteel. The few who truly fulfilled Katherine Bush's ideas of the meaning of the word "lady" stood out like stars.

But with all these flaws, as a collection of people, there was that ease of manner, that total absence of self-consciousness, about them which never could be known at Bindon's Green.

"I suppose times are changed," Katherine told herself, "and the laxity is producing a new type—I do wonder how they would all behave if some cataclysm happened again, like the French Revolution. But when my day comes I mean to uphold the order which I shall join, as Her Ladyship does."

At the last moment, Lady Beatrice did not go as Ganymede to the Artist Models' ball. The history of her alteration of character was a rather bitterly humorous story for Gerard Strobbridge's ears. She had been trying on the dress when a note had arrived with a parcel for her from her husband's aunt, which contained a very beautiful Greek mantle with these few words:

Dear Child,

I send you this mantle which I hope you will wear; it will not really spoil the character of your Ganymede dress, and from the back it will hide the fact that your legs are very slightly bowed. Your charming face will help to distract eyes from the front view, and this very small flaw in your anatomy will pass unnoticed.

Affectionately yours,
SARAH GARRIBARDINE.

She had written it with her own hand. Lady Beatrice stamped with rage, and then flew to her looking-glass. She stood this way and that, and finally came to the conclusion that there might be the faintest substratum of truth in the accusation. The rest of the limbs were not so perfect as her tiny ankles. It would not be safe to risk criticism. So the costume was altered and became a Flora with garlands of roses and long diaphanous draperies—and Gerard and Lady Garribardine watched her entry with the Vermont party with relieved eyes, and the wily aunt said:

"You can achieve the impossible with women, G., if you only appeal to, or wound, their vanity. You must never give orders to one unless she is in love with you—then she glories in obedience—but a modern wife can only be controlled either on the principle of the Irish-man's pig being driven towards Dublin when it was intended for Cork, or by a Machiavellian manipulation of her self-love."

"And then the game is not worth the candle," Mr. Strobbridge sighed with a little discouragement. "I wonder, Seraphim, what is worth while? Striving for the infinite, I suppose—certainly the finite things are but Dead Sea fruit."

"Gerard, my poor boy, you make me fear, when you talk like that, that one day you will be profoundly in love!"

"Heaven forbid!—It would upset my digestion. I was thirty-five last month and have to be careful!"

And in her comfortable bed in Berkeley Square, Katherine Bush read "The Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu" far into the night.

Society had not altered in many respects since these hundred and sixty odd years ago, she thought!

The tableaux were the greatest success and a large sum of money was secured for one of Lady Garribardine's pet charities.

Time went on, Christmas was approaching. It was to be spent at Blissington Court, the place Lady Garribardine had inherited with the barony of d'Estaire from her father. Garribardine was a Scotch title while her ladyship was rabidly English. They would go down to Blissington and have a family party. Her three grandchildren (her daughter, Lady Mereton, was far away, the bored wife of a Colonial Governor), Gerard Strobbridge and perhaps Lady Beatrice and the two old cousins with a young niece of theirs, and a stray man or two, and Mrs. Delemar—but no one could be sure who would turn up at the end. Katherine was not to have any holiday; she had come too recently, her employer explained to her, and the Christmas accumulations were quite beyond her power to tackle alone.

Katherine was grateful—she looked forward to seeing this country home with pleasure. She had been kept unusually busy and so had very rarely seen any one except Her Ladyship. But one morning about ten days before they were to go down into Blankshire, Lady Garribardine informed her secretary she was to be given for the whole afternoon to Mr. Strobbridge to type a quantity of letters about a new charity he was arranging for her.

"My nephew dictates abominably, but he said that you had understood him so well that first evening when you arrived a month ago, that he has asked me to lend you to him to-day for this business, and I have consented. He will lunch here, so have plenty of paper ready for the afternoon." Then as Katherine was leaving the room, she handed her a ten-pound note.

"Here is a little present for you, Miss Bush, for Christmas; I want you to buy yourself an evening frock—you must dine with us on Christmas Day and perhaps you had not provided for this possibility. I am very pleased with you, girl—you work splendidly."

Katherine coloured to the roots of her ashen-hued, glistening hair. She could not analyse her emotions. She hated presents, and yet she was gratified at the kindness and appreciation which lay in the manner of the gift.

"Your Ladyship is too good," she said very low. "I have simply done my duty—but I will endeavour to buy something suitable with the money which is far more than enough."

The old lady looked at her critically with her head a little on one side—she understood what the blush had arisen from and she appreciated the pride in the girl.

"The creature must have some breeding in her somewhere in spite of the auctioneer parentage. I must talk to her when we get to Blissington. She may prove a great interest for my old age."

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But she said aloud:

"Well, get what you like with it. I leave it to you, your taste is excellent—and while you are out, pay these two bills for me, and take a little walk—you have been looking rather pale; I fear you have not taken enough outdoor exercise lately."

Katherine thanked her and went rapidly to her room, a sense of excitement and anticipation in her heart. This might prove an interesting afternoon. There she reviewed her wardrobe. Her "dressy" blouse from Oxford Street was too ornate for the daytime, and she thought now in rather bad taste, and her morning ones were too dowdy. This was a great occasion and one which she had been waiting for. She was to go home late on this Friday to stay the night at Bindon's Green. Matilda had insisted upon it, because it was her birthday; she would be thirty years old. She had been quite tearful about it on the second occasion on which she had met her sister in the Park.

"You need not cast us all off like this, Kitten," she pleaded, "and we shall have Mabel and a few other friends on Friday night, and Fred has given us a lot of lovely new nigger song records for the gramophone, and it will all be so awfully jolly."

So Katherine had promised to go, and this fell in admirably with her plans. There would be a real excuse for her to have her hair waved. She had been given the evening off and it was known that she was going home. She would consult Gladys again for the frock for Christmas night and buy what was necessary on her way back to Berkeley Square on the morrow.

It was the first time in her life that a hairdresser had ever touched her thick mop of hair, and she had no idea of the difference to her appearance that it would make. But so critical and observant of all things had become her eye that she realised with her first peep in the mirror, when the undulation was complete, that it had turned her into almost a beauty. The broad waves fell back from the parting and showed the admirable planting of her brow and the Greek setting of her magnetic eyes. She allowed no elaboration of fashion, but had her ample tresses bound tightly to her head—the effect was distinguished and gave her satisfaction. Then from the hairdresser's she went and bought another blouse—something pale grey and becoming, and with the parcel she got back to Berkeley Square in good time for luncheon and began to dress herself.

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She was glad her hands were so white, she had lately taken to giving great care to the polish of her nails—she wished her feet were smaller, but they were well shaped and no one's feet were really small nowadays, Lady Garribardine had said!

She was quite content with the picture she saw in her looking-glass before she went downstairs. It was of a tall, slim girl with a very white, smooth face—extraordinary eyes under level, dark brows, and a big red mouth, and hair of silvery fairness that glistened grey, not gold, in its lights. She knew very well that she was attractive, and gave one of her rare soft laughs.

A month and more of mental discipline and acute observation of those in that status of refinement to which she wished to attain had given her numerous subtle distinctions of manner which she had not possessed before. She looked like a lady, and felt that she was approaching the time when she herself—most severe of all critics—might consider herself to be one. She was nearly as excited as on that afternoon when she had left Livingstone and Devereux's to go on a three days' honeymoon with Lord Algy. She made herself eat her luncheon as calmly as usual, and then when the tray had been taken away she opened the window wide and poured a packet of cedarwood dust on the fire—and she was sitting demurely at the table when from the library Lady Garribardine and Mr. Strobridge came in.

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Gerard Strobridge carried a bag full of papers and looked cross and harassed.

"Now G. you may have the services of Miss Bush until five o'clock; that will give you two hours and a half—you must not keep her, as she is going home to-night—then come up to my sitting-room to tea," and Lady Garribardine went out of the other door

which her nephew held open for her.

Katherine had risen and gone immediately to a cupboard, ostensibly to get something out for her work, so she hoped Her Ladyship had not remarked her hair—which indeed had happily been the case.

Mr. Strobridge had not even glanced in her direction, but her moment came when she sat down at the typing machine, and looked straight up into his eyes as she asked in her deep alluring voice:

"What do you wish me to begin upon, please?"

Then he took in the whole effect and a wave of intense astonishment swept over him. What had happened? Was he dreaming? Was this beautiful creature the ordinary, silent, admirable typist, Katherine Bush?

CHAPTER X

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He pulled himself together and took some papers from his bag without speaking, and when he had selected two or three, he drew a chair up to the other side of the table and began to dictate, stopping every now and then to explain the purport of his arguments.

They worked so for perhaps an hour.

"One has to do these things," he said at last, as Katherine had not uttered a word. "One wonders sometimes if there is any good in them."

"I suppose all effort has some merit," she responded, without looking up. He began to long to make her raise her eyes again.

"You think so?—On what grounds?"

"It exercises a useful faculty."

"What faculty?"

"Will, of course; to use effort is an exercise of will, because if there was no effort needed, no will would be required either."

He smiled whimsically; this was obvious.

"Then I must look upon the organisation of this very intricate charity, of doubtful use to mankind, as profitable to me because of the effort entailed."

"It is as good a way as any other of looking at it.—Did you say quarterly or monthly returns upon the capital?"

"Oh—er—" glancing at his papers—"the confounded thing! Where is it—Yes—quarterly."

The machine clicked uninterruptedly. Katherine never looked up.

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He began to allow himself to take in details. Why had he not remarked before that she had an extraordinarily well-shaped head?—And what wonderful hands—in these days of athletic, weather-beaten paws! She would be very stately, too, when she filled out a little. The whole thing was agreeably symmetrical, throat and shoulders, and bust and hips.

"Why, in the name of all the gods, have I never noticed this young woman before! She thinks, too! That was a curious reflection about will—I'd like to talk to her—The devil takes this d—d—charity!"

So his thoughts ran and his eyes eagerly devoured Katherine's face.

She was perfectly conscious of the fact; she knew with unerring instinct that the spark which she had dispatched by that first steady gaze of her eyes had struck tinder, the flame of interest was ignited, and the more difficult she made things now, the more complete would be her triumph presently. She resolutely kept her attention upon her work, never raising her head.

"To be so meritoriously industrious, are you using effort?" he asked, in a moment or two. "You look as though you had a most formidable will!"

"Very little effort; it is second nature to me now."

"Even if the subject is as uninteresting as this?"

"That is all the better; one can let one's mechanical brain tackle it, and one's real thoughts can wander."

"Where to?"

She put in a fresh sheet of paper—and now glanced at him again for one second.

"Into dreamland."

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"Yes, that is a ridiculously pleasant place devoid of draughts and of chilling surprises. It would be very impertinent, I suppose, if I asked you where is your dreamland?"

"Perhaps not impertinent—out of place. You are dictating a letter to the Lord Mayor of London at the moment."

"To be sure I am—you made me forget it—he is an infernal bore, the Lord Mayor of London, compelling me to branch off from this very interesting conversation to his confounded letter!—I beg your pardon!"

Katherine read aloud the last coherent sentence he had given her, and she permitted one of her faint sphinxlike smiles to play about her mouth, while her eyes sought the typing.

Gerard Strobridge moved a little nearer—he felt a sudden strong thrill.

"I shall not give you another word to type until you tell me about your dreamland—Is it in sea or sky or air?"

"It is half-past three o'clock and you are only to stay until five—had you not better attend to your work first, sir?"

She was waiting in an attitude of respectful attention, infinitely provoking.

"Certainly not! I shall ask my aunt to lend you to me for another day if we do not finish this afternoon—Indeed, on second thoughts, I do not think I shall try to finish to-day—we can complete the matter at Blissington—" And then he stopped abruptly—Lão Delemar would be there! He had melted her into a mood from which everything could be hoped during this week of uneventful family party—Beatrice would only stay for Christmas Day, and was indeed no great obstacle in any case. But he feared he would probably not be able to have interesting business interviews during the holidays with his aunt's typist.

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He laughed shortly to himself, and dictated a long sentence, concluding the letter to the Lord Mayor. He had better control the interest he was feeling, that was evident!

Katherine made no remark, while she wondered what had stopped his questioning so suddenly. She smiled again a little. It had the desired effect—Mr. Strobridge jumped up from his chair and went to the fireplace.

"Well—what are you thinking about?" he demanded, from there.

"My work, of course! What else should I be thinking about?" Her eyes at last met his in innocent surprise.

"I don't believe you are quite truthful—one does not smile in that enigmatic fashion over work—dull, tedious work like this, statistics of bodies who are to benefit by this absurd charity—Oh! no, fair scribe! I feel there lies a world of malice in that smile."

"Even a scribe is permitted sometimes to make reflections."

"Not without confessing what they are."

"We are not in the days of the Spanish Inquisition—" taking up a paper. "On the first list there is a letter for the Mayor of Manchester."

"Confound the Mayor of Manchester!"

"Poor gentleman!"

"I must know all about dreamland and cryptic reflections first."

He drew the armchair now over towards her and flung himself into it. He was a graceful creature, not so tall or so ideally perfect of form as Lord Algy, but a very presentable Englishman, with a wonderful distinction of manner and voice.

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Katherine Bush was experiencing intense pleasure—there was something feline, if not altogether feminine, in her well-balanced brain. It was peculiarly gratifying to find that her plans were being justified. How glad she was that he had not remarked her in her raw days! How wise she had been to have made ready—and then waited! The whole thing was the more effective because of the complete absence of all dramatic emotion in her. She was like a quiet, capable foreign minister playing his game of statecraft with the representative of another country, his face permitted to express—or conceal—only what he desired.

At this moment, she shrugged her shoulders very slightly, as though to say, "I am only an employer. I cannot force you to work if you will not"; but she did not speak, so he was obliged to demand again.

"Won't you tell me what made you smile?—We can drift to dreamland afterwards."

"No—I will not tell you what made me smile, because I do not know exactly; the aspect of life generally, perhaps."

"And you sit and work in this gloomy back room all day—What do you know about life?"

"I am observing—I know that one must pretend interest in what one is bored by—and one must show attention to those one despises—and—keep from laughing at things."

"What a dangerous young woman, watching and coming to cynical conclusions—but you say truly; one must keep from laughing at things—a very difficult matter generally." He lay back against the brown leather cushion, and proved the truth of this by laughing softly, while he looked at her quaintly.

Katherine Bush suddenly felt that a human being understood *with her*; it was a delightful sensation.

"Practically the whole of life is a ridiculous sham and must arouse the sardonic mirth of the gods—Here are you and I spending an afternoon arranging a charity in which neither of us takes the least interest—I am dictating fulsome letters to Lord Mayors to induce them to influence others to open their purses—I don't care a jot whether they do or they do not—You are mechanically transcribing my asinine words, and we could be so much better employed exchanging views—on each other's taste, say—on each other's dreamlands."

Katherine Bush looked down and allowed her hands to fall idly in her lap—he should do most of the speaking.

"The only good that I have been getting out of it as far as I can see," he went on, "is the contemplation of your really beautiful hands at work—Where did you get such perfect things in these days?"

She lifted one and regarded it critically.

"Yes, I have often wondered myself. My father was an auctioneer, you know, and my mother's father was a butcher."

Gerard Strobridge was extremely entertained. She was certainly a very wonderful product of such parentage.

"May I look at them closely?" he asked.

She showed not the least embarrassment; if he had been asking to see a piece of enamel, or a china vase she could not have been more detached about it. She held them out quite naturally, and he rose and took them in his own. Their touch was cool and firm, and every inch of his being tingled with pleasure. He examined them minutely finger by finger, stroking the rosy filbert nails in admiration, while an insane desire to clasp and kiss their owner grew in him.

Katherine Bush was perfectly aware of this, and when she thought he had felt emotion enough for the occasion, she drew them back as naturally as she had given them.

"I am always asking myself questions about such things," she remarked, in a tone of speculative matter-of-factness. "I am so often seeing contradictions since I have been here—My former conclusions are a little upset."

"What were they?" He had returned to his chair. He was no novice to be carried away by his sensations, and he knew very well that to indulge them further at present would be very unwise, and perhaps check a most promising amusement.

"I believed that birth and breeding gave fine ears and fine ankles and fine hands—as well as moral qualities."

"And you have been disappointed?"

"Yes, very—have not you?"

"No, because I have had no illusions—one never can tell where a side cross comes in, or what will be the effect of overbreeding—that runs to enormities sometimes."

"I suppose so—"

"And have the moral qualities surprised you also?"

"Oh, yes—more than the physical; I have seen and heard what I would have thought were common things even at Bindon's Green."

He laughed again—If the crew who had attended the tableaux rehearsals could have heard her!

"You are perfectly right—looked at in the abstract, I suppose we are rather a shoddy company nowadays."

"There are individuals who come up to the measure, of course, but not all of them, as I had imagined. You must have opened the doors to quite ordinary people to have made such a mixture."

"We have grown indifferent; we no longer care about a standard, I fear."

"That is why you let all these Radicals be in power, perhaps—You have become effete like the nobles before the revolution in France, who could only die like gentlemen, but not live like men."

Gerard Strobridge was startled. This from the granddaughter of a butcher of Bindon's Green!

"She picks it all up from Seraphim, of course," he reflected presently. "And yet—look

at her strange face!—it is a woman of parts from wherever it has come!"

"That is an apt phrase—where did you find it—'die like gentleman, but not live like men'?"

"I don't know, it just came from thinking and reading about them—so much was fine, and so much—foolish."

"Yes—and you think we are growing also to that stage in England? Perhaps you are right; we want some great national danger to pull us together."

"You will rust out otherwise, and it will be such a pity."

"You think we are good enough to keep?"

"In your highest development—like Her Ladyship—you are, I should think, the best things for a country in the world."

She knew he was drawing her out and was very pleased to be so drawn.

"Tell me about us—what have we that is good?"

"You have a sense of values—you know what is worth having—You have had hundreds of years to acquire the quality of looking ahead. No person of the classes from which the Radical statesmen are drawn has naturally the quality of looking ahead; he has to be told about it, and then get it if he can—it is not in his blood because his forebears only had to snatch what they could for themselves and their families day by day, and were not required to observe any broad horizon."

"How very true—you are a student of heredity then, Miss Bush?"

"Yes—it explains everything. I examine it in myself; I am always combating ordinary and cramping instincts which I find I have got."

"How interesting!"

"No common Radical could be a successful foreign minister, for instance—unless perhaps he were a Jew like Disraeli—but they have sense enough to know that themselves, and always choose a gentleman, don't they?"

"You wonderful girl—do you ever air these views to my aunt? They would please her."

"Of course not—Her Ladyship is my employer and she knows my place. I speak to her when I am spoken to."

"You think we on our side are too casual, then?—That we are letting our birthright slip from us—I believe you are right."

"Yes—you are too sure of yourselves. You think it does not matter really—and so you let the others creep in with lies and promises—you let them alter all the standards of public honour without a protest, and so you will gradually sink to the new level, too—I feel very sorry for England sometimes."

"So do I—" his face altered. He looked sad, and in earnest and older. For the moment he forgot that he was wasting valuable time in the most agreeable task of exploiting the ideas of a new species of female; her words had touched a matter very near his weary heart.

"What can we do?" he cried, in a tone of deep interest. "That is the question—what can we do?"

"You should all wake up to begin with, like people do when they find that their houses have caught fire—at least, those whom the smoke has not suffocated first. You ought to make a concentrated, determined effort to save what you can to build a new shelter with."

"Admitted—but how?"

"Have common sense taught from the beginning in the schools, the reasons of things explained to the children. If you knew the frightful ignorance upon all the subjects that matter which prevails among my class, for instance! They have false perspectives about everything—not because they are bad; in the mass they are much better than you—but because they are so frightfully ignorant of the meaning of even the little they have learnt. Everything has a false value for them. There is hardly a subject that they can see straightly about; they are muffled and blighted with shams and hypocrisies."

"You should address meetings among them."

"They would not listen to me for a moment; the truths I would tell them would wound their vanity; it would only be in the schools among the children that anything effectual could be done."

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes, I know—My own sisters and brothers are examples. I could never teach them anything, and there are millions in England just like them. Good as gold—and stupid as owls."

"It does not sound hopeful, then."

"No, the rust has gone too far; there should have been no education at all, or a better one—but the present system looks as if it would swamp England if the children are not taught things soon."

"You are a Tory, it would seem."

"No, I don't think I am. I think everyone has an equal right, but only according to his capacity; and I certainly don't think the scum of the earth of idiots and wastrels have equal rights with hardworking, sensible artisans."

"Indeed, no?—Go on!"

"I think aristocrats are things apart from the opportunities they have had, and should know it, and keep up the prestige and make their order a great goal to strive for. You see, if they were stamped out, it would be like cutting down all the old trees in Kensington Gardens; they could not be produced again for hundreds of years, and all the beauty and dignity of the gardens would be gone. But aristocrats ought to act as such, and never slip into the gutter."

"There you are certainly right. I am more than with you—But what can one do?"

"You should have the courage of your opinions, as Her Ladyship has—you only laugh when she is saying splendid things sometimes. So few of you seem to have any backbone that I have seen."

"You shame me!"

Her face became filled with a humorous expression—they had been serious long enough, she thought. His caught the light of her eyes; he was intensely fascinated.

"You did not, of course, come from—Bindon's Green—is it?—You came down from Parnassus to teach us poor devils of aristocrats to stick to our guns—I will be your first disciple, priestess of wisdom!"

"It is five minutes to four, sir—it will be quite impossible to finish that pile of papers to-day—And I *did* come from Bindon's Green—and I am going back there by the six o'clock train from Victoria, to a supper party at my home—That is why my hair is crimped and I have on this new blouse."

He got up and stood quite near her.

"And what will you do at the party? I can't see you there."

"I shall look disagreeable, as I generally do. We shall have supper of cold pressed beef and cold meat-pie, and cheese-cakes and figs and custard, and some light dinner ale or stout, and cups of tea—and then when we have finished that, there are a whole lot of new nigger song records for the gramophone, and my brother Bert will recite imitations of Harry Lauder, and my future sister-in-law, Miss Mabel Cawber, will sing 'The Chocolate Soldier' out of tune—We shall make a great deal of noise, and then we shall push the furniture back and dance the turkey trot and the bunny hug, and some of the elder ones, like my sister Matilda, will make up a whist-drive, and at about one o'clock I can get to bed."

"It sounds perfectly ideal; but you return from this to-morrow?"

"Yes—by an early train. I am not a favourite at home. Now will you please begin again to dictate."

He walked up and down the room for a minute; he was not a boy accustomed only to acting from inclination; he knew very well that it would be much wiser now to resume attention to business. So he took up his memoranda and started once more, and for over half an hour nothing but dictation passed between them; the pile of papers grew considerably less.

"If you care to give me directions for the rest quickly, I will take them down in shorthand, and then I could finish all this to-morrow, some time. Her Ladyship, I am sure, would be better pleased if her whole scheme is complete."

He agreed—he truly admired her perfect composure and common sense; she was so capable and practical, a person to be relied upon. He would do as she suggested, though he had not heard about dreamland yet.

He set his mind to the affair on hand, and before the clock struck five all was done and ready for this admirable young woman to type when she had leisure. And now he took her hand again.

"A thousand thanks, Egeria," he said. "You ought to discover a likely lad and turn him into the Prime Minister. You would make an ideal Prime Minister's wife—but—er—don't look for him at Bindon's Green!"

"No, I won't—good-night, Mr. Strobridge. Thank you for your wishes—but I have other views. I shall not turn my 'lad' into anything; he shall turn me—"

"Into what?"

"That is still in the lap of the gods," and she made him the slightest curtsey, and went with a bundle of receipts to the cupboard in the wall, while her grey-green eyes laughed at him over her shoulder.

As Gerard Strobbridge walked up the shallow marble steps to his aunt's sitting-room, he felt like a man in a dream.

CHAPTER XI

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"What are you thinking of, G.?" Lady Garribardine said, noticing after a little while his preoccupation. "That wretched charity has tired you out, dear boy—I hope Miss Bush was efficient?"

"Quite—" and he lay back in his very comfortable chair and devoured a bit of brown bread and butter. "The whole thing is practically finished. Your secretary very kindly said she would complete alone the last directions, which she took down in shorthand."

"Then it will be done, G.; she is a young person of her word."

Mr. Strobbridge did not become expansive; it was fortunate, he thought, that he had never yet shown any interest in Katherine Bush, because very little escaped his aunt's perceptions.

She was already wondering what caused his absence of mind. He surely was not being so foolish as to have allowed himself to become seriously enamoured of Lăo Delemar! Her precious Gerard! This must be ascertained at once.

"Lăo telephoned just now that she would not come to the play to-night—Really, the caprices of these pretty women are quite intolerable, throwing one over at a moment's notice—masses of selfishness and conceit."

"Yes,—aren't they?" languidly.

This did not sound a lover's disappointment, but perhaps he was prepared for her news, and Lăo's proposed absence was what caused his depression.

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"What excuse has she given you?"

He looked surprised.

"None. I did not know that she had chucked; did she give any reason?"

"Some nonsense about a friend of her mother's having turned up. I was so annoyed that I put the receiver down."

"You must console me, *carina*," and he leaned forward and took his aunt's fat hand. "Lăo would never be missed if a man might count upon you for his partner."

"Flatterer!" but she smiled complacently. "The Colvins can both talk to Tom Hawthorne then. I had intended Henry Colvin to be my portion; he is a bright creature, and distracted me at dinner last week—but I am tired, and I always prefer you, G. Ah! if you had only been my son!"

"It would have destroyed the happiest of relationships in the world—and you know it. A son you could overscold—a mother I could overrespect—Let us thank Heaven for the charming courtesy tie that we enjoy."

"I wish you would have a son, though, G.; you know I am perfectly indifferent to Emmeline's boy."

"I shall never have any Strobbridge children, Seraphim. Beatrice would faint at the idea. We only touched upon domestic pretences and got them all over with the very lightest effort in the first week. Besides, one would not want a Thorvil child—there is a mad streak in the whole family, I have often thought. I am much interested in heredity."

He did not add how greatly the afternoon had augmented this interest!

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"Yes—did you chance to notice my secretary's hands?—The mother must have had a lover, of course."

"I don't think so—they seldom do in that class. They become so intolerably unattractive at once; nothing human could come up to the scratch. It is just a freak, or a harking back—many of the exquisitely aristocratic features one finds in old villagers, for instance, date from the *droit de seigneur*."

"The whole question of heredity is a frightfully serious one, of course, and we are in a stupendous muddle at the present time, with the inroads of the Lord knows who to muddy the stream."

"Do you suppose that is the cause of the dry rot which has got into us?—Or is it that we are really rusting out?"

"It is luxury and humanitarianism, and absence of national foes, which have sent us to sleep—and forgetfulness of dignity and duty. We eat the food of those whose fathers fed in our fathers' kitchens, and not because they are worthy and nice—that would be quite justifiable if so—but just because they are rich and have a superb

chef, or because they are giving our younger sons a lift in the city—I loathe all money-making and trade—I am thankful that I, at least, can stand on my own feet, though I see the sad decadence in all around me—But I must not talk like this; it depresses and ages me!—By the way, Sterling had the impertinence to tell me that she thought my new toupées from Paris are too light!—What do you say, G.?"

He looked at her critically, at the clever, shrewd, painted old face and the ridiculous girlish wig—and then he kissed her hand again, and told her the truth. Something about her words touched him infinitely.

"I adore very dark hair when it is going grey, Seraphim. I have often thought how beautiful you would be if you burnt all those things. Your sense of humour is so supreme, they always seem incongruous."

"I will, then, this very New Year, while we are at Blissington. It will be the sensation when we return to town. Sarah Lady Garribardine with snow-white hair!"

"No, iron grey. It will make your eyes brighter."

"It shall be done!" Then she laughed softly. "G., how goes it with Lăo—you are not in love?"

Mr. Strobridge shook his head regretfully.

"Alas! not an atom. I fear it won't last until the Easter recess."

"She is artificial."

"Extremely."

"And hopelessly vague."

"Yes—but quite charming."

"Beatrice says she pretends to be full of sex and other dreadful natural things—you always had fruity tastes, Beatrice avers!"

"My tastes *are* fruity, but are never gratified in these modern days, alas! She is quite wrong about Lăo, though; she is as cold as ice. She smiles with equal sweetness upon the waiters when we are lunching at restaurants. She is merely a lovely woman demanding incense from all things male.

"Beatrice said 'pretends,' remember—Beatrice is not at all dense!"

"No, quite a subtle companion when not composing odes, or discussing the intensity of blue with Hebe Vermont."

"—Are you glad Lăo is coming for Christmas?"

"Y—es. I shall want some of your very best champagne."

"You shall have it, G., and I will try to make things difficult for you as a sort of appetiser. I have some kind of feeling that you are depressed, dear boy?—I am putting Lăo in the parrot suite."

"It will suit her admirably."

Then they both laughed.

"But you are depressed, G.?"

"A shadow of coming events, perhaps! not exactly disaster, or I should be what the Scotch call 'fey,'" and he sighed. He felt very fatigued and disturbed, and he hardly knew what.

Lady Garribardine did not press the matter. She had enormous tact.

Mrs. Delemar at that moment was lying upon her sofa in a ravishing saffron gauze teagown smoking scented cigarettes, while she discussed her heart's secrets with a dearest friend.

"Gerard is madly in love with me, Agnes. I hardly know what to do about it. I have chucked for to-night on purpose to give him a setback."

"It will be most cosy dining here alone with Bobbie Moreland and Jimmy and me. You were quite right, darling."

"Poor Bobbie, back from that horrible India where he has been for a year—of course, I could not refuse him—But Lady Garribardine is wild."

"It would not do to offend her really, Lăo sweet. You must be penitent and send her some flowers to-morrow."

If Katherine Bush had been there, she would have seen a strong likeness in Mrs. Delemar to her future sister-in-law, Mabel Cawber; her cigarette ash was knocked off in almost as dainty a fashion as that lady employed in using her spoon. Mrs. Delemar *never* ceased remembering that she was a beautiful woman, and must act accordingly; the only difference between them was that Mabel Cawber *never* forgot

that she was a perfect lady, and was determined that no one should miss this fact if she could help it. Their souls were on a par—or whatever animating principle did duty as a soul in each.

Mrs. Delemar returned to the subject of Gerard with a sigh, telling her friend Agnes the most intimate things he had said to her and giving her pleasing descriptions of her own emotions, too. Gerard was a feather for any woman's cap, and Agnes should know how crazily in love he was with her.

"I think he'll do something desperate, darling—if I don't give way soon—I wish men were like us, don't you?"

"One must please the creatures, or they would not stay."

"Yes—but oh! isn't it a shocking bore—that part—if they only knew!"

Katherine Bush, meanwhile, was arriving at Laburnum Villa, where a crowd of sisters and friends welcomed her home.

Fresh from the entrancing fencing match with Gerard Strobridge, their well-meant chaff and badinage sounded extremely bald. But among them poor Gladys was silent, and sat with flushed cheeks and overbright eyes, looking at Katherine.

"I want to talk to you, Glad," this latter said, kindly. "Lady Garribardine has given me ten pounds to get a real evening frock with. I must have it to take down to Blissington for Christmas—we go to-morrow week. But can I get it in the time?"

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Gladys was all interest at once. Clothes were a real passion for her. She devised something pretty; but five pounds would be quite enough. Katherine had better have two dresses, a black and that lovely new shade of mauve.

"I'll have the black, the very simplest that there can be, if you know of one of your hands who could make it for me. I'll leave it entirely to you."

Gladys was delighted, and then her large prominent eyes grew haunted and wistful.

"I'd like awfully to talk to you to-night, Kitten," she said. "May I come to your room?"

Permission was given, and they all went to supper. It was exactly as Katherine had described it that afternoon, and Mr. Prodgers was there in his best frock coat, more full of what Miss Ethel Bush called "swank" mixed with discomfort than Katherine had ever known him. If she had not felt so deeply that these people were her own flesh and blood, she could have been amused by the whole thing.

Nothing could equal the condescension of Miss Cawber. Lady Garribardine's name was not entirely unknown to her—although, to be sure, it was not in the same class as that of the Duchess of Dashington, Lady Hebe Vermont or any of the "smart set"—but still it had chanced once now and then to have appeared in the society column of the *Flare*, she rather thought as the patroness of some dull old political thing—and yes—more recently in connection with those *tableaux vivants*, which Miss Cawber was dying to hear the details of; perhaps Katherine could gratify his need?

"Did Hebe Vermont look a dream as Sicchy and Lord St. Aldens as Cupid? My! they must have been a pair! I always do say to Fred when we meet them at church parade of a Sunday that they are the real thing."

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Katherine for once took up the gauntlet, while one of her sphinxlike smiles hovered about her mouth.

"*Lady* Hebe Vermont played Psyche—if that is who you mean by 'Sicchy'—but who is Lord St. Aldens, Mabel? Mr. John St. Aldens, who acted Cupid, is an 'Honourable'; he is a Baron's son, his father is Lord Hexam."

Mabel reddened; while maintaining for the most part a rather chilling silence with her, Katherine had never before deliberately crossed swords. She felt indignant! A paid companion to try to make her look foolish before the others! She who had never done a stroke of work even in a business house in her life! She would have to put this future sister-in-law in her place, and no mistake! Her manner plainly showed that Katherine was in disgrace, as she answered loftily:

"Really, I ought to know—My father was a great friend of his father, and often went to their place."

"In what capacity, Mabel?" Katherine smiled. "We none of us remember your father, but Liv and Dev told me once when I asked them that he had been an under-clerk at Canford and Crin's—the St. Alden solicitors—and then passed the examinations. From what I've learned about his sort of people by living among them for a month, I don't expect Lord Hexam was very intimate with Mr. Cawber—but we are all acquainted in the same way, aren't we, Tild? You remember hearing of this family from mother's father, who was their butcher for the river house at Maidenhead."

Mabel glared; this was sheer impertinence; her queenship of this circle was not being treated with proper respect—How vulgar of Katherine, she thought!

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Mabel's refinement was almost of the degree of the Boston lady who insisted upon the piano's "limbs" being put into pantaloons with frills. She would hardly have spoken of a butcher! She felt particularly annoyed now also, because the clerk episode was a fact which she thought was quite unknown—the solicitorship at Bindon's Green having gloriously advanced the family fortunes.

Poor Matilda was quite upset and reproached Katherine when she succeeded in getting her into a corner alone.

"Whatever did you speak to Mabel like that for, Kitten?—And I am sure we need not tell everyone about Grandpa—since he did not live here."

"Her nonsense makes me feel quite sick, Tild—she is always pretending some ridiculous knowledge and acquaintanceship with the aristocracy. She gets all the names wrong, and gives herself away all the time; it does her good to be found out once in a way."

Matilda could bear this side of the affair, but resented the allusion to the butcher with undiminished fervour.

"Oh! what awful snobs you all are!" Katherine exclaimed, exasperated out of her amused tolerance at last. "I am not the least ashamed of him: I am proud, on the contrary. He was honest and made money. Why are you and Mabel and all your friends such absurd shams, Tild!—There is nothing disgraceful in being lower middle class; it is honourable and worthy. Why on earth pretend to belong to another, when anyone who knows can see it is untrue—or if you hate your real station, then do as I am doing, educate yourself out of it."

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"Educate myself out of it!" Matilda was incensed. "Why, I'm sure we are all as fairly educated as any ladies need be."

This point of view naturally ended the argument for Katherine; she could only smile again.

"All right—it is your birthday, dear old Tild, so I won't quarrel with you! By the way, where is Bob Hartley? I don't see him here to-night."

The fiancé of Gladys was prevented from coming by a severe cold, she was informed.

And so the evening passed with the Bunny Hug and games, and the gramophone shouted forth its nigger songs, in which they all joined.

"Hasn't it been too lovely, Kitten," Matilda said affectionately—her whilom indignation fled as they walked up the narrow stairs. "I've never had such a perfect birthday party, and I am sure you could not have had a more refined, enjoyable evening, not in any home."

Katherine kissed her as she turned into her room.

"You dear old Tild," she said, and then presently Gladys came in.

Katherine was seated in a shrunk dressing-gown which she had left behind, and Em'ly had lighted a fire in the attic grate.

The two girls looked at one another, and then Gladys was asked to sit down.

"I know what you are going to say," and Katherine's voice was deep and level. "You would not have to say it if you had not always been such a fool, my poor Glad—you have got into trouble, of course, and Bob Hartley is not playing the game."

Gladys burst into passionate sobs.

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"However did you guess, Kitten! Why, Tild doesn't know a thing!"

"Most likely not—Well, what do you want him to do—marry you?"

"Why, of course, Katherine; that is what he promised most solemnly beforehand—at Brighton. You know it is his mother who has kept him back; his Aunt Eliza, with whom we stayed, is quite willing for me. I am sure I'm as good as him, anyway."

Further sobs.

"Oh! that part does not matter a bit, as good or not as good—these awful men like Bob Hartley always seduce women with promises, solemn promises, of matrimony and that sort of stuff; if they meant them, they would not forestall matters—vile brutes!"

"There is no good in abusing Bob, Kitten; he has always meant kind; it is his mother, I tell you, has got at him!"

"Does she know?"

"Oh, my! I hope not. No one knows but you—and Bob."

"Have you told him he must marry you at once?"

"Yes, I've implored him to on my bended knees."

"And he has refused?"

"Yes—he can't break his mother's heart, he says, and speaks of going to Australia."

"Very well—go to bed now, dear—I will see him to-morrow and see what I can do. I think he will marry you next week, perhaps, after all. You must undertake the inventing of a reason for the suddenness to the family, if I accomplish the fact. Go now, dear—I want to think."

Gladys sobbed her gratitude.

"And you don't believe I am really bad, Kitten, do you? Indeed, I never wanted—anything—but Bob—We went to the theatre one night and had a bit of supper—and afterwards, I was so afraid he would be off to Carry Green if I did not do as he wished."

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Two great tears grew in Katherine's beautiful eyes, and rolled slowly down her white cheeks.

"I think—most men are devils, Glad—but nine-tenths of the women are fools—and fools always have to pay the price of everything in life. A woman always loses a man if she gives way to him against her conscience. You felt you were sinning all the time, I suppose?"

"Why, of course, Kitten—I'm really a good girl."

"Then what else could you expect? If you feel you are doing wrong, you must know you will be punished—that attitude of yours was bound to have drawn—this. I tell you, Glad, no one of your sort can afford to step one foot aside out of the narrow path. You've 'sinned,' as you call it—for love. It gave you no pleasure and you have practically lost Bob—remember this, and never give way to him in anything again."

"Why did you have the tears in your eyes, Katherine—? You so cold!"

"It was stupid of me, but the incredible pitifulness of some parts of life touched me for a moment. Now go to bed, dear—and keep your courage up—don't let Tild know; it would break her heart—and think of Mabel!"

"Oh! My!" wailed Gladys, and went towards the door.

Katherine jumped up suddenly, and gave her the ten-pound note which had been lying under a box of matches on the imitation oak dressing-chest.

"Here, Gladys, get the little black frock for me just as cheaply as ever you can. Lady Garribardine will never know what it cost; she is accustomed to pay forty or fifty pounds for her evening dresses—and you keep all the rest. If—if—Bob should not be reasonable to-morrow, it might be useful for you to have some money that you need not account to Tild for—I know she looks after everything that you have got."

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"But you will make him, Katherine, oh! you will if you can—you are so clever—and he'll be in the train if you go by the early one. You'll have him alone."

"Very well. Bring me up a slice of bread or anything you can find when you first go down; I can't stand the family breakfast, and I will just rush off by the eight-five."

What she said to Mr. Bob Hartley she never told anyone—but it was extraordinarily effectual—it contained biting scorn and heavy threats. Among them, his chief should know of his conduct that very day, before he could possibly sneak off to Australia, unless he went and got a special license. The Registry Office would do very well, but by the following Wednesday Gladys must be his wife, or Katherine's scorpion whip would fall. He should be thrashed by Fred and Bert and Charlie Prodggers, too! She would have no mercy upon him—none at all.

"You poor, mean, sanctimonious, miserable cur," were some of her parting words to him. "Come into this telegraph office with me and send this wire to Gladys this minute. 'Will you honour me by marrying me on Tuesday? If so, get ready.' You can pretend you had a secret wedding to save expense, and tell them at home on Christmas day."

Mr. Hartley was a thorough coward; his plans were not matured enough yet to go to Australia, and his present berth was a good one, so he felt it was wiser to give in and do what he was bid. And presently Katherine got into a taxi and was whirled back to Berkeley Square, where later in the day her sister's telegram of rapturous thanks came to her.

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But when she was alone that night by her comfortable fire, she let a volume of Flaubert drop on her knees and looked into the coals, her thoughts going back to the painful incident. Here was a plain indication of the working of laws shown in her own case and the difference between it and that of Gladys. Alas! the piteous fate of weaklings!

And then she set herself to analyse things. "Whether the accepted idea of morality is right or is wrong—of God or of man, those who break its laws are certainly drawing to themselves the frightfully strong current of millions of people's disapproval and so must run great risk of punishment." Thus she mused and then her eyes grew wide as she gazed into the glowing coals. *What* if some day she should have to pay some price for her own deviation from recognized standards?

Christmas Day fell upon a Tuesday in 1911, and on the Saturday before Katherine Bush accompanied her employer, and the two dogs, down to Blissington in the motor. She had only been in one for short drives in the Bois with Lord Algy, so to tear through the frozen country was a great joy to her, although, not possessing proper wraps, she was rather cold.

"You must have a fur coat, Miss Bush! I am greatly annoyed that I did not remark that you were insufficiently clad before we started. Here, crouch down under this rug—and there is an extra one at my feet you must wrap round you."

Katherine was grateful.

"Stirling must find you some warm garment of mine while we are at Blissington. I have no patience with idiots who deliberately take cold."

Katherine agreed with her.

"Do you know the English country, or are you quite a cockney girl?" she was then asked.

"No, I hardly know it at all. I know Brighton, and a lot of seaside places, but we never chanced to go to the country for our holidays."

"It is a wonderful place, the English country, the most beautiful in the world, I think; it will interest me immensely to hear your impressions of it; after a week you must tell me."

"I shall be very pleased to do so."

"We pass Windsor; you must go over it some day—it is only twenty miles from Blissington—. Are you interested in historical associations?"

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"Extremely—any places which are saturated with the evolution of man and nations are interesting, I think. I am afraid I would not care to go to Australia, or a new country."

Lady Garribardine turned and looked at her secretary. The creature evidently had a brain, and this would be a good opportunity to draw her out.

"You feel the force of tradition, then?"

"Oh, yes—in everything. It acts for generations in the blood—it makes people do all sorts of things, good and bad, quite without reason."

Lady Garribardine chuckled—she loved discussions.

"How does it act in yourself, for instance?"

"I have tried to stop its action in myself, because I saw the effects of the traditions of my class in my brothers and sisters, and how stultifying it was."

"You certainly seem to have emerged from them in an extraordinary manner—how did you set about it?"

Katherine thought a little and then answered deliberately.

"I always wanted to know the reason why of everything and I soon felt sure that there was no such thing as chance, but that everything which happened was part of some scheme—and I always desired to be able to distinguish between appearance and reality, and I got to understand that personal emotion distorts all reality and creates appearance, and so I began to try to dissociate things from personal emotion in my judgments of them."

"Yes, but how about tradition?"

"Tradition suggested certain views and actions to me—but looked at without emotion, I saw that they were foolish. I analysed my brothers' and sisters' ideas and instincts because I wanted to see if what I did not like in them was inevitable in myself too from the force of tradition or if there was any way to get rid of stupidities."

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"And you found?"

"Of course, that everything, even instincts, can be eradicated if only their origins can be traced and the will is strong enough to overcome them."

"Yes, everything depends upon will. And you found time for all this reasoning while you kept the accounts at the pork-butcher's?"

Lady Garribardine's eyebrows ran quizzically up into her forehead, and there was a twinkle in her eye. She was greatly amused.

"Yes—in the evenings."

"No wonder you have emerged! You do not allow yourself to have any emotions then?"

Katherine looked away demurely.

"I try not to indulge in them; it is more prudent to watch their action in others."

"Have you ever been in love, child?"

"It depends upon what one calls love." The tone was dignified. Katherine did not think this quite a fair question.

Lady Garribardine laughed appreciatively.

"You are quite right. I should not have asked you that, since we were up upon a plane of discussion in which even women do not lie to one another!"

"If Your Ladyship will permit me to say so, women have very little notion of truth, I think!"

"Oh! that is too bad. You must always stand up for your sex."

"Forgive me for differing, but I should be acting from good nature in that case, not from justice."

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Lady Garribardine was delighted.

"So you think we are not truthful as a company?"

"Oh, no, we have no love of abstract truth, truth for itself. When we are truthful in our general dealings with people, it is either because we have decent characters or religious views, or for our own ends, not from a detached love of truth."

"What a cynic! And how about men?"

"A man is truthful because he likes truth, and to tell lies he feels would degrade himself."

"And yet men always lie to women—have you remarked that, girl?"

"Yes—that seems to be the one exception in their standard of truth."

"How do you account for this? Have you found the 'reason why' of this peculiarity?"

"It seems presumptuous of me to give my views to Your Ladyship."

"I think I am the best judge of that matter," and Lady Garribardine frowned a little. "I asked a question."

Katherine answered then immediately. She was not quite pleased with herself for her last remark, it had laid her open to a snub.

"Original man had no regard for women—they were as the animals to him—he would not have felt degraded in lying to animals—because such a thing could not occur. He would not consult animals—he simply ordered them."

"Well?"

"Then as soon as he had to consider women at all he found it easier to lie to them because of their want of understanding, and chattering tongues, and as he did not consider that they were his equals in anything, no degradation was entailed in making things easy for himself with them, by lying to them."

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"How ingenuous!"

"That is how it seems to me, and so things have gone on—tradition and instinct again! Until even now when man is forced to consider women, the original instinct is still there making him feel that it does not matter lying to them."

"I believe you are right. You are not a suffragette?"

"Oh, no! I like women to advance in everything, but unless you could destroy their dramatic instinct, and hysteria, I think it would be a pity for a country if they had votes."

"You despise women and respect men, then?"

"Not at all; it would be like despising bread and respecting water. I only despise weakness in either sex."

"Well, Miss Bush, I think you have a wonderfully-stored mind. I don't feel that ninety pounds a year and drudgery is the right thing for you. What is to be done?"

Katherine gave one of her rare soft laughs.

"Believe me, madam, the lessons I am learning in Your Ladyship's service are worth more to me than my salary. I am quite contented and enjoy my drudgery."

"So you are learning lessons—are you!" Lady Garribardine chuckled again. "Of the world, the flesh or the devil?"

"A little of all three, perhaps," Katherine answered with shy demureness.

"Look here, young woman, I have remarked more than once that you possess a quality—almost unknown in ninety-nine females out of a hundred, and non-existent in the middle classes—a fine sense of humour. It is quite out of place—and like the royal rose imprinted upon the real queen's left shoulder, I expect we shall discover presently that the butcher and baker forebears are all moonshine, and that you are a princess in disguise.—See, that is Windsor—isn't it fine?"

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"Ah! Yes!" cried Katherine. "It makes one think."

They were rushing along the road from Staines where they could see the splendid pile standing out against the sky.

"All those old grey stones put together by brutes and fools and brains and force. I will take you there myself some day."

"I shall love to go."

Then Her Ladyship became quite silent as was her custom when she felt inclined so to be. The obligation to make conversation never weighed upon her. This made her a delightful companion. They arrived at the park gates of Blissington Court about one o'clock, and Katherine Bush felt again a delightful excitement. She had never seen a big English country home except in pictures.

The lodge-keeper came out. He was an old man in a quaint livery.

"I cannot stand the untidy females escaping from the washtub who attend to most people's gates. This family of Peterson have opened those of Blissington for two hundred years, and have always worn the same sort of livery, from father to son. Their intelligence is at the lowest ebb, and they make capital gate-keepers. There is generally a 'simple' boy or two to carry on the business. The women folk keep out of sight, it is a tradition in the family—they take a pride in it. I give them unusually high wages, and whatever else grows more and more idiotic, the gate-keeping instinct survives in full force. There are three lodges—all kept by Petersons."

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"How wonderful," said Katherine.

"Good day, Jacob!—The family well? Jane quite recovered from the chicken-pox, eh?"

"Quite well, Your Ladyship," and the old man's wandering eyes were fixed in adoration upon his mistress's face. "And Your Ladyship's godchild, Sarah, is growing that knowing my daughter can hardly keep her from the front garden."

"I am delighted to hear it. I shall be stopping in to see you to-morrow, tell Mrs. Peterson. This is my new secretary, Miss Bush, Jacob—you will know her again, won't you?"

"I'll try to, Your Ladyship," a little doubtfully, and he bowed deeply as the motor rolled on along a beautiful drive through the vast park, with its groups of graceful deer peering at them from under the giant trees.

Katherine was taking in the whole scene, the winter day, and the brown earth, and the blue sky, and the beauty of it all!

Yes—this sort of thing was what must be hers some day when she had fitted herself to possess it. They came to another gate—and yet another—iron ones with no lodges, and then they swept through a wide avenue with sprucely kept edges and so on up to the front door.

It was a long irregular building which Katherine saw, principally built in the middle of the seventeenth century, and added to from time to time. It was very picturesque, and when they were inside, the hall proved to be very fine. It was huge and square and panelled with some good Grinling Gibbons carving, and quantities of indifferently painted ancestors, for the most part in stiff peers' robes.—They had been a distinguished crew, not of the fox-hunting type.

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"These are my people, Miss Bush, not Garribardines," Her Ladyship said, pointing to the portraits. "They were not handsome, as you see, and evidently did not encourage the best artists—the few who did are in the other rooms and the picture gallery. Come, we will go straight in to lunch; I am as hungry as a schoolboy—You will lunch with me."

Bronson had gone down much earlier and was awaiting them with two footmen, as dignified as usual.

The dining-room was in a panelled passage to the right and was a long, low room of much earlier date.

"A relic incorporated later in the present structure," Katherine was told.

It was perfectly beautiful, she thought, with its deep brown oak, wax polished to the highest lustre, and its curtains of splendid Venetian velvet in faded crimson and green, on a white satin ground all harmonious with age and mellowing.

"I had a terrible struggle to oust the Victorian horrors I had been brought up with, and which had insinuated themselves, as all vulgar things do, into almost every room among their betters—taste was quite dead sixty years ago in my father's day. I had to combat sentiment in myself and ruthlessly condemn the whole lot."

"It is most beautiful." Katherine's admiration was indeed sincere.

"Yes—it has been a great pleasure to me getting it perfect. You shall see the whole house presently, but now food is the only important matter.—Bronson—I distrust the look of that ham soufflé—are you sure it has not been kept waiting? A second or two alters its consistency. Take it away at once, man!"—with an indignant sniff—"and tell

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François never to hazard so precarious a dish again for arrivals by motor!"

"Very good, Your Ladyship."

"One can eat bread and cheese, but one cannot stomach an indifferent soufflé—it is like an emotional woman, its charm is just as capricious and just as ephemeral!"

The rest of the lunch was to her taste and no further disapproval was expressed.

It was the first time Katherine had broken bread with her mistress, or indeed had even assisted at a whole luncheon. Coffee was the extent of her knowledge hitherto. It interested her to see the varied dishes, to watch the perfect service, the style of the placing and removing of the plates—the rapidity and noiselessness of it all. She thought of the pressed beef and the stout and the cheese-cakes and the frightful untidiness of everything at Laburnum Villa. That was the strange difference, the utter want of method and order which always rendered the home table a mass of litter and miscellaneous implements towards the end of a repast, plates and cups pushed here and there and everywhere.

How very good to be out of it all!

To her great surprise, Her Ladyship drank beer—clear golden stuff poured from a lovely crystal and silver jug into a chased silver tankard.

"The best beverage in Christendom!" that epicure said, as she quaffed it. "Have some, Miss Bush. You are young enough to have no dread of gout. It is a vice with me, the worst thing in the world for my rheumatism, and yet I cannot resist the temptation! The day I return home I must fall to my tankard! To-morrow, Bronson removes the accursed thing to the sideboard, out of sight, and I keep up my courage on ridiculously thin Zeltinger."

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Katherine tasted it; it was delicious, and as different from what she knew as beer as the tea had been from her original idea of tea.

"Isn't it a heavenly drink, girl! I am glad to see you like it."

Then Lady Garribardine chatted on, giving crisp, witty descriptions of the village and the inhabitants, in language which would often have shocked the genteel sensibilities of Mabel Cawber, but the tones of her voice, whether loud or soft, were the dulcet tones of angels. She had indeed that "excellent thing in woman."

Katherine's workroom was the old schoolroom up in a wing which contained rooms as ancient as the dining-room, and her bedroom adjoined it; and from this a little passage led to a narrow staircase going down to a door which opened into the small enclosed rose garden. Up another set of steps from her corridor you were brought into the splendid gallery which ran round two sides of the hall, and into which Her Ladyship's own rooms gave. But in Katherine's corner she was isolated and could come and go abroad without ever passing the general living rooms—what an advantage, she felt!

And when, later in the afternoon, her things were unpacked, and she was sitting before a glorious wood fire in the old chimney, sniffing the scent of the burning logs and taking in the whole picture of quaint chintz and shining oak, she felt a sense of contentment and satisfaction.

Fate was indeed treating her handsomely.

CHAPTER XIII

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Katherine saw nothing more of her employer on the Saturday, but on the Sunday morning a message came to say she would expect her to go to church with her. As no mention of church had ever been made in London, Katherine was quite unprepared for this, and was obliged to scurry to be ready.

"In the country and at one's home, one must always go to church, Miss Bush," she was informed when they were in the motor. "It is tradition again."

Then there was silence until they were almost at the door.

"It is rather a fine little church, with some good tombs of my ancestors in it, prolific people who seemed to have married either widows with like proclivities, or to have commemorated their own marital achievements.—There are two very curious monuments, one of a marriage with about seven or eight children behind both the man and the woman, proofs of their former activities, and another of a second pair with numerous olive branches owned mutually. They were of an enchanting ingenuousness in those days. You will face these figures during the sermon. You can examine them, a not unpleasing pastime I used to find it in my youth."

Lady Garribardine's walk from the church was a kind of triumphal progress. All the faces of the clustering local groups beamed with joy and welcome for her—she had a word and a nod for everyone and to Katherine's amusement stopped threateningly in

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front of a biggish boy who was handling a bandanna handkerchief.

"If I hear one snuffle, Thomas Kroughton—out you go!—It is a habit you have got into, flaunting these colds every time I get home. I won't put up with it!"

"Very good, Yer Liddyship," the boy returned stolidly, pulling his forelock.

It was evident to be seen that their Lady Bountiful was held in deep respect by her tenants. The service was quite cheerful and merry with Christmas music from a fine organ, one of the patroness's gifts, and the monuments were certainly diverting, Henry VII and Edward VI costumes carved in stone adorning meek-faced women and grave men.

When they came out, a number of the local farmers and their wives had to be greeted. Lady Garribardine seemed to know all their domestic affairs, and to wield an absolute dominion over them. She was kindly and autocratic, and not in the least condescending; they evidently loved her dearly.

Katherine stood by respectfully, and once or twice her mistress said, "This is my new secretary, Miss Bush," with a wave of her hand.

Apparently the bounties and teas and Christmas feasting being prepared for everyone knew no bounds by what Katherine heard discussed.

As they motored back Her Ladyship said:

"Now, before lunch I want you for an hour to explain the country duties to you as I explained the London ones—and this afternoon you must see over the house. Mrs. Illingworth will show you round, and to-morrow I have to start very early to see my poor people—You have those lists copied out, have you not?"

Katherine lunched alone in her sitting-room and before her inspection of the house began she went for a little walk. The old park delighted her, the sense that it was not public property gave her pleasure. She could go for miles, it seemed, upon the soft turf, or along the smooth avenues, without meeting a soul. There was something in her nature which enjoyed this isolation from the common herd.

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"I believe if it were mine I should dislike even a right of way!" she said to herself.

She stopped close to some deer; they were so tame they hardly started from her. The whole place, when she came to a rising ground and could look back at the house, exalted her in some strange way. The atmosphere of it was so different from anything which she had been accustomed to. It was no wonder that people living in such houses should have wider scopes of imagination than the inhabitants of Bindon's Green with every little semi-detached villa watching the habits of its neighbour. She made up her mind that she would study Lady Garribardine's methods with her people for her own future guidance. The perfect certainty with which she looked forward to obtaining the same sort of situation was almost sublime!

When her inspection of the house came her feelings were further stirred; there was a great bump of veneration in her for ancient things. Her artistic sensibilities which had not yet been as awakened as her practical ones now began to assert themselves. She felt she must read books upon architecture, and learn the dates and styles of furniture. She admired, but she was conscious that she had not yet sufficiently cultivated critical faculties to appreciate fully. Her tour opened a new field of study for her—a new consciousness of her own ignorance, and a new determination to acquire the necessary knowledge on these points.

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Ever since her outing with Lord Algy, she had been aware that mere book-learning is not enough. There were many things of interest in life that she would never have heard of or realised the existence of but for that first opening to her imagination.

Mr. Strobridge would be an invaluable teacher, but she must get up a few technical points first. She would at once ask her mistress if she might take some books from the library, up to her sitting-room for the evening. She would immediately look up the bald facts in the Encyclopedia to begin with, and then study individual volumes. Then there were the painters and the sculptors to learn about more fully, although she had often gone to the galleries and museums in London, but not with what—she now knew, after her inspection of this home where for hundreds of years the owners had been cultivated collectors—was a critical eye. She felt as if the key to understanding had only just been given to her. Even the housekeeper (not Mrs. Pepperdon of Berkeley Square, but this elderly, portly Mrs. Illingworth) knew more about the beauties that she was showing off than she did. This state of ignorance must not continue for even a week!

Permission was accorded about the books when Lady Garribardine looked into the secretary's room before her tea—and until three o'clock in the morning this indefatigable young woman kept her lights on, cramming facts into her head—and then when her work was over before lunch next day she walked again through the picture gallery and the big drawing-rooms to see if she had mastered anything. The picture gallery was filled with early and late Italian works, and some fine specimens of Spanish Renaissance as well as English portraits. She found that with even this much knowledge gained she had already grown more appreciative, but she realised

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that it was a question of training her eye as well as her brain.

The guests were all to arrive on Christmas Eve and a message came for Katherine that she was to come down and pour out the tea for them, because "Her Ladyship's hand was very rheumatic."

She had been extremely occupied with the dispatching of parcels of presents and various matters all the afternoon. This would be an occasion to wear the grey blouse again, and she had discovered that the becoming waves upon her brow could be achieved also by water and combing, so she would not be at the mercy of a hairdresser in the future for her improved looks!

She was seated behind the tea-table in the library when the first batch of the visitors arrived by train. Mr. Strobridge and Lady Beatrice were motoring; the three grandchildren and their attendants had come early in the afternoon.

The party consisted of the two old maiden cousins, the Misses d'Estaire by name, and a young niece of theirs, and two or three stray men, and Mrs. Delemar. Katherine attended to their wants and watched the whole scene—no one had greeted her, but whoever chanced to be near her exchanged a friendly word; Mrs. Delemar was even gracious, it was her way always to be polite to everyone.

How easy they all were! No stiffness, no self-consciousness, and one of the men was quite witty and the young Miss d'Estaire a most lively modern girl. Katherine enjoyed herself although she never spoke unless spoken to, and then returned monosyllabic answers.

When they had all been chaffing and eating quantities of muffins and buns and blackberry jam and cream for half an hour, Gerard Strobridge and his wife came in.

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"We have had the most deplorable journey, Aunt Sarah," Lady Beatrice announced plaintively. "A judgment upon one for travelling with one's husband. Gerard would drive, and of course collided with a milestone, and injured one of the wheels so that the tire, which broke, took hours to put on again and I was frozen with cold."

Everyone sympathised with her, while Mr. Strobridge only smiled complacently and asked Katherine for some tea.

"As you can guess, I shall require it very hot and very strong to keep my courage up after these reproaches," and he smiled as though to say, "I am sure you understand."

Katherine attended to him gravely; she was purposely the stiff secretary, aloof and uninterested in what was going on; Mr. Strobridge rather wondered at it, and it piqued him a little, but the lady who had been asked for his special delectation had no intention of allowing him any leisure to converse with anyone else. She gave him one of her ravishing smiles, moved her dress a little to make room for him on her sofa, and then whispered to him softly for a long time, amidst the general merry din.

Nothing escaped the eyes and intelligence of Miss Bush. She was observing behaviour, character and capability in each one of the guests and was making up her mind what she would do next for the furtherance of her plan that Gerard Strobridge should be a friend.

For one moment he looked up and met her eyes, and she allowed hers to show that sphinxlike smile before she lowered the lids. Gerard Strobridge experienced an emotion. Lão was perhaps making him look a little ridiculous. She was overdoing her pleasure at seeing him. However, he was too old a hand at dalliance with women to allow himself to stay beside her for a moment after he felt this. So he made some forcible excuse about the post's going, and got up and left the room. He was completely at home, it was plain to be seen, at Blissington Court.

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Katherine smiled again to herself.

After dinner there was to be a cinematograph show for Lady Garribardine's grandchildren, a thirteen-year-old schoolboy and girls of ten and seven, and they were dining punctually at eight. Katherine was to bring them into the hall when the entertainment began, having had them with her for dinner in the old schoolroom. She was not particularly fond of children, but she did her best to make them enjoy their meal. They were stupid, unattractive creatures with none of their grandmother's wit. They were to go on to their paternal relations for the New Year, and then with their governess and tutor were to sail to join their parents in the Antipodes.

The "dressy blouse" had to do duty as evening attire on this night (the creation of Gladys' arranging must be kept for the grand occasion of the Christmas dinner in the dining-room) but Katherine had altered it a little, the wretched thing! and cut down the neck to make it more becoming. It looked quite suitable to her station in any case, she thought, as she caught sight of herself in the long glass in her room. She was beginning to take an interest in dress which surprised herself!

She took a chair in the background, close to the staircase from which the servants were to be allowed to witness the show—Her whole demeanour was quiet and unremarkable—and no one paid any attention to her at all until the lights were turned up in the interval between one set of pictures and another, when Lady

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Garribardine called out to her:

"Can you see from where you are, Miss Bush? The next thing ought to be very funny."

Katherine had the kind of voice which people listen to, and one or two of the men glanced round at her when she answered with thanks that she had a capital view. And old Colonel Hawthorne said to a young guardsman friend of Miss Betty d'Estaire that, by Jove! Her Ladyship's secretary, or the children's governess, or whoever she was, had a pair of eyes worth looking at!

Gerard Strobridge had found Lăo charming again! He had dined well and partaken of his aunt's promised very best champagne, and he had indulged in some obviously subtle insinuations as to his further intentions in regard to their enjoyable friendship, whispered in her shell-pink ear while the lights were low.

"Oh Gerard!—I won't allow you to!—Wait—not yet!" Mrs. Delemar had gasped prettily, expecting him to press the matter further.

But unfortunately it was just then that the lights had blazed up, and Gerard had turned round and caught sight of the provoking face of Katherine Bush as his aunt spoke.

"How attractive that confounded girl looks!" he thought. "What a nuisance she is not married and a guest, instead of the typist—it is undignified and—difficult!"

But the brief glance had disturbed him and rearoused his interest; he found that he could not bring himself up to the desired level of enthusiasm again with Lăo, and contented himself by talking enigmatically about the parrot rooms that she was in—their situation and their comfort—while he looked unutterable things with his deep grey eyes. Then presently when they all moved, and the show was over, he allowed himself to be supplanted in her favours by a promising youth of three and twenty, a distant cousin of the house, who would not have been permitted the ghost of a chance at another time! But Gerard's emotions did not show on the surface and Katherine Bush slipped up to bed presently in rather a depressed frame of mind.

She realised fully that the goal was yet a long, long way from attainment, and that it would require all her intelligence to walk warily through this coming week.

No one had been in the least slighting or unkind to her, but naturally no one had troubled to converse with her; she was just the secretary and was treated exactly as she would treat her own, when she had one, she felt. It would not be safe to attract any of the party; her employer's good will and contentment with her mattered far more than the gratification of her vanity.

Mr. Strobridge, however, was one of the chief pieces in her game, and him she would see often as long as she remained in Lady Garribardine's service, so there was no hurry—she could afford to wait.

But all the same she settled down to read "The Seven Lamps of Architecture" without the buoyant feeling of self-confidence which usually gave her such a proud carriage of head.

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CHAPTER XIV

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A message came up to Katherine next morning—the morning of Christmas Day—from Lady Garribardine to say that she could walk across the park to church with the two elder children and that she was to take them into the front pew that faced the large carved family one behind the choir at right angles.

And from this well-placed outlook Miss Bush later on observed the house party enter by a door in the chancel. They filled the whole long seat and overflowed into the pew where she and the children sat, and it happened that Gerard Strobridge was next her and knelt to say his prayers.

Propinquity is a very curious thing, and when all possibility of conversation is nil, propinquity has sometimes been known to exert a very powerful influence. Gerard Strobridge was conscious with every throb of his pulse of the nearness of Katherine Bush; there was a magnetic disturbing emanation he felt coming from her, which excited him unaccountably. He kept glancing at her regular profile from time to time. Her very pale skin and large red mouth attracted him immensely. She never once looked at him, and maintained an air of absolute unconsciousness.

"What is she thinking about, I wonder?" he mused. "I have never seen a face more sphinxlike; she could be good or devilishly bad, she could love passionately and hate coldly, she could be cruel as the grave and hard as adamant. She is a woman that a man were wiser not to know too well for his own safety."

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But reflections of this sort never yet made son of Adam avoid the object of them, so when they came out and Katherine was waiting for instructions from her employer as to the disposal of the children, Mr. Strobridge came up to her.

"A happy Christmas, Miss Bush," he said. "Are you going to walk back through the Park? Here, Teddy, I will come with you."

"We are going in the motor with Grandmamma," both children cried at once as Katherine returned his greeting, and they ran off to Lady Garribardine. So Katherine started to walk on alone, while the rest of the party lingered about the porch and made up their minds as to whether or no they would drive.

She had gone some way and was on a path by a copse in the Park, when Mr. Strobridge caught her up.

"Why did you race ahead, Miss Bush?" he asked. "Did you not want any companion in your solitude?"

"I never thought about it," she returned quite simply.

"I did—I wanted to walk with you, I have been watching you all the time in church. I believe that you were in dreamland again; now will be the very moment to finish our discussion upon it."

"I don't think we had begun it."

"Well, we will."

"How are we to start?"

"You are going to tell me where yours is—in the heart or in the head?"

"Such a conversation would be altogether unprofitable." There was mischief lurking in the corner of her eye and trembling in the curves of her full mouth.

"I must judge of that."

"How so? Do I not count?"

"Enormously—that is why I want to hear of your dreamland."

"It is a place where only I can go."

"How unsociable—but you look disobliging."

"I am."

"Very well, I give up the task of trying to make you tell me about it. By the way, I have not had the chance to thank you for so kindly finishing those papers for that confounded charity. My aunt said they were in perfect order."

"I am glad of that."

He raised his head and looked away in front of them down into a dell and so up again to the house.

"Isn't this a beautiful view? I always think of 'the stately homes of England' when I walk back from church."

Katherine's eyes followed his to the gabled, irregular red brick house, with its wreath of blue smoke going straight up into the winter sky.

"I have never seen one before," she told him. "You can imagine how wonderful this appears to me after the place where I have lived. I had only seen Hampton Court, but somehow all the people there and its being a museum did not make it have the impression of a house that is inhabited."

"This pleases you, does it?"

"Naturally. I love everything about it, the space, and people not being allowed in. It is Her Ladyship's own—she can shut the gates if she wants to and have it all to herself—that must be good."

"What a strange girl! You would not like to share anything, then? I have already remarked this deplorably selfish instinct in you, in reference to your dreamland—and you would keep poor devils out of your park, too, if you could!"

"Generally—yes."

"Well, I want to be the exception to this exclusiveness. If I come up one afternoon to the old schoolroom, for instance, and ask you to talk to me, will you turn me out?"

"It depends what you want me to talk to you about. If it is upon a subject only to please you—yes—if to please me then I may let you stay for a little."

"What subjects would please you?"

"I would like to hear all about the pictures in the house, for instance—you see, before I came to Lady Garribardine I had never conversed with anyone educated in art. So I have only a very little book knowledge to go upon."

"We will talk about art then; the house is full of interesting things, part of it is so old."

For the rest of the way he did his best to entertain his aunt's insignificant secretary, and they both knew that the walk had been very charming. When they got into the shrubbery, Katherine took the path which led to the small rose-garden courtyard, on

which the schoolroom staircase opened.

"Of course, I had forgotten you have a front door all to yourself."

"Yes—our roads divide here. Good morning, Mr. Strobridge."

"Are you going to shake hands with me?"

"No, it is quite unnecessary."

"*Au revoir*, then. To-night I shall dance with you. I have not danced for ten years."

"Then probably you will not do it well. Recollect I come from Bindon's Green where we learn the very newest steps. I never have put up with a bad partner."

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"I can't 'turkey trot,' if that is what you mean."

"Then I am afraid you are too old and too old-fashioned for my taste." And smiling demurely, she walked off to the quaint, wrought-iron gate which opened into the rose garden.

Gerard Strobridge laughed as he went on his way. Why was he attracted to this girl? He was a person of the highest fastidiousness, and had never had a *liaison* with any woman beneath him in class in his life, even in his Oxford days. It was against his idea of the fitness of things. To flirt with his aunt's secretary! But the creature was so sensible, and so intelligent it made matters appear in a different light—there surely could not be much harm in discussing pictures and sculpture with her, or a poet or two! But at this stage he did put some restraint upon himself, and made no further attempts to see her until she came down to pour out the tea again. He bravely made love to Lăo, and exercised as much skill to keep matters from approaching a climax as he was wont to use in bringing on that happy occurrence. It caused him a cynical amusement.

Katherine had on the dress which rather resembled his wife's, and looked almost as distinguished, and a good deal more healthy and attractive.

Her demeanour was so admirable, too; she had none of either that overhumble obsequiousness or touchy assertion, which so often distinguished these quasi-gentlefolk, he thought. She might have been a Lady Clara Vere de Vere in her quiet dignity and utter freedom from all self-consciousness.

It was evident that she was not thinking of herself at all, or wondering whether or no she was being noticed or slighted, or properly or improperly treated. She was just gravely pouring out the tea and attending to people's wants as quietly sure of herself as his aunt would have been. Indeed, it almost seemed to Gerard watching her that she stood out, if he could have selected one from the whole party, as the most perfect specimen of womanhood.

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Was it her supreme will—her force of character which had overcome all class traditions? He remembered what she had said about no ordinary Radical ever being able to be a foreign minister. How she must have thought out matters! Her brain was that of a woman in a thousand.

The Christmas tea grew very merry, and old Colonel Hawthorne, friend of the family for countless years, found it his pleasant duty to be genial with the good-looking secretary. Gerard continued to watch; she answered the pleasantries with so much wit, and never the least presumption.

After a while he drifted up to his aunt's own sitting-room for a quarter of an hour before dressing time—Lăo had been cajoled into thinking all was well between them, and had gone off to make herself especially beautiful for dinner.

She had been through one or two disquieting moments. Gerard had appeared all that an eager lover should be, and she felt she must have been stupid in some way to have given him the impression that she was serious in her protestation of "not yet." She had no rival—that was plain to be seen. He never spoke to Betty d'Estaire—who was the only other young woman of the party. Perhaps it was because of Beatrice! Gerard was such a perfect gentleman, perhaps in some corner of a foolishly overpunctilious heart he was deterred by—Beatrice! But fortunately Beatrice was leaving the day after Boxing Day.

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In any case her usual method of rigid circumspection—until the very last moment—had not been quite successful with this would-be lover; he had been deceived by it and slightly rebuffed. It was merciful as far as her own emotions were concerned, but she knew men well enough to know that unless she herself had damped his ardour, this state of things was not altogether natural, and therefore it might imply some lack in her own charm, which was not an agreeable thought. However, she need not feel really disquieted while his attentions were still so *empresé*.

"Seraphim, I walked back from church with Miss Bush," Gerard said, stretching himself out in a huge chair by his aunt's fire, while he lighted a cigarette. "You are quite right, she is a most intelligent young woman; how do you account for that

something about her which is not at all of her class?"

"I don't know, it has puzzled me. I was watching her to-day pouring out the tea; she is the first secretary I have ever had, not excepting poor Arnott, who on such occasions did not feel that one or other of the guests was trying to snub her—Katherine Bush is never on the defensive—it is quite unique in a person of her station."

"I watched her, too, and was struck with the same thing; and to-day she talked so well. She wanted to hear about the pictures—she is absolutely frank and tells one in the naïvest manner about what things she is ignorant of—but one finds that she must have read considerably."

"She is full of theories about tradition and evolution. I let her tell me them motoring down—she seems to have dissected herself and her family in an endeavour to eradicate what she disapproves of in the way of instincts."

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"It is astonishing, isn't it, Seraphim?"

"Very—she made one or two rather dreadful gaffes when she first came, especially during the tableaux week—it was quite interesting to see her face when she realised this. She did not once try to explain them away—she drew in her lips and I could see she was registering a vow never to make the same mistake again. That kind of nature always wins any game it is playing."

"I wonder what hers is—don't you?"

"The immediate one obviously is to turn herself into a lady—She means to do in a few years consciously, what nature takes many generations to accomplish in the ordinary course of events—Her progress is quite remarkable even in these six weeks."

"What shall you do with her, Seraphim?"

"Keep her as long as she will stay with me, G., and perhaps take her education in hand myself when you all leave." And then Lady Garribardine laughed softly. "Lão is a huge joke, dear boy—I think the parrot rooms suit her, don't you? Are you pleased with my arrangements for my guests?"

There was something exquisitely whimsical in Her Ladyship's old black eyes, his met them delightedly. Aunt and nephew understood each other so well, these two perfect citizens of the world!

"Lão is charming! And I am sure she is deriving all sorts of inspirations from the blue macaw's amourettes with the yellow-crested cockatoo, which she looks at from her downy couch—Seraphim, I am going to persuade Beatrice to stay on—Beatrice is an excellent creature in spite of her contempt for my powers as a chauffeur! She is quite amused with Victor Thistlethwaite. I paved the way by suggesting to her this morning that she should take the early train on Thursday, and she said at once, that she rather thought she was not leaving until Saturday with the rest."

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Lady Garribardine chuckled delightedly; the noise was as of cream bubbling—if cream can bubble!

"*Tiens!*" was all she said and then went on to speak of other things. "Betty d'Estaire is going to catch young Allonby, G. I believe they will settle it to-night. For one of my blood she has a number of overmodern faults, and Gwendoline and Arabella will be glad to get her off their hands."

"She is a promising young person."

"Even blood can't stand against the total want of discipline which prevails among the present generation, G. When these impossible girls' children have grown up there won't be any ladies left."

"I don't think they will have many children—we are breeding a neuter race, Seraphim. All the games are making their bones too rigid, and all the want of discipline is weakening their nerves—very few of the future ones will be able to stand the agonies of child-bearing."

"You are not in a position to criticise, G., with no offspring of your own!"

"I am not an eldest son; there is no obligation entailed upon me! Dick has three boys, fortunately, and Alec, two."

"I consider that the poorest excuse."

Mr. Strobridge sighed.

"Perhaps it is—the whole thing is rather played out with us all, isn't it? Seraphim, when I talked with that balanced, healthy young woman to-day, I felt we want an admixture of new blood in a number of our families, if only to bring back our enthusiasm. Dick's children are fine enough fellows physically, but there is not half a peck o' wits among them—and as you know, Alec's little Yankee chaps are what their mother calls 'brainy' to a degree, but masses of overstrung nerves as well."

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Lady Garribardine leaned forward from among her sofa cushions and looked at her nephew with a quizzical eye.

"G., if you were free and my heir, I'd marry you off to Katherine Bush just for the pleasure of the experiment!"

Then the little Sèvres clock chimed. "Why, it is striking the quarter—rush off at once, dear boy!—and don't forget to put on your hunt coat; the scarlet pleases the children."

In another part of the house, Her Ladyship's secretary, quite unaware that she was under discussion, was joyously dressing in her pretty oak-panelled room, with a delicious sense of excitement. Martha was coming in to help her presently for this wonderful first occasion in her life when she should put on a real evening dress, showing pearl white neck and arms. Gladys had given her every instruction as to its fastenings and had supervised the making of it with a zeal which she would only have bestowed upon an order from the richest customer. The frock fitted to perfection, and was astonishingly becoming in its black simplicity.

Martha had brought her in some beautiful lilies of the valley, when she came with her hot water, accompanied by the information that Mr. Strobridge's valet had handed them to her for Miss Bush, from his master.

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Gerard had been robbing the hothouses evidently. The head gardener was a particular friend of his. They were just the touch wanted to complete the picture; their snowy whiteness and brilliant forced green gave the note of freshness which went so well with Katherine's skin—of an astonishing purity—by candle-light as clear as ivory and as pale in tone.

She gazed into her looking-glass and felt satisfied with what she saw, and presently she held her shoulders back and her head up, and walked down the corridor with the grace of a Comédie Française queen! So greatly does the consciousness of fine raiment affect the morale of young women!

Lady Beatrice came out of her room in the great gallery and they went down together.

"You do look so pretty, Miss Bush," she said. "What a duck of a frock! It looks like an Ermantine."

"Yes, my sister is a saleswoman there, and she had it made for me," Katherine told her.—"I am glad you think it looks well. I have never had on a real evening dress before."

"You know how to wear it so that is all right! Ah, children, come along!" as three joyous calls came from over the banisters. And Katherine slipped on alone. Lady Garribardine had told her, before she went to dress, to go to Bronson to see that a special order about the presents was carried out.

All the party were assembled in the great drawing-room when this duty was done, and so her entrance did not pass unremarked.

"By Jove!" was the significant exclamation of old Colonel Hawthorne.

"And I am to have the pleasure of taking you in to dinner," said the charming young man who had so far succeeded in diverting Lady Beatrice.

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Gerard Strobridge felt a strange sensation as he looked at Katherine presently, between the great bowls of camellias—there was no comparison with anyone at the table; Her Ladyship's secretary had blossomed forth into the beauty of the night.

"How clothes can alter a person!" Mrs. Delemar said without conscious spite—dependents, even pretty ones, were not things which counted.—"Look, G.—dear Sarah's typist appears quite pretty to-night, and how kind she is to her servants; see, she has let the girl have those beautiful lilies of the valley which Hawke told me to-day when you were making him give me the orchids, it just breaks his heart to have to cut!"

CHAPTER XV

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The sudden accession to beauty in Lady Garribardine's secretary had a double—nay, treble—result! It caused Mr. Victor Thistlethwaite plainly to show that he perceived it at dinner, and thereby considerably to annoy both the Lady Beatrice and Mr. Gerard Strobridge during that meal! Lady Beatrice considered it impertinence on the part of Miss Bush and Mr. Strobridge found it "ridiculous cheek of that insufferable puppy Thistlethwaite."

Katherine for her part enjoyed herself! She had got over the awe of servants—and the strangeness of well-bred companions—She was now sure of the methods of eating, too, and so had leisure to enjoy conversation and she was filled with that

delicious sovereign complacency which only a woman discovering that she is undeniably a success can know.

While remaining exceedingly demure, she managed to arrest the exclusive attention of her partner for the feast, and Lady Garribardine watched the whole thing with a whimsical eye.

Gerard Strobridge was too good a diplomat to allow the vaguest trace of his disturbed equilibrium to show in his face, and talked to Lăo with renewed passion, so that before they began to pull crackers she was feeling perfectly contented in the certain conviction that it was Beatrice's presence alone which kept him within bounds! He had not made love to women ever since he left Eton, or served his country at the Foreign Office until the age of thirty-five, without acquiring a certain experience in feminine psychology, and a knowledge as to the best manipulation of diplomatic situations, and even though he had been irritated by Mr. Thistlethwaite's evident admiration, he saw that it would certainly cause Beatrice to stay until the Saturday, and so in it there lay good.

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There were quantities of silver charms in the blazing plum-pudding, and some received omens of wealth, and some of princely mates or lengthy journeys, but Gerard Strobridge could only secure the emblem of an old maid—a thimble was his portion—and he turned the unhappy augury to much good account in a suitable reproach to Lăo.

When the caps from the crackers were put on, an early English gold paper crown fell to Katherine's share, and became her mightily.

"Why, Miss Bush looks just like Queen Victoria when she came to the throne, Grandmamma!" called out the elder girl grandchild. "We have her picture on the nursery screen."

"And I wonder what her end will be," Gerard Strobridge thought; "she looks remarkably well in a crown."

The hall had been cleared for dancing and when the excitement in opening the wonderful little presents which lay hidden in a rose by each person's plate was over, the company poured in there, while three local musicians struck up a merry tune. It was a two-step and Miss Betty d'Estaire must try it with some new variations which were just coming in from America at that date (it was before tango days). Katherine was an adept in them, for was not Bindon's Green always in the forefront of modernity? And any kind of dancing she really loved. It was the one pastime of her sisters which she had shared with delight, and often practised with Ethel in their tiny drawing-room before going to bed.

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Mr. Thistlethwaite asked her for a turn with him, and they started off.

"It is much better than a stupid old valse, isn't it?" he said to her while they careered smoothly ahead. "And by Jove! how well you dance!"

The blood was rushing in Katherine's veins; it was so good to be young and admired, and forgetful of relative positions for once in a way. She knew very well that she was a far finer performer than the other young girl, and all that was sensuous in her nature came uppermost and quivered through the rhythmic movements of her supple body. Gerard Strobridge watched her silently. He was conscious of profound and increasing emotion; it was as if some primitive, strong, vital thing was there before him, dwarfing the puny make-believes at passion which were so well assumed by Lăo Delemar. She was standing beside him looking as beautiful and as artificial as the orchids in her dress.

"How that girl could love!" he breathed to himself as he watched the dancers, and Lăo seemed as utterly meaningless as a wax doll!

Once was enough of this sort of thing, Katherine Bush thought; she was keenly alive to atmospheres and she felt that for a secretary to do more than show that she was proficient in these steps would be a breach of taste. So no persuasions of her partner would move her after the first few rounds, and she left him and went off with the youngest grandchild in a polka step.

Thus the Lady Beatrice recovered her whilom admirer, and when another tune had begun and Lăo had been safely lured into the arms of the distant cousin, Gerard Strobridge came over casually to where Katherine stood.

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"Am I to be allowed a turn of this old-fashioned valse, Miss Bush?" he asked.

But Katherine was not to be beguiled so easily—she must parley first!

"I do not know if her Ladyship expects me to dance any more," she answered. "If you think she will not mind my accepting this honour, I shall be very pleased."

"Foolish thing! Is it not Christmas night, and are you not the belle of the ball?" And he held out his arm and they whirled off. It gave him immense pleasure to hold her in his embrace—but something in the scent of the violets in his scarlet hunt coat brought back to Katherine with a sickening thrill of anguish and longing the remembrance of Lord Algy and the Saturday night in Paris when they had danced in

masks and dominoes at a Bal Tabarin. Oh! the pain of it!—Suddenly the whole present melted away from her—the dreams of the future, the pride in her conquest of the past! The passionate woman in her cried aloud in wild longing for him, Algy—her darling, her dearly-loved mate! How plain were these other young men!—How tired and old Gerard Strobbridge looked! At that moment she would have thrown her whole ambitions away into nothingness, to be clasped once more to Algy's heart! Her cheeks became ashen white and her strange eyes grew shadowed and fierce, and Gerard Strobbridge was brought up sharply out of his intoxication of emotion by the look in her face.

"What is it, child?" he asked anxiously, holding her close.

"Let me go—let me go!" she cried wildly, breaking from him near the staircase recess. "I—I—cannot bear it—I would like to get out of all this!"

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He was intensely astonished, but he saw that she was trembling, and well as he knew women he could not fathom the reason of this strange outburst. Katherine recovered her composure almost immediately and gave a short mirthless laugh.

"I am awfully stupid," she faltered. "I cannot think what came over me. I believe it must be because I am unaccustomed to parties, and it is getting late."

"It is not yet eleven o'clock—but come and have something to drink—I see a tray down there in the long hall," and she let him lead her to it and pour out some champagne and seltzer for her, and then they sat down.

He saw very well that something had deeply moved her, and his perfect tact would not permit him to refer to the occurrence, but caused him rather to talk soothingly of ordinary things—and in a few minutes he saw that the normal whiteness had come back to her face. But nothing would induce her to dance any more, and although she continued doing whatever was expected of her during the rest of the evening—and snatched flaming raisins in the snapdragon with dashing indifference to pain—he knew that she was doing it all as an automaton, and that the living, vital, magnetic Katherine was no longer there, and that this pale, quiet girl whose hand he held presently in the deserted corridor was only too glad to say good-night.

"Dear child," he whispered, as he kissed it with homage, "I don't know what it was that caused it, but you have evidently seen a ghost, and now go to bed, and forget everything but that we have all had an awfully happy Christmas, and I want to tell you how pleased I am that you have worn my flowers to-night."

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"—Your flowers! Oh! yes, I ought to have thanked you for them before—they were lovely, but now they are dead," and she unpinned them carelessly—almost as if she did not like them any longer to touch her—and threw them in the big open grate.

"Good-night—and thank you for your kindness," and she was off down the passage and up the side stairs.

And when Gerard Strobbridge joined the rest of the party in the drawing-room, he had a cigarette between his lips, as though he had been having a smoke, and it required all his polished skill to bring himself back to talking gaily, and to looking what he did not feel, into Mrs. Delemar's sparkling eyes, before they all parted for the night.

Meanwhile, Katherine Bush had reached her room and had flung herself into the armchair. This would not do—she must steel herself against giving way to weakness like this. Why had the scent of the violets in another man's coat had power to affect her so that every part of her being cried out for Algy? As though the suppressed emotions of her heart would no longer obey her will—and must proclaim themselves her master! It was shameful feebleness, and she indignantly resented the dominion that love still held over her. She sat there reasoning with herself, but nature reigned stronger than any other thing at the moment, and the memory of her lover obsessed her. She seemed to hear his voice and feel his kisses, until the agony of longing for reality grew unbearable, and she fell forward and lay there on the rug before the fire beating the floor with her hands. It was as the despair of some fierce savage caged animal crying out for its mate. Her whole face altered, the most intense passion blazed from her eyes—and whitened her cheeks. Could Gerard Strobbridge have seen her he would indeed have been moved.

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"Algy! Algy—My darling, my love—Come back to me, I want you. My dear, my dear! —"

She sobbed with agony—and then worn out at last—"Oh! God!" she wailed. "Can whatever comes be worth it—after all!"

But by the morning she had crushed emotion and came down ready to assist with the huge Christmas tree for the tenants' children, with her usually composed face.

But that passion denied should have exacted this anguish frightened her a little. All her will should be used to prevent such madness ever holding sway again.

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CHAPTER XVI

Lady Beatrice remained until the Saturday, greatly to her husband's satisfaction and relief. He had manœuvred this arrangement with much skill, and Lăo's vanity felt satisfied, and indeed gratified, by the belief that the presence of his wife was causing Gerard untold suffering and disappointment! The preliminaries of the game were so very agreeable! and when they could be prolonged by fate so that there was no fear of losing the other participant in them, nothing could be more to her taste.

Passion, like that which Katherine Bush knew, would have appeared as something absolutely shocking and horrible to her—indeed, she would have agreed with Mabel Cawber in considering it as most unladylike!

The circumstance of the Christmas night dance had left a feeling of mystery with Gerard Strobridge, which did not detract from his interest in Katherine Bush. That some strong upheaval had taken place in this strange young woman's soul he did not doubt.

But what in Heaven's name had caused it? Did it concern him?—Or was he only the medium connecting some memory?—He wished he could feel sure. Then there was the incident of his flowers; why had she worn them, and then thrown them from her as if they had burnt her?

His rather tormenting thoughts kept him too frequent company—especially as the provoking girl seemed to have retired from sight, and except on rare occasions, before everyone, he never had the chance of even a word.

Lady Garribardine's rheumatism was better, so Miss Bush had not even been required to pour out the tea.

It was with a sigh of intense relief that he returned into the hall after tucking Lăo and his wife into the motor en route for London town, on Saturday morning an hour or two before lunch.

The hostess was not down to speed her parting guests; she was very much occupied in her boudoir, and they had gone thither to bid her farewell.

As Mr. Strobridge mounted the stairs, he met Katherine coming out of the room with her arms full of papers and small parcels, and a couple of big books, which she had some ado to carry.

"Let me help you," he said, eagerly—and she gave him the heavy volumes without a word.

A sense of exasperation arose in him. He would not be flouted like this! He followed her to the old schoolroom, merely remarking on the way that now all the guests, except Colonel Hawthorne, had departed, he felt there was breathing space.

Katherine seemed quite unconcerned and indifferent as to whether he did or did not; and she took his burden from him and thanked him absently, with a look towards the door evidently expecting him to go back again whence he came.

But he showed no signs of moving.

"Am I to be offered a chair on this my first call upon Miss Bush?"

"It isn't a call—you helped me to carry the books. I am very busy to-day."

"I don't care. I am here now, and I am going to stay—I shall tell my aunt how inhospitable and ungracious you are!"

"Sneak!" and she began sorting the little parcels into a row, her sullen eyes smiling. "I always hated tell-tales at school."

"So did I—but I could commit any crime to be with you. I have been tantalized all the week—Miss Bush not even seen at tea—and only glimpses of her scurrying along passages and up stairs!"

"What then do you want with Miss Bush?—Have you some more charity business to do?"

"No—The charity will be quite on the side of the fair Katherine, if she will allow a weary wayfarer to bask in the sunshine of her presence for a little while."

"Mr. Strobridge, you are talking nonsense, and I have not a moment's time to waste on you."

"I love to talk nonsense. It annoys you, and I want to see your eyes flash. I have seen them laughing—and full of pain—and snakily cold. Now I want them to flash—and then I would like them to grow tender.—They would be divine like that."

Katherine sat down and took up a pen, with a glance of withering indifference; then she began to address the labels of the packets from a list.

He came quite close to her; he was feeling a number of things.

"What a temptress you are—aren't you?—teasing me like this!"

Katherine now opened her eyes wide and stared at him, but she did not move away an inch.

"The whole thing is only in your imagination," she said, calmly. "You are a proof of my theory that personal emotion creates appearance, and hides reality."

"You understand then that I do feel emotion?"

"Why, of course. A man of your brains and cultivation could not behave in so foolish a way otherwise."

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He drew back and leaned against the mantelpiece while he laughed shortly.

Katherine continued to work.

"I am merely waiting until you have finished directing those confounded parcels, which I presume are for this post—and then I am going to coax you to talk to me—May I smoke?"

"Yes, if you like—" still with lowered head.

"Won't you have a cigarette?"

"Thanks."

He handed her one from his case. She pulled a box of matches near and lit it casually, going on with her work as a boy might have done—There was no knocking off of ash or graceful movement of the hand in the fashion of Lăo, who loved her white jewelled fingers to be seen to advantage.

Neither of them spoke. He might not have been in the room as far as she was concerned! He, on the contrary, was profoundly aware of her presence. Emotion such as he had not felt for years was surging through him.

She was the most damnably attractive creature, he thought, he had ever met. She awoke primitive passions, and stirred his blood. There was that intense note of reality and strength about her. She was like some dangerous lazy lioness. She made him feel that civilisation was slipping from him, and that he could willingly seize her for a jungle mate.

She, however, continued to smoke and to write for quite ten minutes, until all the parcels were addressed, and several papers examined and annotated and filed. Then she looked up. His eyes had never left her face.

"I can't think how you can stare like that," she said, with abominable matter-of-factness. "It would make me blink."

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"I can enjoy looking at the sun—Now are those infernal things finished? I have been waiting with the patience of Job."

"But I can't think what for?"

"To talk to you."

"Well, talk then! I must do some typing," and she got up and went to her machine, which was on another table by the window. She knew perfectly well that she was driving him mad; it gave her a savage pleasure, and seemed a sort of balance to her own emotions on Christmas night about Algy.

He came and leant against the mantelpiece and looked down at her and quoted Dryden:

"She knows her man, and when you rant and swear
Can draw you to her with a single hair."

and stretching out his hand, he touched for an instant the faint broad waves on her forehead.

And now he saw her eyes flash brilliantly enough!

"If you are going to be impertinent, Mr. Strobridge, the staircase into the garden is quite close, and the sooner you find your way to it, the better I shall be pleased."

"I would not be impertinent for the world—the temptation was overwhelming; it is so lovely, your hair—"

His voice was quite sincere, and it was not in her plan to quarrel with him.

"Very well."

"I want to hear so many things about you, child—tell me what made you come to my aunt's?—I somehow cannot ever feel that you should be in any dependent position."

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"I came to educate myself—I do not mean to be dependent always—What do you do in the Foreign Office?"

He gave her a brief sketch of his days.

"Well, then," she said, "you have to do what you are told to also—nothing matters as long as the spirit is not dependent. You will be a Chief some day, I suppose?"

"Perhaps—and are you learning here?"

"Yes—and you could teach me if you liked."

"I should quite adore it—what wages should I have?"

"None."

"Then that means, by the rules of all games, that I should be working for—love——"

She shrugged her shoulders and put in another piece of paper in the typing machine. She had no intention of talking about—love——

"You are the queerest creature—you make me feel—I do not know what—Well, if you won't discuss wages—tell me what I am to teach you?"

"Literature—Do you remember a day when I came in and had coffee in the dining-room?—It was before you knew I existed—You and Her Ladyship talked of the things then which I would like you to talk to me about."

"Yes, was it not strange?—I must have been blind all those weeks."

The sphinxlike smile hovered round Katherine's mouth; it was enigmatic and horribly tantalizing. Gerard Strobbridge felt a rush of wild emotion again; the temptation to seize her in his arms and passionately kiss those mocking lips almost overcame him. It is quite doubtful what might have eventuated, if at that moment he had not caught sight of old Colonel Hawthorne in the rose garden. He had come out through the same little door which Katherine used, the passage from which, on the ground floor, led to the smoking-room. He waved his hand and beckoned to Gerard.

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It broke the spell, and drove some sense into the latter's head.

"Colonel Hawthorne is calling you; had not you better go and get some air?" Miss Bush suggested graciously. "It would be most beneficial, I am sure, to you, on this fine morning!"

"I daresay you are right—Well, I will go—only some day perhaps you will pay me some wages after all!"

"Is that a threat?"

"Not in the least"; he went towards the door. "Don't be cross—and when you have time will you come and see the pictures in the gallery?"

"Yes—I would love that," and her face brightened. "But you had better ask Lady Garribardine if I may."

"All right—Leave it to me—*Au revoir!*" and he was gone.

As he went down the stairs, he thought that it was a good idea of his aunt's to have had the smoking-room removed to this wing of the house. It had only been done that autumn, so that the shooters could go straight in if they pleased, by the side door.

Katherine did not continue her typing for a moment after she was left alone. Her brows were contracted. She was thinking deeply.

Mr. Strobbridge might not be quite so easy to rule as Charlie Prodggers. She had heard that thoroughbred racers required the lightest hand, and also that there were moments when nothing would control them, neither bridle, nor whip, nor spur. She must think out her plan of action coolly. It was necessary for what she required of him that his desire to please her should surmount all other things. At the present stage it would be difficult to get him to talk sense—but she would do her best to make him do so. This point settled, she went on with her work again undisturbed.

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Gerard Strobbridge found old Tom Hawthorne a tiresome companion, on their prowling round the stables, and soon escaped to his aunt's sitting-room; he must somehow arrange for Katherine to see the pictures with him after lunch.

Lady Garribardine was reading the *Times* when he came in, and looked up delightedly. She enjoyed converse with her favourite at any hour.

They talked of many things; politics in chief. Her Ladyship's views were Tory to the backbone, but she had a speculative cynical lightness which leavened any retrogressive tendencies. Gerard often disagreed with her just to draw out her views. She loathed the Radical government. It aroused her fiercest sarcasms and contempt.

How could such a class of people, she argued, from their heredity, no matter what clever brains they had, have the right qualities in them to enable them to govern England? How could they with personal and financial axes to grind possibly concentrate honestly upon the welfare of the country above their own necessities? It was quite ridiculous in logic, whether their views were Radical or Tory. The supreme voice in the government of a country should only be in the hands of those raised by their position above all temptation for merely personal aggrandisement, so that the glory of the country could be their legitimate and undivided aim. It could not be that the little Mr. Browns and Greens with their parochial lawyer instincts and bitter class hatreds, greedy for their salaries and own advancement, could rise to the necessary heights of sublime prevision to enable them to see far enough ahead to have the final decision on any great question. She was all in favour of the most advanced views for the advantage and raising of the lower classes in freedom and education, no matter

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from which side they emanated. But she resented the pushing up of individuals totally unfit in integrity of character for the positions of authority they occupied, and who year after year were exposed as having in some way lowered the standard of honour in their office.

She would receive none such in her house.

"I eat with no one who lowers the prestige of my country in the eyes of other nations," she declared. "Making us a laughing-stock in Europe where we were once great!"

And for her that settled matters!

Mr. Strobridge coasted warily among the shoals of her opinions, and gradually got the conversation on the topic of the pictures in the gallery, some of which she really thought ought to be sent to London to be cleaned—had Gerard noticed lately?—particularly two early Italians? This was a most fortunate suggestion! Mr. Strobridge had noticed—and had meant to speak about them.

"We must have a critical examination to-day after luncheon while the light is good. One ought not to delay over such matters."

He knew incidentally that his aunt was going to drive Tom Hawthorne into the town in her phaeton, to try a new pair of cobs which she had bought just before Christmas, and would be starting the moment that meal was finished—but he showed just the right amount of regret and surprise when she informed him of this fact.

"Never mind. I will go round alone, or better still, if you could spare Miss Bush for an hour, I will get her to make shorthand notes of what I think should be done to each picture."

Lady Garribardine looked at her nephew shrewdly; his face was innocent as a babe's.

"I believe Miss Bush would make quite an agreeable companion in a picture gallery," she remarked.

"I am sure you are perfectly right."

Then they both laughed.

"G., you won't flirt with the girl, will you, and turn her head?"

"The sad part of the affair is that it is the girl who is more likely to turn my head. Her own is far too well screwed on."

"Upon my word, I believe you! Well, then, innocent of thirty-five, don't be beguiled into idiocy by this competent *séductrice* of twenty-two!—If you were forty-five there would be no hope for you, but a glimmer of sanity may remain in the thirties!"

"She *is* attractive, Seraphim—and will love to see the pictures. She says she wants to learn about art and literature—and kindred things."

"And you have offered to teach her?"

Mr. Strobridge put on a modest air, while his humorous grey eyes met his aunt's merrily.

"I have applied for the post of tutor—with no salary attached."

"She won't put up with inefficiency; you will have to keep your wits at high-water mark, then."

"I feel that."

"Well, G., perhaps you deserve a treat. The Christmas entertainment I had provided for you in the way of Lăo fell rather flat, did it not!"

"One grows tired of soufflé."

"Yes, but do not forget that more substantial food can cause shocking indigestion, unless partaken of with moderation."

"Heavens, Seraphim! I am no gourmand!"

"Gerard, my dear boy—you are at a stage of hunger, I fear, when intelligence may not guide discretion. You see, Nature is apt to break out after years of artificial repression."

"We are overcivilised, I admit."

At that moment, the luncheon-gong sounded and they both rose from their chairs.

Lady Garribardine slipped her fat hand into her nephew's arm, as they went down the stairs.

"G.—I leave the afternoon to you—only don't burn your fingers irretrievably; this young woman is no fool like poor Lăo. I look upon her as a rather marvellous product of the twentieth century."

After lunch the two in the picture gallery passed a perfectly delightful half-hour. Mr. Strobridge had sagacity enough to know that he must stick loyally to art, and indeed after the first few minutes he found he was carried away himself, his listener was so interested, and gave such intelligent response. He almost began to believe that she had really come there to learn something; and not to flirt with himself! Her taste also surprised him, and her want of all pose.

She wrote systematically the reflections he made as to the condition of the canvases.

"It is a great thing to learn how to look at pictures," she said when they halted before a particularly primitive Madonna. "Of course I could not have seen anything to admire in this if I had come by myself, and I do not suppose that I shall ever be able really to appreciate it—except the colour—because there is something in me which likes the real so much better than the ideal; I like prose far more than poetry, for instance."

"Will you let me come up again to the schoolroom and read to you some day?"

"I should like that very much."

"I would try to make you love poetry; you are endeavouring to convince me that you are a very material young woman, you know!"

"Well, I suppose I am material. I like facts and solid things."

"And yet you spoke of dreamland once not so very long ago—do you remember!"

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"Yes—but you do not know that this dreamland of mine may not be a place where wished-for facts and solid things appear realities, not fancies."

"You would not tell me if I asked you; I recollect how you eluded me before, and said it was a place which only admitted yourself."

"Even materialists must have some corner where they can be alone."

Then he questioned her.—How had she learned all that she knew?—And his interest did not diminish when she gave him a brief outline of the manner of her education.

"It was very difficult sometimes, because I never had anyone with whom to talk, and one grows one-sided *if* one has only oneself to argue with, and I don't really know how to pronounce numbers of words. I should be grateful if you would tell me every time I make a mistake."

"It is quite evident that we must ratify this compact that I shall be your tutor, though I am to get no wages—even love!"

"Who would be supposed to give the love?"

Her strange eyes glanced at him provokingly for a second, and then resumed their steady look. He was quite uncertain as to whether in this there lay a challenge.—He proceeded to act as if there did.

"When I come up to give my first lesson I will tell you all about the giving—and taking—of love."

"That would be of no advantage to either of us. Love is a thing which can cause only pain."

"You are quite mistaken—it is the only divine joy in this unsatisfactory world."

Her face changed; she felt this was cruelly true—and she did not wish to be reminded of the fact.

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"You shall only come to the schoolroom if you talk sense. I will not listen to a word of speculation about love; it is pure waste of time—but in any case I do not see how you can come there at all. I would not receive you without Her Ladyship's permission—it was very kind of her to let me have this afternoon."

"What a circumspect darling!"

Miss Bush looked at him with scorn.

"I am not a darlings—I am a lower middle class young woman, trying to learn how to be a lady, and whatever you think, if you want to be with me, you will have to treat me as if I had arrived at my goal already."

"I think you have, but the greatest ladies are often darlings."

"Yes, but married men do not tell them so, on very short acquaintance, Mr. Strobridge."

In his case he felt this was rather true, since he never spoke to girls at all if he could help it. He suddenly wondered in what light he really did consider her?—As an abstract and quite adorably provoking woman, he supposed.

"Is there anything else to be written down?" she asked. She had become the conventional secretary. "Because if not, I must go back to my work."

"My aunt gave me full permission to keep you for two hours. I told her all we had to do would take quite that time."

"Well, you see it has not—we have come to the end of the gallery."

"Then there is a very comfortable sofa not too far from the fire, where we could sit down and discuss what we have learned."

They walked to it. As long as he was being of some use to her Katherine Bush desired his company. So they talked uninterruptedly until dusk fell, and the footmen would soon be coming to close shutters and draw curtains.

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They flitted from subject to subject, Gerard Strobbridge exerting his brain to interest and amuse her, in a way that he had seldom done with Englishwomen, even of his own class. Her receptive power was exceptional, and she was completely frank. She was honestly and deeply interested in all he had to say, and the subtle flattery of this was eminently soothing. He began to take pride in his pupil. They touched upon the spirit of the Renaissance and its origin—and upon all the glorious flood of light which it brought to art and learning. He was astonished to find her so advanced in certain branches of literature, and absolutely ignorant of the names even of others—showing that it had merely been chance and no helping hand which had guided her.

"I must send you some books upon the Renaissance," he said, "if you will let me."

"That will be very kind—If I had had some master to give me an idea what to read, as a kind of basis to go upon, it would have been much better, but I had no guide—only if I saw one subject that I did not know about mentioned in what I was reading, I looked it up, but of course with really educated people there must be some plan."

"Well, shall we begin upon the Renaissance; that is rather a favourite period of mine?"

"Yes—do you not wonder if we shall ever have another?—What a lot of good it would do us, would it not?"

"Probably—some learned professors think that we must go through a second series of dark ages first; when we shall get back to primitive ideas—and primitive passions."

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"It may be,—nearly everything natural is distorted now; the world seems so tired to me, just looking on."

He stretched himself and threw out his arms—as it were to break some imaginary bonds.

"Yes—we have been coerced into false morals and manners—and we have suppressed most things which make life worth having—sometimes I envy the beasts."

"I never do that—it is only weaklings who are coerced; the strong do what they please, even in these days—but however strong a beast may be, he always finds, as Jack London shows with his wonderful *Buck* in 'The Call of the Wild,' that there is invariably 'the man with the club.'"

"You mean to conquer fate, then?"

"I shall do my very best to obtain my desires, and of course shall have to pay for all my mistakes."

He looked at her curiously—had she made any mistakes? Not many, he thought, her regard was so serene, and her clever, strong face showed no vacillation. He suddenly faced the fact that he was falling in love with her, not as he had tried to do with Lăo—not even as he had once succeeded in doing with Alice Southerwood, long ago. There was a quality in his present feeling which almost frightened him, it was so lawless.

She felt his eyes searching hers burningly, and rose from the sofa.

"Now I am going to have my tea—so good-bye for to-day. I have really enjoyed the pictures."

"May not I come and have tea with you? I am all alone."

"Certainly not—Martha would be scandalised. It does seem so extraordinary that I should have to tell you such things—it shows either great disrespect to me, or else—"

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"What?" eagerly. He had risen, too, and was following her as she walked down the long room.

"—That you cannot help yourself."

"Yes—that is it. You have bewitched me in some way—I cannot help myself."

"Do you want all I have taken down typewritten? I can do it after tea, if so?"

"And you will sit up there all by yourself from now until you go to bed?"

"Of course."

"You must feel awfully solitary."

"Not in the least. I have books which are the most agreeable companions. They have no independent moods—you can be sure of them, and pick up those which suit

yourself. Good-night."

And she turned at the bend of the great staircase from which the gallery opened, and rapidly walked on to the entrance to her passage.

He looked after her with a rapt face, and then he went discontentedly down into the library, and waited for his aunt's return.

He was extremely disturbed; it was horribly tantalizing to feel that this girl whom he was so passionately drawn to, was there in the house with him, and that he might not talk with her further, or be in her presence.

He walked up and down the room—and those who knew the casual Gerard Strobridge, cultivated, polished and self-contained, would have been greatly surprised could they have seen his agitated pacings.

Lady Garribardine had a quizzical eye when she finally came in—how had the afternoon progressed? Her opinion of the mental balance of her secretary was exceedingly high. She felt convinced that she would know exactly how to tackle her nephew, and if Gerard desired to amuse himself he would certainly do so whether she smiled upon the affair or not!

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It did strike her that he was rather a dangerous creature to be left a free hand with any young woman—and that after to-day she would see that Katherine ran no more risks from too much of his company.

The pupils of his eyes were rather dilated, she noticed; otherwise he seemed his usual self at tea—and when Colonel Hawthorne left them alone, she got him to read to her, and did not mention her secretary at all.

The afternoon had been most instructive, Katherine thought, as she ate her muffin, and looked at the papers before the old schoolroom fire. She had learned a quantity of things. Mr. Strobridge was undoubtedly a charming man, and she wondered what effect he would have had upon her if she had never met Algy? As it was he mattered no more than a chair or a table, he was just part of her game. And he was rapidly approaching the state when she could obtain complete dominion over him.

"He knows quite well that he is married and that I can never honestly be anything to him. He is only coming after me because he is attracted and is not master of his passions or his will. If he is a weakling he must pay the price—I shall not care! He is not thinking in the least as to whether or no it will hurt me—he is only thinking of himself, just like Bob Hartley, only he is a gentleman and therefore does not make any hypocritical promises to try to lure me."

And then she laughed softly. "Well, whatever comes is on his own head, I need have no mercy upon him!"

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So she calmly finished her tea and wrote to Matilda whose excited letter with the family news of Gladys' secret marriage she had not yet replied to. Gladys had written her a little missive also—full of thanks for her part in the affair. Bob was being rather rude and unkind to her about it, she said, but it was not altogether his fault, because on Christmas night he had had rather too much to drink, and had been quarrelsome for two days since. She was going to keep the expected event from being known as long as possible, and then she supposed they would go and live somewhere together. It would be wretched poverty and struggle, and she was miserable, but at least she felt an "honest woman," and could not be grateful enough to her sister for bringing this state of things about. Katherine stared into the fire while she thought over it all. It seemed to her too astonishing that a woman should prefer a life tied to a man who was reluctant to keep her—his drudge and the object of his scorn—to one of her own arranging in America, perhaps—along with the child, but free. Gladys had sufficient talent in her trade to have earned good wages anywhere, and must have enough money saved, could she have got it from Matilda's fond guardian clutches, to have tided over the time. But weaklings must always suffer and be other people's slaves and tools. Poor Gladys! Then she fell to thinking of Algy—why was he haunting her? For the first month the complacent satisfaction from the conquest of self had upheld her splendidly, but now the pain felt as keen as on the first day of separation.

She would crush it.

Except on the path coming out of church she had no words with Mr. Strobridge on the morrow—and then it was only a few sentences of ordinary greeting. Lady Garribardine claimed his entire attention. She did see him from the window, smoking a cigar in the rose garden in the afternoon, whither he had come from the smoking-room. She deliberately let him catch sight of her, as she stood there, and she marked the look of eager joy on his face, and then she moved away and did not appear again.

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So the Monday arrived—the last day of the old year.

Lady Garribardine was having no party for it as was her usual custom; her rheumatism was rather troublesome, and she stayed in the house all the day, up in her boudoir, where Katherine was in constant attendance.

Gerard and Colonel Hawthorne were out rabbiting with the keepers in the park, and only came in to tea.

Katherine found her mistress rather exacting and difficult to please, and she felt tired and cross—so it gave her some kind of satisfaction to be as provoking as possible when she was ordered to pour out the tea for the shooters in the sitting-room. She remained perfectly silent, but every now and then allowed her magnetic eyes to meet Mr. Strobridge's with the sphinxlike smile in them.

On his side Gerard had found the hours hell.—He knew he was now madly in love with this exasperating girl, and that she was exercising the most powerful attraction upon him.

He gazed at her as she sat there, white and sensuous-looking, her red lips pouting, and her grey-green eyes full of some unconscious challenge, and gradually wild excitement grew in his blood.

As soon as her actual duties were over, Katherine said respectfully:

"If Your Ladyship has no more need of me, I must get some letters finished before the post goes."

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And when a nod of assent was given, she quietly left the room.

So Gerard Strobridge knew he would see her no more that night; and there would be a boring dinner with the parson, and his wife and daughter, to be got through, and on the morrow he was returning to town!

For the first time in their lives he felt resentful towards his aunt. That Seraphim should not have been more sympathetic, and have made some opportunity for him to talk again to Katherine, was quite too bad!

She, who usually understood all his moods and wants! Her silence upon the subject of her secretary, ever since her return from that drive, was ominous, now that he thought about it. Evidently he need hope for no further coöperation from her, and because he was feeling so deeply, he could not act in the casual and intelligent way to secure his ends which he would have used on other occasions. So the incredibly wearisome evening passed. The guests left early, and Lady Garribardine went gladly to bed, leaving her nephew and Colonel Hawthorne to drink in the New Year together—the New Year of 1912.

But the old gentleman was fatigued with his day's shooting and when half-past eleven came he was glad to slink off to his friendly couch.

Thus Gerard was alone.

He lit a cigar and stretched himself in a huge leather armchair, an untouched drink close at hand.

The house was quite silent. He had told Bronson that he would put out the lights in the smoking-room when they left. No one was about and not a breath of wind stirred a tree outside.

He sat there for some minutes—and then his heart began to beat violently.

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Whose was that soft footfall directly overhead? With the departure of the grandchildren from the old nurseries there was no one left in the wing but Katherine Bush!

All sorts of visions came to him; she had not yet gone to bed—perhaps she, too, was waiting for the New Year?

He got up and listened, his pulses bounding so that he seemed to hear his heart thumping against his side.

There was the sound again!

It was not to be endured. Fierce emotion shook him, and at last all restraint fell from him, and passion became lord.

Then he extinguished the lights and softly crept up the stairs.

CHAPTER XVIII

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Katherine had that instant removed her dressing-gown after the brushing of her hair, which now hung in two long plaits. She was in the act of slipping into bed. The carpet in the passage was thick, and she heard no sounds, so that the first thing which startled her was the actual opening of the door of her room, which it had not been her custom to lock.

For one second a blind terror shook her, and then all her nerve and resource returned. She stood there magnificent in her anger and resentment. She had no female instinct instantly to seize the dressing-gown to cover herself. She stood straight up in her cheap nainsook nightgown, all the beautiful lines of her tall, slender figure showing in the soft shaded light.

Gerard Strobbridge was like a man drunk with wine. His eye flamed and he trembled with excitement. The bed, a small old wooden one, was between them with a writing-table at the foot. So that to reach her he must go round by the fire.

This he did, while he whispered hoarsely:

"Katherine—I love you—madly—I had to come to you, darling girl!" Then he stopped within a few feet of her, literally sobered by the expression of her face. It showed not an atom of fear—rather the proud contempt of an empress ordering the death of a presuming slave.

She did not speak for a moment; she seemed to draw up to her full height, and even to grow taller; she was only an inch or two less than himself. And if the scorn of eyes could kill, he would have lain there dead.

"Darling!" he cried, and went forward to take her in his arms.

She stepped back only one step and spoke at last, her deep tones low.

"If you dare to touch me, I will kill you—I am not afraid of you, you know—You are only a beast, after all—and I am the man with the club."

"Beautiful fiend!"—but he hesitated—He was no coward, and cared not a jot for her threats, only his fastidiousness was assailed by the thought of a struggling, fighting woman in his embrace, when he had come there for—Love! It would be wiser, perhaps, to cajole her. He was too intoxicated with passion to realise that it would also seem more dignified!

"Katherine, do not be so horribly unkind, darling girl! I love you wildly, I tell you, and I want you to be mine."

"What for?" She was perfectly calm still, and never moved from her place.

"That we may be happy, you sweet thing. I want to hold you in my arms and caress you, and make us both forget that there is anything else in the whole wide world but our own two selves!"

And exalted by this enchanting picture, he drew a little closer and held out his hands.

"I tell you plainly—if you come one step nearer to me, you do so at your own risk. I will tear the flesh from your face with my nails, and strangle you." Her voice was absolutely deadly in its icy intentness. "I am not weak, and I despise your mean action in coming here to-night too greatly to have any fear."

The breeding in him responded to this sting.

"My mean action—!" but his voice faltered a little, and she interrupted him before he could argue further.

"Yes—I am a dependent in your aunt's house here, earning my living, and you chance my being disgraced and sent away for your own shamefully selfish ends. Indeed, you are teaching me the lesson of the depth to which an aristocrat can sink."

He drew back, and some of the fire died out of him. Her words cut him like a knife, but he was too overwrought with emotion yet to give in and leave her.

"Katherine—my darlings—forgive me!" he cried, brokenly. "I admit I am mad with love, but you shall never suffer for it—give yourself to me, and I will take you away from all drudgery. You shall have a house where you like. I will protect you and teach you all you desire to know. You shall lead an intellectual life worthy of your brain. We can travel in Italy and France, and I shall worship and adore you—Katherine, my sweet!"

The tones of his cultivated voice vibrated with deep feeling, and he looked all that was attractive as he stood there in his faultless evening clothes, pleading to her as though he were but a humble suppliant for grace, and she a queen.

But Katherine was not in the least touched, although her awakened critical faculties realised fully the agreeable companion he would probably make as a lover, with his knowledge of the world, and his polished homage to women. There was something fierce and savagely primitive at this moment in her faithfulness to Algy. For all the strongly sensuous side of her nature, any other man's caresses appeared revolting to her. It was *the man*, not *men*, who could arouse her passionate sensibility.

"You ask me to be your mistress, then—is that it?" her voice was coldly level, like one discussing a business proposition.

His whole face lit up again—there was hope perhaps after all.

"Of course, darling—What else?"

"It is an insult—but I am not concerned with that point. My views are perhaps not orthodox. I am merely interested in my side of the affair, which is that I have not the slightest wish for the post. I will be no man's mistress—do you hear?"

"Katherine, can I not make you love me, sweet?"

She laughed softly. It was a dangerous sound, ominous as that which a lioness might make when she purrs.

"Not if you stayed on your knees for a thousand years! I have loved one man in my life with the kind of love which you desire—I know exactly what it means, and probably I shall never love another in that way—I sacrificed him for my idea. I had will enough to leave him, feeling for him what perhaps you feel for me. So do you think, then, that you could move me in the least!—You whom I do not love, but—despise!"

All this time, she stood there utterly desirable in her thin raiment, which she had never sought to cover. Indeed, now that she saw that she was going to win the game, she took joy that he should understand what he had lost, so that his punishment should be the more complete: there was nothing pitiful or tender about Katherine Bush. Her strange, strong character had no mercy for a man who had shown her that he was not master of himself—above all things, she admired self-control.

Gerard Strobbridge suffered, as she spoke, as perhaps he had never done in his life before. If he had been one whit less of a gentleman, he would not now have conquered himself; he would have seized her in his arms, and made her pay for her scalding words. The effect of tradition for centuries, however, held him even beyond the mad longing which again thrilled through his blood as he looked at her.

He flung himself into the armchair and buried his head in his hands.

"My God!" he cried, hoarsely, "how you can torture—can you not? I knew when I watched you in church that you could be cruel as the grave—but I thought to-day when you looked at me there in my aunt's sitting-room, that to me perhaps you meant to be kind; your face is the essence of passion—it would deceive any man."

"Then it is well that you should be undeceived—and that we should understand one another. What did you think you would gain by coming here to-night?—My seduction? And some pleasure for yourself." She was horribly scornful again. "You never thought of me—It does not matter what my personal views are about such relations; you do not know them, and I do not believe that I have given you reason to think that you might treat me with want of respect; but your action shows that you do not respect me, I can only presume, because of my dependent position, and because you despise my class—since you would certainly not have behaved so to any of your aunt's guests."

He writhed a little at her taunt, and his face was haggard now as he looked up at her.

"There is no use in my asking you to forgive me—but it is not true that I do not respect you, or that I have acted as I have for the reason that I despise your class—That is a hateful thought. I came here to-night because I am a man—and was simply mad with longing for you after the tantalization of the last two days, and never being able to speak a word to you." His breath came rather fast, and he locked together his hands. "I love you—I would have come had you been the highest lady in the land. My action was not premeditated—it was yielding to a sudden strong temptation because I was sitting there in the smoking-room thinking of you, and I heard the noise of your soft footfall overhead, and suddenly all the furious passion in me would no longer be denied and cried out for you!"

He rose and came over to her, and sitting down on the edge of the bed, he held out his arms to her in supplication. "It swept away all the civilisation in me. Nature breaks asunder all barriers in the best of us at times—and you are so adorably dear—Katherine—darling—I have done this thing, and now it is too late for me to plead for your pardon—but I love you more wildly than I have ever loved a woman in my life.—You could make me your slave, Katherine, if you would only give yourself to me. I would chase away the memory of that other and teach you all the divine things of love there are to learn in life."

She moved and stood by the fireplace. She was shivering a little, half from cold.

"I forbid you to say another word on this subject," she said gravely, but with less of her former scorn. "Neither you nor any other man could rob me of the memory of my once dear lover—but I would rather not hate you—so I appeal to that part of you that I still think is a gentleman to go at once out of my room."

He followed her to the fire almost overcome again by the picture she presented in her straight thin garment, virgin white and plain. He wildly desired to unplait that thick soft hair and bury his face in it—he longed to hold her to his heart. But he restrained himself.

There was complete silence for a second or two, and then across the park in the church tower, midnight pealed, tolling the dying year.

They both lifted their heads to listen, unconsciously counting the strokes, and then when the last one struck, and the joyous bells rang out, something in their sound melted the anger and contempt in Katherine's soul. She looked at him, his refined, distinguished face very pale and utterly dejected now. And the broad-minded, level-headed judgment which she brought to bear on all matters told her that she had no right to great anger and made her realise for the first time that she was actually to blame perhaps for this situation having developed since she had not sufficiently considered what might be the possible result of arresting a man's attention through

the eyes and ears.

"Listen," she said gently, holding out her beautiful hand. "Here is the New Year—I do not want to begin it with any hard thoughts—After all, I understand you—and I forgive you. I believe I have been in some measure to blame. I cannot ever be your love—but I am very lonely—won't you be my true knight and friend?"

She had touched the deepest chord of his being. The tears sprang to his fine grey eyes; he knelt down upon the rug and bent and kissed her knees.

"Indeed, I will—I swear it, darling—And whatever suffering it brings to me, I will never make you regret your sweet forgiveness of me, and your resumed trust in me to-night."

She leaned forward, and for an instant smoothed his thick brown hair in blessing.

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He took her hands and kissed the palms, and then without another word, he rose and went towards the door. There he turned and looked at her, standing in the firelight, the dark oak-panelled room only lit by the one small electric-shaded lamp by the bed. He looked and looked, as though his famished eyes must surfeit themselves with the vision. It was fair enough to see!

And then he noiselessly quitted the room and went on down the stairs to the smoking-room as silently as he had come.

CHAPTER XIX

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The months went by. It was Easter time before Katherine Bush again saw Gerard Strobridge. He went off to Egypt about the middle of January, and Lady Garribardine was up in London for a few days alone before he left seeing her grandchildren off. Katherine missed him, and unconsciously his influence directed her studies. She remembered isolated sentences that he had used in their talk that day in the picture gallery. He had certainly shown a delightfully cultivated mind, and she wished that things had not reached a climax so soon between them. She regretted deeply that she had caused him any pain and determined never to deviate from loyal friendship so that he should have no cause to suffer further. He had not forgotten about the books, and she was now the proud possessor of several volumes on the Renaissance, including, of course, Symonds and Pater. They opened yet another door in her imagination, and on days when she was not very busy, she would wander in the picture gallery and go over all the examples of the Italian masters again and again, and try to get the atmosphere of the books.

Lady Garribardine watched her silently for the first few weeks after her nephew went, without increasing their intimacy. Her shrewd mind was studying Katherine, to make sure that she had made no mistake about her. Such a very deep creature might have sides which would make her regret having dropped the reserve which, accompanied by a high-handed kindness, she showed to all her dependents.

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The great event of New Year's day had been the advent of the grey wig so beautifully arranged with her ladyship's own snow-white hair, that the whole thing seemed growing together! With her dark, sparkling eyes and jet brows, she now looked an extremely handsome old lady; and Katherine who did not see her until the afternoon when they were alone, was unable to keep a faint, almost inaudible "Ah!" of admiration from escaping, when she first saw her. She was furious with herself and bit her lip, but Lady Garribardine smiled.

"You would say something, Miss Bush? Pray speak."

Katherine coloured a little; she felt this was one of those slips which she very seldom made, but frankness being always her method, she answered quietly:

"I only thought how beautiful Your Ladyship looked—just like the Nattier in the gallery."

"You find my grey locks an improvement, then?"

"Oh, yes!"

"The Nattier was an ancestress of mine.—A French entanglement of a great great-grandfather, which ended, as these affairs are seldom fortunate enough to do, in a marriage all correct with the church's blessing—the husband being most conveniently killed in a duel with another man!—So the then d'Estaire brought her here to Blissington, where she was shockingly bored, poor thing! and died a year or two after producing an heir for him. When I was young, I always went to fancy balls as the charming creature—it is amusing that you see the likeness even now."

"It is very striking."

"I always felt a great pity for her—transplanted from Versailles and all the joys of the Court, to this quiet, English home—Have you ever read Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son, girl?"

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Katherine had not.

"Well, then, you had better read them; there is a good edition in the library. They are, you will find, the most instructive things in English literature. If I had had a son, I would have brought him up upon them. I was reminded of them now by thinking of my twice great-grandmother. Chesterfield always quotes the French nobles of that date as the *ne plus ultra* of good breeding, and rather suggests that the Englishmen were often boors or blockheads. So although d'Estaire may have satisfied her, the general company could not have done so, one feels."

"I would like to see Versailles," Katherine ventured to remark.

"You will some day—I may go to Paris after Easter—one must have clothes."

Katherine realised this necessity—her own wardrobe would require replenishing by the springtime, but she had not dreamed of Paris.

Her immediate action after this was to get from the library the Chesterfield Letters, the reading of which she always afterwards looked back upon as being the second milestone in her career. She devoured them, and learned countless advantageous lessons of the world therefrom. The first and chief being the value of graciousness and good manners. She now began to realise that her own were too sullen and abrupt, and a marked change in them was soon perceivable to anyone who would have cared to notice. This was during the time when she was still only on probation in her employer's favour, but it was not lost upon that astute lady; nothing ever escaped her eagle eye. And she often smiled to herself quietly when she watched the girl.

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Now and then they would go up to the London house for a few days and "picnic," as Her Ladyship called it, which meant taking only her personal footman to wait on her, and a maid or two for the house. Katherine went with her nearly always, and was sent shopping and allowed to go and see her family, if she wished.

But she did not wish, and always met Matilda at some place for tea. The gulf between them was growing wider and wider, and while Katherine was far more agreeable than of old, Matilda stood in much greater awe of her.

She felt, although she would not have owned it for the world, that her sister had really gone into another class, and she was not quite comfortable with her. Katherine seemed to look more stately and refined each time, and Matilda gloried and grieved in secret over it.

Gladys accompanied her on one occasion.

"I suppose Kitten will be marrying one of them gentlemen, some day," Matilda said on the way home to Laburnum Villa. "You'd never know she wasn't someone tip-top now, would you, Glad?"

"No—she is quite like any of our 'real thing' lot who came into Ermantine's—they're dowdy, but you'd know they were it."

"Well, I hope she'll be happy." Matilda sighed doubtfully.

"Yes, she will," Gladys returned a little bitterly. "Katherine would never do anything to get herself into a mess; she is quite just, and she can be awfully kind—but she looks to the end of things and doesn't care a rush for anyone but sticks to what she wants herself. I tell you what, Tild, I used to hate her—but I don't now—I respect Katherine. She is so perfectly true."

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"She seems to talk different, don't you notice, Glad?"

"She always did—but now more than ever; she is like our best lot—I suppose she did learn something extra at those evening classes she was so fond of?"

Matilda shook her head regretfully.

"I never did hold to them—she'd have been happy at home now and engaged to Charlie Prodggers all comfortable, but for that nonsense."

"Oh! but, Tild, I expect what she has got is better even than that."

"What! to be a grand lady's servant, Glad! My! I'd far rather be Mrs. Prodggers, junior, a lady myself, and keep my own general! Mabel's forever saying Katherine can't be anything but a slave—And Mabel knows—her cousin's aunt's daughter who married that gentleman with the large city business was presented at Court!"

But Mrs. Bob Hartley only sighed. Life was growing particularly grim for her just now. She felt horribly ill, and had to stand about all day, and conceal every sensation to keep up the appearances that all was fair.

Katherine reflected deeply upon the moral of the situation, after her sisters had left her. What martyrs many women were in life! and what hideous injustice it all seemed—and more than ever she saw how merciless nature is to weaklings.

About three weeks before Easter, Lady Garribardine was alone down at Blissington; she had lately taken to having her secretary with her sometimes on her frequent visits to her cottagers.

She would start in a rough, short suit, and a pair of thick boots, with a serviceable walking-stick, and would tramp for miles carrying a basket, in which were sweets and medicines. She was worshipped by her people, arrogant, commanding, kindly great lady!

On one of these occasions they had the motor to meet them at the end of the home village, and drove six or seven miles to another in her outlying property.

She was very gracious as they went along.

"What books have you been reading lately, girl? If they are the Chesterfield Letters I think I may tell you that you have profited by them. Your manners generally are greatly improved."

Katherine reddened with pleasure.

"I have read them over and over again. I have found them more instructive to me than any other book."

"In my young days they were considered highly immoral and pernicious, by most of the canting Victorian hypocrites—when, of course, everyone of the world knew that Chesterfield's advice on all points was the most sensible and sagacious that could be given—but hypocrisy had risen to a colossal height in the sixties and seventies."

"I suppose so."

"Nowadays not one person in ten thousand reads them, more's the pity. If the young men with their great personal beauty—which sport and suitable feeding have produced—could have been brought up to understand the advantage of cultivating 'the graces,' what godlike creatures they would be!"

Katherine thought of Lord Algy; he must have done so unconsciously, she felt.

"People are so apt to judge such a book upon the letter, not the spirit—naturally one must make allowances for the different customs and habits of the times; but the spirit of the advice adapted to modern requirements would make any man or woman into an eminent person if it was faithfully followed. I recommend it to you strongly, since I believe you are steadily trying to educate yourself, Miss Bush."

"I am, indeed—I hope I am not overconfident in believing that if one probes the meaning of everything, and can see the faults in oneself, including those of instinct, it is possible to do, by will, what only the evolution of centuries accomplishes by natural process. The Chesterfield Letters have encouraged me in my belief."

"Of course, it is possible, but people will hardly ever face the truth, and would not dream of examining their own instincts; it would wound their self-love; they would rather be mediocre and blinded to their stupidities, than teach themselves any useful lesson. Your determined effort interests me deeply, child."

Katherine turned a radiant face of gratitude; this was praise indeed!

"I will do all I can to merit Your Ladyship's goodness to me."

"No, I am not good—I have no altruistic or humanitarian proclivities—I would not bother with you for five minutes if you were not so intelligent that I have grown to take a kind of pride in you."

"I can't say how I appreciate Your Ladyship's kindness."

Lady Garribardine turned and looked at her for a second, and then she said slowly:

"I am going to ask you a question not strictly justifiable—and you need not answer it if you would rather not—but you may have formed some opinion of my integrity in these months, which will perhaps allow you to be frank with me—Did my nephew, Gerard Strobridge, make violent love to you when he spent Christmas with us? It seemed to me at the time, and afterwards, that he grew considerably depressed."

Katherine felt a twinge of distress.

"Mr. Strobridge showed some interest in me which I felt it wiser to discourage—He was very kind to me though, and agreed to be my friend, and sent me some books."

For a second, Lady Garribardine felt irritated. Her precious Gerard to have been a suppliant to this dependent in her house!—And then the broad justice of her nature regained its mastery; the girl was worthy of the homage of a king.

"I think he must have been extremely hard hit—I am quite devoted to him, as you know. I rely upon you not to hurt him more than you can help, when he comes back."

"I never wished to hurt him at all—I did wish to talk to him, though, because he is so clever, so at first I was glad to attract his attention. I know now that that was wrong."

Lady Garribardine looked at her secretary critically. She was astonished at this frank avowal which she realised not another woman in a million in Katherine's situation would have made.

"You deliberately attracted him then, girl, eh?—" her voice was stern.

"Yes—on the afternoon he first spoke to me when we typed the charity papers. I was so anxious to learn about books and art, and before that he had not noticed me at all."

"You did not calculate that it might hurt him?"

Lady Garribardine wondered at herself that she did not feel angry.

"No. I never thought about that—he seemed older and of the world, and able to take care of himself, and he was married."

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"None of which things ever saved a man when Eve offered the apple—I suppose I ought to be very annoyed with you, child—but I believe it has done him good; he wanted rousing, he is, as you say, so clever.

"He could have done brilliantly, but he is lacking in perseverance—If he had married a woman like you, he would have risen to great things. The finest gift of God is an indomitable purpose *to do*. My nephew drifted, I fear."

Then their talk branched off to other things, and this proud old aristocrat, having made up her mind now once for all that Katherine possessed a character and qualities after her own heart, she from this day treated her as an equal and a valued companion whenever they were not in actual relation of employer and secretary; when in that, she would always resume her original aloof manner of one in command.

Katherine delighted in this *nuance*, and appreciated the subtle tribute to her own sense of the fitness of things, and never once took the ell when she was given the inch, showing in this the immeasurable distance she had risen above her class.

And so Easter came, and with it a large party—and Gerard Strobridge. At first sight, he did not appear at all changed. Katherine saw him from the window of the schoolroom just at sunset on the Thursday afternoon, when the guests arrived. He was walking in the rose garden with a tall, beautiful woman. The lowering globe of fire was making a blaze of reflected light from striking the row of mullioned windows of the picture gallery on the opposite side, and the flower-beds were a mass of daffodils and hyacinths. It was a nice background. He looked up, so Katherine saw his face plainly—then she stepped behind the curtain and the pair went on.

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She felt very glad to see him, and wondered when they would meet. At these huge parties she never came down, even to pour out the tea if Her Ladyship's hand ached, as at the smaller family Christmas one. So unless he made the chance deliberately, it was quite possible no words would be exchanged.

This uncertainty added to the interest, and made her decide when Sunday should come to take especial pains with her appearance for church—Under Gladys' direction, she would be most simply and charmingly garbed, in a new blue serge suit, and becoming black hat. Before Saturday when they actually met, however, she had seen Gerard twice, once from the gallery as she was leaving Lady Garribardine's sitting-room, and he was talking to the same beautiful lady in the hall—and once from her window when he paced the rose garden alone.

Katherine was familiar with the names and characteristics of all the guests, for had she not written their invitations and read their answers? Did she not type the cards which slipped into the little plates on their doors, and those for their places at dinner?—And on Saturday night a message came for her that she was to print two more, and go immediately to Bronson with a fresh arrangement of the table, as two extra men were going to turn up by motor at the last moment, guardsmen quartered at Windsor.

She was coming from the dining-room down the passage which led to her staircase, and also the smoking-room, when Gerard emerged from there, and met her at the foot of the stairs.

He put out his hand with cordial friendliness, while he cried gaily:

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"At last I can greet you!—I would not go to dress on purpose, because I saw you rush down the passage, and I knew you would have to come back—It is good to see you again!"

She answered suitably and would have passed on, only he barred the way.

"I thought you were going to let me be a friend," he said reproachfully, "and here you snub me at once and want to run away."

"No—but you will be late."

"I care not a jot!—When can I possibly see you to-morrow?"

His eyes began to grow hungry; he was taking in the subtle improvement in her—which had happened even in these few months. His interest in her had not diminished, he discovered, much as he had hoped that he had crushed it to within bounds.

"I cannot say—in church, I suppose."

"That is small comfort! May I not come up the stairs just for half an hour before lunch?"

"Yes, if you find it possible—remember, I trust you not to do anything unwise."

"I promise—if you prefer it, I will ask my aunt's permission."

"Do as you think best—but now I must go. Good-night!"

He took her hand and kissed it—his lips were burning. Then he watched her as she went up the stairs, never looking back. And a sudden anguish came over him. How hopeless the whole thing was! He had better not have relied upon his self-command, and have stayed away.

He did not go to church on the Sunday. Katherine rather wondered at this, as she walked back alone across the park. In the country, Lady Garribardine expected the inmates of her house to be very orthodox.

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The fine spring wind had blown two faint pink roses into her cheeks, by the time she reached the schoolroom, and there found Mr. Strobridge seated in her favourite armchair reading a book!

He rose eagerly as she entered, but he did not shake hands.

"I thought possession would be nine points of the law, so I ensconced myself here, and awaited you, and I am going to stay until you turn me out."

"Very well—that will be at ten minutes to one—at five minutes to, Thomas comes to lay the table for my lunch."

"That gives us just under half an hour—Katherine, you beautiful thing, let me look at you!"

And now he took both her hands and pulled her to the light.

"You have grown much prettier, you know—and are more attractive than ever, alas!"

"If you are going to talk like that, although you may stay, I shall leave you alone."

"No, I am going to be reasonable. Tell me everything, what you have been doing, and reading, and thinking, since I went away?"

"I have been doing my work—and reading all the books you gave me—and many others—and thinking about life."

"Never once of me, I suppose?"

"Yes—you are part of my life—my one friend."

He started forward.

"Dar!—" but he checked himself before the word came quite out, and said instead:

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"Ah! that is joy to hear! And now I want to know what you thought of Symonds and Pater and the rest?—You will have quantities of things to discuss with me, I am sure."

Katherine began taking off her hat and coat, and then put them neatly on the long, hard sofa; she never glanced in the glass or patted her hair—She was boyish in her unconsciousness.

Gerard Strobridge watched her, and then suddenly looked away; the insane desire was rising in him again to take her in his arms. So he exerted extra control over himself, and spent the rest of the time in truly friendly converse, in which he assumed the character of stern tutor, examining a promising pupil upon a holiday task performed in his absence.

Katherine was enchanted, and when ten minutes to one came, she wished he had not to go.

"It has given me so much pleasure to talk to you—I am so glad you have come back." But she held her hands behind her when he would have taken them again, in gladness at her words.

"So much touching is undesirable if we are going to remain friends," she told him.

"When may I come again?"

"You must arrange that."

"After tea, just until it is getting dark enough for Martha to be coming to draw the curtains?"

"Yes, perhaps."

And with this he left comforted.

But when he had gone, Katherine Bush went and looked out of the window, and very slowly shook her head in perplexity.

"It will certainly hurt him—and what will Her Ladyship say? She may think I am not playing the game."

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And then she remembered Lord Chesterfield's advice in one of his maxims:

When a man of sense happens to be in that disagreeable situation in which he is obliged to ask himself more than once, "What shall I do?"—he will

answer himself—"Nothing." When his reason points out to him no good way, or at least no one way less bad than another, he will stop short and wait for light.

CHAPTER XX

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Katherine Bush always looked back upon that Easter party as being the third milestone in her career.

It happened that a certain guest wished to try some new songs she was going to sing on Sunday night, and instead of the agreeable gloaming Gerard Strobridge had been looking forward to enjoying with Katherine alone, he was forced by his aunt to take this lady up to the schoolroom after tea and request Miss Bush's services as accompanist.

Katherine had been practising her old gift of reading music almost every evening when alone and was now very proficient. Lady Garribardine knew this, because she had sent for her secretary to play to her several times in her sitting-room when she was there without visitors and was suffering from rheumatism.

Mr. Strobridge introduced Katherine to the visitor, who turned out to be the beautiful lady he had walked with in the rose garden; and they got on extremely well. It was the first time Katherine had ever chatted, as practically an equal, alone with a member of society except her employer.

The stranger was charming, and insisted that she should come down to play again in the drawing-room after dinner.

Another occasion for the black frock to be worn! And a chance not to be wasted for observation as to behaviour! Katherine, when evening came, made herself look her very best, and was waiting demurely by the piano as the ladies entered the room. From this position she attracted no attention until some of them wanted to play. The guest she had accompanied was again graciously sweet to her, and some of the others joined in the conversation while they strummed and pulled about the songs.

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There was something arresting in Katherine's type which called for notice when people were near enough to observe details of her mousy fair hair that had no touch of gold in it, but always glistened grey, and her wonderfully pale skin and dark brows, giving her strange eyes that intense shadowed mystery which aroused interest.

Gerard, who joined the party by the piano when the men came in, watched her silently. She had studied to obtain an air of distinction, and Gerard, whose love did not blind his fastidious critical faculties, remarked that there was a real advance in this direction since the Christmas night when he had last seen her in evening dress. She did not look so sullen either and answered with fluency and ease when she was addressed, and not in the monosyllabic fashion of former days.

An elderly politician spoke to her. He seemed delighted with her conversation, and indicated by a gesture that she should sit down beside him when the songs were over and she was about to slip away out of the room.

Katherine was not at all certain whether she ought to stay or not, but Lady Garribardine at that moment came up and said casually, "You must not go to bed yet, Miss Bush, perhaps they will sing again; wait here and talk to Sir John."

And so bidden, Katherine was delighted to obey and used her intelligence to be agreeable and sympathetic. Gerard continued to watch her and felt pride in her.

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"Your secretary is having a great success to-night, isn't she, Seraphim?" he said to his aunt.

"Yes—and it is deserved; the girl is one in a thousand. I think I shall encourage Sir John for her; he is longing for a wife, and has a tidy seven thousand a year, and only rare attacks of gout. She could manage him capitally and be of real use to the party. She will never let her heart interfere with her ambitions!"

"He would make an ideal husband!" Mr. Strobridge's tone was sardonic. "A lover in that case would be an immediate necessity—by all means, Seraphim, press the match!"

Her Ladyship gave him one of her shrewd glances and then she said:

"Come and breakfast with me in my sitting-room to-morrow morning, G. We can talk it over," and she chuckled softly.

When Katherine sat by her fire an hour later she set herself to look carefully over the last five months of her life, and to mark what they had brought her.

The gain was immense! She had emerged from being an ordinary shorthand typist at Liv and Dev's to be an inmate of the house in Berkeley Square, and from that to be

the passion of Gerard Strobbridge, and the valued companion of Lady Garribardine at Blissington. And now she had spent the evening almost as their equal and had heard twenty eminent people all talking the shibboleth of the great world of politics and fashion; and had not felt totally out of place in their company, which she knew was not composed of the agreeable fools of the Christmas party, but contained several politicians of distinction, a diplomat or two and a foreign ambassador.

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The contrast was delightful to think about; it even gave her pleasure to recall Bindon's Green as a foil! She laughed without any bitterness to herself when she remembered the bath and the oyster incidents, and several others of the Lord Algy Period—and how she had secretly admired the "rather awful" rooms at the Great Terminus Hotel; her eye and her taste then so totally uneducated that in spite of many walks in museums, she had not been able to distinguish her deplorable deficiencies in both respects. Oh! What an immeasurable gulf now separated her from those days! It was a praiseworthy achievement for only five months. But she realised more than ever from the conversations she had heard to-night that she was still very ignorant, and that constant mixing with this society would be the only way to give her that polish and confidence which could enable her to display the really cultivated thoughts of her mind.

The quickness and lightness with which subtle and clever sallies were answered—the perfect ease of everyone! She knew that she was able to control her own face and manner to appear at ease, but she could not pretend that she felt so altogether as yet, except with Gerard Strobbridge, but then Gerard, while her literary master, was her worshipping servant—so that was different!

To please companies of women must now be her aim, and to avoid talking to any attractive men at all until she had obtained such a sure place that the jealousy of her own sex would be immaterial to her. She had observed that Lady Elton, whose songs she had accompanied, had a distinct penchant for Mr. Strobbridge—unreturned she knew—but it behooved her to be more particularly careful. Another woman who had also spoken to her, a Mrs. Bosanquet, was really interesting—about fifty and highly intelligent. Katherine had carefully watched how she led the conversation in the group where she stood. As a company all these ladies were much gentler and more refined in manner than some of those who had assisted at the tableaux. She gathered from their remarks that they rather held themselves apart from these others and indeed laughed at them good-naturedly. There were sets within sets evidently, and this was the very inner *crème de la crème*.

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Katherine wondered how long it would be before some distinct goal presented itself—that would be for Fate to decide—and only those who had made themselves fit to profit by Fate's chances could hope to succeed in such a difficult game as she was playing; with every prejudice of class and sex against her, there was no time to be wasted in any foolish relaxations!

She wondered if Lady Garribardine had approved of her behaviour. The old gentleman she had talked to had been intelligent if pompous, and she had enjoyed their discussion. She thought of the Chesterfield Letters—of what great use they had been to her! She saw the pitfalls they had enabled her to avoid. Now her next immediate aim must be to come down into the drawing-room as frequently as she was allowed. She determined to make herself of great use, and, if she had the chance to tackle any bore, so that her mistress should feel that she was of real service.

At last she retired to bed well pleased with her evening.

When Mr. Strobbridge came into his aunt's sitting-room next morning he found her in a charming negligée and cap pouring out the coffee.

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"I could not wait for you, G.," she told him. "Sit down, quickly—there are only two dishes besides bacon and eggs—chicken curry and devilled sole—they are all on the table at your elbow."

They chatted of several things, the party principally.

"Now I have time, G.—to hear how it fares with Lăo. How did you escape—with dignity—or rather in disgrace?"

"She believes she threw me over; it is extremely fortunate. Beatrice was an invaluable help." Mr. Strobbridge put some chutney in his curry. "Lăo and I are the greatest friends—she feels that I fought hard with my inclinations and made a noble conquest—by absenting myself in Egypt! Now she is greatly amused with a Hussar boy at home on leave from India—she must be older than one thought."

His aunt laughed delightedly.

"It is a bad sign certainly. Lăo is ageless, though, anything between twenty-eight and forty-five. We stay like that for years and then suddenly grow ridiculous! I believe you have extricated me from the appearance of that at all events, G. My new toupée has given me a new perspective."

"You are quite beautiful now, Seraphim."

"My golden ones were a habit. It has been a source of great gratification to me to

watch how my friends have taken the alteration—even Miss Bush made a faint exclamation when she first saw it!"

"She is usually very self-contained."

"G., that girl is a wonder—have you anything to tell me about her?"

"Nothing except that I agree with you that she is the most naturally intelligent creature I have ever met."

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"Are you in love with her, dear boy?"

"Yes—extremely."

"To the point of unhappiness?"

"I have not analysed the point—but it is bound to be unhappiness since she does not care one atom for me."

"You burnt your fingers that day in the picture gallery, then? It was a pity I let you."

"The fire was lit before that—I think it was better that it flared up—now I am trying to settle down into being friends. Seraphim, I want to help her. I do so admire her courage and her profound common sense. She frankly desires to cultivate her mind and improve in every way; the change in her even since Christmas is remarkable—do be kind to her and let her come down sometimes as you did last night."

"I intend to." Lady Garribardine helped herself to honey. "I am going to take her to Paris with me next week and then we shall be in London—there it will be more difficult."

"Seraphim, have I your permission really to teach her things?"

Her Ladyship laughed her bubbling laugh.

"It quite depends what things—to love you, a married man? Certainly not! To improve her own intellect—perhaps."

"It is, alas! to do the latter, dearest of aunts, but——" and here his voice vibrated with unwonted feeling, "I tell you frankly that if I did not know that the case is perfectly hopeless, and that I could never succeed in making her care for me, I believe I would brave even your wrath and attempt to win her."

"As what—your mistress?" rather tartly.

Mr. Strobridge shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"I would marry her willingly if Beatrice would divorce me—such things can be arranged."

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"Yes, Beatrice is an excellent creature, as you often say—but since Miss Bush will have none of you, you had better stick to Beatrice, she has done you so many good turns. Think of Lăo!"

Then as she saw the look of pain and weariness upon his much-loved face, she got up and did what she had perhaps not done for quite ten years, she put her kind arm round his neck and pulled his head back against her ample bosom.

"Dearest boy," she whispered softly, "I cannot bear that anything should really hurt you. What course is the right one to pursue, so that you shall not have more pain? We must think it out."

He was deeply touched and rested there comforted by her fond affection.

"Let me see her now and then in peace without subterfuge, so that I may help her with her education—and then in the autumn I think I will take that chance of being sent to Teheran—Seraphim, do you remember the afternoon she typed the charity things, when I came up to tea with you, you said I was depressed, and I said it was the shadow of coming events? Well, how true it has proved—that is the first time I ever noticed her, and once before you had remarked that you feared I should one day be profoundly in love."

Lady Garribardine stooped and kissed his forehead.

"Alas!" she said. "But you were too fine, dear G., to go on drifting forever from the Alice Southerwoods to the Lăos; it was bound to come with your temperament. I really wish you could marry this girl and have some splendid little sons for me to adopt and leave some of my money to."

"I would ask nothing better of Fate," and his eyes became suffused with light at the thought. His aunt sat down again and began peeling an apple.

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"You would have no objection to that despised domestic relationship, then—it would not even appear bourgeois, eh?"

"Not in the least."

"G.,—how the whole world is full of shams. This ridiculous thing called marriage! What a problem, and no light on the subject! A suitable marriage is perfect happiness, the obligations are joys and pleasures, and it does not seem to be allowed to occur more than once in a hundred years. All the rest are in gradations of

unsuitableness and fret and boredom. It makes me shudder now when I see people standing at the altar, swearing to love forever—nine-tenths of them not even taking in the meaning of the vows they are making—and a large percentage going through them for some ultimate end entirely disconnected with love or desire for the partner they are being bound to—it is tragic."

Mr. Strobridge agreed.

"I am convinced," Her Ladyship went on, now warmed to her subject, "that much unhappiness would be avoided if no vows were made at all, but the parson merely joined the hands and said a prayer over them to ask that they might go on desiring each other, and that ended the business. I believe truly that the actual breaking of the vow acts in some mysterious occult fashion and draws penalties of misery upon the breakers."

"What a disturbing thought!"

"Yes—because it is not really the infidelities which can be sins, they are merely human nature—it is the breaking of the given word which draws the current of disaster."

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"I expect you are quite right—the whole thing is infernal—and yet we must have some sort of union recognised by the state or chaos would ensue."

"Obviously—and as marriage now stands there seem to be only three ways of supporting it. One," and she ticked them off on her fat fingers—"to grow to that abstract state of good when to keep a vow against inclination in itself brings happiness; two, to behave decently to the legal partner, and with propriety before the world, and then if necessary to have mistresses or lovers as the case may be; or—three—for the state to allow a man to have several wives, and the woman, if she desires it, a change of husbands!"

Mr. Strobridge handed his cup for more coffee.

"Most of us are quite out of the running for the first, the third would be unworkable, Seraphim, so I see no help for it; the second course is the only possible one for half the poor devils in the world."

"Probably—then the greatest pains ought to be taken to keep up appearances so that those who live up to the first may not have their feelings outraged. No one should show a bad public example. The facts of straying fancy cannot be altered until human nature changes—an unlikely event!—so the best we can do is to hide irregularities under a cloak of virtuous hypocrisy. It helps many good and weak people to keep up a general standard, but there must be something wrong in the original scheme, G., if we are obliged to do this."

"Undoubtedly. It is the one, however, which has kept all sensible societies going since the beginning of civilisation and will continue to do so while there are two sexes in the world. But all this does not help me in my present case of being madly in love with a woman whom I may not have as either wife or mistress. Friendship is the only cold comfort left to me!"

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"Tut, tut! Half a loaf is better than no bread!"

"You think she might marry Sir John?" There was hope in his tone.

"Why not? Only I don't feel sure that he deserves such a prize. For me she is quite a marvellous character, and we could perhaps find her something young and handsome."

Mr. Strobridge jumped up with a start. This idea was altogether unpalatable to him.

"How shocking! Seraphim, that might be a creature a woman would adore!"

"Well?"

"Well——"

"Concentrate upon friendship, my dear boy!—If she has once said you nay, the rôle of lover is not for you—no matter whom she marries!"

CHAPTER XXI

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Time passed. A year went by after this with a gradual but unmistakable upward advance on the part of Katherine Bush. Moments of depression and discouragement came, of course, but her iron will carried her beyond them. All would go well for a while, and then would come a barrier, as it were, which was difficult to climb, and which would baffle her intentions for a week or two, and then she would surmount it, and race onward.

Her manipulation of Gerard Strobridge was masterly. She never permitted him to go beyond the bounds of friendship, and he gradually grew to entertain the deepest

worship and respect for her, which influenced his whole life. She spurred him on in his career, while obtaining from him all the polish his cultivated mind could bestow. Lady Garribardine watched the passage of events with her wise old eyes, assisting them, moreover, when she deemed it necessary.

If Katherine's dominion over her beloved nephew was for his good, she must not let class prejudice stand in the way of her sympathy. The world for Sarah Garribardine was full of incredible fools, who, however strong their desire might be for a given end, were yet too stupid to see that their actions and methods—nearly always inspired by personal vanity—militated against the attainment of that end, and so they went on their blundering way, continually surprised at their own want of success!

It was the quality of reasoning and of analysis in her secretary which grew to interest her most deeply. Katherine was her perpetual study, inasmuch as she stood so far apart from the world of fools.

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Their visit to Paris had been a great experience for Katherine. She took the place historically, not as she had taken it before, as the setting for a love dream. She had had a recurrence of the violent longing for Lord Algy when they arrived at the Gare du Nord, that strangely sudden seizure of passion to which she seemed periodically subject; when she knew that if at the moment Fate were to offer him to her again she would find the temptation of acceptance too strong to resist. She was afterwards always extremely thankful that this did not occur, and that she was given time to resume her self-command.

When first she drove down the Champs Elysées, a strange sense of fear came over her—what if after all that Palatial Hotel episode in her life should have power one day to raise up its ghost and destroy the fabric of her ambitions? The more she saw of the great world, the more she realised that such a breach of convention, such a frank laying aside of all recognised standards of morality, would never be forgiven if discovered. Incidents of the kind occurred every day, but must always be rigorously kept out of sight. She grew to understand that it is a much more punishable offence to hold unorthodox views and act honestly by them, than to profess orthodox, stringent virtue, and continually blink at the acting against conscience, by secret indulgences!

One day it chanced that she could discuss the point with her mistress.

"You must remember the good of the community always first, girl," Lady Garribardine had said. "If you want to benefit humanity you must not be too much occupied with the individual. For the good of the community certain standards must be kept up, and sensible people should put on blinkers when examining the frailties of human nature. Nature says one thing and civilisation and orthodox morality another; there must logically be an eternal conflict going on between the two and the only chance for souls to achieve orthodox morality is for hypocrisy to assist them by hiding bad examples given when nature has had an outburst and won the game. If you won't conform to these practical rules it is wiser and less harmful to your neighbours for you to go and live in the wilds—I am all for *tenué*, I am all for the uplifting of the soul where it is possible, and decency and good taste where it is not."

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"I see," responded Katherine. "One must in this, as in all other things, look to the end."

"You have indeed said it!" Her Ladyship cried. "That faculty is the quintessence of statesmanship, as it is of wisdom, and one we never see displayed by a radical government!"

As the season went on in London, various peeps at society were afforded Katherine, and as her eyes opened, and the keenness of her understanding developed, she learned many useful lessons.

On rare Saturday afternoons, she visited the museums again with Gerard Strobbridge, to her intense delight, and with much pain as well as pleasure to him, and when the big Saturday to Monday parties came down to Blissington, Lady Garribardine often found her secretary invaluable for the entertainment of unavoidable bores.

Thus by the autumn, when Gerard's aching soul and denied passions thought to take solace in flight on that mission to Teheran, Katherine Bush was an established institution at tea time, and had acquired the art of conversation in a degree which would have pleased Chesterfield himself!

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To make herself liked by women was the immediate objective she had laid down for herself. Of what use to gain the little pleasure by the way, of the gratification of her vanity from the incense of men? She must wait until some one man appeared upon the scene, the securing of whom would be her definite goal—then she could pursue her aims without the stumbling-block of female antagonism.

She learned many things from her employer: tolerance—kindness of heart—supreme contempt for all shams, apart from that of necessary moral hypocrisy, which seeming paradox she grew to realise was a sensible assistance to the attainment of a general moral ideal. Her wits sharpened, her brain expanded, her cultivation increased and her manners assumed an exquisite refinement and graciousness; and when the

second Christmas came and the New Year of 1913, no one could possibly have discovered the faintest trace of Bindon's Green, or of the lower middle class from which she had sprung.

Lady Garribardine had materially augmented her salary, and substantial cheques found their way to poor Gladys, whose baby was born dead, much to Matilda's disappointment.

"But it is often like that," she told Katherine as they walked in the park one Sunday, "with a seven months' child, and Glad don't take on about it as I should."

Mrs. Robert Hartley was firmly determined to go to America.

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"We've had enough hell in these few months, Bob," she informed her husband as she was getting better, "and I am going to be like Katherine and make a career for myself. I'm tired of your grumbling and your rudeness to me, and every bit of love I had for you is gone—We've no baby—There's nothing to keep us chained up together like a pair of animals, and I'm off to make my fortune—so I tell you flat."

Mr. Robert Hartley asserted the rights of an English husband, but to no avail. Gladys had the money from her sister in her hand to start herself with, and a warm recommendation from Madame Ermantine, and so in the early autumn sailed for New York and almost immediately obtained lucrative employment.

Thus the family at Bindon's Green was reduced to Matilda, Ethel, and the two young men, and still further diminished in the New Year by the marriage (and retirement to a villa of his own!) of Mr. Frederick Bush with the genteel Mabel Cawber!

The wedding of the pair was a day of unalloyed pleasure to Matilda. Katherine had manoeuvred so that she could not possibly be spared to attend it; thus the festivities were unclouded by the restraint which her presence—quite undesired by herself—always imposed upon her relations. They were all admittedly uncomfortable with her, not she with them. They felt in some vague way that they were of less account in their own eyes when in her company, and that an impassable gulf now separated them. They had nothing to complain of, Katherine gave herself no airs, she neither patronised them nor talked over their heads, but a subtle something divided them, and all were glad of her seemingly enforced absence. All except the bride, who was sorry the poor secretary sister-in-law should not be chastened by witnessing her triumph!

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For was she not having four bridesmaids dressed in pink pongee silk with blue sashes, and two pages to carry her court train! Pages in "Renaissance" costume. The Lady Agatha Tollington's were so described in the *Flare*, and why should not hers be also? "Renaissance!" She did not know what the word meant, but it had such a nice sound and seemed so well to fit the picturesque suits advertised as copied from Millais' immortal Bubbles which had been secured at the local emporium to adorn the two smug-faced infants who would carry—very shamefacedly it must be admitted—the confection of cheap satin and imitation lace which would depend from Miss Cawber's angular shoulders.

If Katherine could have seen all that! Miss Cawber felt that a humbler mien in this obstreperous creature might have resulted!

But Katherine never saw it, and when Matilda recounted all the glories to her, she had the awkwardness to ask why Mabel had indulged in a court train?

"Bridesmaids were natural enough," she said, "if you all wanted to have some gaiety and a jolly party, but Fred's wife will never go to Court, so why pages and a train?"

"Oh—well," Matilda returned in annoyance, "who's to know that at Bindon's Green? And it has given her ever such a tip-top position to begin her home upon. The Perkins girls and Bob Hartley's mother and cousins were just mad with envy, and Fred as pleased as Punch to have such a stunning turn-out at his side to down the aisle with."

"I am so glad you are all happy then," Katherine said kindly.

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How merciful, she reflected when she had left her sister at Stanhope Gate, that their ambitions were so easily satisfied! How merciful also that only Matilda's affection for her need count in her future connection with the family—and Matilda might at no distant date be a bride too! The bride of Katherine's old devoted admirer, Charlie Prodgers! While Ethel announced her intention of following Gladys' example and migrating to America the moment she was seventeen, in the spring.

Thus, visits to Bindon's Green were no longer desired by the inhabitants of Laburnum Villa, nor of Talbot Lodge, where Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Bush were installed, and Katherine felt she could drift from them all without hurting their feelings, indeed, with mutual satisfaction.

So the winter of 1912 drew to a close, and the spring of 1913 came, and with it Gerard Strobridge.

He was well and sunburnt and seemed more resigned on his first visit after he returned to Blissington accompanied by Lady Beatrice.

Katherine was pouring out the tea—now her daily task—when he came in, and a glad

thrill ran through her. Would he see any change in her? Would he be pleased with her advancement? He was her friend, and her helpmate in literature, and never by word or look did she recognise that he could feel any other emotion but a platonic one for her.

Her attractions always struck Gerard afresh after his absences, and made him remark upon them each time he returned.

"How beautiful you have grown, Katherine," he said when presently they had a chance of talking a little apart. "You are the most wonderful thing in the world—I came back hoping to find you less attractive, and you are just as fascinating as ever—more so—Oh! shall I never make you care the least for me?"

"Never."

"It is a wonder that I should love you so madly, when you are as cold as ice to me, and never melt—I believe you could see me on the rack without turning a hair—if it suited your purpose!"

"Probably."

But she smiled softly, so he asked eagerly:

"Is it so, Katherine?"

"Will you never understand even after the hundreds and hundreds of talks we have had? I have marked out a settled, determined path in life which I intend to follow—so that even if I loved you I would crush all emotion out of myself, since indulging in it would ruin my aims, and drag us both to social perdition meanwhile. It is extremely fatiguing to have to recommence explaining our positions every time you come back from abroad. As a friend I delight in you—I love our talks, our discussions and controversies. I have tried in every way to improve under your tuition, but if you will be weak and give way to other feelings—it is you who put yourself on the rack—And if you do it I cannot help it, it cannot change my determination, even if I see you suffering."

"How can a man worship anything so logical?"

"I don't know; what I do know is that I never mean to admit that you have any feelings for me but those I have for you, of warm friendship. I shall always act as if you were only my friend, and only consider any of my actions as affecting you from that point of view. If you are hurt it is your own fault, I cannot be responsible for the pain."

He clenched his hands with sudden violence.

"And if I refused to bear it—if I broke all friendship and never spoke to you again—what then?"

"You would be quite right to do so if it gave you any satisfaction. I should miss you—but I should understand."

He gave a faint groan.

"Well, I have not the strength to throw off your influence. I always think I have done it when I go to foreign climes, and I dwell upon the pleasure that your intellect gives me. I come back quite resigned, but the first sight of you, the sight of those red, wicked lips and that white skin drives me mad once more, and I feel I do not care whether you have any brain or no, in the overwhelming desire to hold you in my arms."

Katherine gave an exclamation of weariness.

"Oh, it is tiresome that you must always have these scenes when you return, they spoil everything. You force me to seem cruel. Why can't you accept the situation?"

"Because I am a man and you are a woman," and his eyes sought hers with passion, "and all the rest of emotion is but make-believe; the only real part is the tangible. To have and to hold, to clasp and to kiss, to strain the loved one next the heart—Katherine, you make me suffer the tortures of the damned."

"No—you permit yourself to suffer them, that makes all the difference. If I made you, then I should feel as wicked as you say my lips look."

Here Lady Beatrice interrupted them in her plaintive, drawling voice.

"Gerard, can you imagine it! Aunt Sarah has just had a letter from Tom Hawthorne by the evening's post, announcing that Lăo has quietly married that boy in Paris, and they are going to Monte Carlo for their honeymoon! Isn't it quite too tragic for them, poor things!"

Lady Garribardine joined the group, with the epistle in her hand.

"Lăo was always a fool, but I believed even the sense of a rabbit would have kept her from this!"

"They are madly in love, dear Sarah!" old Gwendoline d'Estaire said sentimentally.

Her ladyship snorted.

"Tut, tut! Lăo is forty-two years old and the boy not more than six and twenty, sixteen years between them! Quite an immaterial discrepancy while he remained a lover—but a menace which even the strongest brain cannot combat when the creature turns into a husband. The situation is ridiculous at once. It means that the woman has to spend her time not only fighting old age as we all have to do, but watching for every sign of weariness in the youth, trembling at every fresh wrinkle in herself, and always on the tiptoe of anxiety, so that she loses whatever charm lured the poor child into her net."

"But really Lăo had made it so evident—the affair—perhaps she thought——"

"That a second wedding ring was essential! Ridiculous nonsense, Gwendoline! We are not of the *bourgeoisie*—there is an epidemic of these rich widows rushing these penniless young men into matrimony. No one objects to their amusing themselves, but these respectable unions offend the sensibilities at once from their obvious unsuitableness. The woman loses prestige—almost caste, I was going to say. The man grows either sheepish or intolerably insolent, and if you notice, the pair eventually drop out of all agreeable society."

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"How awful to contemplate!" and Lady Beatrice sighed sadly. "To think that after one had *pretended* for years that one was full of emotions and sex and horrible things, one should succumb to them really—it is a cruel retribution—Gerard, aren't you interested?"

For Mr. Strobridge had raised a whimsical eyebrow.

"Perfectly thrilled. I am amply revenged for her indifference to me!"

"Is it not possible for them to be happy, then?" Katherine whispered to him in the din of a chorus of remarks the news had provoked.

"They have about a hundred to one chance for a few months; then either will suffer, probably both. Oh! the intolerable bond of matrimony!—Unless, of course——"

Katherine shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, I suppose so, if one was not quite sure what the reason was that one was marrying for, and had not weighed it and found out if it would be worth while or no."

"What will you marry for?"

"Contentment, I expect."

"And what is contentment—only the obtaining of one's heart's desire."

"I shall not marry unless it is to obtain my heart's desire," and that sphinxlike smile grew round her mouth, which always roused Gerard Strobridge's curiosity. After all this time, he could never quite fathom what was going on inside that clever brain.

"I refuse to think about it—Let us talk about something else—books you have been reading—something I can do for you."

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"There is one thing I would like you to do very much—only I do not know if it could be managed. Last week, Her Ladyship allowed me to go with Miss Arabella d'Estaire to see the House of Commons. I would so much like to see the House of Lords and hear a debate there before the Easter recess. I am trying to study politics."

"That will not be very difficult. I can get an order from Blackrod; there will be something to listen to next week, when I believe my aunt will be in town. I shall love to gratify your wish, Katherine."

"We must ask Lady Garribardine first if I may."

"Model of circumspection! Of course."

Then the company drifted from the tea table and Miss Bush returned to her sanctum, while Gerard Strobridge went up to his aunt's sitting-room.

They talked of numbers of things, and at last that lady said:

"G.,—more than ever I understand your passion for my secretary. I do not even find your fidelity ridiculous; she is one of the most fascinating creatures I have ever met. A masterpiece of balance and common sense, she will rise to the highest position one day—mark my words, boy!"

"I daresay—I cannot feel interested in that. I am still horribly in love. I thought Teheran had dulled the ache for her, but it has not."

Lady Garribardine sighed as she arranged a cushion.

"I live in terror that one day she will come and tell me quite honestly that she has learned all that my situation can teach her, and that she is going on to something new."

"She could not be so ungrateful."

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"It would not be ingratitude—she works for money, not for love. It would be part of her plan of life. Sentimental emotion does not enter into it—that is what makes her so interesting, and so invaluable."

"But I know, Seraphim, that she has a deep affection for you—she has expressed it to me many times. You are her model for all fine conduct and point of view."

"Yes—the girl is devoted to me, I think. Well, we must hope that she is content here, for I do not know how I could quite get on without her. I have had her down for a little at each party during the winter, G. She literally devours bores for me, and gets all the cranks into good tempers. And all the women like her; that shows triumphant astuteness on her part."

"Triumphant! You did not after all marry her to Sir John while I was away. I almost hoped that you would do so when I left in October."

"Sir John was willing; he wanted but a hint from me to have shown all the ardour of a young lover. One even pictured verses—it is in this way that it takes aged politicians. One imagined a discreet wedding and almost by now the inevitable preparatory layette!—But Miss Bush would have none of it! When I approached her upon the subject she looked me straight in the face and said quite respectfully, but with a hauteur befitting a D'Estaire, that she had other views, and while sensible of my kindness she must decline the honour! I was immensely diverted."

"Danger is still ahead, then—She has told me just now that she means only to marry when she can gain her heart's desire—but what that is God—or the devil—alone knows."

Lady Garribardine looked at him shrewdly for a second; she did not speak, so Mr. Strobridge went on:

"By the way, she wants me to take her and Arabella to hear a debate in the House of Lords—may I?"

"Of course."

If he had not been so preoccupied with his own thoughts he would have remarked his aunt's tone, but he was absently staring out of the window and did not even see her face with its sagacious, querying expression.

"She is greatly interested in politics, I believe; she is well up in them already—she is well up in everything. I daresay she could open a bazaar, or give an address better than I could myself. I can spare her next Wednesday afternoon when the debate on the Land Bill will be in full swing. You can arrange it."

"I will.—Seraphim, isn't it pitiful about poor Lăo!—Younger or older it would not have mattered quite so much—but at forty-two—Heavens! The only thing the poor darling had—her beauty—won't be worth looking at in a year or so. The mentality of women is beyond me, so utterly unaccountable their actions are."

"Not at all, my precious G. They are as plain as a pikestaff—only any man can be bamboozled by the silliest of them. They all answer to type and sex. Lăo has the brains of her type, the female guinea pig, raised under artificial conditions which have altered, but not stifled, the guinea pig's strongest instinct—prolific reproduction. It came out in Lăo, not in the desire to have a numerous family, but in an intense desire to attract the male—*pas pour le bon motif, bien entendu!*—but for variety—Then she falls in love at a foolish age, and the emotion, being one of nature, the instinct rights itself for the moment, and swamps the effect of artificial conditions. Hence the passion for the wedding ring—vows—the male in the cage, all unconscious preparation for a family—the last thing she would desire, in fact—and all sense of proportion lost sight of."

Mr. Strobridge laughed delightedly.

"You should write a 'Guide to the Knowledge of Women,' Seraphim, for the enlightenment of your men friends."

His aunt smiled, showing all her strong, well-preserved white teeth.

"I would like to, but not one of them would speak to me again, they would tear my new grey *toupée* from my snowy locks, and denounce me as a liar, because I would tell the one thing they strongly dislike—the truth!"

"Yes, a thoroughly lovable feminine woman loathes the truth, doesn't she! I have always found my greatest success with her lay in a distortion of every fact to suit her personal view. Katherine Bush and yourself, sweet Aunt, are the only two of your sex that I have ever met whom a man need not humour, and can speak his real mind out to."

And with this he kissed her fat hand and took his way from her presence down the gallery to his room to dress for dinner.

But all the while Stirling was coaxing the real silver and auxiliary iron grey waves into a superbly simple triumph of hairdressing, her ladyship wore a slight frown of concentrated thought.

What did it mean, this desire on the part of her secretary to see the House of Lords?

"Vermondsay—Hankhurst—Upper Haringway." She counted over a long list of the names of peers who frequented Blissington and Berkeley Square—but at the end she

shook her head. "No—none of these—Who then—and what for?"

Katherine Bush was no guinea pig answering to type. What type was she, by the way? A complicated, conglomerated mixture, not easy to dissect at any time, was this new move a manifestation of sex—or type?

Time alone would show—Until then the solution must remain in the lap of the gods. And in all cases, dinner should not wait, and it behooved a hostess to be punctual.

CHAPTER XXII

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The outside of the Houses of Parliament had always affected Katherine. They looked stately and English—and when they—herself and old Arabella d'Estaire and Gerard—walked through the corridors of the House of Lords, and came at last to the huge vaulted chamber itself, and so to the pen where they might stand to hear the debate, her heart began to beat with some strange excitement.

They went into the left side enclosure, and so could have a facing view of the Opposition benches.

Some member of the Government had just begun a speech as they entered, and Katherine had time to look about her. What types to study! And what an atmosphere of calm, after the scene in the House of Commons she had witnessed on her visit there! A din of angry voices and uncontrolled emotion. Here if people felt anything it did not appear on the surface. Katherine leaned upon the second carved griffin which helps to adorn the partition which separates the pen from the sacred floor of the House itself. From there her eyes travelled from face to face opposite her. She recognised several, indeed many whom she had seen either in London or at Blissington—but who were those others, some with features far from aristocratic?

She now examined the Ministerial benches, and made many reflections, while she only half listened to the rather lame string of sentences which were falling from a very refined-looking, carefully preserved gentleman, who seemed little interested in his subject, and almost ashamed to be speaking from that side of the House.

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Then from the end by the throne two newcomers entered, and took their seats, one on the front Opposition bench.

For the moment, Katherine's eye had followed the younger of the two who went towards the back, so that she did not become conscious of the personality of the other until, at the conclusion of the Minister's speech, he rose and laid some papers down upon the table in front of him amidst a sudden thrill of interest which noticeably ran through the assembly.

He was a very tall and arrogant-looking person, rather thin and upright; and in everything about him there was a strange old-world suggestion, which characterised even the cutting and brushing of his hair and the shape of his coat. The brow was lofty and broad, and the thin iron-grey locks were combed straight back from it, and seemed to be perhaps rather longer than those of the young men. He had very large eyes deeply set, probably dark blue, Katherine thought, and his nose was prominently aquiline. He was clean-shaven, all but a small pair of close-cut whiskers, and this with some peculiarity about the shirt, and the frockcoat he wore, as well as a black satin stock, stamped him as someone of an altogether different generation—century, Katherine had almost said to herself!

Who could he be?

There was some picture she had seen which he reminded her of. She thought for a minute. Yes, it was a certain print which hung in a passage at Blissington, of the Duke of Wellington in evening dress, a profile, with the ribbon of the Garter across his breast. This man had something of the same personality.

His whole appearance was so unusual, so almost startling, that had anyone else attempted to achieve the same result he would have looked either vulgarly dramatic or quite grotesque, but with this man even the old-fashioned clothes with their suspicion of a by-gone dandyism seemed to add to his immense distinction. Katherine thought that if she could have drawn a picture of a typical aristocrat of the Tory persuasion, of perhaps a hundred years ago, this man would have made a perfect model.

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And now he began to speak!

And of all the voices she had ever heard or admired from beyond the half-high glass screen at Liv and Dev's, or listened to in her present situation, none had ever struck her as so ultra refined as the perfectly modulated tones now vibrating through the house.

His words were selected with judgment and grace, and showed the command of an uncommon vocabulary. She had thought Gerard Strobridge's sentences were well-

chosen, and cultivated, but they would sound quite modern and almost colloquial, she felt, compared with the highly-polished flow of language which poured forth from this clear-cut mouth. The whole mien of the man expressed intense pride and dignity, and a perfect unself-consciousness. He gesticulated very little and kept one hand with the thumb resting above a button of his fastened coat, so that she could see his hand plainly, and its shape, which was in keeping with the rest of his appearance, and on his little finger was a great graven emerald, or some green stone in a ring, which caught a ray of light and sparkled for a second.

How was it that so noticeable a personage had never been to Berkeley Square or Blissington?

He was of Her Ladyship's political convictions, too, and must be of importance to occupy so prominent a place. And presently she began to take in the words he was saying, and gathered from a sentence which remarked upon his "long absence from your Ladyship's House" that he must have been for some time out of England.

Then she grew fascinated with the speech itself, it was so witty and filled with an exquisite sarcasm. Such must have been the speeches of Chesterfield, she thought, in this same House of Lords more than a century and a half ago.

How old could he be? Fifty—forty-five—forty? It was impossible to say.

Suddenly she was conscious of a deep enthralled interest affecting her, and she turned and whispered to Mr. Strobridge at her side:

"Who is that man speaking now—I would so much like to know?"

"The Duke of Mordryn—is he not a type? The last real Tory left in this age."

And then Katherine remembered that letters addressed to this name, and written in Lady Garribardine's own hand, had often gone with the rest to be posted, always to addresses abroad, ever since she had been in her service. And often, too, she recalled, the Duke had been spoken of as being here or there, and gradually on his way home, but nothing about him had particularly interested or struck her, except the name Mordryn—it was a perfect name!

She began piecing together what she knew about him. At Liv and Dev's she had been obliged to know a good deal about all Dukes; their sub-titles, son's courtesy titles, and family names. This string came back to her mechanically—"Duke of Mordryn, Marquis of Valfreyne, Earl of Rievaulx" and a number of Baronies, while the family appellation was Monluce, and the chief place of several residences Valfreyne in Dorsetshire. She remembered too that the Duchess had died less than two years ago.

After this her absorbed interest concentrated upon the man himself and she almost felt a little breathless when he sat down; and a moment or two after, when he seemed to have leisure to look about him, she met his eyes and she could see that they were indeed a very dark blue and that his gaze consciously rested upon her.

She did not turn hers away; she was fascinated, and slowly there came a thought to her:

"This is what fate means for me—" And for a few seconds she felt faint and icy cold, so great was her emotion.

The unknown goal of all her striving was revealed at last! The position of this man's wife would be the greatest to be achieved in England, for prestige and influence. *And it should be hers.*

She heard and saw and knew nothing which happened after this, only what was spoken and done by the Duke, and presently, Miss Arabella d'Estaire growing tired, they went out, their exit accelerated by Katherine who saw that His Grace had risen and was coming their way. They stopped for a second just at the place where the hats are left and he caught them up and shook hands with Mr. Strobridge and Miss d'Estaire.

"I am very glad to see you, Gerard," he said, "it is good to be at home again," and then he gave some gallant greeting to Miss d'Estaire, and paused, absently looking at Katherine, who stood by demurely, presenting an attractive picture in her grey suit and hat. All care was now taken of her ample tresses, which were arranged to show the smallness of her head, and every article of her garments was chosen to express unobtrusive distinction. For many months her astute intelligence had been turned upon the enhancing of her attractions, with wonderful result.

"Miss Bush—the Duke of Mordryn," Mr. Strobridge was obliged to murmur, and Katherine bowed and waited to see if the Duke would speak. He did, with that aloof but gracious courtesy which he showed to all women.

"You have come to hear our highly futile debate in this mutilated chamber—I hope you were not too bored."

"I was very much interested," and she looked straight into his eyes in the way she did when she intended to compel attention.

As Gerard Strobridge watched her, he suddenly felt a twinge of fear. He refused to

acknowledge the thought which presented itself, but indicated that they should go on.

The Duke meanwhile had not been unaffected by Katherine's magnetic eyes—he felt a spark of interest and so continued the conversation for a minute, but finally had to give way to Gerard's evident desire to move forward.

"Tell Her Ladyship that I am coming to lunch to-morrow. I only crossed last night, and have had no time to answer her note awaiting me. I hope she is well and has not allowed this modern rush and turmoil to spoil her enchanting wit."

When they got out into the open air, Katherine noticed that Mr. Strobridge had a fierce and rather hunted expression on his face. He got into the taxi after the two ladies without a word, and said very little as they drove to Miss d'Estaire's tiny flat in Knightsbridge.

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"Perhaps as it is so fine you will let me dismiss the cab and we might walk across the Park," he suggested as he rejoined Katherine after seeing Miss Arabella in at the door. And she consented.

The air was crisp and fresh and the dusk was gathering. It was a quarter to six o'clock.

They turned towards Stanhope Gate and walked in silence. Then Mr. Strobridge stopped suddenly and drew Katherine to a chair.

"Katherine," he said, and his voice was husky. "Is it so?"

"Is what so?" she questioned, to be quite certain what he meant.

"Is the Duke to be your objective?"

She did not answer. She was weighing things. Gerard's assistance would be necessary for the pursuance of a plan which had been forming in her head since she had left the Houses of Parliament. She was swift to decide, and swift to act at critical moments in her life.

"Do you think you have any right to ask me such a question?"

"Yes."

"What right?"

"I love you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"No, I will never admit it."

"It is true enough—Oh! Katherine, there is nothing I would not do for you and you know it, only I cannot help wanting to be certain if I am to expect the worst. I feared it at once when you looked into his eyes. Has my doom come at last then?"

"You are paying me a great compliment; you seem to think that the matter lies only in my hands."

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"You will accomplish anything you desire."

She did not speak.

"Katherine," he pleaded, and there was anguish in his voice, "tell me the truth, whether I have the right to ask it or no. The idea has come to you that this would be worth winning, this position—has it not?"

"Yes."

"He is fifty-three years old, Mordryn—but a fifty-three which women adore—You would probably fall in love with him also."

"It is possible."

"Can you expect me to be anything but pained then?"

"I have always told you that I consider you only as a friend, and that I only view your emotions for me as those of friendship; therefore there should be no pain even in such an idea according to my view."

"There is."

"I am sorry."

"But it does not change your determination?"

"No."

"I understand a man's killing a woman sometimes," and he clenched his hands passionately.

"So do I—when she deceives him, never because she is honest and unvarying. I have never deceived you or led you to hope for anything but friendship—that you have in full, and you have hundreds of times promised me yours; if you meant it I now ask you to give me a proof of it."

"What proof?"

"I wish to meet the Duke—not as Lady Garribardine's secretary; that would prejudice him too much, naturally! I want to meet him in the evening at dinner as a guest. I want to talk to him and see for myself what he is like, and if he is as wonderful as he looks. Only you could arrange this. If you asked him to dinner and asked me and Miss Arabella or Miss Gwendoline d'Estaire it would be possible, would it not?"

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He was staring at her now, overcome by her masterly frankness. No—she would never deceive him, he realised that and also that nothing of his will could ever impose upon hers. He knew he was impotent as a factor in the determining of her plans; all he could do to keep her favour was to fall in with them.

Her face, white as a lily in the growing dusk, was calm and cold and beautiful. He had never desired her more—but that fastidiousness in him, that power of detachment which could appreciate skill even when exercised against his own interests, asserted itself, and helped him. She was so wonderful a character, he must assist her even to his own pain.

"I suppose it would be possible—Beatrice goes down to Allerton to-morrow until after Easter. I expect I could arrange it for Friday night if I can only get the Duke—he will be awfully busy these days—but perhaps if I ask him at once I might catch him—" Then he thought a moment—"Yes—I've got a new case of miniatures I bought last week at an odd sale. I could beguile him on the pretext of giving me his opinion as to whether or no two of them are really Cosways. You see to what a state of abject slavery you have reduced me."

"No, I have not—you are being merely a loyal friend."

"To-night at dinner I will ask my aunt if you may dine—I have some boring country friends coming in any case that night and she will let me have you to help to entertain them, I expect. You are supposed to be extraordinarily talented as an entertainer of bores!"

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He could not keep some of the bitterness he was feeling out of his voice. Katherine looked at him reproachfully.

"I thought you would perhaps have understood—and been kind."

He responded at once to her tone.

"Darling—I will—you know it. I will show you that I am indeed your devoted friend; will that please you?"

She inwardly appreciated his sacrifice and her eyes shone softly upon him.

His face was haggard and looked hungry—its expression would have surprised the many women who had loved him, and on whom he had turned a transient smile.

"Yes, that will please me," and her voice was sweet. "Now tell me about him. I remember to have read in the papers some time ago that the Duchess had died."

"He has had an awful life—the Duchess was mad. She was a Thorval, a cousin of my wife's, and went more or less off her head soon after they were married about twenty-eight years ago. Then for more than fifteen years she was extremely peculiar, but not quite bad enough to be entirely shut up. Only of course it made it impossible for him to have friends or to entertain and enjoy his great position. Then she became quite mad and had to be isolated and by this time Adeliza, the only child, began to show signs of derangement, too, and so he had the horror of seeing the same thing occurring over again. About two years ago the Duchess died and fortunately soon after Adeliza caught scarlet fever and died also, just before you came to my aunt's—and then Mordryn started on a long voyage round the world to try and make a break and forget—and he has been abroad ever since, and only returned last night."

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"Poor man, then he did not obtain much pleasure from his great position?"

"Not in England—but one must suppose that he has had some kind of consolations in all these years. He was often in Paris and has always been extremely attractive, but he is a great gentleman, and there have never been any scandals about him."

"And now all those ugly shadows have been removed from his life and he is free—" Katherine drew in her breath a little.

"Yes, he is free," Gerard concurred gloomily. "He is a most intimate friend of my aunt's; you will see him constantly at Blissington."

"Where I am the secretary—yes. Ah! if you knew how I long sometimes to be—myself—and not to have to act meekness—Ah! you would know then how grateful I shall be if you can give me this one evening of happiness."

He was touched, she so seldom showed any emotion. He felt rewarded for some of his sufferings.

"You shall have as perfect a time as I can secure for you, Katherine, dear girl—" and he bent forward and took her hand. "You would adorn any position in the world—but if Mordryn were not a most splendid character I would not help you to meet him—He is—One of the finest in the world—and I will try—I promise you I will try not to let

any jealous envy stand in your way."

"You are a dear after all," and she returned the pressure of his fingers before she drew hers away.

There was a strange light in her eyes as she walked up the stairs to her room in Berkeley Square. A wonderful vista had suddenly opened itself before her, with a mountain in the distance all of shining gold. It seemed that it must always have been there but that some mist had hidden it which was now rolled away.

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What if she should be able to reach this splendid gilded mountain top—some day?—

A glorious end to aim at in any case, and she shut her white teeth firmly—and sitting down by her open window began steadily to think.

That night fate held a surprise in store for her. She was going to the theatre with Matilda, a periodical treat which that sister greatly enjoyed. They went in the dress circle and saw the show, two unobserved units in the crowd. As it was for Matilda's pleasure she was left to choose what she would see. It was always either a Lyceum melodrama or a musical comedy, and this night it chanced to be the latter, and one newly put on, so the audience was less remarkably homely than usual.

Who and what were the audiences at theatres? This Katherine often asked herself. And while Matilda enjoyed what was happening on the stage, she studied the types around her.

Who invented such hairdressing? Who designed such clothes? Whence came they and whither did they go?

This particular night Katherine and Matilda were rather at the side of the dress circle a row or two back, so that they could see a good deal of the stalls; and towards the end of the first act Katherine's languid attention suddenly became riveted upon two particularly well brushed male heads in the front row. Their owners must have come in while she had been looking at the stage. There was something quite uniquely spruce about young Englishmen's heads, she knew, and they were all very much alike of a certain class, but the fairer of these two was painfully familiar; it belonged to Lord Algy and to no one else. He had returned from Egypt then! He was there within a few yards of her. Oh! why was it such pain to see him again?

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Her heart beat to suffocation, she felt every pulse in her body tingle with excitement, and then she felt a little sick—and for a few minutes she could not have risen from her seat.

Matilda turned for a moment and exclaimed:

"Oh, my goodness gracious! Kitten! Whatever is the matter, dear?"

Then Katherine recollected herself and answered a little shakily:

"I don't know—the heat I suppose—I am all right now though, and isn't this a funny scene! Don't let us talk and spoil it."

And Matilda, reassured, gladly again turned to the stage. So Katherine sat on, fighting her battle alone. She forced herself to look at her whilom lover with calm—and watch every movement of his attractive head. He appeared well and bronzed and handsomer than ever, she could see as he turned to speak to his companion, and she almost fancied she could hear the tones of his voice. Then she made herself analyse things. Did she really love him still?

Then gradually she became more controlled as she realised that if she kept her eyes fixed upon him like this the magnetic power of her gaze would certainly cause him to look round presently and see her, and that above everything she did not want this to occur.

So she turned her attention to the stage and forced herself to listen to what was being sung.

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The act was soon over, and then she saw Lord Algy's perfect figure rise to go out. That was "Jack Kilcourcy" she thought, probably, with him, about whom she had so often heard—and perhaps they had come to see some special beauty in the chorus, and would go on to supper later at the Savoy or elsewhere. Oh, no!—she would not allow herself to feel any more; she had surely passed beyond such things!

The second act came and went, and the third, and when it was over she hurried Matilda out, in a desire to escape before the stall crowd could mingle with theirs in the doorway.

It was raining a little when they came to the door, and there stood Lord Algy talking with his caressing devoted air to a lovely woman in black, whom Katherine had noticed in one of the boxes. He did not see her, as, clutching Matilda's arm, she shrank away among the bedraggled people beyond the lights, and there she paused and turned for a last look at him, and saw him follow the lady into a smart car, the door of which was being held open by a motor groom; it had just driven up.

"We will have a taxi, Tild," she said. "Let us walk on and find one. I can't stand an omnibus to-night."

She drove Matilda to Victoria first, and then went back to Berkeley Square, a rather damp creature in body and soul. And when she was in bed, the tears would trickle down her cheeks. It was all hateful! The dress circle—the rain—the cab—the dependence—and last of all Lord Algy and the lovely woman in black!

Then her sense of the value of things came back again; her indomitable spirit revived, and before she fell asleep she knew that once for all she had banished any lingering regrets and that she would play for the great stakes in the game of her ambition with a zest as strong as the desire for love—that love which she now realized had been mainly an affair of the senses and which was over and dead.

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CHAPTER XXIII

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That night after dinner when the guests had left the house in Berkeley Square, Mr. Strobridge asked his aunt if she would lend him Miss Bush for Friday night to help him to entertain some bores. Beatrice would be away, and he really felt he could not face them alone. Gwendoline or Arabella would come, too. Katherine had dined at the Strobridges' house in Brook Street once or twice before, for similar reasons, and the request therefore did not seem unusual. But Gerard knew his Seraphim too well not to be aware that when she heard that Mordryn had dined also she might suspect some plot, and would then very possibly be mildly annoyed with him, and really angry with Katherine. Every scrap of his diplomatic gift would have to be employed over this. He was going to be at the luncheon next day which the Duke had announced his intention of attending. He must so manage the conversation that miniatures were discussed, and then in aunt's hearing Mordryn could be asked to come and inspect them as a mere afterthought. If this failed to allay all suspicion of underlying intention in the affair, he would have boldly to tell his aunt the truth, only taking the whole credit—or blame of the idea—upon his own shoulders—No reflection must fall upon Katherine.

Her Ladyship announced casually that, yes, he might take the secretary and welcome if he returned her not too late at night; she had to be up early in the morning as she was starting on a holiday of a few days' duration. The dutiful nephew thanked his aunt, and requested her to let Miss Bush know that she would be wanted on Friday if she would be kind enough to come.

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But Lady Garribardine was preoccupied with a subject much nearer her heart, and turned to it at once.

"I am dying to see Mordryn, G. I wish I had known he was going to speak to-day and I would have gone to the House; he felt it his duty, I suppose—this wretched Land Bill! How did he look? And did you get a word with him? I shall see him to-morrow, of course."

Mr. Strobridge gave the message that he had been asked to give, and vouchsafed the information that the Duke had appeared as usual and was altogether charming as ever.

"It is to be hoped he will get some good out of life now that he is free at last from those mad women."

Her Ladyship's face assumed a strange expression. She sat down in her usual armchair with an air of fatigue.

"Your words strike home, G.—for you know I made his marriage—in those far back ignorant days when no one thought of heredity or such things. I literally married him off to Laura almost against his will, because he was utterly devoted to me and I to him, and the situation was becoming impossible, over ten years between our ages, his immense position and mine—and Garribardine jealous—There was nothing else for it. Laura was a sweet, foolish creature then, beautiful and of no account. I felt she would never replace me in his affection, and in those days, nearly thirty years ago, it would have been considered almost indecent to talk of what future children might turn out—They were supposed to come from the cabbage beds and to have nothing to do with their parents!"

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"Of course, one had always heard he was devoted to you, Seraphim—He is still."

"Dear Mordryn!—Laura gave him trouble on the honeymoon, and once made him look ridiculous—He never pardoned that. By the time she was shut up, I was fifty, G., and had mercifully a strong sense of humour, so Mordryn and I had no lapses and have remained firm friends as you know."

"One has often wondered what his inner life could have been during all those years of horror at home. He was a model of circumspection outwardly, but the adoration of women must have affected him now and then."

"Not greatly, I think—Naturally he has had some consolation, but when one thinks of it, it is perfectly marvellous that no woman in England has ever been able to flatter

herself that she possessed an influence over him—and, of course, in these last years he has not even seen any."

"I suppose he will marry again now, having no heir?"

There was a very interested note in Mr. Strobridge's voice.

"He must—And he must find a sane and strong woman—the family is on the verge of being overbred. I must look out a suitable bunch for him to select from."

"I should leave it to fate this time, Seraphim."

"If I do that some totally unsuitable creature with a clever mother will grab him."

Mr. Strobridge laughed.

"Has not the man a will of his own?"

"No man has a will of his own while the vanity of his sex is still in him. He is as defenceless as a baby, and at the mercy of any cunning female. I could not bear to see Mordryn suffering a second time," and Lady Garribardine sighed.

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After luncheon next day, when the rest of the company had departed, the Duke stayed on and accompanied his friend up to her own sitting-room where they could talk undisturbed.

They understood each other completely. They spoke for a long time of his travels and of his release at last from bondage and strain, and of how he was going to open Valfreyne once more and see the world of his fellows and take up the thread of his life.

"You must not keep a grain of mawkish sentiment, Mordryn," Her Ladyship said at last. "You must banish all remembrance of Laura and Adeliza and begin life afresh."

"At fifty-three?—It is a little late, I fear, for the game to have much zest."

"Tut! tut! You have never found the youngest and most beautiful woman recalcitrant, I'll wager. One had heard not so many years ago that a certain fine creature in Paris almost died of love for you!"

The Duke smiled, and when he did this it was an illumination, his face in repose was so stern.

"Not of love—of chagrin, because the ruby in the bangle she received was reported to her—by her masseuse—to be of less pure pigeon's blood than the duplicate—which I gave to the Spaniard. It is impossible to gauge the love of a mistress; it is equally kindled by rubies and the charms of a youthful Apollo."

"But you need not now confine your attentions to *ces dames* any longer, Mordryn; there are numbers of our world who would console you."

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The Duke smiled again.

"None of them ever mattered to me very much, as you know, dear friend, from the days when my whole soul was yours. Since then women have been rare relaxations, ephemeral diversions leaving no mark."

"We are going to change all that!"

Then their talk drifted to other things, and before His Grace left he had promised to spend Easter at Blissington.

While luncheon had yet been in full swing and a propitious moment had come, Gerard had carried out his plan. The subject of miniatures was introduced, and a heated argument ensued about the likelihood of the new acquisitions being by Cosway, and then the suggestion that the Duke should come in and dine the next night and decide the matter came out quite naturally.

Lady Garribardine made no remark at the time, and indeed hardly thought about it, but that night when she sat by her bedroom fire, she suddenly remembered that her secretary would meet the Duke, and for a long time she stared into the glowing embers in deep thought.

No, it was not possible that the girl had known that he would speak; that was not her reason for wishing to go to the House of Lords; but she had seen him there, and now she would meet him at dinner!

A number of expressions chased themselves over Her Ladyship's countenance, while her eyes never left the one point in the coals. The frown of cogitation deepened on her forehead and then cleared away. She had come to a decision.

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When Mordryn had retired with his hostess after luncheon, Gerard Strobridge had sought Miss Bush in the secretary's room.

"The deed is done, Katherine," he announced, with an attempt at gaiety while his heart was heavy within him. "The Duke is coming to dinner on Friday night, and Gwendoline not Arabella, and a couple of bores from the country, so all my duties and sacrifices are completed. Now are you going to give me a reward?"

"It depends upon its nature."

"Yes, I know that. It is quite a reasonable one. It is to come down in my motor with me this afternoon and see the spring borders at Hampton Court?"

Katherine hesitated. She would love to go, but she had work to do before to-morrow, and unless she sat up late at night it could not be accomplished.

He came over and spoke earnestly.

"I feel that this will be the last time that we can be pupil and teacher, Katherine. Fate is going to change for us both. I want to keep a memory of you, dearest, when you were my friend alone, without the shadow of any other interest between—Won't you try to give me this one last great pleasure?"

Katherine was touched.

"Yes, I will," she agreed. "I cannot go up and ask Her Ladyship now, but I believe she would let me go. I have no business with her until to-morrow morning. Do you want me to come at once?"

"Yes, I will walk on round to the garage and get the motor, and you can meet me at Stanhope Gate."

It turned out to be an afternoon which neither of them would ever forget, and Katherine Bush had never been so near to emotion for her friend as when at last they sat down upon a bench and looked away to the broad green avenue between the giant trees.

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Gerard Strobridge had exerted every power he possessed to please her. He had enchanted her fancy, and had drawn out all that was finest in herself. They had studied the flowers, and talked of their favourite books; and Katherine was conscious that she herself was being brilliant, and that now his flights were not beyond her, but that she could fully hold her own.

"If I had been unwed, Katherine, would you have married me?" he asked her at last. "Divine as to-day has been, think what it would have meant with love between us—and further joys to come. Katherine, I would have done my utmost to make you happy. Will you answer me this question? I think it may be the last one I shall ever ask you."

She let her hands fall into her lap and she looked at him critically for a while before she spoke. And her voice was reflective when she did reply.

"I think if you had been free at that first Christmas, yes—I would have married you, I would have let you take me away and teach me all that I now know—And then I would have made you use all your gifts and rise, rise to the top of your tree. I would never have rested until you had reached the summit, and I with you."

He gave a little groan and covered his face with his hands.

"I forged all the barriers to joy by weakness long ago, Katherine. I drifted idly down life's stream, and now am caught in the rushes and cannot get free. The thought is bitter sweet, dear love—this picture of what might have been. And I would have taught you to love me at last. Ah! God! the pain! But now I do not want to finish this day with sorrowful repinings. I will keep this memory of your words and go my way, and when you come into your kingdom remember me, and let us renew our friendship on calmer shores."

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He took her hand, and pulling her glove off backwards kissed each white finger, and then his eyes grew misty and he said farewell. And in Katherine's heart there was a strange sadness, and they hardly spoke at all as they sped homewards.

CHAPTER XXIV

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When Friday night came and Katherine was ready to get into the taxi with Miss Gwendoline d'Estaire, she felt exalted as she had never done in her life.

This evening would be the test of her powers—If she failed, then she would know that such high goals were not for her, and so she must curtail her aspirations. *But she would not fail.* It might be that the Duke would not be drawn to her—it was impossible to tell from that one afternoon what his temperament could be—but at all costs she must not fail in being a cultivated lady, a guest among equals, and so to take at least that place in his regard.

There was something almost diabolically whimsical in the fact that one passionate would-be lover was deliberately arranging that his lady should meet a possible rival!

Gerard Strobridge appreciated this point as he stood before the cheerful wood fire in the morning-room in Brook Street, awaiting his guests.

The bores, of course, came first, and then Katherine and old Miss Gwendoline d'Estaire, and last of all, not more than five minutes late—His Grace.

He was quite abnormally distinguished looking in evening dress, which when dissected did not prove to be remarkably different from that of the others, but which yet possessed some subtle quality entirely apart from theirs, in its bygone suggestion. His manners were most courtly; he recognised Katherine at once and shook hands with her. And then dinner was announced.

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Gerard sent the lady bore in with the Duke—himself taking old Gwendoline, and leaving Katherine to the husband, so that Katherine sat next His Grace at a little round table.

She was looking quite beautiful in a new black frock, as simple as the old one, and with some of her favourite lilies of the valley tucked into the belt. Mordryn felt constrained to talk to his partner until after the fish—the host, by a tactful interruption, drew away her attention and left him free, and then without hesitation he turned to Katherine.

Her heart was beating fast, and the excitement made her eyes dark and her cheeks pale, but she did not lose her head, and indeed felt an extra stimulant to her brain power.

He began about the debate on Wednesday. The whole thing was rather a mockery since they were robbed of all power now in the House of Lords, and could only make mild protests, but not enforce their opinions. Was Miss Bush interested in politics?

Katherine said that she was, but thought it rather a degrading profession now, with paid members making their living out of their seats. And so they spoke for a little upon this theme, and the Duke found himself agreeably entertained. He liked her deep voice, and above all her extraordinarily good hands.

"Bush?" he said to himself. "I do not remember to have heard the name before—the mother perhaps had the breeding. Those hands do not come from the shrubbery or the common!"

Now Katherine began to talk of travels. She knew that all people enjoyed discussing theirs on their return.

She would much like to visit the East. She had always been thrilled with Kinglake's description of Damascus in "Eothen." Was it really a city "of hidden palaces, of copses and gardens, and fountains and bubbling streams"? His Grace's eyes expressed real interest now, not so much that they should discuss Damascus, but that a modern girl should have read Kinglake and deeply enough to quote him correctly! He also knew his Kinglake, and had that potent gift of memory which never stumbles in its manifestations.

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He continued the subject with enthusiasm and found that this charming young woman was familiar with all the subtlest shades. They had touched upon passages of peculiar beauty concerning the Dead Sea, and the girls of Bethlehem and the wonderful desert sun, and were in the middle of those dedicated to the Sphinx, when the Duke became aware that a sweet was being handed and that dinner was more than half over! With infinite discretion the host had never allowed the flow of conversation to flag, so that no pause among so small a company should bring this promising *tête-à-tête* to a close. Katherine should have a fair field if he could procure it for her.

But His Grace's good manners reproached him for his negligence to the lady he had taken in, and he turned from the contemplation of Katherine's regular profile with reluctant dutifulness, inwardly determining to continue Kinglake and other things when they should all be safely in the drawing-room. These people would surely play bridge. What a capital thing cards were if one had strength of mind enough to enforce one's own selfishness in not playing them!

Katherine now used her best endeavours to be agreeable to the bore husband, and spoke of subjects which were in his ken. And Gerard, watching her, admired the progress of his pupil. No one of his world, or any world, could have been a more polished or enchanting guest. And his pride in her numbed the pain he had felt all the day.

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Then the conversation became general, and gave fresh opportunity for Katherine to show her powers of repartee.

Yes, the quartette played bridge, and began it almost immediately the men joined the ladies upstairs. Mr. Strobridge had carefully not allowed the talk to stray to any personal subject while they were alone in the dining-room, in case the Duke should question him about Katherine. If so, he would have been forced to say who she was, and that would spoil her plans perhaps. How she meant to get out of the dilemma afterwards he did not speculate. All pretence was so foreign to her nature. But that was her affair; his only concern was that this evening should be without flaw.

The Duke found a place on the sofa beside Katherine as soon as the rest began their rubber, and here he could look at her undisturbed and without craning his neck.

He admired her extremely. She was the exact type which pleased him, distinguished and well-bred looking. He liked the way she spoke, with no distressingly modern slang in her phrases. She must evidently have been most carefully brought up in a really refined home! Could she be a relation of the d'Estaires? But to ask questions of this sort was not his method, and he turned the conversation back to "Eothen" again and kindred things.

Katherine was in the seventh heaven; she was blooming like a glowing hot-house plant and seemed to radiate sweetness and serenity. Every now and then she let her eyes meet his dark-blue ones, with that strange magnetic look in hers which she knew would compel his interest.

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They spoke of music and poetry, and then of pictures—pictures in general—and lastly those of Blissington.

"Did she know Blissington well?"

Yes, she knew it very well, and that enigmatic smile hovered for a moment round her lips. Mordryn was surprised at it.

"It contains some recollections for you which are humorous, then?"

"Yes—very humorous."

"Won't you tell me what they are?" His most attractive clear-cut face came a little nearer to her in his interest.

"Some day you will know."

"How fraught with meaning! 'Some day I shall know!' Not to-night, then?"

"No, for to-night we are guests at a dinner-party and are talking about literature and music and art."

"But I want to talk about you—May I not?"

"I do not see why you should. I am just a person whom you will never really see again—I mean, never really talk to again—so why waste time in unprofitable investigations?"

"How do you know that they would be unprofitable?"

Katherine looked down at her own white hands folded quietly in her lap, then up again and straight into his eyes.

"This night week if you chance to think of this evening, you will realise how right I am as to their complete unprofitableness!"



"You are ready for the great adventure?"

"You speak in riddles."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly and smiled.

His Grace found himself distinctly curious.

"Why should you be so sure that I shall never really see—or was it speak to—you again? Do you then live on some desert island off the north of Scotland, by chance?"

"In a much more inaccessible place than that." Her eyes sparkled with some unfathomable expression.

"Iceland?"

"There is an ice barrier surrounding it."

"I shall have to give it up, and you will tell me yourself out of gratitude, for ceasing to tease you."

Katherine leaned back on the soft green silk cushions of the sofa. She was looking most alluring in her new rôle of honoured guest. It was so delightful to be perfectly at ease and able to lean there, and not sit bolt upright in a chair in an attitude of respect. The Duke found the sight of her extremely soothing.

"You come to London sometimes, I expect?"

"Yes, for a part of the year."

"Ah! I thought so! I did not believe that Iceland produced such a polished creature. You know you are quite unusual, Miss Bush. You have consented, without apparent reluctance, to talk upon interesting subjects to a wearied and middle-aged man, and you have not spoken of golf or dancing—and you have not smoked!"

"I do smoke sometimes, but only when I am doing some tiresome mechanical work like typing."

"Typing?—I suppose it is useful—but what can you have to type? Are you writing a book?"

Katherine gave a sudden soft laugh, infinitely provoking; it made the blood run in Gerard Strobridge's veins, and he viciously played a knave while quivering with a sense of rebellion. He knew what it meant when she laughed like that! When would this ghastly evening end?

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And Katherine half whispered: "No, not writing one, but trying to learn out of that greatest volume of all time—the book of life!"

"What can you know of life?" The Duke asked the question as Gerard Strobridge had asked it long ago. "Protected and pampered and kept from all but its pleasant sides—what can girls of our class know of life?"

"Tell me, then, what it is—since I could not be supposed to know?" and her mouth still looked mischievous as well as her eyes.

The Duke thrilled a little.

"Life is either a muddle through, or an achievement. And it contains good things and bad things, and passions—and it is forever trying to express itself, and proclaim its meaning quite regardless of laws."

"'Tis not to stalk about and draw fresh air,
From time to time, or gaze upon the Sun."

"Oh! it is a splendid thing!" Katherine cried, and her voice vibrated. "And unlike the *Spanish Student*, I shall not 'grow weary of the bewildering masquerade,' 'where strangers walk as friends and friends as strangers.' And even if they did, the unexpectedness of it would be delightful!"

Mordryn looked at her. At the fresh, young firm, smooth cheeks, the living red, voluptuous mouth, the ashen-hued hair, every strand of which seemed to be specially alive and to hold its own silvery glitter. And then at her strange, compelling eyes, and he sighed a little. She seemed such an embodiment of vital things.

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"You are ready for the great adventure?"

"Quite, and I mean to know everything before I grow old and indifferent."

He sighed again.

"Age does not always produce indifference; it would be merciful if it did."

"There can be no need really to grow old. Age comes because people lose their grip on things."

"Probably. But responsibilities and sorrows and disappointments age. You have no doubt a very sheltered life, and so it seems to you that all is easy."

Katherine laughed again softly. It was so delicious to think of the reality in contrast to his supposition!

"My life is indeed sheltered—by a very strong shield, but not by the one your words would suggest."

"No? What then?"

"It is not at all interesting to talk of me; I have already told you so—Why do you persist? I would much rather hear of foreign countries—Italy, for instance. I have never been there."

There was not the least subjective deference in her manner to him. It was as if an equal were talking to one of her own brain calibre and that equal a woman, who had a right to be humoured. Women—especially girls—were not wont so to treat him, but were always more or less impressed by his great position, or his aloofness, or his satirical but courteous wit. He had sometimes an expression of contemptuous, amiable tolerance, which was eighteenth century and disconcerting. It made all but the most simple or most highly cultivated among them slightly uneasy—Was he laughing at them? They were never quite sure.

He found himself piqued now, and in no mood to be balked, so he contradicted Katherine.

"You may not find yourself interesting to talk about; it chances that I do. I wish to know what it is that shields you so effectively."

"A clear idea of what I want, I expect, and a strong enough will not to be much buffeted about by any wind of opinion."

"What a *rara avis*! And you look so young!"

"I am twenty-three; that is fully grown."

"And what is it you want?"

"To be free to soar—to see the world—to feel its throb—to demonstrate some of my ideas."

"On what subjects?"

"The meanings of things—and why they are—and the common sense aspect of them. Then one could help humanity. Lady Garribardine is my ideal of what a woman should be. There is nothing small about her; she is as big as a great man and far more sagacious."

"There I am with you!" and his voice became eager. "Her Ladyship has always been the perfection of things feminine, in my opinion. You know her well?"

"Extremely well. She is not afraid of her views and principles. She is really an aristocrat. She believes in herself, so everyone believes in her, too!"

"Most of us are shaky about ourselves."

"You are not—I shall turn the tables now and say I want to talk about you! What does it feel like to be a Duke?—A real Duke, not a *parvenu* or one who makes a laughing stock of his order."

He smiled; she was a most engaging and audacious young person, because she did not speak with childish artlessness, but with deliberation.

"It feels a great responsibility sometimes, and a thing of very little consequence at others. It enforces perhaps a standard of behaviour which it is difficult always to follow. If the circumstances of my life had been different when I was younger, I should have endeavoured not to let our order slip into impotency; now the whole modern political outlook disgusts me so that I seldom speak in the House."

"That is very wrong of you, and cowardly." She was quite fearless. "You should never give up a fight or remain passive when what really belongs to you is being filched from you. If you do, as a band, you deserve to be put aside. You should fight with the same fierceness with which those Radicals do who know they are shams, but are indeed in earnest to obtain their own ends."

"You are quite right. There are some women who stimulate in all ways, who are, as it were, sent into the world as electric dynamos. They get the best out of everyone; they make men work better and play better—and love better."

He looked at her now with his fine eyes sparkling, but flirtation was far beneath his feet. To his mistresses he was a master, a generous, tolerant, contemptuous master; to his friends like Lady Garribardine the essence of courtly consideration; to the general company politely aloof. But to the woman who could arouse his love, what might he not be! Katherine thought this, and a quiver ran through her of a kind she had never experienced before, so that her composure was not so perfect as usual when she answered:

"If one really knew exactly what is love!"

"You have no dim guess at it, then?" He was quite surprised that it should interest him to know what her reply would be.

"Yes, I have—more than that. I know that some phases of it make one feel mad, agitated, unbalanced, animal, even motherly and protective—but what it could be if it touched the soul, I cannot fathom."

The Duke did not speak for a moment; he was filled with wonder and a growing admiration, admiration which extended even beyond the very real appreciation of her beauty. Her mentality was so far above the average, her directness so interesting. There was not the slightest trace of pose in anything she said—And that last speech—what possibilities it opened up! She knew something of one side of love then, evidently!

"Do you realise what your words imply?"

"Yes."

"That you have loved someone—in that way—once?"

"Yes, I have—It is a way that frightens one, and makes one more than ever sure that there must be something else. Do you know that there is—you who have lived your life?"

Her face was pale and cool as moonbeams. She seemed to be talking in the abstract, for all the personal question. The Duke found himself quite unaccountably moved, and was just about to answer eagerly, when at that moment the host joined them from the other drawing-room; the rubber was over, and he felt he must do his duty and not make too obvious a point of leaving the pair alone.

"Come and see the miniatures, Mordryn," he said. "We must not forget that it was their lure which brought you here to-night."

His tone Katherine well understood, it contained for all its surface graciousness some bitterness underneath.

There was general movement after this, and no more private confidences could be exchanged, so that Miss d'Estaire and Katherine left, with His Grace's answer to the latter's question still unspoken.

And Gerard Strobridge, as he pressed Katherine's hand in good-nights, whispered:

"Have I done well—and are you satisfied?"

The firm clasp of her cool fingers was his answer.

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CHAPTER XXV

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Lady Garribardine was unable to spare her secretary from the Easter party, so it had been arranged that she was to have a few days holiday from the Saturday following the dinner-party, but she must catch the three o'clock train from Paddington on the Thursday before Easter, and return then.

Katherine did not go home to Bindon's Green. She went off alone to a little place by the sea on the east coast, and there she set herself to review events, and think out her plans while she lay upon the sands unheeding the east wind.

Gerard Strobridge had served her loyally—the interest which she had meant to kindle was kindled. The Duke now had made a mental picture of her, unmarred by possible qualifications which, if he had known she was his friend's humble secretary and typist, he would have been bound to have made. Not that he was in the least a snob, but that he would have naturally considered it unbecoming his situation to go about looking for interesting companions among his friend's dependents. He would simply not have observed her at all when he came to Blissington, any more than she herself had observed either of the footmen at Gerard Strobridge's dinner. Not that she despised footmen as footmen, or the Duke secretaries as secretaries; they were worthy and necessary servants; but guests did not remark them except in their professional capacities, people who were there to serve at table or write letters and attend to business.

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Not the slightest irritation or resentment mingled with these reflections of Katherine's. She was much too wise and just, and never under the influence of hurt vanity or dramatic instinct, so this point of view, that she knew the Duke would naturally take, seemed to her perfectly right, and instead of resenting it, she had used her brain to nullify it, knowing full well that if she played her part at the dinner effectually, interest would be aroused which no barrier of different statuses could entirely obliterate afterwards. Now on this last afternoon at Bayview, she must think out what she would do next, for the Duke would be arriving at Blissington by a train from the west which got in a few minutes after her own from Paddington. She had known before the dinner-party that he was coming for Easter, and that morning had received a command from her mistress that she was to look out for him, and tell him he was to take the small coupé and not get into the other motor, which would await her and be loaded up with fragile hat-boxes which were coming by Katherine's train. There would be the luggage car for his servant and his trunks as well. All the rest of the guests were arriving by motors or by the express an hour later.

Thus the plunge from equal to humble secretary would have to be made at once, and

she must see to it that it was done with tact and skill, so as not to mar the effect already produced, but rather enhance it. There was only one drop in her cup. She did not feel altogether happy in keeping this secret from her beloved mistress. A secret, too, which concerned her, perhaps, most valued guest. But it was absolutely impossible that she could frankly avow her intentions to Lady Garribardine, as she had done to Gerard; so much she would keep to herself, but she would speak of her enjoyment at meeting the Duke, if Her Ladyship did not herself begin the subject, and she had not reason to believe Mr. Strobridge had told his aunt of the encounter. She had not seen Lady Garribardine since the dinner, having left for her holiday very early on the Saturday morning. All the way down in the train to Blissington she was conscious of suppressed excitement. She had been most careful about her appearance, and looked as charming and yet unobtrusive as it was possible to look.

She waited, when once arrived, at the entrance where the subway from the departure platform emerged—and she felt a quiver when she saw the top of the Duke's hat and then his face.

How attractive he looked! And how unlike other people! Among a crowd he was a magnificent personality, one to whom porters and officials and strangers naturally showed deference. Peers could look like very humble and sometimes even vulgar people, she knew, but no man, woman or child could mistake His Grace of Mordryn for anything but a great noble.

When he caught sight of Katherine standing just at the inside of the stream of passengers, his whole stern face changed, and an illuminating smile came over it, while he stretched out his hand cordially.

"Miss Bush! Are we to be fellow guests? You are coming to Blissington? How delightful!"

Katherine made as though she did not see the hand, and with deference and lowered lids, she said:

"Yes, I am going to Blissington, but Your Grace is under a misapprehension which I must correct. I am Her Ladyship's typist and secretary, and I am here now to give you a message, that you are to take her Ladyship's own small coupé and not the motor which is waiting for the bandboxes and me."

But with all her demureness, she could not prevent an irresistible and humorous quiver from dimpling round her lips, and then she raised her steady eyes and looked at him suddenly as she bowed and moved off quickly, leaving him for the first time in his life completely nonplussed! What was the meaning of this comedy? He felt rather angry. What business had Gerard Strobridge to trick him so? But had he tricked him? He recollected now that Miss Bush had not been mentioned by Gerard at all one way or another. She was simply treated as any other guest, and had come apparently with Gwendoline d'Estaire. That she was a high-bred lady his own senses had told him, whether she were a typist or no!—Highly bred and educated and exceptionally cultivated and refined. She must certainly be the daughter of some friend of Sarah's who had met with financial misfortune, poor charming girl! And he hurried after her—but only got outside the station to see her disappear in a motor already piled up inside with milliner's boxes. So, baffled and still deeply interested, he entered the coupé awaiting him and was whirled off. Seraphim would, of course, tell him all about it, and so he dismissed the matter from his mind; but his first thought when he got into the hall was to wonder if Katherine would be at tea. She was not. Tea was a *tête-à-tête* affair in his old friend's boudoir, where a hundred thousand things of interest had to be discussed between them, and no time or chance was given for reference to obscure secretaries.

After tea on her way down to receive the guests, who would continue to arrive in relays until dressing time, Lady Garribardine went into the schoolroom to see Katherine.

They spoke of business, and Katherine received orders, and took down notes, and then she said:

"Your Ladyship will be amused to hear that I met the Duke at dinner at Mr. Strobridge's. He did not know my position, and I am afraid at the time I did not undeceive him. It was such a very great pleasure to me to be taken for a lady and a guest just for once. Of course, I told him at the station my real position, and he appeared much surprised."

Lady Garribardine walked to the window and pretended to be looking out at something. She wanted to hide all the expression which might come into her eyes. The simple words, "It was such a very great pleasure to be taken for a lady and a guest just for once," had deeply touched her. She seemed to realise what such a spirit as Katherine's must feel, always in a subordinate position of no particular status—And with what dignity she carried it off!

"Child," she answered, without looking round, "no one who knows you would ever take you for anything else—the theory of blood being absolutely necessary for this, you have proved to be nonsense. The Duke is one of my oldest friends and a very fine

gentleman. I am glad you had a chance of talking freely to him."

After she had left the room, Katherine folded and unfolded a bit of paper, a very unusual agitation moving her.

"Oh! I wish I could tell her outright, my dear lady!" she cried to herself. "I almost believe she would sympathise with me, but if I see that she would not, and that it would hurt and anger her, I will give up even this, my ambition."

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Gerard Strobbridge was not of this party; he had been obliged to go to his brother's, so Katherine would have no collaborator and would be forced to act alone.

She did not dine downstairs, but was required in the drawing-room afterwards, and until ten o'clock she stayed alone in her sitting-room, wondering what the Duke had thought, and if it would have been wiser to have stayed for a minute after firing her bomb.

Had she known it, nothing to chain his interest could have been better than her swift disappearance, for he was now thinking of her, and at the first opportunity between the soup and fish, he said to his hostess:

"Seraphim, I met your secretary, it seems, the other night at Gerard's—a very intelligent girl. I had no idea at the time that she was in any dependent position—and was greatly surprised when she addressed me at the station to-day as 'Your Grace!' She is some misfortunate friend's daughter, I suppose. Anyone I knew?"

Lady Garribardine's eyes beamed with a momentary twinkle which she suppressed—She thought of the auctioneer father and the butcher grandfather and then she said casually:

"No—she came from an advertisement, but she is a splendid creature, with more sense in her little finger than most of us have in our entire bodies—What do you think of my grey locks, Mordryn?"

The Duke assured her he found them bewitching; he saw that she did not mean to speak of her secretary.

"They cause you to look ten years younger, dear friend. I could find it in my heart to make love to you once more—and be repulsed with unabated violence, I fear!"

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"Love was good when we were young, Mordryn; ten or twelve years do not matter when a man is twenty-five and a woman thirty-five to thirty-eight—that is, if they are not married. The discrepancy in age only becomes grotesque later. We loved and laughed and lived then, and should be grateful—I am—As for you, you will love again—fifty-three for a man is nothing. You are abominably attractive, you know, Mordryn, with your weary, aloof air—and your Dukedom—And now that you are altogether free from anxieties, you should take the cup of joy in both hands and quaff it—Look round the table. Have I not provided some sweet creatures for you?"

"You have indeed—Which one in particular have you destined for the cup-bearer?"

"Any one of the three on that side towards the top. You can't have brains and beauty. Lily Trevelyan has beauty, and enough tact to hide her absence of brain. Blanche Montague has no beauty but a certain chic—and I am told wonderful variety of talent. She does not satiate her admirers with sameness—While Julia Scarrisbrooke is all passion so well assumed as to be better than the real article, and always handy. These credentials I have collected from a cohort of past admirers and they can be vouched for. You have only to choose. Any one of them will be enchanted. They are only waiting to spring into your arms!"

"I believe that would bore me. I want someone who is not enchanted—someone who leaves the whole initiative to me."

Her Ladyship cast up her eyes. "My dear Mordryn, your unsophistication pains me! Who ever heard of a Duke of fifty-three, well preserved, good-looking, unmarried and distinguished—known to be generous as a lover and full of charm—being allowed to take the initiative with women—Fie!"

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The Duke laughed, and by some curious turn of fancy he seemed to see the white, perfectly composed face of the stately, slender secretary, who had treated him as naught that night at Gerard's, and then looked almost mockingly respectful when she called him "Your Grace!" in the station. Would she be in the drawing-room after dinner?—Perhaps.

Yes, she was, over by the piano at the far end; but Lily Trevelyan and Blanche Montague and Julia Scarrisbrooke had surrounded him before he could get half-way down the long room, and escape was out of the question. No manœuvring enabled him to break free of them. So he had to sit and be purred at, and see with the tail of his eye a graceful creature in black talking quietly (and intelligently he felt sure) to some less important guest—and then playing accompaniments—and then slipping away through a door at that end, presumably to bed.

He cursed civilisation, he profoundly cursed beautiful ladies, and he became sarcastic and caused Julia and Lily who were for the moment bosom friends to confide to each other, over the latter's bedroom fire, that Mordryn was "too darling for words" but spiteful as Her Ladyship's black cat.

"I do hate men to be so clever—don't you, Lil? One never knows where one is, with them."

"Oh! but Ju, dearest, he isn't deformed or deadly dull or diseased, or tipsy, he is awfully good looking and very rich and a *Duke*—Really you can't have everything. I thought Blanche Montague was shockingly open in her desire to secure him, did not you? I wonder why Sarah asked her here with us!"

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Meanwhile Katherine Bush did not permit herself to wonder at His Grace's possible feelings or his future actions at all. She had seen the eager look in his dark blue eyes once or twice across the room and being a wise woman left things to fate.

"I wish G. were here," the hostess said to herself as she, too, stood by a bedroom fire—her own. "I have no one to exchange unspoken confidence with. He would have understood and appreciated the enchanting comedy of female purpose, male instinct to flee, and one young woman's supreme intelligence!"

The next day the Duke, who knew the house well, and in what wing Miss Arnott had worked, took it into his head to walk before breakfast in the rose garden. Miss Bush saw him from the window and allowed herself to bow gravely when he deliberately looked up; then she moved away. He felt a distinct sensation of tantalization. After breakfast everyone would play tennis. He played an extraordinarily good game himself, and was in flannels ready. Katherine thought he had a very fine figure and looked much younger in those clothes. She wanted to ask him about the emerald ring—she wanted to ask him about a number of things. She had work to do all the morning, but came out to the tennis lawn with a message to her mistress just before luncheon, during an exciting single match between the Duke and an agile young man—the last game was at 30 all—and Katherine paused to watch the strokes—40-30—And then Mordryn won—amidst shouts of applause.

Katherine had remarked that he ran about very little and won by sheer style and skill and hard hitting.

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She did not loiter a second when he was free to move, but flitted back to the house before he could get near her.

She lunched alone in her schoolroom.

By the afternoon, when she did appear at tea, the Duke was thoroughly ill-tempered, he knew not why or for what reason, merely that his mood was so. Katherine, busy with the teapot, only raised her head to give a polite, respectful bow in answer to his greeting. He was infinitely too much a man of the world to single out the humble secretary and draw upon her the wrath of these lovely guests. So he contented himself by watching her, and noting her unconcerned air and easy grace. Some of the people seemed to know her well and be very friendly with her.

She showed not the slightest sign of a desire to speak to him—Could it be possible that this was the girl who only that night week had talked with him upon the enthralling subject of love!

Those utterances of hers which had sounded so cryptic at the time were intelligible now. How subtle had been her comprehension of the situation. He remembered her face when he had asked her if she knew Blissington! And again when she had told him that that night week he would know how altogether unprofitable any investigations regarding her would be! And now in the character of humble secretary she was just as complete as she had been when apparently a fellow guest and social equal. It was all annoyingly disturbing. It placed him in a false position and her in one in which she held all the advantages! And there she sat serene and dignified, hedged round with that barrier of ice of which she had spoken. He had not experienced such perplexing emotions for many years.

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He wanted to talk to her. He wanted to ask her what it all meant—He would like to know her history, and whence she had come. Gwendoline d'Estaire had treated her, he had noticed, not as a dependent, but as a friend. He felt himself rather awkward—he, a man of the world accustomed to homage from women!

He did manage to say that it was a bore that the rain had come on, and it looked as though to-morrow would be wet. And he felt humiliated at the fine, instantly suppressed smile which flickered round her mouth at this brilliant remark from an acknowledged wit!

Then he became angry with himself—what matter to him whether she smiled or did not smile? It was obvious that he could not be on terms of familiar friendship with Seraphim's secretary, at his age and with his position. So he had strength of mind to move away from the table, and to allow himself to be purred over by one of the trio of charmers who had been asked for his benefit—but rage mounted in his breast. He was not enjoying himself at all, and if he did not see more of his old friend herself, he really would not stay over Monday as he had intended, but would go back to town on

Sunday night!

Lady Garribardine knew the signs of the times and took him off to her sitting-room after tea when most of the others began to play bridge.

"I think modern women have less charm than they had, Seraphim," the Duke said from the depths of an armchair, rather acidly. "They are almost as illiterate as ladies of the ballet used to be when I was young; they are quite as slangy and noisy, and they are full of affectations. If one does not know the last word of their fashionable jargon and cannot keep up a constant flow of 'back talk'—which, incidentally, it would require the wit of the St. James Street cabmen of twenty years ago to be able to do—one is asphyxiated by them. I shall have to become acclimated, I feel. I have been too long away and have lost touch with the movement—I sigh for repose and peace."

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"Nonsense, Mordryn—it will do you a great deal of good to be shaken up, you must move with the times."

"But I entirely decline to do so. To what end?"

"You must certainly marry again now that you are at last free."

"Undoubtedly it is my obvious duty, as otherwise the title will die out—but surely you do not suggest that I should convert any of these charming creatures who were good enough to try to lighten my mood last night and to-day, into my wife! I had hoped they were at least safely married, and now you make me tremble in case you are going to announce to me that some are widows!"

"Blanche Montague is; I merely asked the others to accustom you to the modern type. They are to break in your sensibilities, so to speak, and next time you come, if you don't fancy Blanche I will have a selection of suitable prospective Duchesses."

"Will they make as much noise as these '*ballons d'essai*'?"

"More—nothing modern can be dignified or quiet, so get the idea out of your head. They are all so out of door and so hearty, such delightful, fresh, knowing, supremely uninnocent, jolly good fellows, they can't be silent or keep still. There are too many new *révues* to be talked about, and too much golf to be played, and new American nigger dances to be learned.—Come, come, Mordryn! You do not want to be ridiculously old-fashioned—and really Blanche Montague is most suitable. Montague left her well provided for—and she was only thirty-two last birthday."

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"But I don't like her voice, and what should we converse about in the *entr'actes*?"

"Blanche is famous for her small talk, she will start upon any subject under the sun you please—and change it before you can answer the first question. No fear of stagnation there!"

"Even the description tires me. I prefer the lady who you assured me was all simulated passion. I adore passion, though I confess I prefer it to be real."

"How captious of you! The thing is unknown in these days, it has to be reconstructed, like the modern rubies—lots of little ground-up fragments pressed into a whole by scientific chemistry.—A good imitation is all you will get, Mordryn."

"I loathe imitations," and His Grace shuddered.

"I think you had better give me an exact description of what you do want, for, my poor old friend, you seem to be out to court disappointment. I earnestly desire to help you into a second noose more satisfactory than the one I originally placed around your neck—so out with it! A full description!"

The Duke deliberately lit a cigarette, and a gleam of firelight caught his emerald ring.

"Your famous talisman is flashing, Mordryn, the lyre shows that it approves of your thoughts!"

"The woman I should like to marry must be, and look—supremely well-bred—but healthy and normal, not overbred like poor Laura, and Gerard's wife, Beatrice.—She must be able to talk upon the subjects which interest one—a person of cultivation in short. She must have a sense of humour and fine ideals and a strong feeling about the responsibilities of the position, and be above all things dignified and quiet and composed.—And I should like—" and here a faint deprecatory smile flickered about his mouth for a moment, "I should like her to love me, and take a little interest in the human, tangible side of the affair—if you do not think I am asking too much of fate at my age?"

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"It is a large order—I only know of one woman who answers to your requirements and she of course is entirely out of the question."

"Who is she—and why is she out of the question?"

"Useless to answer either query, since, as I say, she is altogether out of the running. It was only an idea of mine, but I will diligently seek for your paragon—for, Mordryn, I shall never feel my conscience clear until I see you happily told off—and the father of at least six sturdy boys."

The Duke raised his hands in deprecation.

"Heavens, Seraphim! You would overwhelm me with a litter, then! My wants in that direction are modest. The 'quiver full' has never appealed to me. I want my wife to be my loved companion—my darling if you will—but not, not a rabbit."

When he was dressing for dinner he thought over his friend's words—He had not insisted upon knowing who the "one woman" could be—He himself had lately seen a creature who seemingly, as far as he could judge from one evening's acquaintance, possessed quite a number of the necessary qualifications—but as in the case of Seraphim's specimen, his was also completely out of the running, and not to be thought of in any capacity—Alas!

It was strange, with this resolution so firmly fixed in his mind, that after dinner he should have broken loose from the bevy of ladies waiting to entrap him, and have deliberately gone to the piano to talk to that dull little Lady Flamborough who was leaning upon the lid, chatting with Miss Bush!

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Katherine kept her eyes fixed upon the keyboard with that meek, deferential demureness suitable to her station when amidst such exalted company; but her red mouth had an indefinable expression about it which was exasperating.

Mordryn seized the first second in which Lady Flamborough's attention was diverted by a remark from someone else, to bend down a little and say softly,

"Are you not even going to say good evening to me, Miss Bush?—It is 'this night week.'"

She looked up with perfect composure.

"Good evening, Your Grace."

He frowned. "Is that all?"

"As Your Grace very truly remarked, it is 'this night week.'"

"And you think that has answered all the riddles?"

"Of course."

He frowned again, he knew Julia Scarrisbrooke was swooping down upon him, there was not a moment's time to be lost.

"I do not—to-morrow I will make an opportunity in which you will have to answer them all categorically—do you hear?"

Katherine thrilled. She liked his haughty bearing, the tone of command in his perfect voice.

She remembered once when she and Matilda had been eating lunch at a Lyons popular café, Matilda had said:

"My! Kitten, there's such a strange-looking young man sitting behind you—Whatever makes him look quite different to everyone else?"

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And she had turned and perceived that a pure Greek Hermes in rather shabby modern American clothes was manipulating a toothpick within a few feet of her—and her eye, trained from museum study, had instantly seen that it was the balance of proportion, the set and size of the head, and the angle of placing of eyes which differentiated him so startlingly from the mass of humanity surrounding them. She had said to Matilda:

"You had better look at him well, Tild—You will never see such another in the whole of your life. He is a freak, a perfect survival of the ancient Greek type. He is exactly right and not strange-looking really. It is all the other people who are wrong and clumsy or grotesque."

She thought of this now. The Duke stood out from everyone else in the same way, although he was not of pure Greek type, but much more Roman, but there was that astonishing proportion of bone and length of limb about him, the acknowledged yet indescribable shape of a thoroughbred, which middle age had not diminished, but rather accentuated.

She again noticed his hands, and his great emerald ring—but she did not reply at all to his announcement of his intentions for the morrow. She bent down and picked up a piece of music which had fallen to the floor, and Julia Scarrisbrooke swooped and caught her prey and carried it off into safety on a big sofa.

But as Katherine gazed from her window on that Good Friday night up into the deep blue star-studded sky, a feeling of awe came over her—at the magnitude of the vista fate was opening in front of her eyes.

The Duke found great difficulty in carrying out his intention on that Saturday. For a Duke to escape from a lady-pack brought there especially to hunt him is no easy task! He had reason to believe that his hostess would not aid him either, and that it would be impossible to appeal to her sympathy, because he was quite aware that he would withhold his own, had he to look at the matter dispassionately as concerning someone else.

It was a fool's errand he was bent upon in all senses of the phrase. But as this conviction forced itself upon him, the desire to see and talk with Katherine grew stronger.

It happened that she lunched downstairs. At such a large party as this, that meal was consumed at several small tables of six each, and of course the secretary was not placed at His Grace's! Indeed, she sat at one directly at his back, so that he could not see her, though once in a pause he heard her deep, fascinating voice. When later in the hall coffee and cigarettes had come, Katherine passed near him to put down a cup, and he seized the moment to address her.

"In twenty minutes, I am coming from the smoking-room to the schoolroom—please be there."

Miss Bush gave no sign as to whether or no she heard this remark, which was made in a low voice with a note of pleading in it. If he chose to do this, she would make it quite clear that she would have no clandestine acquaintance with him, but at the same time she experienced a delicious sense of excitement.

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She was seated before her typewriter busily typing innumerable letters, when she heard his footsteps outside, and then a gentle tap at the door.

"Come in!" she called, and he appeared.

His face looked stern, and not particularly good-tempered.

"May I stay for a moment in this haven of rest, Miss Bush?" and he shut the door. "In so large a party, every sitting-room seems to be overflowing, and there is not a corner where one may talk in peace."

Katherine had risen with her almost overrespectful air, which never concealed the mischievous twinkle in her eyes when she raised them, but now they were fixed upon the sheets of paper.

"Your Grace is welcome to that armchair for a little, but I am very occupied. Lady Garribardine wishes these letters to go by this evening's post."

"I wish you would not call me 'Your Grace'," he said, a little impatiently. "I cannot realise that you can be the same person whom I met at Gerard Strobridge's."

"I am not," she looked up at him.

"Why?"

"It is obvious—I was me—myself, that night—a guest."

"And now?"

"Your Grace is not observant, I fear; I am Her Ladyship's secretary."

"Of course—but still?" he came over quite close to her.

"If I had been the same person as the one you met at Mr. Strobridge's, you would not now have been obliged to contrive to come to the schoolroom to speak to me."

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A dark flush mounted to his brow. She had touched a number of his refined sensibilities. Her words were so true and so simple, and her tone was quite calm, showing no personal emotion but merely as though she were announcing a fact.

"That is unfortunately true, but these are only ridiculous conventions, which please let us brush aside. May I really sit down for a minute?"

Katherine glanced at the clock; it was half-past three.

"Until a quarter to four, if you wish. I am afraid I cannot spare more time than that."

She pointed to the armchair which he took, and she reseated herself at the table, folding her hands. There was a moment's silence. The Duke was feeling uncomfortably disturbed. There had been a subtle rebuke conveyed in her late speech, which he knew he merited. He had no right to have come there.

"Are you not going to talk to me at all, then?" he almost blurted out.

"I will answer, of course, when Your Grace speaks; it is not for me to begin."

"Very well, I not only speak—I implore—I even order you to discontinue this ridiculous humility, this ridiculous continuance of 'Your Grace,' resume the character of guest, and let us enjoy these miserable fifteen minutes—but first, I want to know what is the necessity for your total change of manner here? Gerard and Gwendoline knew that you were Lady Garribardine's secretary that night, but they did not consider it imperative to make a startling difference in their relations towards you because of that, as it seems that you would wish me to make now."

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Katherine looked down and then up again straight into his eyes, a slight smile quivered round her mouth.

"That is quite different—they know me very well—and dear Miss Gwendoline is not very intelligent. I have been there before to help to entertain bores for Mr. Strobridge and Lady Beatrice, but that night I was there—because I wanted to see—Your Grace."

Here she looked down again suddenly. The Duke leaned forward eagerly; this was a strange confession!

"I wanted once to talk to a man as an equal, to feel what it was like to be a lady and not to have to remember to be respectful. So I deliberately asked Mr. Strobridge to arrange it—after I had heard you speak."

The Duke was much astonished—and gratified.

"How frank and delicious of you to tell me this! I thought the evening was enchanting—but why do you say such a silly thing as that you wanted to feel what it was like to be a lady? You could never have felt anything else."

"Indeed, I could; I am not a lady by birth, anything but! only I have tried to educate myself into being one, and it was so nice to have a chance of deciding if I had succeeded or no."

"And your verdict was?" he raised amused eyebrows.

She looked demure.

"By Your Grace's words just now, I conclude that I have succeeded."

"Only by my words just now? I thought we had had a rather pleasant and interesting hour of conversation as fellow-guests."

"Yes—You are not shocked, then, when I tell you that I am not really a lady?"

"No. The counterfeit presentment is so very perfect, one would like to hear the details of the passage to its achievement."

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Then she told him in as few and as simple words as she could—just the truth. Of her parentage, of her home at Bindon's Green—of Liv and Dev's, of her ideals, and her self-education, and of her coming to Lady Garribardine's.

Mordryn listened with rapt attention, his gaze fixed upon her face—he made brief ejaculations at times, but did not otherwise interrupt her.

"You can understand now how entertained I was at the things which you said to me that night, can you not?"

Thus she ended her story, and the Duke rose and sat down upon the edge of the table quite close to her; he was visibly moved.

"You extraordinary girl. You have upset every theory I ever held. I shall go away now and think over all you have said—Meanwhile, I feel that this is the only way in which I can show my homage," and he took her hand with infinite respect and kissed it.

Then he removed his tall form from the table and quietly left the room.

And when she was alone, Katherine gently touched the spot where his lips had pressed; there was a quite unknown emotion running through her.

She found it very difficult to go on with her work after this, and made a couple of mistakes, to her great annoyance. Nearly an hour passed. She got up from her typing, and after changing her blouse, went down to tea, her thoughts not nearly so calm as usual.

Was her friendship with this man finished? Had her frankness overreached itself? Just what did that kiss mean? Here was a character not so easy to read as Gerard Strobridge's. Here was a will perhaps as strong as her own. Her face was very pale, and those concentrated grey-green eyes looked stormy and resentful.

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The Duke reached the smoking-room and was seated at the writing-table only one moment before the room was invaded by Lady Garribardine.

"Poor Mordryn! You had to take refuge here! I fear those charming creatures I have invited for you are proving a little fatiguing."

"Frankly, Seraphim, they bore me to death."

"Two others are coming of a different type presently. But you are safe in this corner. Most of them do not know I have moved the smoking-room to this wing."

"I think it is a great improvement."

Her Ladyship looked at him out of the tail of her eye, but she said, quite innocently:

"Yes, Gerard always says so." Then she left him to his letters, with a word as to tea and a cosy talk in her boudoir after it.

So Gerard liked this room, too! Miss Bush was with him at the House. She dined at Brook Street. Then Mordryn frowned and looked the very image of the Iron Duke,

and did not even begin to write an order which he had intended to send his agent. His mind was disturbed. Every word Katherine had said had made a deep impression upon him.

The father an auctioneer—the grandfather a butcher! And this girl a peerless creature fit for a throne! But if she were fit for heaven, there were still quite insurmountable barriers between even ordinary acquaintance with her. He rather thought he would leave Blissington on Sunday night.

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Then he frowned again. Gerard Strobridge was a charming fellow. Seraphim adored him—he was often here—he liked the smoking-room! Somehow the conversation must be turned, when he was alone with his friend presently, to the subject of Gerard.

Then he found himself going over every minute sentence that had fallen from Katherine. What a wonderful, wonderful girl! How quite ridiculous class prejudices were! How totally faulty the reasoning of the world!

At tea, he did not converse with Miss Bush, but he never lost the consciousness of her presence, and was almost annoyedly aware of a youngish man's evident appreciation of her conversation. So that his temper, when he found himself in Lady Garribardine's sitting-room, was even more peevish than it had been on the evening before.

Katherine had preceded him there, but had left ere he arrived. She had brought some letters for her mistress' inspection. When this business was finished, she said quite simply:

"His Grace came up into the schoolroom after luncheon to-day. He appears to have been confused over my two identities. I explained to him, and told him who my father was, and my mother's father, and how I have only tried to make myself into a lady. It did not seem fair that he should think that I was really one born."

Lady Garribardine looked disagreeable for an instant. She, too, had to conquer instinct at times, which asserted itself in opposition even to her heart's desire, and her deliberate thought-out intentions. One of her ancestors had put a retainer in chains for presumption! But her intelligence crushed out the folly almost as quickly as it arose, and she smiled:

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"And, of course, the Duke at once said he could not know common people, and bounced from the room! Katherine Bush, you are a minx, my child!"

Katherine laughed softly.

"He did not say that exactly—but he did go away very soon."

"He that fights and runs away!" quoth Her Ladyship; "but I don't think you had better let him come to the schoolroom again. Martha will be having her say about the matter."

Katherine reddened. That her dear mistress should think her so stupid!

"I did not intend to. It is very difficult—even the greatest gentlemen do not seem to know their places always."

"A man finds his place near the woman he wants to talk to—you must not forget that, girl!"

"It is a little mean and puts the woman in a false position often."

"She prefers that to indifference. There is one very curious thing about women, the greatest prude is not altogether inwardly displeased at the knowledge that she exercises a physical attraction for men. Just as the greatest intellectual among men feels more flattered if exceptional virility is imputed to him, than all the spiritual gifts! Virility—a quality which he shares with the lower animals, spirituality a gift which he inherits from God. Oh! we are a mass of incongruities, we humans! and brutal nature eventually wins the game. Animal savagery is always the outcome of too much civilisation. And unless the dark ages of ignorance fall upon us once more, so that we can again be sufficiently simple to believe *en masse* in a God, I feel our cycle is over and that we shall be burnt out of time."

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Then presently, as her secretary was moving towards the door, Her Ladyship remarked irrelevantly:

"Look here, girl—Do you think it is in your nature ever to love really, or are you going to let brain conquer always?"

"I—do not know," faltered Katherine.

"Love is the only thing on earth which is sublime. This evening until you come down after dinner, I recommend you to read the 'Letters of Abelard and Heloise'."

The Duke talked of politics for a while when he came into his old love's sitting-room—

and then of books and ideas, and lastly of Gerard. Was he happy with Beatrice, after all?

"Yes, they do very well together. Beatrice is bred out of all natural emotions. She is sexless and well-mannered and unconsciously humorous. They go their own ways."

"But Gerard was always an ardent lover. Has he had no emotions since the Alice Southerwood days?"

"A transient passion for Lăo Delemar, and since then a deep devotion elsewhere—quite unreturned, though. It has rather improved him."

The Duke unconsciously felt relief.

"Unreturned?—that must be a new experience for him: Gerard has every quality to attract a woman."

"This one is infinitely too proud and too intelligent to waste a thought upon a married man."

"It is a girl, then! How unlike Gerard's usual taste!"

"Yes—Mordryn, shall you open Valfreyne quite soon?"

"Immediately—I shall have a party for Whitsuntide, if you will honour me by acting hostess."

"All right—if I may bring my *personnel* with me—a large order! I can't stand the racket without Stirling and James and Harmon, my chauffeur—and Miss Bush."

"All are perfectly welcome—especially Miss Bush. She appeared an extremely clever girl when I had the pleasure of talking to her."

"Yes, she is a wonderful creature. I am thinking of marrying her off to Sir John Townly."

The Duke leaned forward, his voice was quite shocked.

"How inhuman, Seraphim! John Townly must be sixty, at least."

"My dear Mordryn, that is only seven years older than you are, and I look upon you as hardly yet at the prime of life—and beggars cannot be choosers, the girl is of no family. Neither for that matter is Sir John. It will be suitable in every way—I suppose you will let me have a say as to the guests for the Whitsuntide outbreak, eh?"

"Naturally—but spare me any too overmodern widows, or any further breakers in of my sensibilities!"

Seraphim laughed, and they set about making the list.

But when the Duke had gone to dress, she looked long into the fire, something a little sentimental and yet satisfied in her gaze.

"Dear Mordryn—Gerard and the smoking-room caused him uneasiness; it would not have done for that to continue, because of the unpleasant reflection that G. is a married man. Sir John was splendid—but Mordryn is no fool. I must now really oppose him in every possible way—I am not sure if, after all, I shall take her to Valfreyne."

And the Duke, as he dressed, said to himself that he did not understand women. Here was Seraphim, a creature with the kindest heart, yet so full of that distressingly feminine matchmaking instinct which was the curse of her sex, that she was ready to pitchfork this charming, living, fascinating young person into the mouldering arms of old John Townly! The idea was simply revolting to contemplate, even if beggars could not be choosers! And then suddenly he seemed to see the auctioneer father and the butcher grandfather and the home at Bindon's Green!

He walked down to dinner in a subdued mood.

CHAPTER XXVII

On Easter Sunday in church, Katherine sat in the overflow pew, and so could be looked at by those highly placed in the chancel seat of honour without the least turning of their heads. It was not surprising, then, that the Duke found the sermon a very good, and a very short one, as his thoughts ran on just as Gerard Strobridge's had done in that same church once before.

What a charming oval face the girl had—and how purely white was her skin! What was she thinking about with that inscrutable expression? The mouth was so firm and so was the chin. Full red lips, which were yet firm, were dangerous things. Her air was very distinguished and her garments showed great taste. The whole thing was incredible, of course; there must be some harking back to gentle blood. Not one of the party looked so like his ideal of a lady as she.

And she had spoken, too, of love! She had admitted that she knew of one side of it. What were her words, "It makes one feel mad—agitated, unbalanced, animal, even motherly and protective," but what it could be if it touched the soul she could not fathom—Well, the phase which she did know was not without its charm! What extraordinary, alluring eyes she had! Who could the fellow have been? Not a person from—er—Bindon's Green, of course; she must always have been too refined for that—and not Gerard. A woman who had once felt those emotions for a man did not look at him with that serene calm with which Miss Bush had looked at Gerard. What a most damnably exasperating circumstance it was that she was not a guest—and that he could not spend the afternoon discussing love, and its aspects, while pacing that sunny walk in the walled garden, safe from the east wind!

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How beautifully her hair grew! The brow was queenly. How well it would look with an all-round crown of diamonds surmounting it. Sir John would probably give her something of the sort. These rich parvenus—people with but a grandfather, perhaps—would buy some flashy modern thing! That kind of head would do justice to family jewels. He knew of one particular crown which had belonged to a certain Duchess of early regency days, which was reposing now at Garrards, and which would be specially becoming. Italy—she had spoken of Italy, she had never been there; what a companion to take to Italy! She grasped the spirit of countries. How she had understood "Eothen!"

But the people were rising—the sermon was over. Capital fellow, Woolman, his sermons were much shorter, though, than they used to be. Would she walk back across the park? Yes, of course, and he would have to motor. What contemptible slaves civilisation made of people!

As everyone was assembled in the hall on the way to luncheon, the exasperated Duke came over to Katherine.

"Can I find shelter in the peaceful backwater again this afternoon, Miss Bush? It is a vile day, you see, and no tennis is possible."

"No, I am afraid not."

"Does that mean no tennis or no backwater?"

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"Both."

"Why?"

"The schoolroom is not intended for visitors, and Sunday afternoon is the only time in which I can sit in the armchair myself and read."

"I would not take more than the edge of the table, if you would let me come," eagerly, "and we could talk over what you are reading."

Katherine looked at him, and there was reproach in her eyes.

"Your Grace must know that it is altogether impossible for you to come to the schoolroom; it could but bring censure upon me—is it quite kind?"

He was contrite in a moment.

"Forgive me! I see my suggestion was not chivalrous—forgive me a thousand times."

She moved on with the general company without answering and it chanced at luncheon that the Duke could see her face, and it looked to him rather sad. He felt a number of things, and even though it rained he went for a walk in the early afternoon alone.

There was obviously only one post which a woman in her position in life could fill, in regard to a man in his—But every fine sentiment in him revolted at the picture of it. That proud head could never bow to the status of mistress. He must dismiss such vagrant thoughts, he must dismiss all thoughts of her except that she was a pleasant companion when chance allowed him to be naturally in her society, for a minute now and then.

There were so many other interests in his homecoming which he must think of. His public duties, which the tragic circumstances of his life had forced him to waive for so long. There were politics, too. The renovation of the London house—the plans for the Season—the reopening of Valfreyne. By the way, which rooms should he give to Seraphim and her secretary for Whitsuntide? The Venetian suite on the ground floor in the west wing. Seraphim should have the bedroom and dressing-room and sitting-room, which looked on to the park, and Miss Bush the smaller bedroom hung with green damask adjoining—and how would things be? She would be his guest then, and should be treated with all honour. There should be no more coming into the drawing-room after dinner—and lunching if the numbers had to be made up!

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But to what end? This was ridiculous weakness, this allowing his thoughts to dwell upon her so much. He had better go back to the house and talk to one of the newcomers—quite a nice woman, who was not intent upon falling into his arms.

And Katherine sat in the schoolroom for a little, but she did not read. She had seen the Duke from the window for an instant passing the end of the rose garden. The

sight of him had made her sit down in her armchair and begin to think.

Could the barrier of the enormous difference in their positions ever be surmounted, after all? Dukes had married even actresses in the past, but she would never accept such a position as had been the lot of such Duchesses. She must only wear the strawberry leaves if they could be given her in all honour, and with the sympathy and the approval of her own immediate world. It almost looked as though her mistress's acquiescence would be forthcoming. But there was yet another side of the question; there was the recollection of the three days with Lord Algy. No faintest uneasiness or regret about that episode had ever entered her brain during all her friendship with Gerard except on that one evening, after hearing of the misfortune of Gladys and upon that one occasion when first she had again seen the hotel in Paris. Now she was faced with the thought what would the Duke say if he knew of this circumstance in her life? With his lofty point of view, his pride and his present great respect for her, the knowledge would inevitably part them. And if he should remain in ignorance and marry her, the secret fear of his ever discovering the truth afterwards would hang like Damocles' sword over her head. It would insidiously and inevitably destroy the harmony and perfect balance of her mind, necessary for her to carry through the great task of playing successfully the part of Duchess, and it would eventually spoil her whole life.

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She more than ever realised the certain reaction of every single action committed, and of every thought thought. Therefore the tremendous necessity of forethought.

Unless the mind is perfectly at peace with itself, she knew it could never have magnetic force to propel its desires, and must lose confidence and so fail to reach its goal. This she realised fully. Her particular type and logical brain, weighing all matters without sentiment, totally uninfluenced by orthodox ideas as to morality if such orthodox ideas did not seem to be supported by common sense, caused her to feel no guilt, nor any so-called conscience prickings on having taken Lord Algy as a lover. They had both been free and were injuring none. To her it appeared no sin, merely that such actions, not being sanctioned by custom, would inevitably draw upon those who committed them the penalty attached to breaking any laws, even should they be only those of conventionality.

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But beyond all this, there was another and quite newly experienced emotion troubling her. It had arisen sharply and suddenly in her breast, born of that strange thrill she had felt when the Duke had kissed her hand—What if he—the man himself—should grow to matter to her—matter as Algy had done, quite apart from his Dukedom and his being the medium through which she could gratify her ambitions?

What a unique, subtle, extraordinary emotion she had experienced! She must keep her head; she must not give way to such things. How hateful, how unbearable it would be if one day she should see disgust and contempt in those dark-blue eyes, instead of the look of homage which had preceded the kiss!

Then she scolded herself. To fear was to draw inevitably the thing feared. She must have no fears and no regrets. She must pursue her plan with intelligence, and if the feeling that she was using deception grew to be insupportable, then she must have courage to face the result of her own past action, and she must admit herself beaten and retire from the game. She went over the chances of discovery. Lord Algy would never give her away; she had calculated upon that fact when she had chosen an aristocrat for her partner in initiation. There remained only the valet Hanson, who had seen her often enough possibly to recognise her again. But he did not know her real name, and had shown no interest in her—too accustomed, probably, to the changes in his master's fancies to remark upon individuals. Also, she was so completely altered since those days, no casual remembrance Hanson might have kept of her would be likely to revive if he chanced to see her now.

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The odds were ten thousand to one that neither the Duke nor anyone else would ever know of her adventure. It thus resolved itself only into a question for her own honest soul to decide.

The common sense way to look at everything was that the time for these heart-searchings was not yet; and that her energies must be concentrated upon continuing to profit by the results of her first sensible action in making the impression upon the Duke's imagination unbiased by class prejudices.

So presently she grew quieter and at last fell asleep over the wood fire, the volume of the "Letters of Abelard and Héloïse" still in her hand.

She was awakened after a while by the entrance of Lady Garribardine, and quickly rose from her seat.

"I am sorry to disturb your well-earned Sunday peace, Miss Bush, but some of the guests are growing restive with the wet. Go and take charge of those in the drawing-room and accompany their songs. I don't think this party has been well chosen, the elements do not assimilate."

Katherine was laboriously doing her duty when the Duke came in. He did not attempt to come near her, but stayed by the great centre fireplace talking to one of the

newcomers without his usual air of making a virtue of necessity, which his attitude towards the three charmers had hitherto suggested to Katherine.

She could get a good view of him from the piano, and found her eye greatly pleased. He was certainly very attractive. He had that same humorous and rather cynical expression which so often distinguished her mistress. His figure was so perfect and his clothes, with their air of a bygone day!

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For a second, Katherine's hand seemed to tingle again in the place which he had kissed, and she experienced that nameless thrill which is half quiver and half shock. She felt that she hated having to play the accompaniments, and resented her position. It gave her some relief to crash loud chords. None of the younger men could approach the Duke in charm. What was he talking to that woman about? Interesting books? some of their mutual friends, perhaps? She wished she could hear—but she could not. His voice was lazy again; she caught its tones now and then, but not the words, and the firelight made his emerald ring sparkle. She wondered if there was some history connected with it; it was so large and so unusual a signet for a man to wear. How exquisite it would have been to have been able to have let him come up to the schoolroom, then she could have asked him about it, perhaps. She sighed unconsciously, and presently they all went in to tea.

There was some inscrutable expression in her eyes as they met his in handing him his cup. They were a little shadowed and sorrowful. They drew him like a magnet, so that desire made him at last use sophistry in his arguments with himself.

What harm could there be in a little casual conversation? and he took a seat near.

"Had you profitable repose this afternoon in your armchair, Miss Bush?"

"Yes, I hope so—I was sorting things and getting them into their niches in my mind. I hope you had not too wet a walk; I saw you from the window passing the end of the rose garden."

"I wish you had come out; the air was fresh and it is rather nice to have the wet in one's face at times—So you put everything into niches in your mind? Was it in chaos before, then?"

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"Yes, partly."

"What has caused this upset?"

"That——" and there was a peculiar tone in her voice—"I should much like to know—We seem to come to new vistas in life, do we not—when everything must be looked at in a fresh perspective?"

"That is very true——"

"And then we must call up all our sense of balance to grasp the new outlines accurately, and not to be led away into false conceptions through emotion."

The Duke was greatly interested. How exactly she was describing his own state of mind—but what had caused such thoughts to arise in hers?

"It is extremely difficult to see things as they are when emotion enters into the question," he said, "and how dull everything appears when it does not!"

She looked at him, and there were rebellion and suppressed passion in her compelling eyes—and the Duke's pulses suddenly began to bound; but this was the sole exchange of sentences they were vouchsafed, for Blanche Montague subsided into a sofa close to his side and beamed at him with a whispered challenge. So Katherine turned and devoted herself to some other guests beyond.

She did not come into the drawing-room again that night. She asked her mistress if she might be excused, for if not really wanted, there were numbers of letters to write. And Mordryn looked for her in vain, and eventually manœuvred the conversation round to the reason for her absence, when speaking to old Gwendoline l'Estaire who, he had perceived, was devoted to the girl.

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"I think she must be tired to-night, having asked Sarah to excuse her. I don't remember her ever to have done such a thing before. She is such a dear child, I don't know what Sarah would do without her—we are all very fond of her. A perfect lady, wherever she came from, but I really do not care from where."

"Of course not!" cordially responded the Duke. And he wondered what had made her tired, and why her eyes had been rebellious and sad. Was she wounded because he had suggested coming to the schoolroom, with the risk of drawing down censure upon her head? She needed some explanation certainly from him, he felt, upon this matter. It had been thoughtless on his part and not really kind. He would not leave to-morrow, after all. Why should not Gwendoline, who was stupid and good-natured, be used to further his plans if the chance to see Miss Bush looked too impossibly difficult of attainment? But he went to bed with no sense of happiness or satisfaction in his heart.

He liked rising early, and escaped to the rose garden alone about nine o'clock on Easter Monday morning. No windows but those of the smoking-room wing and those

of the picture gallery and the main hall looked out upon this secluded spot. He had walked to the end when he saw in the distance at a turn in the shrubbery, the figure of Katherine disappearing towards the park. This was luck, indeed! He hurried after her, and overtook her as she opened the shrubbery gate. She carried a basket of fresh eggs and a black bottle.

"Whither away, Mistress?" he asked, as he raised his cap and walked by her side.

"I am going to take these to old Mrs. Peterson at the far lodge; she has not been well these last days."

"Jacob's wife?"

"Yes."

"Then may I come, too? I must have some exercise; look upon it like that, since I strongly suspect if I told you that it was simply for the pleasure of being with you, you would send me back."

"I should not want to, but I suppose I should have to say that."

She was looking very pretty in her rough homespun suit and green felt hat. The wind had blown no colour as yet into her cheeks, but had made her little ears almost a scarlet pink. She seemed the embodiment of sensuous youth and health and life. Her type was so far from being ascetic. What ever the mental gifts might be, Nature would have a strong say in everything concerning her. The Duke admired her supple, slender limbs, and he reflected, just as Gerard had done long before, how very stately she would become presently—if she married and had children—Sir John—but he banished Sir John!

"Shall we forget all those stupid conventions on this wild March morning, and return to the stage in our acquaintance at which we were when we said good-night at Gerard Strobridge's?"

"That would be nice."

"Is it a bargain, then?"

"Yes."

"I am not to be 'Your Grace,' and you are not to remind me every two minutes that you are Lady Garribardine's secretary."

"Very well."

"If you remember, the last words we had together then were finished by a question from you to me, as to whether there was not something else in love beyond that passionate side which you intimated that you already knew."

"Yes, I remember."

"I think there is a great deal more, but it would not be complete alone. Love to be lasting must be a mixture of both passion and idealism, but where can one find such a combination in these days? The emotion which most people call love is composed of self-interest, and a little transitory exaltation of the senses. But such old-fashioned and divine qualities as devotion and tenderness and self-sacrifice are almost unknown."

Katherine did not speak; the "Letters of Abelard and Héloïse" were very fresh in her memory; one passage in *Héloïse's* first letter had struck her forcibly:

If there is anything that may properly be called happiness here below, I am persuaded it is in the union of two persons who love each other with perfect liberty, who are united by a secret inclination and satisfied with each other's merits. Their hearts are full of love and leave no vacancy for any other passion; they enjoy perpetual tranquillity, because they enjoy content.

And now, with sudden illumination of the spirit, the conviction came to her that this was the truth, and that this man walking by her side talking in his exquisite voice to her, looking at her with his deep blue eyes, could inspire in her all the passion and all the devotion, and all the tenderness which *Héloïse* had felt of old. And the magnitude of the discovery kept her silent, with lowered lids.

He waited for her to speak, but when no words came, he bent forward and looked into her face. The eyes which at last met his were troubled and sweet, and not falcon-like in their proud serenity as usual.

"Do not let us talk about love," she said at last. "It is a moving theme, and better left alone. Yesterday I was reading the 'Letters of Abelard and Héloïse,' and it is wiser to remember the wisdom in this phrase of *Abelard's* than to talk of love: 'What great advantages would philosophy give us over other men, if by studying it we could learn to govern our passions.'"

Mordryn smiled.

"Finish the quotation," he commanded, "or shall I? 'What efforts, what relapses, what

agitations do we undergo. And how long are we tossed in this confusion unable to exert our reason to possess our souls, or to rule our affections. What a troublesome employment is love!' Philosophers remember *Abelard* as a great scholar and ethical teacher, but he lives not by his learning or his philosophy, but by the memory of his profound and passionate love."

Katherine sighed.

"I suppose it is indeed divine, but please do not let us talk of it; it makes everyday life grey and commonplace by contrast."

The Duke was sufficiently master of himself to realise that it was wiser to take her advice. To discuss love on a March morning with this most attractive and forbidden young woman was not wisdom, so he changed the subject by expressing his contrition at having come to the schoolroom. He hated to think that his chivalry had been at fault.

Then they talked of many things, all in the abstract, evolution and ethics and aspirations and theories, and at last Katherine said:

"How glorious to be you! To have all that is noble your own by right, and so to have leisure to let your soul expand to the highest, without wasting it in the struggle to emerge from clay."

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Her deep voice had a passion in it, and her eyes flashed. "You, and all aristocrats, should be grateful to God."

Later in the day, Mordryn felt that it was fortunate that at this particular moment they had reached the gate of the far lodge, the opening of which broke the spell, of what he might have answered he did not feel altogether sure, so deeply had she affected him.

Mrs. Peterson was a good deal better, it seemed, and Katherine proposed to stay with her for half an hour—so she came out of the door and asked the Duke not to wait for her.

"Go back without me—I have been so happy—and please—do not talk to me any more to-day—and, oh! please, remember who you are and who I am, and leave me alone."

And to his intense surprise and sudden unhinging, her fearless glance was softened by a mist which might have presaged tears.

CHAPTER XXVIII

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Mordryn spent a most unrestful day; he found it very difficult to settle to anything. He felt it wiser whenever his thoughts turned to Katherine Bush, immediately to picture Bindon's Green and the auctioneer father and butcher grandfather!—they acted as a kind of antidote to the very powerful intoxicant which was flooding his veins.

And Katherine sat typing mechanically her morning's work, but some third sense beyond eye and hand was busy with agitating thoughts. No, she could play no further game with the Duke, fate had beaten her. It would be no acting. She knew that she was just a woman, after all, and he was a man, and the Dukedom had gone into shadowland.

He possessed everything that Algy had lacked, there would be no blank half-hours when passion was lulled, with him. His perfectly cultivated intellect could enchant her always. She adored his point of view, as unconsciously arrogant as Lady Garribardine's, and yet as free and expanded. How she could soar with him to guide her! What happiness to take refuge from everything in his arms.

He did not seem old to her; indeed, except for his thick, iron-grey hair and the expression of having greatly suffered, which now and then showed in his proud eyes, there were no unlovely signs of age about him. He could still call forth for many years the passionate love of women. And what was age? A ridiculous phantasy—the soul was the thing.

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Katherine was beginning to believe that she herself had a soul, and that Otto Weininger was altogether wrong about individuals, even if his deductions were correct concerning the majority of women.

Several guardsmen from Windsor came over to luncheon, which was so crowded that there was no necessity for Katherine to go down, and tea came before she again saw the Duke. He deliberately allowed himself to be entrapped by one of the trio of Graces, and did not come near her; and when Katherine got into the drawing-room after dinner, he was nowhere in sight. A Cabinet Minister, one of the few Her

Ladyship considered sufficiently worthy to be allowed to visit Blissington, had arrived in the afternoon, and the Duke and the hostess, and another man and woman, made a group in the small, red drawing-room in earnest converse; while most of the rest of the company danced in the hall. And Katherine went among these, and presently she slipped up to her old schoolroom.

His Grace was carrying out her request, it appeared, but therein she found no joy.

And later, Mordryn drank his final hock and seltzer in his old friend's boudoir, where they had a little talk together alone.

"It has been dear of you to stay so long, Mordryn," she told him. "Especially as the diversions which I hoped I had provided for you turned out of no more use than a plague of gnats. I hope you have not been too bored?"

"I am never bored with you, dear friend."

"No, I know that; but in a big party, I cannot give you as much time as I should like. You will come again when we are quiet, though, just as you always used to, and I will really find you a suitable bride."

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The Duke was in a cynical mood, it seemed, for he treated this proposal not at all in the light fashion he had done at the beginning of the visit.

He replied gloomily that he had decided to select something steady and plain, if he must marry—he knew he could never care for a woman again, and a healthy, quiet, well-bred creature with tact, who would leave him alone, was all he asked. Life was a hideous disappointment and very difficult to understand, and to try to do one's duty to one's state, and get through with it, was all that anyone could hope to accomplish.

But to this Her Ladyship said a vigorous, "Tut—tut! You speak like a boy crossed in love, Mordryn! If you were five-and-twenty, you could not have a more delightful vista opening out in front of you, '*Si jeunesse savait. Si vieillesse pouvait*'—that was cried from a wise and envious heart! Well, you both *know* and *can*, so what more could a man ask of fate! I have no patience with you! I don't want you now only to do your duty, to fulfil the obligations of your station. You have always done so. Your life has been one long carrying out of *noblesse oblige*. I want you to kick over the traces and be happy, Mordryn! Ridiculously, boyishly happy!—do you hear, conscientious martyr!"

Mordryn heard, but his smile was still bitter, as he answered:

"We are not so made, Seraphim, neither you nor I—we could not do as you say, even when we were young, and tradition and obligation to our order will still dominate us to the end of time, dear friend."

Then he said good-night and good-bye—for he was leaving at cock-crow for a place of his in the North.

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When Lady Garribardine was alone, she did not look at all disturbed at the passage of events, as she reviewed her Easter party. She smiled happily, in fact, and decided that she would take her secretary to Valfreyne for Whitsuntide, after all!

Man "proposed," but, she reflected sagely, God often "disposed" in favour of intelligent women!

In the following week, the establishment from Blissington moved up to Berkeley Square for the season, and Katherine's duties became heavy again.

Her first meeting with Gerard Strobridge happened quite soon; he came into the secretary's room from the library after luncheon.

"Now tell me all about everything," he said. "I have gathered from Gwendoline that you came down every night and had your usual success at the Easter party, and that Mordryn evidently liked you, for he told Gwen that you were the most intelligent girl that he had ever met."

Katherine half smiled, a little sadly.

"Yes, he may have thought so, but eventually the secretary swallowed up the guest. I do not know if he will ever speak to me again."

"He felt as badly as that, did he! Poor Mordryn! No doubt you tormented him; but Mordryn is no weak creature like me. If he feels very much about you, he will either defy convention, or break away from all temptation"—then his voice changed, and he asked a little anxiously:

"Katherine, do you begin to care for him?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

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"I do not know—I could care a great deal—he pleases me in every way—I love his looks and his mind—and he—he makes me feel something which I have never felt

before—is it the capability for devotion?—I do not know."

For the first time in their acquaintance, Mr. Strobbridge saw her undecided, gentle, a little helpless even—it touched him deeply. He loved her so very dearly. He would rather see her happy if he could aid her to become so. He came over to her and leaned upon the table.

"Dearest girl—everything is a sickening jumble in this world, it seems. I have a kind of premonition, though, that you will emerge triumphant, however it goes; but after to-day, Katherine, I shall not see you until late in the autumn. I am going away—to Russia this time—and I am going to try once more not to care."

So even her one friend would be far from her. Well, she must not lose her nerve. She gave him her blessing for his journey, and they said good-bye. And the days went on apace.

Matilda was engaged to be married to Charlie Prodggers, and was full of importance and glee, and had drifted further and further away from her sister ever since the engagement was announced. Some instinctive feminine jealousy made her feel that she would prefer Katherine to be as far as possible from her fiancé.

"After all, Kitten," she said, when they met in the park to discuss the news, "you aren't one of us and we aren't one of you. I shall be moving up now into Mabel's set, and there is no use in hiding it, Mabel don't seem to dote on you."

"Yes, I feel that," agreed Katherine, meekly lowering her eyes, so that her sister might not see their twinkle. "I expect we shall not meet often in the future, Tild."

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"Well, of course, Kitten, I'd always be very pleased to have tea with you up here now and then," and Matilda gave an uncomfortable laugh; "but it is always best to avoid awkwardness, isn't it, dearie, and you are only a paid servant, aren't you—living in—not like you were at Liv and Dev's, out on your own, and everyone starts better in considering her husband's position, don't they—and Charlie is manager in his department now, and very particular as to who I know."

"You are perfectly right, Tild," Katherine's voice was ominously soft, "and so is Charlie. You go ahead, and very soon you will have got above Mabel, and, of course, I would not be a drag on you for the world. I think, after to-day, we will just write to one another now and then, and you must not bother to come up to see me. We do not think alike on any point—but I shall always remember how good you were to me when I was a tiresome little girl."

"Oh, Kitten!" and Matilda felt almost tearful; for apart from her fear of reawakening her fiancé's interest in her sister, she still had a secret affection for her.

"Yes, you were very good to me, then, Tild, but now we have come to a final parting of the ways, and we are all satisfied—I shall fulfil my ideas, and you will fulfil yours."

And afterwards, when she walked back to Berkeley Square, she pondered deeply. There was no such thing as family affection really in the abstract—it only held when the individuals were in sympathy and had a community of interests. They—her family—were as glad at the thought that they had risen above her, and need not communicate in the future, as she was that she would not have to bring her mind down to their point of view. Matilda was the last link—and Matilda had shown that she desired also to break away. Katherine felt that but for Lady Garribardine's real affection for her, she was virtually alone in the world.

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If only there were no backward thoughts in her mind, she would have looked upon her fair future as a certainty; sooner or later, with the visit to Valfreyne in front of her, and the frequent occasions upon which she must see the Duke at her mistress' house, she knew she could continue to attract him if she so desired, and make him love her with a great love. There was that subtle, indescribable sympathy of ideas between them. And as Algy had called forth physical passion, and Gerard the awakening of the spirit, this man seemed to arouse the essence of all three things, the body, the spirit and the soul.

But there lay this ugly shadow between them, and she began to realise the meaning of the old saw from Horace, "Black care sits behind the horseman," and she had not yet made up her mind to dislodge him and defy fate.

The three days in Paris began to haunt her until she severely took herself to task, and analysed everything. She must not look back upon them in that fashion. She must remember them gratefully, she told herself, since they had opened her eyes for the first time in a way that nothing else could have done, and she indeed felt that it was very doubtful if she could ever have obtained Lady Garribardine's situation, and so her education from Gerard Strobbridge, without the experience that that episode in her life had given her to start upon.

It was contrary to all her principles to allow any past action to influence with its shadow present events. She would banish the whole subject from her mind, and leave the future in the hand of destiny—neither assisting fate by personal initiative, nor resisting its march by deliberate renunciation.

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But she seemed very quiet, Her Ladyship thought, and wondered to herself at the

cause. The Duke was in the North paying other visits for some weeks, and when he did come to Berkeley Square in between times he did not see Katherine.

So April passed and May came, and with it the prospect of Whitsuntide, early that year. Whitsunday fell upon the eleventh of May.

"You must have some decent clothes," Lady Garribardine had said, a week or two beforehand, "another evening dress and an afternoon frock. I think I should like the first to be white and the other black, and in your own excellent taste. You will dine down every night as a guest, and we shall stay from Saturday until Tuesday."

"It is extremely exciting for me," Katherine admitted. "I wonder so much what the house will be like."

"It is a huge Palladian Monument, very splendid and ducal, everything is on an immense scale, and the Duke keeps it up with great state. It is more like some royal residence than a house, but there are some cosy rooms to be found in odd corners. It will interest and educate you, child. You had better read up all about it in one of the old volumes of *Country Life*—some three years ago, I think, it was described."

Katherine lost no time in doing this, and read of its building in 1680, and of its wonderful gardens "in the French style"—and of its superb collections of pictures and art treasures, and of its avenues and lake and waterways and fountains. Yes, it must be a very noble place.

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They were to arrive early in time for luncheon, since Her Ladyship was to act hostess to the party who would come in the afternoon. And when they approached the gates, Katherine felt that one of the supreme moments in her life had come.

The park was vast, larger even than Blissington, and with more open spaces, and the house could be viewed from a distance—a symmetrical, magnificent pile. And it seemed that they walked through an endless succession of halls and great salons, until they were ushered into the Duke's presence in his own particular panelled room.

It was very lofty and partly filled with bookcases arranged in rather an unusual way, sunk into the wall itself, with very beautiful decorations by Grinling Gibbons surrounding them and also the intervening panels wherein fine pictures hung. The curtains and chair coverings were of the most superb old blue silk, faded now to a wonderful greenish tone, and harmonizing with the beautiful Savonnerie carpet with its soft tints of citron and puce and green.

Katherine was frankly awed. Blissington was a very fine gentleman's house—but this was a palace. And suddenly, the Duke seemed a million miles away from her, and she wondered how she had ever dared to be familiar with him, and rebuke him for coming to her schoolroom to talk!

She was meek as a mouse, and never opened her lips after the first words of greeting.

The host had come forward with cordial graciousness and bidden them welcome, and he had looked a very magnificent person somehow in his morning country riding clothes. And all the glamour of high rank and power and fastidiousness enhanced his natural charms, so that Katherine felt a little cold and sick with the emotion which she was experiencing. He was courtly and aloof in his manner with all his kindness, and in a moment or two he accompanied them along to the Venetian suite himself.

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"I must come, dear friend," he had said to Lady Garribardine, "to be sure that you have everything you can possibly want."

The Venetian suite was on a par in splendour with the rest of the house. It was on the same floor as His Grace's own sitting-room which they had left, and it was reached by a passage place which led to the same terrace, which the windows looked upon; this was marble paved, with a splendid balustrade. The ante-chamber had been arranged with a writing table near the great window, and every convenience for Miss Bush to do any writing her mistress might require. For the rest, the Venetian suite was always reserved for the most honoured guest. Here were a sitting-room, a great bedroom and dressing-room for Her Ladyship—all with the same lofty ceilings and fine windows as the room they had left, and behind it came that charming green damask-hung chamber designed for Miss Bush.

"Here in this apartment you will find yourselves completely quiet and shut off from the world," the Duke said. "Once you have passed the great door, as you know, Seraphim, your suite makes the end of this wing, and only I can approach you from my sitting-room!"

Lady Garribardine, who knew every nook in the house, smiled as she expressed herself as content, and he left them alone.

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Katherine examined her room; it would have struck her as very large if it had been in any other house. It looked on to an inner courtyard with a fountain playing, and statuary and hundred-year-old lilac bushes in huge tubs. The room was hung with pale green silk, and had beautiful painted Italian, eighteenth century furniture, and on the dressing-table were bowls of lilies of the valley.

She thrilled a little; was this accidental or deliberate?

She was very well acquainted with the workings of a great house, and the duties of the housekeeper and groom of the chambers. She saw from a technical point of view that these retainers of Valfreyne must be of a very high order of merit because of the result of their work; but even their intelligence could hardly have selected the volumes of her favourite authors, which she had discussed with the Duke, and which were placed in bookstands, with the "Letters of Abelard and Héloïse" and a beautiful edition of "Eothen" out on the top!

These silent testimonies of someone's personal thought gave her unbounded pleasure; they restored her submerged self-confidence, and made her eyes glow. It was divine to feel that he cared enough to have troubled to do this. The subtle flattery was exquisite.

A burning wave of colour overspread Katherine's face, and her nostrils quivered. If the Duke could have seen her—he would have known that that quality he appreciated—the quality of real, natural passion—was abundantly present in her nature. Strong passion controlled by an iron will—a mixture which he thought quite ideal in the woman whom a man would choose to be the companion of his life.

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It was this particular suggestion about Katherine which had alike intoxicated the imaginations of these three far different men, Lord Algy, Gerard Strobbridge and the Duke. The human, adorable warmth of emotion of which her white, smooth-skinned face and red, full mouth looked capable.

Lady Garribardine had told her secretary to take off her hat, as she might be required to do a little work after lunch.

"I shall settle with His Grace how I think the party had better sit, and then you can type anything we want."

So Katherine was particularly careful to arrange her silvery hair becomingly, and looked the perfection of refined neatness as she followed her mistress back into the Duke's sitting-room, and then on in to luncheon in a smaller dining-room in another wing.

They were only three at the meal, and the host talked of politics, and the party who were coming, and was gracious. He did not treat Katherine with the slightest condescension, nor with any special solicitude. If she had been an unknown niece of Lady Garribardine, his manner would have been the same.

Katherine felt chilled again for the moment, and had never appeared more subdued.

She slipped off back to her room when they went to have coffee in a small drawing-room, known as "The Gamester's Parlour," for in it was hung a world-known picture of the famous thoroughbred of that name, the riding of whom in a match against His Grace of Chandos' colt, Starlight, had been the cause of the third Duke's breaking his neck.

There was no immediate work to be done, so Katherine stood and looked from the window of her green chamber and took in the view. Surely, she thought, if people even with the intelligence of Matilda could see such men as the Duke and such splendid homes as this, with every evidence in it of fine tastes and fine living and fine achievement, stamped upon it by hundreds of years of noble owners, they could not go on being so blind to the force of heredity and environment as factors in determining the actions of the human race.

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She stood for a long time quite still, with trouble in her heart, which every fresh realisation of the beauties around her augmented.

No—the Duke could never overlook the three days even if he could forget that she had come from Bindon's Green—and she could not banish their memory either, and so would never be able to rely upon her own power to carry on the great undertaking untrammelled by inward apprehension and self-contempt at the deception of so great a man—her serenity would be gone and with it her power.

Lady Garribardine opened the door presently, and saw her still standing there.

"Run out for a little walk, child," she said, kindly. "You can reach the terrace from the passage ante-chamber which has been arranged for you to write in, and there are steps at the side into the garden. I shall not want you until just before tea. The Duke has the menus and cards and door names printed by his own private press. Then come back with your eyes bright, and put on your new black frock."

Katherine thanked her; there never could be anyone kinder or more thoughtful for others than was this arrogant great lady.

The girl walked in the fresh May sunshine, but nothing lifted the weight which had fallen upon her heart, and her cheeks were paler than usual, and her air had an added delicacy and refinement when she followed her mistress into the great tapestry salon, wherein tea was laid, and which was adjacent to the hall where guests were already beginning to arrive.

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She was not introduced to anyone else, but several she already knew; they were

selected from the *crème de la crème* of Her Ladyship's set of the rather less modern sort.

Mordryn looked at her constantly unobserved. What was the meaning of this new expression in her face? Why would she never meet his eyes? And hers, when he did see them, turned upon ordinary things, had a haunting melancholy in them very different from the sphinxlike smile of old.

He found himself more disturbed than he cared to own. He wished Seraphim had not brought her, after all—He wished—but he did not even in his thoughts form words. Had her changed air anything to do with that last abrupt request on the March morning's walk, that he should remember who she was and who he was, and leave her alone? Was it possible that she felt something for him? How wrong he had been in that case to put the "Eothen" and the "Abelard and Héloïse" and the lilies of the valley in her room—cruel and wrong. He knew now that he saw her again that he had thought of her very constantly ever since Easter time, and had chafed at getting no sight of her when he had twice been in London and had gone to Berkeley Square, though his determination had held at that time, and he had made no attempt to see her, or even to mention her name. But he knew that he had looked forward more eagerly each day to Whitsuntide, and that he had taken peculiar delight in the surreptitious supervision of the details of her lodgment, and the choice of volumes wherewith to refresh her mind.

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But was this chivalrous on his part? Was he not playing upon the feelings of one defenceless and in a dependent position—one who could not even flee?

He grew uncomfortable. He was painfully conscious of her presence, and a sudden mad longing came to him to take her in his arms, and kiss away the trouble from her eyes! And then the cynical and humorous side of his character made him smile at the idea of such feelings in a room full of guests! Guests of his own world, and for the humble secretary of his old love! He fretted under the restraint of his unease. And she was here in his house and he must suffer the temptation of her presence for three more days. He must not look at her—must not talk to her! He must not have any subtle understanding with her about the books—must not, in short, do anything he desired.

Lady Garribardine watched the passage of events with an understanding eye. Something further must be done, she felt.

So just before dressing time, when the company had dispersed, she went with her host into his own sitting-room. The evening post had come in.

"Mordryn, I wanted to ask you, can I send a wire over to Hornwell. I have just heard Sir John Townly is staying there, and I want to suggest that he motor over to-morrow to tea. It will be a splendid chance for him to have a quiet hour with my Katherine Bush. I would like him to see her here as a guest; he is very much in love with her in his heavy way, and I believe I could get the matter settled all right if you would only help me, like a dear."

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The Duke experienced a most unpleasant twinge. This was rather more than he had bargained for! Why should Sir John Townly be given this opportunity in his house!

"The match is quite unsuitable, Seraphim. I can't think how you can countenance it."

Her Ladyship appeared deliberately to misunderstand him.

"But I assure you, Mordryn, Sir John is not in the least upset by her origin or her suburban relations; he realises the magnificent qualities of the creature herself, and he knows very well that she will make the finest hostess, and the most dignified figurehead for Dullinglea that he could find; besides, with her health and youth, he can look forward to a strong little son by this time next year."

Mordryn found himself absolutely revolted—Katherine—(so her name was Katherine?) Katherine—this delicious creature to be the mother of that shocking bore John Townly's son!

The red flush mounted to his broad forehead.

"It is not their relative worldly positions I alluded to, Seraphim—but their ages and appearances—and, oh! tastes! I think it is perfectly inhuman of you, and I cannot countenance such a thing."

"Mordryn! I am really surprised!—how can it possibly matter to you? You must have seen for yourself that night at Gerard's what a charming companion she can make, and how utterly she is wasted in the position of secretary—and yet you won't help me to do the poor child this good turn!"

"If you put it in that way—ask whom you like, but I cannot think how any woman, to escape any position, could sell herself to such a man as John Townly!"

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His tone was heated and his blue eyes flashed.

"That is just the tiresome part of it," and Her Ladyship looked concerned. "I believe she has your same foolish and romantic ideas, and so I thought if she could see him here among this fine company, perhaps the desire to remain in it, and the glamour of

the thing might bring her up to the scratch. Mordryn, do help me like a kind friend. Just think, if she were to leave me, whom else would she ever see? She has quite separated from her own family; she has nothing but a life of drudgery in front of her, and she is fitted in every way to be a queen. She is so extremely self-controlled, she would never make any slips afterwards, and her ambitions could be gratified and make up for lack of love."

"I think the idea is disgusting," His Grace snapped impatiently; "but send your wire, by all means."

Then he abruptly turned the conversation, and presently Her Ladyship left him alone, very well pleased with her work! And the groom of the chambers was handed a warmly worded invitation to telegraph to Hornwell, as she passed to her room.

CHAPTER XXIX

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When he was left alone the Duke swore sharply to himself. He was not a man accustomed to the use of strong language—but occasions arose in life sometimes when a good sound oath seemed to relieve tension!

Then he paced up and down his long room. His imagination was on fire. He could see Katherine—he dwelt on the name "Katherine"—in the baboon embrace of old John Townly—loathsome picture!

Yes, of course, she would adorn any position, and Dullinglea was only a very moderate house. He could see her tall, slender, graceful figure sweeping in rich velvets through much larger rooms than it contained. Such rooms, for example, as these, his own at Valfreyne!

She would sit to-night between young Westonborough and old Barchester, but in a place where a gap in the flowers would give him, the host, a continuous view of her.

Then he went off to dress, in a fiery mood!

Katherine, meanwhile, had been looking over "Eothen," and noting the marked passages, which she found to be the same mutual favourites they had discovered that night at Gerard's.

Had her host underlined them since then, or were they marked before? Then she peeped at "Abelard and Héloïse" and turned over all the leaves. None of them had any pencillings, but her eye caught this sensible paragraph, and it stiffened her jaded spirit, and made her feel more calm:

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"'How void of reason are men,' said Seneca, 'to make distant evils present by reflection, and to take pains before death to lose all the comfort of life.'"

She was here at a splendid party as a guest like everyone else, and she must enjoy it and forget anything but the pleasure of the moment. But oh! if the Duke would only talk to her!

She wore the new white frock and looked quite beautiful, and some of the lilies of the valley shone in her belt.

Lady Garribardine was extremely pleased with her appearance and patted her arm.

"To-morrow Sir John Townly is coming over from Hornwell, child, and I want you to be agreeable to him for me, as I shall be very busy. You must take him for a little walk."

Her Ladyship knew that however irksome it would appear to Katherine, her command would be obeyed!

The Duke's eyes were full of suppressed passion at dinner, and his wit was caustic. Katherine could not hear it, but could see his face, and the puzzled expression which now and then came over the two ladies on either side of him; and once she met his gaze, and there was pain and a challenge in it. Excitement rose in her before dessert came. She knew—she felt—he was conscious of her presence—and that it was not indifference which kept him from her side. What was it all leading to? It was very evident that he was determined not to succumb to whatever it might be. It was also evident that he certainly did experience emotion.

Katherine felt unhappy, but this must not prevent her from talking politely and sympathetically to the ladies she happened to be sitting next to in the great drawing-room, until the men came in. She remarked how protective and gracious her own dear Ladyship was being to her, saying a word in passing and making her feel at home and an equal and a guest. She must be very grateful for these things and not look ahead.

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Why had this new and sudden sense of values come over her? This realisation of the frightful obstacle created by the blemish of the three days? At the dinner at Gerard's she had not so much as remembered them, their meaning had come in a flash with

the thrill of the Duke's kiss of homage upon her hand. Had she been contemplating union with Sir John, she would have looked upon them as a fortunate experience to guide her in her knowledge of men. So this was some psychological witness to the demands of the spirit of—love! Of love that desires to give only the pure gold untarnished to the lover.

She felt like a caged bird, and her triumphant evening of pleasing women, and earning the admiration of all who spoke to her, tasted only as Dead Sea fruit.

Now the Duke, when the men left the dining-room, walked straight to his own sitting-room. He was a man of rapid action and supreme self-confidence. He opened the inner door softly and listened—there was no sound, he could move with impunity. There was no one in the passage room, but there was not a moment to be lost; the housemaids, he knew, would be coming round almost immediately with the cans of hot water for the night. He crossed the space and deliberately entered the green room, turning on the light as he did so.

He hastily looked about at the books—Yes, she had put the two special ones by her bed. And "Abelard and Héloïse" was underneath; he pulled it out and quickly found a passage he wanted and with his gold pencil he scored it deeply underneath, and putting the volume on the top he swiftly left the room and was again in his own, and on his way to the white drawing-room. The whole affair had not taken two minutes. And with the knowledge of this fact accomplished, he looked almost serene as he sat down by a great lady's side and determinedly avoided looking at Katherine.

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So the evening passed without speech between them beyond good-night, and Miss Bush retired sorrowfully to bed.

But she could not sleep, and kept on the light to read. There were "Eothen" and "Abelard and Héloïse" close to her side, their order of placing reversed, since she had left them, this change effected by the housemaids, no doubt. And the love letters being on the top, she opened them first. She read many exquisite thoughts, and was just thinking of sleep when she turned a page and suddenly sat bolt upright in bed, for this is what she read:

"I wish to heaven you had not such a power over me." And the passage was deeply underlined.

Her heart beat to suffocation. There had been no such mark in this place when she had read this very page before dinner. How had it come there?—Who—Who?—But there was only one person who could have done such a thing—the Duke!

She bent nearer the lamp and devoured the lines again, and then she passionately kissed the words and turned out the light.

Next day, Sunday, a number of the party went to church, their host among them—but Katherine and Lady Garribardine did not accompany them. They were seated on the tennis lawn watching a game when the church-goers joined the group.

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Three magnificent cedars of Lebanon made a great patch of shade, and here the chairs were placed. The Duke took one and stretched himself on it as though fatigued. His grey felt hat was tilted over his eyes. He made a pleasing picture of length of limb and grace and distinction—the same curious emotion crept over Katherine again as she had already experienced—half quiver, half shock—a strong desire to be very close to him, to touch him, to feel herself caressing and caressed. His hands were clasped idly upon his knee, and his voice as he spoke softly to a lady was lazy and complacent. Oh! how extremely bitter the whole situation was proving to be!

The emerald ring seemed to flash green fire as a tiny glint of sunlight struck it; it caught the attention of the sprightly dame to whom His Grace was talking.

"What a very wonderful ring that is you wear, Duke. Has it a history?"

"Yes, a very remarkable one."

Katherine listened, deeply interested, she had so often wondered about this ring, too.

"It has been in the family since the last Crusade. It came back with the tradition attached that it was the famous graven emerald seal which Theodoras made for Polycrates, tyrant of Samos, about 590 B. C., and which was in vain thrown into the sea to be lost! It was brought back to Polycrates in the body of a fish next day. Such exampled luck was considered to be ominous by his ally, Amasis, who broke off all alliance with him in consequence. And truly enough, he was not long after murdered from jealousy of his good fortune! The ring then disappeared and was supposed later to have been found by a Roman who handed it down for generations until it somehow got back into Greece, and when wrecked there on his way home from Palestine, the Rievaulx of the day obtained it from its owner, how, history does not say, and it has always been with us ever since—a strange belief attaching to it—that if life is happy it must not be worn, but that if things have gone ill then it is safe to wear it for the rest of time."

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He put out his hand for the lady to look at the stone and a knot of interested people drew near.

"You see," His Grace continued, "it is deeply graven with a lyre—and sometimes it seems to be dull and sometimes it flashes angrily."

"Are you not afraid to wear it?" some tactless person said.

The Duke replied gravely—"Why should I be? I have amply fulfilled all the conditions attached," and then the company, remembering the dark and ugly shadow of the mad Duchess, which had hung over his life for so many years, all seemed to talk at once and so the slightly awkward moment passed.

But Katherine thought deeply upon the subject as she sat in a wicker chair.

Yes, how ill his life had gone, and he was now fifty-three years old, and if it were true that he felt enough to have taken the trouble to score that sentence in her book, his present frame of mind could not be altogether happy either, and she sighed—why was happiness so often a forbidden fruit?

For a second before lunch she happened to be standing near him, and so some kind of words were necessary for politeness' sake.

"I hope you find your room comfortable, Miss Bush, and that you have all that you want."

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She looked straight into his eyes, and there was a world of meaning in hers as she answered.

"Everything, thank you—and I am especially interested in the books. The last guest who slept there must have taken liberties with your volumes and put strange pencillings under some of the paragraphs, which I only discovered last night."

"It was a man who occupied the room lately. What presumption he showed!"

"Yes, I wondered if you knew about it, the most significant marking is in the letters of 'Abelard and Héloïse.' The scribbler had a turn for sentiment, it would seem, and probably was suffering from hallucinations as to his own state, which he imagined to be one of subjection."

"No, he was a level-headed fellow, who was not particularly happy, though. I remember, and no doubt he found solace in reading about the despairing passion of those two, and in underlining that passage which records *Abelard's* rebellion against pain so like his own."

Katherine sighed. "Happiness, alas! lies in the hand only of the very strong," and she passed on to another group.

And the Duke frowned a little as they went in to lunch.

Sir John Townly came over in the afternoon, as he had been invited to do, and Lady Garribardine intimated to her secretary that now she must take this incubus off her hands; so Katherine obediently proposed a stroll round the wonderful tulip beds, which were in full bloom. And Mordryn saw them go off together from the window where he stood.

"I really do not think it looks so ridiculous after all," Lady Garribardine remarked to him reflectively, complacence in her tone. "He is quite a fine figure of a man except for his perfectly bald head, and that does not show now in his hat."

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The Duke made an exclamation of disgust.

"Poor Miss Bush!"

"I do hope she won't be foolish, but she has been so odd lately; I cannot understand these girls."

"Odd?"

"Yes—sad-looking and quiet—Of course I would not force her into anything she did not like, but still, Sir John would be better than some attractive and penniless young guardsman with nothing to offer but love's young dream.—There are one or two who come over from Windsor who rather hang about."

"Oh! yes, certainly," emphatically agreed the Duke, and then he thought of another sentence in that book which seemed such a bond between them, one where *Abelard* wrote, "What a comfort I felt in seeing you shut up!" Yes, to marry old Sir John would almost be the equivalent of a convent. But not quite! There was always the thought that, however old, he would still be the undisputed possessor of this most desirable piece of womanhood! His would be the right to clothe and feed her, and give her jewels. His to hold her in his arms. The realisation of all this was maddening to Mordryn, for he no longer disguised from himself that he profoundly desired to exercise these rights himself. And she had said that happiness only lay in the hands of the very strong.—Yes, but how could one define strong? Strong in fidelity to tradition and family and race and class? Or strong to break all barriers and seize that thing a man's heart cries out for passionately, his mate, his soul's and his body's mate? These were problems which were distressingly agitating to think over, and distracted his mind from the duties towards guests.

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What a time she spent in pointing out those tulips to that old fool! What pompous

gallantry his attitude expressed! Of course the girl must be bored to death. Why had she been "odd" lately, "quiet and sad"? Oh, how divine it would be to go off to the Belvedere presently and see the sunset from over there by the lake, and ask her many things, and then as they looked on the water from the marble terrace, if the falcon's eye grew sweet again and soft, to read dear messages there, and fold her to his heart!

She was so subtle, she understood every shade in anything he said, they had the same tastes and the same likings in books and art. She did not know Italy and France; what supreme pleasure to wander there, and discover their manifold beauties to her! And above all, she was young and fresh and passionate—who could doubt it who looked into her fair face, or knew anything about type? If she loved him she would never be cold, but would amply repay him for his long starvation and abstinence from joy. The lonely splendour of Valfreyne would then become a happy home filled with interest and affection. How was he going to get through another twenty years of dull duty after his twenty-five of anguish and grief? He supposed he might live to be eighty, even, the Monluces were a tenacious race!

Here Lady Garribardine deemed it prudent to divert his thoughts; she realised that the moment for the final good which would draw him over the brink into happiness had not yet come, so she spoke of soothing things, and then amused him and coaxed him into a more peaceful state; only again to see him restive when the pair eventually came in from the tulip beds.

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Katherine looked tired and depressed, but Sir John had an air of gratification about him which made Mordryn feel that he could willingly have punched his head!

His good manners alone enabled him to bid a cordial farewell to the poor man when presently he left.

The sun was declining and the colours were opal over the lake. The duties of host to so many charming ladies restrained the Duke and he had the mortification of seeing Katherine and another girl go off with two of the young men in two canoes on the topaz waters, and by the time he went to dress he was almost desperate.

Katherine was in black to-night, and a red rose was in her belt. Where had she got it from? Had that insupportable young Westonborough, whom she had been in the canoe with, given it to her? Surely Bilton had not been so remiss as not to have seen that fresh lilies were put in the green room!—But perhaps she preferred the red rose; women were incredibly fickle and capricious!

Lady Garribardine perceived the expression of fierceness in his eyes, and so contrived that even a single sentence with Katherine was impossible. And thus the evening passed and good-nights were said, and there remained only the one more day!

CHAPTER XXX

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Katherine read "Abelard and Héloïse" far into the night. Her emotions were complex. She knew now that she was very unhappy and in a corner, and that she could not see clearly any way of escape. If she attracted the Duke further it would only increase the complications.

There was something in her nature which she feared was not strong enough to carry through deceit. Her great power had always lain in her absolute honesty, which gave her that inward serenity which engenders the most supreme self-confidence, and so inevitably draws the thing desired. Her mind was too balanced, and too analytical to give way to impulse regardless of cost, which in such a situation would have made nine hundred and ninety-nine women out of a thousand grab at the chance of securing Mordryn upon any terms. Of what good to obtain the position of Duchess if it only brought a haunting unease? Of what good to obtain the love of this true and splendid gentleman upon false pretences? She could then enjoy nothing of the results. For above all worldly gains she was well aware that to keep her own rigid self-respect mattered to her most. If his character had been less worthy of reverence—if she had not grown so near to passionately loving him—if she had not become aware of the importance in the eyes of the world of the barrier between them, and so of the magnitude of the offence involved in the deceit, she would have played her game to a finish without a backward thought; but as it was it were better frankly to give it up and perhaps marry—Sir John! For none of these considerations, she felt, came into the question of marrying Sir John. He was old and pompous and of no great family. She would be giving more than she received in bestowing her youth and her talents and her company upon him. She did not love him, therefore whether he should ever look upon her with scorn or no was a matter of indifference to her—and she would not for a moment have dreamed of any obligation to reveal that episode in her past to him, since the probabilities were so very remote that discovery could ever happen and therefore her silence would in no way injure him. It would be merely a

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bargain in which an old man bought a young woman "as she stood," so to speak, for the pleasure of his eye.

But the Duke of Mordryn was different—between them there could be no deceptions, no secrets, there must be none but the highest things, since marriage with him would mean the union of their souls. Katherine was far from being altruistic or sentimental, it was only the strictly common sense and baldly honest aspect of any case that ever influenced her.

The temptation was overpowering, of course, to brush aside moral qualms.—To think of reigning in this splendid place!—and she let her imagination run on—To think of being with the Duke always—his loved companion. The joy to make him very happy, and do everything he wished. What pains she would take to fulfil his highest ideal of her—to show to his world that whatever she had sprung from, at least she carried off the situation of Duchess in a manner in which they could find no flaw. She would be gracious and sweet and dignified and capable. She would bring all her reasoning to bear upon all problems. She would let him guide and direct her, and she would carry out his least behest.

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But it could not be. She had made an initial mistake and miscalculation in her career through ignorance of possible results, and she could never shuffle out of it. Self-deception was of all mental attitudes the one she despised the most. She must face the consequence of her mistake now with courage, and take the second best.

Having once made up her mind in the early dawn, it was not in her nature to indulge in further repining. She as resolutely shut out the image of the Duke and the picture of happiness with him, as she had shut out Lord Algy. Only this time the pain was infinitely more bitter, because she knew that she was obliged to refrain from sipping this glorious cup *because of her own miscalculation*. Whereas when she parted from Lord Algy she had had the moral elation of knowing that she was doing rather a fine thing.

Extreme pallor showed in her face in the morning, and her great eyes were shadowed and sad. She remained in the ante-chamber at the writing-table which had been prepared for her, after she had breakfasted with Lady Garribardine in her sitting-room. Numbers of letters had come by the Sunday's post, and she made it seem necessary to answer them at once.

Her mistress allowed her to have her way. She felt some strong underneath currents were affecting the girl, and further tantalization would not be bad for the Duke. So she left her at the writing-table and joined the rest of the party under the cedar trees on the tennis lawn, and did not mention Katherine or her whereabouts. If Mordryn wanted to know why she had not come out, or where she was, he must pluck up courage to ask himself.

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The Duke glanced at her enquiringly, but he said nothing—perhaps Katherine would follow presently—but could she have gone again on the lake with Lady Alethea and those empty-headed young men? He would not ask, he would go himself and see.

So when he had disposed of his important guests, he went to his own sitting-room from which there was a complete view of the waterways, and then he took the trouble to get out his glasses and scan the occupants of the boats.

No, she was not among them.

She must then either be still in her bedroom—or writing perhaps in front of the window of the passage place which was next this very room!

He would go out on the terrace from one of the windows and look in.

Yes—she was there seated at the table very busy, it appeared.

He came forward and stepping across the threshold, he stood beside her.

"Good morning, Miss Bush—it is quite wrong for you to be working on this glorious day. You must come out into the sunshine with the rest of us."

Katherine did not rise or appear to be going to follow his suggestion, so he added authoritatively:

"Now be a good girl and go and get your hat."

"I am very sorry I cannot before lunch; I have much work to do, and it becomes disorganised if I leave it unfinished."

"Nonsense! You did not come to Valfreyne to work. There are such a number of things I want to show you. Everyone is out in the garden, won't you at least come round the state rooms with me?"

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How could she refuse him? He was her host and the pleasure would be so intense. She rose, but without alacrity and answered a little stiffly:

"I should much like to see them—if it will not take very long."

Her manner was distinctly different, he noticed it at once—a curtain seemed to have fallen between them ever since the conversation about the pencillings in the book. It chilled him and made him determined to remove it.

He held the door into his sitting-room open for her, and took pains to keep the conversation upon the ostensible reason for their voyage of inspection. He spoke of carving and dates, and told her anecdotes of the building of Valfreyne. And so they passed on through all the splendid rooms, "The King's Chamber," and "The Queen's Closet,"—and the salons and so to the great state suite of her who should be reigning Duchess.

And Katherine saw priceless gems of art and splendour of gilding and tapestry, and hangings, and great ghostly beds surmounted with nodding ostrich plumes. And stuffs from Venice and Lyons—and even Spitalfields.

"How wonderful!" she said at last—"And there are many other places such as this in England! How great and rich a country it is. We—the middle class population—shut in with our narrow parochial views—do not realise it at all, or we would be very proud of our race owning such glorious things, and would not want to encourage stupid paltry politicians to destroy and dissipate them all, and scatter them to the winds."

"It may seem hard in their view that one man should possess, we will say, Valfreyne."

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"But how stupid! How could it all have been accumulated, but for individual wealth and taste and tradition? Who really cares for museums except to study examples in? Do you know, for instance, such people as my sisters would a thousand times rather walk through these rooms on a day when the public is let in, feeling it was a house owned by people who really lived there, than go to any place given to the nation, like Hampton Court or the Wallace Collection."

"That is the human interest in the thing."

"Yes, but the human and the personal are the strongest and most binding of all interests."

Mordryn looked at her appreciatively—he delighted in hearing her views.

"Then you have no feeling that you wish all this to be divided up among the people of Lulworth, say—the large town near?"

"Oh! no, no! So strongly do I feel for the law by which all goes to the eldest son, that were I a younger one, I would willingly give up my share to ensure the family continuing great. Who that can see clearly would not rather be a younger son of a splendid house, than a little, ridiculous nobody on his own account,—if everything were to be divided up."

"It is so very strange that you should have this spirit, Miss Bush. If you had not told me of your parentage I should have said you were of the same root and branch as Lady Garribardine. Are you sure you are not a changeling?"

"Quite sure. How proud it must make you feel to own Valfreyne, and what obligations it must entail!"

"Yes," and he sighed.

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"It must make you weigh every action to see if it is worthy of one who must be an example for so many people."

"That is how you look upon great position—it is a noble way."

"Why, of course—it could not be right to hold all this in trust for your descendants, and for the glory of England, and then to think yourself free to squander it, and degrade the standard. All feeling would have to give way to worthily fulfilling your trust."

The Duke felt his heart sink—a strange feeling of depression came over him.

"I suppose you are right," and he sighed again.

"I was so much interested in the story of your ring," she said presently, to lift the silence which had fallen upon them both. "It is such a strange idea that great good fortune is unlucky—since we always draw what we deserve. If we are foolish and draw misfortune at the beginning of our lives, we must of course pay the price, but if people's brains are properly balanced they should not fear good fortune in itself."

"You think then that a whole life need not be shadowed with misery, but that if the price of folly is paid in youth, there may still be a chance of a happy old age?"

"Of course—One must be quite true, that is all, and never deceive anyone who trusts one."

"That would mean living in a palace of truth and would be impracticable."

"Not at all. There are some things people have no right to ask or to be told—some things one must keep to oneself for the carrying on of life—but if a person has a right to know, and trusts you and you deceive him, then you must take the consequences of unhappiness which is the reflex action of untruth."

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"How wise you are, child—that is the whole meaning of honour, 'To thine own self be true and it must follow as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.'"

She looked straight up into his eyes, hers were pure and deep and sorrowful.

"Now I have seen your beautiful home I must go back to my work—I shall always remember this visit, and this happy morning—all my life."

Mordryn was deeply moved, passionate emotion was coursing through him—with great difficulty he restrained the words which rose to his lips. He did not seek to detain her, and they retraced their steps, speaking little by the way, until they came to his sitting-room.

"When you go to-morrow, will you take with you the 'Eothen' and the 'Abelard and Héloïse?' I would like to know that you read them sometimes and there is one passage in *Abelard's* first letter which I know I shall have to quote to myself—It is on the fifty-fourth page, the bottom paragraph—you must look at it some time—"

Then his voice broke a little—"And now let us say good-bye—here in my room."

"Good-bye," said Katherine and held out her hand.

The Duke took it and with it drew her near to him.

"Good-bye—Beloved," he whispered, and his tones were hoarse, and then he dropped her hand; and Katherine gave a little sob, and turning, ran from the room, leaving him with his proud head bent, and tears in his dark blue eyes.

And she made herself return to her work—nor would she permit her thoughts to dwell for an instant upon the events of the morning, or the words of the Duke—for she knew that if she did so she would lose control of herself and foolishly burst into tears. And there was lunch to be endured, and the afternoon and evening.

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So this was the end—he loved her, but his ideas of principle held.—And if she was only a common girl and so debarred from being a Duchess—the Duke should see that no aristocrat of his own class could be more game.

Lady Garribardine found her still writing diligently when she came in just before luncheon would be announced, and she wondered what made the girl look so pale.

"It is quite too bad that you have sat here all this time," she exclaimed. "I won't have you bother with another word. This was to be your holiday and your amusement, this visit to Valfreyne, and you have been cooped up in the house working as if at home."

The Duke looked extremely stern at luncheon and was punctiliously polite to everyone, but those in his immediate vicinity were conscious that a stiffness had fallen upon the atmosphere which asphyxiated conversation.

Lady Garribardine was well acquainted with the signs of all his moods. This one, she knew, resulted from pain of some sort, and mental perturbation. What had occurred between him and Katherine? Could they have quarrelled? This must be ascertained at the earliest possible moment.

After luncheon they were all to motor to an old castle for a picnic tea, a beautiful ruin of a former habitation of the Monlucés about five miles away.

Katherine should go with the younger people, and she should have the Duke to herself.

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His manner was certainly preoccupied, and he spoke only of ordinary things as they went through the park.

"The party has been the greatest success, Mordryn. Are you pleased? Everyone has enjoyed it."

"Yes, I suppose it has been all right, thanks to your admirable qualities as hostess, dear friend. But how irksome I find all parties! I have been too long away from the world."

"I thought you seemed so cheery, Mordryn, yesterday, but to-day you look as glum as a church. You must shake yourself up, nothing is so foolish as giving way to these acquired habits of solitude and separation from your kind."

"I am growing old, Seraphim."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Her Ladyship cried. "You have never looked more vigorous—or more attractive, and you are not subject to liver attacks or the gout—so you have no excuse in the world for this doleful point of view."

"Perhaps not—It is stupid to want the moon."

"There are no such things as moons for Dukes; they are always lamps which can be secured in the hand."

"Not without fear of combustion or fusing as the case might be."

"Nothing venture nothing have. No man ought to sit down and abandon his moon chase—if he wants it badly enough he will get it."

"In spite of his conscience?"

Her Ladyship looked at him shrewdly—now was a moment for indicating her sentiments she felt—he might understand her as he so pleased.

"No, never in spite of his conscience, but in spite of custom or tradition or any other man-made barrier."

But although the Duke found much comfort in her words, he was not easily influenced by anyone and the torrent of his passion had not yet reached the floodgates, and was restrained by his will. So he turned the conversation and endeavoured to be cheerful. And Seraphim saw that for the moment she must leave things to fate.

Katherine looked quite lovely at tea. Her new air of rather pensive gentleness suited her well. She showed perfect composure, there was no trace of nervousness or self-consciousness in her manner, only her eyes were sad.

What dignity, the Duke thought as he watched, her conduct and attitude during the whole visit had shown! He knew it must have been a moment of exceptional excitement to her to come there among his and Lady Garribardine's friends, as one of them, and yet not for a second had she shown anything but composure and ease, talking with quiet politeness to whoever addressed her, neither with subservience nor with expansiveness, but with exactly the consideration which so becomes a great lady, even if she is but a girl. He looked at her again and again, and could find only something further to respect and admire.

He wondered how much she was feeling? What had that little sob meant? Pain as well as understanding assuredly. Was she, too, longing secretly to be taken into his arms—as with every fibre of his being he was burning with desire to hold her? Or did she not really care, and was the attention of young Westonborough enough to divert her—and would she eventually marry Sir John?

This last thought was disgusting! but His Grace of Mordryn had not the type of mind like that of Gerard Strobridge, to take comfort in the thought that if she did so, his own chance of future joy would be the greater. No touch of anything but reverence was in his heart towards Katherine.

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And so the afternoon passed with much suffering in two souls, and the rainbow tints of the evening came over the sky. The chestnut trees were the softest fresh green, and the oaks only just out. Copper beeches and limes and firs all added to the beauty of tint. And young birds were twittering their good-nights; the whole world was full of love, and springtime promise of joy.

And Mordryn battled with himself and banished temptation, and had his sitting-room blinds drawn immediately to hide all these sweet things of nature, when they returned, and stayed alone there until it was time to dress for dinner, saying he had important letters to write.

But all the while he was conscious that just beyond that door and that passage, there was a woman who seemed to matter to him more than anything else in life!

The whole afternoon had been such a wretched tantalization. A long duty when he had spoken as an automaton to boring guests. He had not sought to talk to Katherine; that good-bye in the morning had been final, there could be no anticlimax, that would make it all futile.

And she had *understood*, she had realised his motive—this he knew and felt, but took no comfort from the thought.

And Katherine, with half an hour to herself, looked for and found that passage on page fifty-four of "Abelard and Héloïse" and she read:

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I remove to a distance from your person with an intention of avoiding you as an enemy. And yet I incessantly seek for you in my mind—I recall your image in my memory and in such different disquietudes I betray and contradict myself.—I hate you!—I love you! Shame presses me on all sides. I am at this moment afraid I should seem more indifferent than you are, and yet I am ashamed to discover my trouble.

Well—if he felt like that—what could be the end?

CHAPTER XXXI

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London seemed very noisy and tumultuous to Katherine when they returned to Berkeley Square, and the routine of her work came almost as a relief.

What would be the outcome of this visit to Valfreyne? She could not guess. That the Duke loved her she knew—but with what kind of love? With an almighty passion which one day would break all barriers and seek for fulfilment? Or with a restrained emotion which, when the temptation of her presence was removed, would settle down? But of what matter really whether he loved her with the one or the other, since both were equally forbidden and useless!

And she?—What were her feelings? She knew in her heart that if she were to permit herself to indulge in natural emotion, she could shower upon him a love that in its white heat of devotion and passion would make that which she had formerly given to Lord Algy appear but a puny schoolgirl thing.

She must not give way to any such feelings, though; the pain was quite bitter enough as it was—and nothing but stern discipline of mind and an iron self-control could make it bearable at all.

She felt restless during that week—on tenterhooks to know if she should see the Duke; hot and cold as she went into a room. But he did not come and she heard casually that he was still at Valfreyne. And on Saturday morning they went down to Blissington until the Monday afternoon, as was their custom at each week-end.

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Lady Garribardine watched Katherine critically and knew that she was suffering, and so she was unusually kind and witty and sarcastic, and acted as a tonic. She had a shrewd way of looking at men and things which always delighted Katherine, and they seemed to grow closer friends than ever.

"You are a great comfort to me, girl," she said. "I can talk to you and air all my notions as I could to a man—and you do not answer upon another subject. For you know, my dear, that if the basis of your argument with nine women out of ten happens to be that the sea is salt, they will reply that on the contrary the moon is made of green cheese! You mildly protest that it is the taste of the sea, not the composition of the moon which is in question, and then they say they totally disagree with you and that the sun is warm! You are done!—There is nothing left for you but to smile and talk of clothes!"

Katherine laughed delightedly. How well she knew this style of argument! Matilda had always practised it.

"I believe I owe to my dear lady the faculty of seeing a little differently."

"Not at all!—You always were as sharp as a needle. I may merely have encouraged you perhaps."

"It is through your kindness and sympathy that I have emerged and broken away from the stultifying bonds of my class. Oh! if you only knew how deep is my gratitude!"

She was very seldom moved like this, and Lady Garribardine looked at her closely.

"Tut, tut, child—you were made for great things, and it is because I realised this at once, almost, that I have sympathised with you. I could not have kept you back any more than I could have created qualities in you. I could merely have delayed your upward progress or, as I hope I have done, advanced it. The spirit in you is God-given and I have nothing to do with it."

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Katherine's eyes softened with love and reverence! Her dear, dear friend and benefactress!

When she was alone, Lady Garribardine thought deeply over everything, their respect and affection were mutual. It troubled her a little to see the girl so quiet—Mordryn had played quite fairly, she hoped—but yes—he could never do otherwise. She guessed what was the reason of the estrangement—if estrangement there was—on his side, and it caused her no permanent concern.

"When a man feels as Mordryn feels, no class prejudice in the world will keep him from the woman in the end! Only let him suffer enough and then give them an opportunity to meet, and all will be well!"

Thus she mused—And what a weight off her mind it would be to see them happily married! So that her conscience might be at rest, and she could feel that she had more than made up for her action of long ago. Yes—Katherine Bush was a peerless creature, and would be the brightest jewel in any crown. Not a trace of the jealousy or antagonism, which once or twice for the fraction of a second had sprung up from natural hereditary instinct and class prejudice, remained in her heart. Her clear and wise judgment had sifted and weighed all the pros and cons. No two human beings on earth were more suited to one another than her humble secretary from Bindon's Green and this great nobleman. And she could launch Katherine successfully, and make her accepted without question. And after the marriage, she could safely leave to the girl's own superb tact and common sense the task of maintaining the position of Duchess with illustrious distinction. So that the only barrier left to be overcome was Mordryn's tiresome prejudice about class. That most annoyingly obstinate sense of duty, and *noblesse oblige*—duty to his rank and to his race. But his mind was not narrow, and once he could have time freely to think out what real nobility meant, he would realise that highness of birth was not essential at all.

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Lady Garribardine knew the Duke's nature so well; she was aware that if she spoke to him upon this subject and sought to influence him more than her speech at the picnic had already done, his desire being so forcibly upon her side, he would then still more determinedly make up his mind not to be convinced from the fear that he was allowing inclination to weaken his sense of duty.

To leave fate to manage matters was the best plan, and to be ready to give a helping hand at the critical moment.

Mordryn was certainly suffering deeply or he would have returned to London, instead of staying on at Valfreyne.

Not by word or insinuation did she ever indicate to Katherine that she had remarked the Duke's interest in her, or the apparent cooling of it. Indeed, since that day at the Easter party when she had lightly spoken of his coming to the schoolroom, she had never mentioned him to her secretary in connection with herself at all. So on the surface everything was calm and peaceful, and life flowed in its accustomed stream.

Mordryn must be made to come to Berkeley Square again as of old, and he must not be allowed to see Katherine for some time. He must get into the way of dropping in as usual without fear.

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And in the third week after Whitsuntide, the Duke returned to town and did dine there, and Miss Bush was nowhere to be seen. He had spent very miserable days down in his beautiful home. He had not reached the stage of reason yet, he was merely fighting desire with all his might—while daily it grew stronger.

How cold her hand had been when they had said a polite good-bye on the Tuesday morning; he could feel it through the glove! How pale her face had looked, too! He hoped to God she was not suffering; that would be too cruel, and he could not feel guiltless if it were so. He had certainly played upon her feelings, although in the most subtle manner, which made his conduct the more cowardly and inexcusable. This thought brought extreme discomfort, and plunged him into frantic work. He filled all his hours with the business of his estate, in order to banish memory, but with no great success, so at last he came up to London, determined to crush out every weakness. But when he went to Berkeley Square to dine he felt agitated, and he knew that he was fearing and yet hoping to see Katherine.

But he caught no glimpse of her, nor was she even mentioned, it was as though she had never been. He grew anxious—had she left Seraphim's service? This must be ascertained immediately, before he left the house.

"Miss Bush is not dining to-night, Seraphim?" he said, after dinner, when he had a moment with his hostess. "I hope she is well?"

"Yes, thanks," and Her Ladyship turned the conversation at once, so that he was left with this meagre information.

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As he drove away to St. James's, he found himself thinking incessantly of the girl.

She had understood. She was so fine, she had grasped the situation completely—had she not herself explained to him the duty he owed to his race?

But a woman who could take such an abstract view must surely have a very wonderful soul! Every one of her ideas had shown the highest sense of duty, the most profound grasp of what was meant by *noblesse oblige*. He remembered even her remark about his attending the House of Lords, how she had said it was cowardly of him to shirk his work there just because he so despised modern views. In what high esteem, too, she was held by Seraphim—a woman not to be imposed upon by any mere charm, and one who would bring the most critical judgment to bear upon every question before she would accord her friendship.—And that Katherine had Lady Garribardine's friendship in full, he knew.

He went into his library which looked out on the Green Park, and he opened the window side and walked on to the terrace. In the distance the roar of Piccadilly thundered by, but his immediate neighbourhood was quiet and he could think.

He reviewed every minute incident from the beginning of his acquaintance with Katherine that night not so very long ago at the house of Gerard Strobridge. She had admitted that it was she herself who had desired this meeting after she had heard him speak. That proved that she had been drawn to him even then. And how attractive she had appeared, how cultivated and polished, how clever and refined! And to think that such achievement was the result of steadfastness of purpose! A will to compass an ideal against extraordinary odds. An intelligence great enough to realise that facts alone count, and that no assumption of the rights of ladyhood, or demonstration in words, would convince anyone, but only the inward reality of fineness of soul directing outward action. How much more meritorious and to be respected was her achievement than than if these things had been her natural heritage! She had obtained a state of perfection through deliberate intention in a far greater degree than anyone he knew but Seraphim. Her every idea, thought, expression and point of view, accorded exactly with his own. Her sense of duty was paramount. Her level-headedness, and her common sense, and her balance were such as he had never before seen in woman.

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And she was young and beautiful, and in perfect health. No nervous fancies beset that evenly poised brain.

Suddenly, as he stared up into the deep blue starlit sky, it seemed that the scales fell from his eyes, and fog was lifted from his inner vision of the soul.

This beloved creature—daughter of an auctioneer and granddaughter of a butcher—was truly and really an aristocrat in the purest and truest sense of the term. And just because he could trace his pedigree back for countless generations, who was he to stand aside and not give her her due when her spirit and character were so infinitely above him? (Thus love engenders humility in noble hearts!)

Where in the whole world could he find one so worthy to share his great name and great estate? He laughed aloud in glee! It would not be giving way to temptation for personal joy to think of her as his Duchess, but it would be conferring the greatest honour upon his house that it had ever known.

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He marvelled at his blindness—marvelled at his pitifully conventional point of view. How had it ever weighed with him a second? How had he not realised at once the utter paltriness of the designation of aristocrat unless the inner being carries out what that word is intended to convey?

He thought of his wife Laura, with her stupid, mean little brain, developing into madness. He thought of Gerard's wife Beatrice—of what use was she to any man? He thought of his own cousin, Dulcie Dashington, with her vulgar barmaid's instincts, and her degradation of her great state, and he thought of all the crew of frivolous, soulless, mindless worldlings who had flung themselves at his head at Blissington, any one of whom society would call a well-bred lady suitable for him to marry and take to his home!

And then he thought of Katherine's simple dignity. She had not tried to entrap him. She had not been insulted at his holding back, she had understood. In her humility of greatness, she had *understood* what would be likely to be his view—or rather the view of his class.

But now he saw the truth, and the truth was that she stood out a star among womankind and none other was worthy to tie the latchet of her shoe.

He would not hesitate another second. He would telephone in the morning to Seraphim and propose himself for Saturday, and then he should see her—this sweet Katherine—and talk to her and tell her the truth. And if she would so honour him then she should be his own.

The vision exalted him. He let his imagination, curbed and denied expression for so long, have full rein. She was not cold by nature, she would not have to simulate passion like Julia Scarrisbrooke! Hers, if she felt it at all, would be real. She had experienced that part of love before. He even thought of this without a pang, for that was past—and something told him that she was not indifferent to him now. How enchanting to make her really love him—how divine to teach her all the shades of that "something beyond" which she had asked him about!

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And then their life together there at Valfreyne! Yes, this was the true kind of strength which she had spoken of, the strength which breaks down all shams.

And to think how near he had been to allowing the stupid, blind, hypocritical ideas of his world to part them forever! He must have been mad, since he had known her worth always, from the first day. Seraphim would help him after all—had she not told him not to go against his conscience, but only against custom and tradition and any other man-made barrier? And now conscience was with him, and he would break every bar which divided him from his heart's delight!

Lady Garribardine's surprise was great on receiving the telephone message in the morning: Might His Grace speak to Her Ladyship personally?

Katherine repeated the message of the servant.

Certainly His Grace might.

Katherine handed the receiver and was preparing to leave the room, but Lady Garribardine made a sign for her to stay while she sat up in bed.

"Is that you, Mordryn—Oh!—Why, of course you may come down to-morrow! Yes—London is hot. It will only be a dull party—Gwendoline and the Colvins and old Tom Hawthorne. I was merely going for rest myself. You don't mind, you would like that? —Oh! very well, come either by motor or the three o'clock train. All right—good-bye."

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Then she looked at Katherine who met her eyes with a perfectly unmoved face.

"The Duke proposes himself to come to us to-morrow at Blissington, he is bored with London, and out of sorts."

But no joy appeared on the secretary's countenance; in fact she turned a shade paler, as she asked if she should transmit any orders to the housekeeper about his room.

"She feels things like the devil," Her Ladyship thought. "But Mordryn has evidently come to his senses, so they will presently settle the matter all right."

Katherine was glad that her duties now took her out shopping, she felt she must be in the open air and free to think.

What did this mean? Why was he coming to Blissington so suddenly? Would it produce a climax in her fate?

And as Mordryn had done the night before on his terrace overlooking the Green Park, so she too reviewed all their acquaintance and what it had grown to mean to her—something very bitter sweet.

Should she allow herself a fool's paradise for just a day? Should she let him make love to her, if that was his intention in coming to Blissington? But no, she must be firm with herself and act always as she thought right. But her mind was in a turmoil, and she felt tired and excited. The picture held out nothing but pain.

If he came and made love to her, she would have to cut his protestations short. And if he ignored her, that would hurt still more. She devoutly wished she might run away.

At luncheon the next day, after their arrival at Blissington, Her Ladyship said rather irrelevantly:

"You look thoroughly tired out, girl. I advise you to take a rug and a book and go out under the chestnut trees in the beautiful air, and have a nap—and don't come in for tea if you do not want to, there are so few of us I can manage by myself."

And Katherine, glad to escape, did as she was bid.

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CHAPTER XXXII

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When the Duke arrived by motor, tea had just been brought out on the terrace at the eastern side of the house. His glance travelled rapidly over the group. Miss Bush was not present.

His impatience had been growing and growing ever since the Thursday night when his resolution had been taken, and now he almost felt like a boy in his great disappointment at noting Katherine's absence.

How was he going to talk to the Colvins and Tom Hawthorne and old Gwendoline! However, he did manage to be almost his usual self, though Lady Garribardine was quite aware that his nerves were strung to a high tension.

She got through tea as quickly as possible, and then walked him off to see a new set of herbaceous borders.

The very second that they were alone, Mordryn began to talk openly to her. He had determined to have no further cross purposes of any kind.

"Do you guess, Seraphim, what has brought me here to-day?" he asked.

"I have some shrewd idea—you have decided to appreciate reality and discard appearance, as my Katherine Bush would say."

"That is it. Have I your sympathy, dear friend?"

"My warmest sympathy, Mordryn; your happiness means a very great deal to me. I have had some horrible moments in those past years, of remorse for my part in your sorrows—but if you secure this girl, I can feel that you will be amply compensated."

"I am deeply in love, Seraphim, and you, I know, will not laugh at me, or think it absurd."

She gave him a frank smile full of affection.

"Indeed, no—and what is more important, the girl will not laugh either. She is full of passion, Mordryn—have you ever watched her little nostrils quiver? You will have no colourless time with her! She is not of the type of poor Lăo Delemar, Gerard's friend, or Julia Scarrisbrooke! The fierce red blood rushes through her veins!—But she is too entirely self-controlled to let even me see what her real feelings are, though I shrewdly suspect she is in love with you—You, the man, Mordryn—and not, strange to say, the Dukedom at all!"

His Grace thrilled with delight—as why not, indeed! Of all beautiful and maligned things, he knew real passion was the rarest!

"If it had been the Dukedom, she could have tantalized me into committing any madness—weeks ago—but she has done nothing of the sort. She has simply *understood*, that is the wonderful part."

"She is an amazing creature, a wonderful character, old friend—perfectly honest and intensely proud. Not with the pride which sticks its chin in the air, but that which carries the head high; there is all the difference in the world between the two. Upstarts nearly always have their chins in the air, but are unacquainted with the other attitude. She will make the most perfect Duchess your house has ever known—And think of your children!"

The Duke drew in his breath sharply, a new joy permeated him at her words—"Just think of your children! Why, my dream of the six sturdy boys may yet come true!"

"Seraphim—really!"

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Her ladyship chuckled happily. "Now we must use common sense; there must not be a flaw in the whole affair. If she agrees to marry you, I will begin to arrange the situation at once. I will bring her out more and present her to people—and we will not announce the engagement for a few weeks. No one will dare to question who she is, or where she came from if I choose to do that. Some of them may even suggest that she is the result of some past indiscretion of one of the family that I have adopted. They may think what they like! She is so absolutely honest, she would tell anyone the truth herself without a care—but I think I shall advise her to be silent, and let people make up what they please. No one can dispute her perfect refinement or suitability to take any position in the world."

"Seraphim, you are an angel."

"No, I am not—I am merely a capable craftsman. I like to do everything I undertake well. Your Duchess shall start unhandicapped."

"How deep is my gratitude, dear friend!"

"Tut, tut!"

But her dark eyes beamed mistily. "When I see you safely off—with the knot tied, on your way to Valfreyne for the honeymoon—I shall feel content."

"Where is she?"

"I told her to go and rest under the chestnuts this afternoon. She looked as pale as a ghost."

"May I find her there, then, now?"

"Yes—be off! And bless you!"

They wrung hands, and the Duke strode away looking, as Her Ladyship admitted, with a fond half-sigh, still the hero of any woman's dream. His years sat so lightly upon him.

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But he searched under the chestnuts and beyond, and Katherine was nowhere to be seen. A rug was folded beneath one great trunk—she had evidently been there, and had now wandered on and perhaps was not far off.

He continued his search for some time without success, and when he reached the edge of the near woods, with their beautiful paths, some of which ran down to a bit of ornamental water just big enough to be called a lake, he stopped, puzzled as to which one to follow. His heart was beating as it had not beat for years. He decided to go straight to the water's edge to a Chinese tea-house which was there, and when he came at length in sight of this, he perceived the flutter of a grey linen skirt disappearing round the corner of it—On the verandah which overhung the water, there were great white water lilies growing in masses just beneath, while two stately swans swam about in the distance; the sun was sinking, it was past six o'clock; and the lights were very lovely and all was serene and still.

His footfalls did not sound on the soft turf, and Katherine did not know of his approach until he actually stood before her on the broad verandah step.

She was leaning against the balustrade gazing out over the lake, and she turned and caught sight of him.

He came forward with outstretched hands, his face aglow.

"So I have found you at last!" he cried, gladly. "What made you hide away here all alone?"

Katherine controlled herself sternly. She shook hands calmly, saying it was cool by the water and a pleasant place to be.

"Solitude is good sometimes."

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She had felt too restless to stay beneath the trees—even her will could not keep her disturbed thoughts from speculation as to what the day might bring. And now the Duke was here beside her, and the situation must be faced.

He came close and leaned upon the quaint wooden rails trying to look down into her averted face, while he whispered:

"I had rather enjoy a *solitude à deux*."

He saw that she was pale and that her manner was restrained. Did she possibly misunderstand the purpose of his coming?

"Look," and she pointed over to the swans—"they perhaps agree with you—they swim lazily about together, dignified and composed, far from turmoil and agitating currents. One envies the birds and beasts and fishes—sometimes," and she sighed.

"You must not sigh—look at me, Katherine. I want to see your eyes."

But she disobeyed him and turned the broad lids down. He leaned closer still, and this caused a wave of emotion to sweep over her, producing the same feeling which she had once thought only Lord Algy in all the world could evoke in her—so that the Duke saw those little nostrils quiver, which his friend Seraphim had spoken to him

about, and the sight gave him great joy.

"Look at me, Katherine!" and now his voice was full of command.

Then she slowly raised her gray-green eyes and he saw that they were troubled, in spite of the passion that lay in their depths.

"Why do you come here and speak to me like this?" and in her voice there was reproach. "We said farewell at Valfreyne—that was the end—I understood—Why do you come again to trouble me now?"

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"Because I could not keep away—because I love you, darling child."

She drew back, shivering with the pain of the struggle which was developing in her soul.

"Hush, you must not say that to me, I ask you not to, please."

But since coldness and repulsion were not what he read in her glance, her words did not discourage him.

"I was very foolish at Valfreyne, Katherine, ever to have said farewell, but now I have come here to Blissington to tell you that I love you passionately, my darling, and your dear sympathy and understanding saw into my mind, and grasped the prejudices therein. But now the blindness has fallen from my eyes—I adore you, my Beloved One—Katherine, I want you to be my wife."

His voice had never been more beautiful. His splendid presence had never appeared more impressive, nor the fascination of the man more supreme. And he was there, a suppliant before her asking her to be his wife!

For a few seconds her brain reeled. The summit of her ambition was reached—and not ambition alone, but what now seemed to matter more, the realisation of true love. Both were there for her to take and to enjoy. The fateful moment had come. She was face to face with the great problem of her life. How could she relinquish all this glory, just to keep faith with her ideal of right?

She looked up into his proud face and saw it transfigured with worship, and she gave a little cry—No, she could never deceive him, he was far too fine for that. Whatever came, between them there should be only truth. But even so, a flood of passionate emotion burst all bonds, the whole deep currents of her nature were stirred, and must find vent before the final renunciation.

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"Ah!" she cried, and let herself be clasped in his embrace, then, "I love you, I love you!" she went on wildly.—"Kiss me—hold me, let me feel what it is like to be there next your heart—what it would mean—what it *could* mean, if it might only be.—Oh! you do not know what it costs really to say good-bye—Do you remember once when I told you that I knew one side of love and asked you if there was not something beyond? Well, I know now that there is—you have taught me to feel it—It is the soul's victory—I love you with everything in me, with my body and my spirit and my life!"

But she could articulate no further, for the Duke, intoxicated with emotion, strained her to his heart, bruising her lips with kisses which seemed to transport them both to paradise.

Here was no timid lover! But one with a nature as fiercely passionate as her own!

"Ah, God, how divine!" and he sighed when at last after long, blissful seconds his lips left hers. "Katherine, how dare you talk such folly to me of bidding me good-bye! You shall never leave me again, you are absolutely mine."

"Hush!" and she put her hand over his mouth tenderly, while she drew herself out of his arms. "As far as love goes I am indeed all yours, the mightiness of this passion has swept away all other thoughts, but now you will have to listen to me—and you must not speak until the end.—See, let us sit here for the story is long."

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Just to humour her he allowed her to draw him to the seat, and with eyes devouring her with fond impatience, he waited for her to begin.

"Promise that you will not interrupt me until I have finished, no matter what you may feel or think."

He gave his word quite gaily and took and held her hand.

Katherine controlled her every nerve now and told the story in a deep, quiet voice—with no dramatic gestures, drawing a graphic picture of her home and of the office at Liv and Dev's and the effect upon her of the voices of the gentlemen who came to borrow money. And then she told of the coming of Lord Algy and of their acquaintance, and then she paused for a second and glanced at Mordryn's face. It had grown a little strained, but he grasped more tightly her hand.

"Now you must listen very carefully and try to understand. I suppose I must have been in love with him in a passionate kind of way, he was so very handsome and gay and full of charm—Well, I decided to go away with him for three days—I decided deliberately, not so much from love as because I wanted to understand life, and to know the nature of men, and the point of view of an aristocrat."

The Duke's face became ashen white and his hand turned icy cold, but he did not speak. So with a little break in her voice, Katherine went on:

"—Well, we went to Paris on the Saturday and came back on the Monday night; by that time I knew all the passionate side of love; he aroused all those instincts in me which I once told you about—but he never touched my soul—that slept until you came.—I never meant to stay with him or remain his mistress; it was for experience, and that was all—and we parted at Charing Cross Station, and he went to Wales to his family to shoot, and I went home. I wrote to him and told him that I would not see him again. Then I made up my mind that I would leave Livingstone & Devereux's, and begin my next rise in the world. Oh! you do not know how ignorant I was then! But I never lost sight of the goal I meant to win, to win by knowing how to fill the position desired. I had vast dreams even in those early days. I was fortunate to obtain the situation of Lady Garribardine's secretary, and on leaving the house after being engaged, I met Lord Algy by chance in the park. He was very much upset and unhappy at my determination never to see him again—and he asked me to marry him. I refused, of course, because I knew even then that he only attracted one side of me, and also I was not educated enough at that time to have been able to carry off the position with success. I explained everything to him, and made him promise to try and be a fine soldier—he was being sent to Egypt for his extravagance, and so we parted, and I have never spoken to him since. My goal now was definitely fixed; I meant to educate myself to be able to take the highest position to be obtained in England some day. I used to long for Algy sometimes, but only every now and then, when some scent or sound brought him back to me; that is why I said such love is unbalanced and animal—the memory of it is always aroused by something of the senses. Then, after I went to Lady Garribardine, Mr. Strobridge came upon the scene, and his great cultivation inspired me, and presently we became friends. I deliberately encouraged his friendship so as to polish my own brain. I knew he was in love with me, so this may have been wrong, but since he was weak enough to allow himself to feel in that way for me knowing he was married, he must pay the price in pain, not I. He has always been a loyal friend after the beginning, when he lost his head one night and made a great scene. My determination never wavered; it was in every way to improve myself, always to be perfectly true and finally to obtain the height of my ambition. Things went on in this way for a year and a half, Lady Garribardine always helping me and encouraging my education until we became deep and intimate friends. But the goal never seemed to come in view until I went to the House of Lords that day and saw you and heard you speak. In a lightning flash the object of all my striving seemed revealed to me, and I began to lay my plans, but with some unusual excitement, because something in you had aroused an emotion in my heart, the meaning of which I could not then determine. That night I went to the theatre with my sister and there saw in the stalls Lord Algy, returned from Egypt, I suppose, on leave. The sight of him moved me, I felt cold and sick, but I realised once for all that my feeling for him had been only physical, and was passing away.

"I had arranged with Mr. Strobridge to have the dinner, and to let me meet you, not as the secretary, because I knew that your unconscious prejudice would be insurmountable then. And I thought that if you liked me that night, afterwards the prejudice might not be so deep when you did know my real position.—You will remember what followed, but the second part of the story begins with the afternoon you came into the schoolroom. Until then I had never had a backward thought or regret or worry about Lord Algy. I was only glad to have had the experience, that was all. But after I had told you of my life and parentage, you bent down and kissed my hand. And from that moment doubts began to trouble me. You had started the awakening of my soul. And as love grew and grew, so the blackness of the shadow increased. I knew that if I deceived you I should only draw unhappiness and never respect myself. Where love is there can be no deceit—and so at last even before I went to Valfreyne I put all thoughts of you from me. Although each day you seemed to grow more dear—until I knew that you meant everything to me and were my wild and passionate desire—I saw that my position in life held you back, and I was almost glad that it should be so—because I knew that if you should really love me, and conquer your prejudice against my class, it would come to this, that I must tell you the truth and that it would part us forever. And I have tried to prevent you from telling me of your love, I have tried to restrain my own for you, but now I am left defenceless—I love you, but I realise that what I did in the past the world could never forgive, and so I must pay the price of my own action, and say an eternal farewell."

Her voice died away in a sob, and she did not then look at the Duke's face; his hand had grown nerveless in its clasp and she drew hers away from him, and rose slowly to her feet. The awful moment was over, the story was done—she had been true to herself and had lost her love—and now she must have courage to behave with dignity and go back to the house.

But she must just look at him once more, her dearly loved one! He sat there in an attitude of utter dejection, his face buried in his hands.—For long aching moments Katherine watched him, but she did not speak and life and hope and purpose died out of her, drowned in overwhelming grief.

Then after this horrible silence the blood seemed to creep back to the Duke's heart, and reaction set in. He began gradually to think. His level judgment, his faculty for analyzing things, reasserted themselves, and enabled him to view the whole subject in right perspective, and a re-awakening to happiness slowly filled him.

He looked up to Katherine at last as she stood there leaning against a pillar of the balustrade, and he read no humiliation or shame or contrition in her great eyes, but only a deep sorrow and tenderness and love.

And suddenly he realised the splendour of her courage, the glorious force of character which had enabled her to jeopardize—nay, indeed, relinquish, love and high estate and ambition, rather than be false to herself.

For she need not have told him anything of her story. That fact was the great proof of her truth. He had asked no questions about her past. She had made no dramatic virtue of necessity, she had done this thing that she might not soil her own soul with deceit.

Of what matter was a paltry venial sin! If sin it were, the shame of which lay wholly in a too rigid convention—of what matter to him were three days in the past, long before they had met! That she was altogether his now in body and soul he had no faintest doubt. Was there any man living such a fool or puritan that he would renounce life's joy for such a foolish thing! The very qualities of courage and justice which her action in telling him had shown, would wipe out any sin and give him ample guaranties for future security and peace. Such a woman was worth all the world! And ridiculous puny conventions were of no account. Did he dream of looking upon Seraphim as degraded because she had been his love long ago, and not his wife? Of course not! Then why should he feel scorn for Katherine who had not even betrayed a husband, but had been free? Scorn was for such women as Julia Scarrisbrooke—creatures who simulated passion for one man after another, merely as a game—people who held love cheaply and who knew not even the glimmerings of obligation to their own souls.

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Away with all shams of the world! None of them should influence him! He had found a spirit strong and free and honest. Reality had won forever, and appearance had vanished away.

So he rose and came to her again and once more took her into his arms, and bending kissed her white forehead as if in blessing.

"Oh! my Beloved—And you deemed that this would part us, this long-past ugly thing! Foolish one!—You do not know how much I love you! Far beyond any of the earthly things. Darling, I honour your brave courage. I worship your truth. You shall come to me and be my adored wife, and the mistress of my home. Katherine, heart of me, whisper that all sorrows are over, and let us enter heaven together and forget all else."

But Katherine, overwrought with emotion, lay there against his breast, limp and white. She was beyond speech, only her spirit cried out in thankfulness to God for having given her the strength to tell the truth.

Joys kills not—and soon under her lover's fond caresses, warm life rushed back to her. And thus in the evening glory of sunset they found content.

For the one sublime thing in this sad, mad world is LOVE.

CHAPTER XXXIII

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It was more than a month since, in the late July of 1914, the joy bells had rung out on all the Duke's estates for the birth of the heir, the infant Marquis of Valfreyne. And it was just a year since Katherine had become his Duchess!

And what a year in a woman's life!

Days and weeks and months of happiness, of ever-increasing understanding and companionship, with one whose every action and thought inspired respect and love.

The bond between the two had grown always more deep, more sacred, as the days went on, and as Katherine said one morning fondly:

"Mordryn, we are just like *Rochester* and *Jane Eyre*, not modern people, because we never want to be away from one another for a minute—only, thank God, you are not blind."

Theirs was a real marriage, and Lady Garribardine was fully content. She took personal pride in the manner in which her protégé fulfilled the rôle of Duchess, and she rejoiced to see her old love in the midst of such bliss.

For their union was divine and complete, and the coming of the baby Valfreyne had been the crowning joy.

It was a continual source of delight to the Duke to watch Katherine, and to know how absolutely his belief in her had been justified. To watch and to note with what supreme dignity she carried out the duties of his great state. And as each occasion came when some special effort was required, after it was over she would rush into his arms, and caress him, and ask to be petted, and told that he was satisfied, and that his beggar Duchess had pleased him and done all that he would wish!

The year of perfect happiness and gratified ambition had moulded Katherine into a new and noble being, in whom graciousness and sweetness and gentleness enhanced all her old charms.

She continued to make Lady Garribardine her model for everything.

The world had experienced a nine days' wonder when the engagement was announced; but, as Her Ladyship said, there was no use in having kept her iron heel upon the neck of society for all these years, if she could not now impose upon it unquestioned what she wished. So Katherine had had a triumphant entry, and very little antagonism to surmount. She paid visits to all the Duke's relatives under Lady Garribardine's wing, and her own tact and serene dignity had conquered them all, and turned them into friends.

"She is of no particular birth," Her Ladyship was wont to say, "but *I know* who she is, so you need none of you trouble yourselves about it. I will be answerable for her fitness for the post."

Thus the most romantic and fantastic rumours got about, and Lady Garribardine wrote amusedly to Gerard in Russia, after the wedding in September, giving a description of events:

I issued stern commands to Bronson, G., that there should be no talk below stairs, no gratifying of anybody's curiosity, and I think I can count upon their devotion to me, and their great liking for the girl herself, to feel that they will coöperate. Her family were the entertaining thing. The sisters from America wrote sensible letters, realising that the great divide had come, and fortunately the Bindon's Green remainder had themselves cut her off from their intimacy, because she was what they called a "paid servant," "living in," apparently a degraded status in that incredible class! Mordryn received a letter from her sister-in-law a few days after the news was in the papers, a most remarkable bit of feminine spite, which caused us all glee: informing him that as he had no doubt been sadly deceived by Katherine Bush, she felt it her duty to enlighten him as to who she really was! Great stress was laid upon the butcher grandfather, and regrets that she herself had contracted an alliance so far beneath her station, but having experienced the unpleasantness of it, she felt it was only right to warn the Duke!

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I myself wrote the reply as though I had been his secretary, announcing that His Grace was in possession of all these facts and more from Miss Bush herself, and with due appreciation for the motive which had caused the letter to be written, the Duke thanked her for it and would not require to hear from her again!

So all that part is disposed of fortunately, and Katherine can go ahead.

Mordryn is frantically in love and so is she. Mordryn is like a boy and looks ten years younger. He showers gifts upon her, and on the day of the wedding, when he walked down the aisle with his beautiful new Duchess on his arm, I never have seen a man so proud. And when one comes to think of it, G., he has every right to be, for I must say the creature carries out the whole thing with a perfection which justifies my greatest expectations of her, and I think they stand a very fair chance of happiness, because the girl has a logical brain. She is not one of those fools who only like the excitement of a thing's being out of reach; she has the supreme wisdom of a sense of intrinsic values. She realises that she has secured a great position which will give ample scope for her vastest schemes—all high and fine ones, G.; we shall hear of her in the future, boy, not only as a beautiful Duchess, but as a great Englishwoman. And when one reflects that she has accomplished all this, won her game, so to speak, through sheer force of character, sheer knowledge of cause and effect, sheer calculation of action and no low scheming, one cannot but deeply respect her. Force will always win, but it will bring its own retribution if it has been used ill. Katherine has had the great cleverness to use it always well. Weak virtue may draw some kind of namby-pamby heavenly halo, but perfect honesty and strong common sense secure power and a substantial reward on earth! It will be very interesting to watch her career as it goes on. She is grateful for her happiness and knows that it is only weaklings who, once having secured this joy, then let it be taken from them by their own foolishness and discontent. Her whole mind is disciplined and ruled by an astonishingly sound judgment. Impulse is her servant, not her master; every view is

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broad. She sees all things as they really are without the illusion which nearly every woman invests them with. And, above all, she understands Mordryn, G.—and with all her balance and level-headedness, she is as passionate and vital and living as a woman can be, and that is the one kind of being who keeps a man with his temperament forever content. After his life of restraint and abstinence and solitary grief, to have such a creature for a companion must be no mean delight. So altogether, G., my dear boy, I am satisfied. As for his age, he does not look a day more than forty; they probably will have a glorious fifteen years, and you cannot have everything in life. He suits her far better than some younger man, they are made for one another. Mordryn has perfect health and strength, and no human being could be more attractive. You have not a notion of his ways as a lover, G.! He would be a lesson to any of these uncouth, cold-blooded, barley-water drinking modern young men!

Our Duchess is a fortunate creature, I assure you, in more ways than one! So we need not trouble about that or make unto ourselves a picture of a young woman and an elderly man! They are like a pair of love birds—and they will probably have that sturdy heir at once that I have always longed for, and then I can rest in peace.

And when Gerard read this at Moscow, where he happened to be, he was glad, and yet sad.

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The wedded lovers wandered for several months in France and Italy, returning to England only in the new year, and all this interesting foreign travel expanded still further Katherine's mental gifts. Then after some triumphant weeks in London, there were long months of joy at Valfreyne, awaiting the coming of the son and heir.

And now in the early days of September, 1914, they were all again assembled there with Lady Garribardine for the christening—a great and important event!

But war and strain and sorrow lay with that black shadow over England, fallen with a suddenness which no one could realise as yet. Rumours of reverses had come—miscalculation of somebody's plans. And anxiety was tense.

Katherine was resting on the sofa in her boudoir, which looked out south over the exquisite gardens in the state suite at Valfreyne—the suite of her who should be reigning Duchess, in which she had wandered with the Duke on that Monday in Whitsuntide, when they had said their futile farewell! And now it was her own! And in an hour, they would go into the chapel and the splendid chubby baby heir would receive his many names.

Katherine felt very well and in herself supremely happy, in spite of the clouds over England. How good providence had been to her! How grateful her spirit felt!

She lay there in a peaceful dream, her half closed eyes taking in the wonderful beauty of the room, with its late seventeenth century magnificence and yet subtle touches of home.

Then the door opened, and the Duke came in with letters for her from the second post, and the opened *Times* he had been reading in his hand—He put them down upon a table near, and took a low chair close to his lady's side, and she moved a little from the sofa so that she lay half in his arms.

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"My worshipped one!" he murmured fondly, kissing her hair, and smoothing it with infinite tenderness.

"Oh! Mordryn, I am so happy—are not you? What a sublime day for us, dear Love! Just to think that we have that darling little son, the very essence of us both! Tell me that he and I mean everything to you. Tell me that I have given you all you want?"

He reassured her with passionate insistence, as though he could not say enough, and then he asked her again and again if she loved him. It was as if he must have confirmation of her passion for him, and her consent.

And Katherine played with him fondly as was her wont, being altogether fascinating and full of foolish, tender love tricks, which never failed to intoxicate his senses.

But soon he held her closely to him, some shadow in his eyes—and with his free arm he reached over to the table and picked up the *Times*.

Then he spoke, and his wonderful voice sounded a little strained:

"My darling, there is some news in the paper this morning, which may cause you some concern—so I have brought it to you here while we are alone. It is about the retreat from Mons."

Katherine raised herself and looked at him enquiringly, and he found the column and began to read the glorious story, and of one supremely splendid stand made by a certain Guards regiment, which is now world-famed.

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Then he paused and hesitated for a moment. For the name of the bravest who would gain the V. C. was Lord Algernon Fitz-Rufus who, single-handed, had performed an

act of daring courage, resourcefulness and self-sacrifice, which had saved his men, but who had paid with his life for his last supreme effort, being shot through the heart as he had returned to a wounded comrade, Lieutenant Jack Kilcourcy, to bring him in to safety from that bloody corpse-strewn wood.

"What is it, Mordryn?—Please go on."

So the Duke read to the end, and then put the paper down.

And suddenly Katherine's heart seemed to stand still, and a mist darkened the room, and when it lifted she saw only the young *débonnaire* face of her once dear lover gazing at her again, her gay blue eyes alight with laughter and love. And with a stifled cry, she buried her head on the Duke's shoulder and burst into tears.

Thus Algy had fulfilled her hopes for him and become a fine soldier, and had died gallantly to save a comrade—A hero indeed!

Transcriber's Note: Obvious punctuation and printer's errors were corrected. Inconsistent hyphenation and spelling were retained.

Page reference numbers to illustrations were corrected. Links in the List of Illustrations lead to the image, not page.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CAREER OF KATHERINE
BUSH ***

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