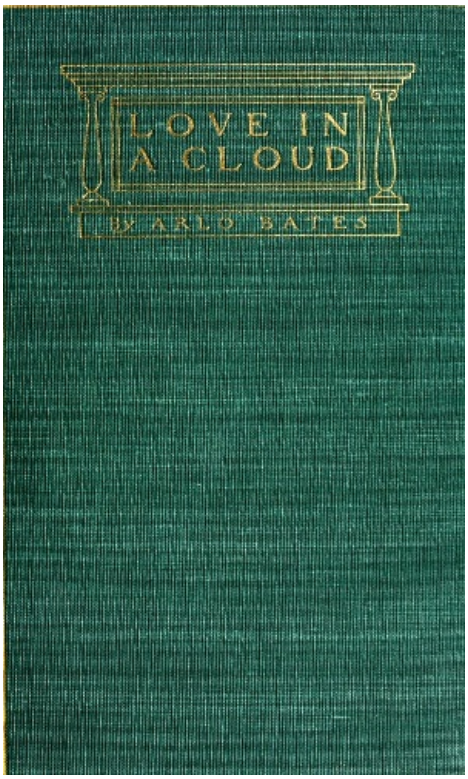
Title: Love in a Cloud: A Comedy in Filigree

Author: Arlo Bates

Release date: May 28, 2013 [EBook #42831]

Language: English



LOVE IN A CLOUD

A Comedy in Filigree

By ARLO BATES

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
1900

LOVE IN A CLOUD

A Comedy in Filigree

By ARLO BATES

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
1900

TO
MRS. E. L. HOMANS

CONTENTS

LOVE IN A CLOUD

I

THE MISCHIEF OF A MAID

"No, my dear May, I positively will not hear another word about 'Love in a Cloud.' I am tired to death of the very sound of its stupid name."

"Oh, Mrs. Harbinger," May Calthorpe responded, eagerly defensive, "it isn't a stupid name."

Mrs. Harbinger settled herself back into the pile of gay cushions in the corner of the sofa, and went on without heeding the interruption:—

"I have heard nothing but 'Love in a Cloud,' 'Love in a Cloud,' until it gives me a feeling of nausea. Nobody talks of anything else."

May nodded her head triumphantly, a bright sparkle in her brown eyes.

"That only shows what a perfectly lovely book it is," she declared.

Mrs. Harbinger laughed, and bent forward to arrange a ribbon at May's throat.

"I don't care if it is the loveliest book ever written," she responded; "I won't have it stuffed down my throat morning, noon, and night. Why, if you'll believe it, my husband, who never reads novels, not only read it, but actually kept awake over it, and after that feat he'll talk of it for months."

Pretty May Calthorpe leaned forward with more animation than the mere discussion of an anonymous novel seemed to call for, and caught one of her hostess's hands in both her own.

"Oh, did Mr. Harbinger like it?" she asked. "I am so interested to know what he thinks of it."

"You never will know from me, my dear," was the cool response. "I've forbidden him to speak of it. I tell you that I am bored to death with the old thing."

May started up suddenly from the sofa where she had been sitting beside Mrs. Harbinger. With rather an offended air she crossed to the fireplace, and began to arrange her hat before the mirror over the mantel. Mrs. Harbinger, smiling to herself, gave her attention to setting in order the cups on the tea-table before her. The sun of the April afternoon came in through the window, and from the polished floor of the drawing-room was reflected in bright patches on the ceiling; the brightness seemed to gather about the young, girlish face which looked out from the glass, with red lips and willful brown hair in tendrils over the white forehead. Yet as she faced her reflection, May pouted and put on the look of one aggrieved.

"I am sorry I mentioned the book if you are so dreadfully against it," she observed stiffly. "I was only going to tell you a secret about the author."

Mrs. Harbinger laughed lightly, flashing a comical grimace at her visitor's back.

"There you go again, like everybody else! Do you suppose, May, that there is anybody I know who hasn't told me a secret about the author? Why, I'm in the confidence of at least six persons who cannot deny that they wrote it."

May whirled around swiftly, leaving her reflection so suddenly that it, offended, as quickly turned its back on her.

"Who are they?" she demanded.

"Well," the other answered quizzically, "Mrs. Croydon, for one."

"Mrs. Croydon! Why, nobody could dream that she wrote it!"

"But they do. It must have been written by some one that is inside the social ring; and there is a good deal in the style that is like her other books. I do wish," she went on, with a note of vexation in her voice, "that Graham would ever forget to mix up my two tea-services. He is a perfect genius for forgetting anything he ought to remember."

She walked, as she spoke, to the bell, and as she passed May the girl sprang impulsively toward her, catching both her hands.

"Oh, Mrs. Harbinger!" she cried breathlessly. "I must tell you something before anybody comes."

"Good gracious, May, what is it now? You are as impulsive as a pair of bellows that could blow themselves."

The butler came ponderously in, in reply to her ring as she spoke, and the two women for the moment suspended all sign of emotion.

"Graham," Mrs. Harbinger said, with the air of one long suffering and well-nigh at the end of her patience, "you have mixed the teacups again. Take out the tray, and bring in the cups with the broad gold band."

Graham took up the tray and departed, his back radiating protest until the portière dropped behind him. When he was gone Mrs. Harbinger drew May down to a seat on the sofa, and looked

at her steadily.

"You evidently have really something to tell," she said; "and I have an idea that it's mischief. Out with it."

May drew back with heightened color.

"Oh, I don't dare to tell you!" she exclaimed.

"Is it so bad as that?"

"Oh, it isn't bad, only—Oh, I don't know what in the world you will think!"

"No matter what I think. I shan't tell you, my dear. No woman ever does that."

May regarded her with a mixture of curiosity and wistfulness in her look.

"You are talking that way just to give me courage," she said.

"Well, then," the other returned, laughing, "take courage, and tell me. What have you been doing?"

"Only writing letters."

"Only! Good gracious, May! writing letters may be worse than firing dynamite bombs. Women's letters are apt to be double-back-action infernal-machines; and girls' letters are a hundred times worse. Whom did you write to?"

"To the author of 'Love in a Cloud.'"

"To the author of 'Love in a Cloud'? How did you know him?"

Miss Calthorpe cast down her eyes, swallowed as if she were choking, and then murmured faintly: "I don't know him."

"What? Don't know him?" her friend demanded explosively.

"Only the name he puts on his book: Christopher Calumus."

"Which of course isn't his name at all. How in the world came you to write to him?"

The air of Mrs. Harbinger became each moment more judicially moral, while that of May was correspondingly humble and deprecatory. In the interval during which the forgetful Graham returned with the teacups they sat silent. The culprit was twisting nervously a fold of her frock, creasing it in a manner which would have broken the heart of the tailor who made it. The judge regarded her with a look which was half impatient, but full, too, of disapproving sternness.

"How could you write to a man you don't know," insisted Mrs. Harbinger,—"a man of whom you don't even know the name? How could you do such a thing?"

"Why, you see," stammered May, "I thought—that is—Well, I read the book, and—Oh, you know, Mrs. Harbinger, the book is so perfectly lovely, and I was just wild over it, and I—I—"

"You thought that being wild over it wasn't enough," interpolated the hostess in a pause; "but you must make a fool of yourself over it."

"Why, the book was so evidently written by a gentleman, and a man that had fine feelings," the other responded, apparently plucking up courage, "that I—You see, I wanted to know some things that the book didn't tell, and I—"

"You wrote to ask!" her friend concluded, jumping up, and standing before her companion. "Oh, for sheer infernal mischief commend me to one of you demure girls that look as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouths! If your father had known enough to have you educated at home instead of abroad, you'd have more sense."

"Oh, a girl abroad never would dare to do such a thing," May put in naïvely.

"But you thought that in America a girl might do what she pleases. Why, do you mean to tell me that you didn't understand perfectly well that you had no business to write to a man that you don't know? I don't believe any such nonsense."

May blushed very much, and hung her head.

"But I wanted so much to know him," she murmured almost inaudibly.

Mrs. Harbinger regarded her a moment with the expression of a mother who has reached that stage of exasperation which is next halting-place before castigation. Then she turned and walked vehemently up the drawing-room and back, a quick sprint which seemed to have very little effect in cooling her indignation.

"How long has this nonsense been going on?" she demanded, with a new sternness in her voice.

"For—for six weeks," answered May tearfully. Then she lifted her swimming eyes in pitiful appeal, and proffered a plea for mercy. "Of course I didn't use my own name."

"Five or six weeks!" cried Mrs. Harbinger, throwing up her hands.

"But at first we didn't write more than once or twice a week."

The other stared as if May were exploding a succession of torpedoes under her very nose.

"But—but," she stammered, apparently fairly out of breath with amazement, "how often do you write now?"

May sprang up in her turn. She faced her mentor with the truly virtuous indignation of a girl who has been proved to be in the wrong.

"I shan't tell you another word!" she declared.

Mrs. Harbinger seized her by the shoulders, and fairly pounced upon her in the swoop of her words.

"How often do you write now?" she repeated. "Tell me before I shake you!"

The brief defiance of May vanished like the flare of a match in a wind-storm.

"Every day," she answered in a voice hardly audible.

"Every day!" echoed the other in a tone of horror.

Her look expressed that utter consternation which is beyond any recognition of sin, but is aroused only by the most flagrant breach of social propriety. Again the culprit put in what was evidently a prayer for pity, couched in a form suggested by instinctive feminine cunning.

"Oh, Mrs. Harbinger, if you only knew what beautiful letters he writes!"

"What do I care for his beautiful letters? What did you want to drag me into this mess for? Now I shall have to do something."

"Oh, no, no, Mrs. Harbinger!" cried May, clasping her hands. "Don't do anything. You won't have to do anything. I had to tell you when he is coming here."

Mrs. Harbinger stared at the girl with the mien of one who is convinced that somebody's wits are hopelessly gone, and is uncertain whether they are those of herself or of her friend.

"Coming here?" she repeated helplessly. "When?"

"This afternoon. I am really going to meet him!" May ran on, flashing instantly from depression into smiles and animation. "Oh, I am so excited!"

Mrs. Harbinger seized the girl again by the shoulder, and this time with an indignation evidently personal as well as moral.

"Have you dared to ask a strange man to meet you at my house, May Calthorpe?"

The other cringed, and writhed her shoulder out of the clutch of her hostess.

"Of course not," she responded, taking in her turn with instant readiness the tone of just resentment. "He wrote me that he would be here."

The other regarded May in silence a moment, apparently studying her in the light of these new revelations of character. Then she turned and walked thoughtfully to a chair, leaving May to sit down again on the sofa by which they had been standing. Mrs. Harbinger was evidently going over in her mind the list of possible authors who might be at her afternoon tea that day.

"Then 'Love in a Cloud' was written by some one we know," she observed reflectively. "When did you write to him last?"

"When I was here yesterday, waiting for you to go to the matinée."

"Do you expect to recognize this unknown paragon?" asked Mrs. Harbinger with an air perhaps a thought too dispassionate.

A charming blush came over May's face, but she answered with perfect readiness:—

"He asked me to give him a sign."

"What kind of a sign?"

"He said he would wear any flower I named if I would—"

"Would wear one, too, you minx! That's why you have a red carnation at your throat, is it? Oh, you ought to be shut up on bread and water for a month!"

May showed signs of relapsing again into tears.

"I declare, I think you are just as horrid as you can be," she protested. "I wish I hadn't told you a word. I'm sure there was no need that I should. I—"

The lordly form of Graham the butler appeared at the drawing-room door.

"Mrs. Croydon," he announced.

II

THE MADNESS OF A MAN

While Mrs. Harbinger was receiving from May Calthorpe the disjointed confession of that young woman's rashness, her husband, Tom Harbinger, was having a rather confused interview with a client in his down-town office. The client was a middle-aged man, with bushy, sandy hair, and an expression of invincible simplicity not unmixed with obstinacy. Tom was evidently puzzled how to take his client or what to do with him. He had, as they talked, the air of being uncertain whether Mr. Barnstable was in earnest, and of not knowing how far to treat him seriously.

"But why do you come to me?" he asked at length, looking at his client as one regards a prize rebus. "Of course 'Love in a Cloud,' like any other book, has a publisher. Why don't you go there to find out who wrote it?"

The other shook his head wearily. He was a chunky man, seeming to be made largely of oleaginous material, and appearing to be always over-worn with the effort of doing anything with muscles and determination hopelessly flabby despite his continual persistence.

"I've been to them," he returned; "but they won't tell."

"Then why not let the matter pass? It seems to me—"

The other set his square jaw the more firmly amid its abundant folds of flabby flesh.

"Let it pass?" he interrupted with heavy excitement. "If something isn't done to stop the infernal impudence of these literary scribblers there will be no peace in life. There is nothing sacred! They ought to be punished, and I'll follow this rascal if it costs me every dollar I'm worth. I came to you because I thought you'd sympathize with me."

Mr. Harbinger moved uneasily in his chair like a worm on a hook.

"Why, really, Barnstable," he said, "I feel as you do about the impudence of writers nowadays, and I'd like to help you if I could; but—"

The other broke in with a solemn doggedness which might well discourage any hope of his being turned from his purpose by argument.

"I mean to bring suit for libel, and that's the whole of it."

"Perhaps then," the lawyer responded with ill concealed irritation, "you will be good enough to tell me whom the suit is to be against."

"Who should it be against? The author of 'Love in a Cloud,' of course."

"But we don't know who the author of that cursed book is."

"I know we don't know; but, damme, we must find out. Get detectives; use decoy advertisements; do anything you like. I'll pay for it."

Mr. Harbinger shrugged his shoulders, and regarded his client with an expression of entire hopelessness.

"But I'm not in the detective business."

The other gave no evidence of being in the least affected by the statement.

"Of course a lawyer expects to find out whatever is necessary in conducting his clients' business," he remarked, with the air of having disposed of that point. "There must be a hundred ways of finding out who wrote the book. An author ought not to be harder to catch than a horse-thief, and they get those every day. When you've caught him, you just have him punished to the extent of the law."

Harbinger rose from his chair and began to walk up and down with his hands in his pockets. The other watched him in silence, and for some moments nothing was said. At length the lawyer stopped before his client, and evidently collected himself for a final effort.

"But consider," he said, "what your case is."

"My case is a good case if there is any justice in the country. The man that wrote that book has insulted my wife. He has told her story in his confounded novel, and everybody is laughing over her divorce. It is infamous, Harbinger, infamous!"

He so glowed and smouldered with inner wrath that the folds of his fat neck seemed to soften and to be in danger of melting together. His little eyes glowed, and his bushy hair bristled with indignation. He doubled his fist, and shook it at Harbinger as if he saw before him the novelist who had intruded upon his private affairs, and he meant to settle scores with him on the spot.

"But nobody knew that you had a wife," Harbinger said. "You came here from Chicago without one, and we all thought that you were a bachelor."

"I haven't a wife; that's just the trouble. She left me four years ago; but I don't see that that makes any difference. I'm fond of her just the same; and I won't have her put into an anonymous

book."

Harbinger sat down again, and drew his chair closer to that in which the other seethed, molten with impotent wrath.

"Just because there's a divorced woman in 'Love in a Cloud,'" he said, "you propose to bring a suit for libel against the author. If you will pardon me, it strikes me as uncommon nonsense."

Barnstable boiled up as a caldron of mush breaks into thick, spluttering bubbles.

"Oh, it strikes you as uncommon nonsense, does it? Damme, if it was your wife you'd look at it differently. Isn't it your business to do what your clients want done?"

"Oh, yes; but it's also my business to tell them when what they want is folly."

"Then it's folly for a man to resent an insult to his wife, is it? The divorce court didn't make a Pawnee Indian of me. My temper may be incompatible, but, damme, Harbinger, I'm human."

Harbinger began a laugh, but choked the bright little bantling as soon as it saw the light. He leaned forward, and laid his hand on the other's knee.

"I understand your feelings, Barnstable," he said, "and I honor you for them; but do consider a little. In the first place, there is no probability that you could make a jury believe that the novelist meant you and your wife at all. Think how many divorce suits there are, and how well that story would fit half of them. What you would do would be to drag to light all the old story, and give your wife the unpleasantness of having everything talked over again. You would injure yourself, and you could hardly fail to give very serious pain to her."

Barnstable stared at him with eyes which were full of confusion and of helplessness.

"I don't want to hurt her," he stammered.

"What do you want to do?"

The client cast down his eyes, and into his sallow cheeks came a dull flush.

"I wanted to protect her," he answered slowly; "and I wanted—I wanted to prove to her that—that I'd do what I could for her, if we were divorced."

The face of the other man softened; he took the limp hand of his companion and shook it warmly.

"There are better ways of doing it than dragging her name before the court," he said. "I tell you fairly that the suit you propose would be ridiculous. It would make you both a laughing-stock, and in the end come to nothing."

The square jaw was still firmly set, but the small eyes were more wistful than ever.

"But I must do something," Barnstable said. "I can't stand it not to do anything."

Harbinger rose with the air of a man who considers the interview ended.

"There is nothing that you can do now," he replied. "Just be quiet, and wait. Things will come round all right if you have patience; but don't be foolish. A lawyer learns pretty early in his professional life that there are a good many things that must be left to right themselves."

Barnstable rose in turn. He seemed to be trying hard to adjust his mind to a new view of the situation, but it was evident enough that his brain was not of the sort to yield readily to fresh ideas of any kind. He examined his hat carefully, passing his thumb and forefinger round the rim as if to assure himself that it was all there; then he cleared his throat, and regarded the lawyer wistfully.

"But I must do something," he repeated, with an air half apologetic. "I can't just let the thing go, can I?"

"You can't do anything but let it go," was the answer. "Some time you will be glad that you did let it be. Take my word for it."

Barnstable shook his head mournfully.

"Then you take away my chance," he began, "of doing something—"

He paused in evident confusion.

"Of doing something?" repeated Harbinger.

"Why, something, you know, to please—"

"Oh, to please your wife? Well, just wait. Something will turn up sooner or later. Speaking of wives, I promised Mrs. Harbinger to come home to a tea or some sort of a powwow. What time is it?"

"Yes, a small tea," Barnstable repeated with a queer look. "Pardon me, but is it too intrusive in me to ask if I may go home with you?"

Harbinger regarded him in undisguised amazement; and quivers of embarrassment spread over Barnstable's wavelike folds of throat and chin.

"Of course it seems to you very strange," the client went on huskily; "and I suppose it is etiquettsionally all wrong. Do you think your wife would mind much?"

"Mrs. Harbinger," the lawyer responded, his voice much cooler than before, "will not object to anybody I bring home."

The acquaintance of the two men was no more than that which comes from casual meetings at the same club. The club was, however, a good one, and membership was at least a guarantee of a man's respectability.

"I happen to know," Barnstable proceeded, getting so embarrassed that there was reason to fear that in another moment his tongue would cleave to the roof of his mouth and his husky voice become extinct altogether, "that a person that I want very much to see will be there; and I will take it as very kind—if you think it don't matter,—that is, if your wife—"

"Oh, Mrs. Harbinger won't mind. Come along. Wait till I get my hat and my bag. A lawyer's green bag is in Boston as much a part of his dress as his coat is."

The lawyer stuffed some papers into his green bag, rolled down the top of his desk, and took up his hat. The visitor had in the meantime been picking from his coat imaginary specks of lint and smoothing his unsmoothable hair.

"I hope I look all right," Barnstable said nervously. "I—I dressed before I came here. I thought perhaps you would be willing—"

"Oh, ho," interrupted Harbinger. "Then this whole thing is a ruse, is it? You never really meant to bring a suit for libel?"

The face of the other hardened again.

"Yes, I did," was his answer; "and I'm by no means sure that I've given it up yet."

III

THE BABBLE OF A TEA

The entrance of Mrs. Croydon into Mrs. Harbinger's drawing-room was accompanied by a rustling of stuffs, a fluttering of ribbons, and a nodding of plumes most wonderful to ear and eye. The lady was of a complexion so striking that the redness of her cheeks first impressed the beholder, even amid all the surrounding luxuriance of her toilet. Her eyes were large and round, and of a very light blue, offering to friend or foe the opportunity of comparing them to turquoise or blue china, and so prominent as to exercise on the sensitive stranger the fascination of a deformity from which it seems impossible to keep the glance. Mrs. Croydon was rather short, rather broad, extremely consequential, and evidently making always a supreme effort not to be overpowered by her overwhelming clothes. She came in now like a yacht decorated for a naval parade, and moving before a slow breeze.

Mrs. Harbinger advanced a step to meet her guest, greeting the new-comer in words somewhat warmer than the tone in which they were spoken.

"How do you do, Mrs. Croydon. Delighted to see you."

"How d' y' do?" responded the flutterer, an arch air of youthfulness struggling vainly with the unwilling confession of her face that she was no longer on the sunny side of forty. "How d' y' do, Miss Calthorpe? Delighted to find you here. You can tell me all about your cousin Alice's engagement."

Miss Calthorpe regarded the new-comer with a look certainly devoid of enthusiasm, and replied in a tone not without a suggestion of frostiness:—

"On the contrary I did not know that she was engaged."

"Oh, she is; to Count Shimbowski."

"Count Shimbowski and Alice Endicott?" put in Mrs. Harbinger. "Is that the latest? Sit down, Mrs. Croydon. Really, it doesn't seem to me that it is likely that such a thing could be true, and the relatives not be notified."

She reseated herself as she spoke, and busied herself with the tea-equipage. May rather threw herself down than resumed her seat.

"Certainly it can't be true," the latter protested. "The idea of Alice's being engaged and we not know it!"

"But it's true; I have it direct," insisted Mrs. Croydon; "Miss Wentstile told Mr. Bradish, and he told me."

May sniffed rather inelegantly.

"Oh, Miss Wentstile! She thinks because Alice is her niece she can do what she likes with her. It's all nonsense. Alice has always been fond of Jack Neligage. Everybody knows that."

Mrs. Croydon managed somehow to communicate to her innumerable streamers and pennants a flutter which seemed to be meant to indicate violent inward laughter.

"Oh, what a child you are, Miss Calthorpe! I declare, I really must put you into my next novel. I really must!"

"May is still so young as to be romantic, of course," Mrs. Harbinger remarked, flashing at her young friend a quick sidewise glance. "Besides which she has been educated in a convent; and in a convent a girl must be either imaginative or a fool, or she'll die of ennui."

"I suppose you never were romantic yourself," put in May defensively.

"Oh, yes, my dear; I had my time of being a fool. Why, once I even fell violently in love with a man I had never seen."

The swift rush of color into the face of Miss Calthorpe might have arrested the attention of Mrs. Croydon, but at that moment the voice of Graham interrupted, announcing:—

"Mr. Bradish; Mr. Neligage."

The two men who entered were widely different in appearance.

That Mr. Bradish was considerably the elder was evident from his appearance, yet he came forward with an eager air which secured for him the first attention. He was lantern-jawed, and sanguine in color. Near-sight glasses unhappily gave to his eyes an appearance of having been boiled, and distorted his glance into an absurd likeness to a leer. A shadow of melancholy, vague yet palpable, softened his face, and was increased by the droop of his Don Quixote like yellow mustaches. The bald spot on his head and the stoop in his shoulders betrayed cruelly the fact that Harry Bradish was no longer young; and no less plainly upon everything about him was stamped the mark of a gentleman.

Jack Neligage, on the other hand, came in with a face of irresistible good nature. There was a twinkle in his brown eyes, a spark of humor and kindliness which could evidently not be quenched even should there descend upon him serious misfortune. His face was still young enough hardly to show the marks of dissipation which yet were not entirely invisible to the searching eye; his hair was crisp and abundant; his features regular and well formed. He was a young fellow so evidently intended by nature for pleasure that to expect him to take life seriously would have seemed a sort of impropriety. An air of youth, and of jocund life, of zest and of mirthfulness came in with Jack, inevitably calling up smiles to meet him. Even disapproval smiled on Jack; and it was therefore not surprising if he evaded most of the reproofs which are apt to be the portion of an idle pleasure-seeker. He moved with a certain languid alertness that was never hurried and yet never too late. This served him well on the polo-field, where he was deliberately swift and swiftly deliberate in most effective fashion. He came into the drawing-room now with the easy mien of a favorite, yet with an indifference which seemed so natural as to save him from all appearance of conceit. He had the demeanor of the conscious but not quite spoiled darling of fortune.

"You are just in time for the first brewing of tea," Mrs. Harbinger said, when greetings had been exchanged. "This tea was sent me by a Russian countess who charged me to let nobody drink it who takes cream. It is really very good if you get it fresh."

"To have the tea and the hostess both fresh," Mr. Bradish responded, "will, I fear, be too intoxicating."

"Never mind the tea," broke in Mrs. Croydon. "I am much more interested in what we were talking about. Mr. Bradish, you can tell us about Count Shimbowski and Alice Endicott."

Jack Neligage turned about with a quickness unusual in him.

"The Count and Miss Endicott?" he demanded. "What about them? Who's had the impertinence to couple their names?"

Mrs. Croydon put up her hands in pretended terror, a hundred tags of ribbon fluttering as she did so.

"Oh, don't blame me," she said. "I didn't do it. They're engaged."

Neligage regarded her with a glance of vexed and startled disfavor. Then he gave a short, scornful laugh.

"What nonsense!" he said. "Nobody could believe that."

"But it's true," put in Bradish. "Miss Wentstile herself told me that she had arranged the match, and that I might mention it."

Neligage looked at the speaker an instant with a disbelieving smile on his lip; and tossing his head went to lean his elbow on the mantel.

"Arranged!" he echoed. "Good heavens! Is this a transaction in real estate?"

"Marriage so often is, Mr. Neligage," observed Mrs. Harbinger, with a smile.

Bradish began to explain with the solemn air which he had. He was often as obtuse and matter-of-fact as an Englishman, and now took up the establishment of the truth of his news with as much gravity as if he were setting forth a point of moral doctrine. He seemed eager to prove that he had at least been entirely innocent of any deception, and that whatever he had said must be blamelessly credible.

"Of course it's extraordinary, and I said so to Miss Wentstile. She said that as the Count is a foreigner, it was very natural for him to follow foreign fashions in arranging the marriage with her instead of with Alice."

"And she added, I've no doubt," interpolated Mrs. Harbinger, "that she entirely approved of the foreign fashion."

"She did say something of that sort," admitted Bradish, with entire gravity.

Mrs. Harbinger burst into a laugh, and trimmed the wick of her tea-lamp. Neligage grinned, but his pleasant face darkened instantly.

"Miss Wentstile is an old idiot!" said he emphatically.

"Oh, come, Mr. Neligage," remonstrated his hostess, "that is too strong language. We must observe the proprieties of abuse."

"And say simply that she is Miss Wentstile," suggested Mrs. Croydon sweetly.

The company smiled, with the exception of May, whose face had been growing longer and longer.

"I don't care what she says," the girl burst out indignantly; "I don't believe Alice will listen to such a thing for one minute."

"Perhaps she won't," Bradish rejoined doubtfully, "but Miss Wentstile is famous for having her own way. I'm sure I shouldn't feel safe if she undertook to marry me off."

"She might take you for herself if she knew her power, Mr. Bradish," responded Mrs. Croydon. "No more tea, my dear, thank you."

"For Heaven's sake don't mention it then," he answered. "It's enough to have Jack here upset. The news is evidently too much for him."

"What news has upset my son, Mr. Bradish?" demanded a crisp voice from the doorway. "I shall disown him if he can't hide his feelings."

Past Graham, who was prepared to announce her, came a little woman, bright, vivacious, sparkling; with clear complexion and mischievous dimples. A woman trimly dressed, and in appearance hardly older than the son she lightly talked of disowning. The youthfulness of Mrs. Neligage was a constant source of irritation to her enemies, and with her tripping tongue and defiant independence she made enemies in plenty. Her gypsyish beauty and clear skin were offenses serious enough; but for a woman with a son of five and twenty to look no more than that age herself was a vexation which was not to be forgiven. Some had been spiteful enough to declare that she preserved her youth by being entirely free from feeling; but since in the same breath they were ready to charge the charming widow with having been by her emotions carried into all sorts of improprieties, the accusation was certainly to be received with some reservations. Certainly she was the fortunate possessor of unfailing spirits, of constant cleverness, and delightful originality. She had the courage, moreover, of daring to do what she wished with the smallest possible regard for conventions; and it has never been clearly shown how much independence of conventionality and freedom of life may effect toward the preservation of a woman's youth.

She evidently understood the art of entering a room well. She came forward swiftly, yet without ungraceful hurry. She nodded brightly to the ladies, gave Bradish the momentary pleasure of brushing her finger-tips with his own as she passed him, then went forward to shake hands with Mrs. Harbinger. Without having done anything in particular she was evidently entire mistress of the situation, and the rest of the company became instantly her subordinates. Mrs. Croydon, almost twice her size and so elaborately overdressed, appeared suddenly to have become dowdy and ill at ease; yet nothing could have been more unconscious or friendly than the air with which the new-comer turned from the hostess to greet the other lady. There are women to whom superiority so evidently belongs by nature that they are not even at the trouble of asserting it.

"Oh, Mrs. Neligage," Mrs. Croydon said, as she grasped at the little glove which glanced over hers as a bird dips above the water, "you have lived so much abroad that you should be an authority on foreign marriages."

"Just as you, having lived in Chicago, should be an authority on un-marriages, I suppose. Well, I've had the fun of disturbing a lot of foreign marriages in my day. What marriage is this?"

"We were speaking of Miss Wentstile's proposing to marry Alice to Count Shimbowski," explained Mrs. Harbinger.

"Then," returned Mrs. Neligage lightly, "you had better speak of something else as quickly as possible, for Alice and her aunt are just behind me. Let us talk of Mrs. Croydon's anonymous

novel that's made such a stir while I've been in Washington. What is it? 'Cloudy Love'! That sounds tremendously improper. My dear, if you don't wish to see me fall in a dead faint at your feet, do give me some tea. I'm positively worn out."

She seated herself near Mrs. Croydon, over whose face during her remarks had flitted several expressions, none of them over-amiable, and watched the hostess fill her cup.

"Come, Mrs. Neligage," protested Bradish with an air of mild solicitation. "You are really too bad, you know. It isn't 'Cloudy Love,' but 'Love in a Cloud.' I didn't know that you confessed to writing it, Mrs. Croydon."

"Oh, I don't. I only refuse to deny it."

"Oh, well, now; not to deny is equivalent to a confession," he returned.

"Not in the least," Mrs. Neligage struck in. "When you are dealing with a woman, Mr. Bradish, it isn't safe even to take things by contraries."

IV

THE TICKLING OF AN AUTHOR

The entrance of Miss Wentstile and her niece Alice Endicott made the company so numerous that it naturally broke up into groups, and the general conversation was suspended.

Miss Wentstile was a lady of commanding presence, whose youth was with the snows of yester year. She had the eye of a hawk and the jaw of a bulldog; nor was the effect of these rather formidable features softened by the strong aquiline nose. Her hair was touched with gray, but her color was still fresh and too clear not to be natural. She was richly dressed in dark green and fur, her complexion making the color possible in spite of her years. She was a woman to arouse attention, and one, too, who was evidently accustomed to dominate. She cast a keen glance about her as she crossed the room to her hostess, sweeping her niece along with her not without a suggestion that she dragged the girl as a captive at her chariot-wheel.

Jack Neligage stepped forward as she passed him, evidently with the intention of intercepting the pair, or perhaps of gaining a word with Alice Endicott.

"How do you do, Miss Wentstile," he said. "I am happy to see you looking so well."

"There is no reason why I should not look well, Mr. Neligage," she responded severely. "I never sit up all night to smoke and drink and play cards."

Neligage smiled his brightest, and made her a bow of mock deference.

"Indeed, Miss Wentstile," he responded, "I am delighted to know that your habits have become so correct."

She retorted with a contemptuous sniff, and by so effectually interposing between him and her niece that Miss Endicott could only nod to him over her aunt's shoulder. Jack made a grimace more impertinent than courtly, and for the time turned away, while the two ladies went on to Mrs. Harbinger.

"Well, Alice," Mrs. Harbinger said, "I am glad you have come at last. I began to think that I must appoint a substitute to pour in your place."

"I am sorry to be so late," Miss Endicott responded, as she and her hostess exchanged places. "I was detained unexpectedly."

"I kept her," Miss Wentstile announced with grim suddenness. "I have been talking to her about —"

"Aunt Sarah," interposed Alice hurriedly, "may I give you some tea?"

"Don't interrupt me, Alice. I was talking to her about—"

Mrs. Harbinger looked at the crimsoning cheeks of Alice, and meeting the girl's imploring glance, gave her a slight but reassuring nod.

"My dear Miss Wentstile," she said, "I know you will excuse me; but here are more people coming."

Miss Wentstile could hardly finish her remarks to the air, and as Mrs. Harbinger left her to greet a new arrival the spinster turned sharply to May Calthorpe, who had snuggled up to Alice in true school-girl fashion.

"Ah, May," Miss Wentstile observed, "what do you settle down there for? Don't you know that now you have been brought out in society you are expected to make your market?"

"No, Miss Wentstile," May responded; "if my market can't make itself, then it may go unmade."

The elder turned away with another characteristic sniff, and Alice and May were left to themselves. People were never tired of condemning Miss Wentstile for her brusque and naked remarks; but after all society is always secretly grateful for any mortal who has the courage to be individual. The lady was often frank to the verge of rudeness; she was so accustomed to having her own way that one felt sure she would insist upon it at the very Judgment Seat; she said what she pleased, and exacted a deference to her opinions and to her wishes such as could hardly under existing human conditions be accorded to any mortal. Miss Wentstile must have been too shrewd not to estimate reasonably well the effect of her peculiarities, and no human being can be persistently eccentric without being theatrical. It was evident enough that she played in some degree to the gallery; and undoubtedly from this it is to be argued that she was not without some petty enjoyment in the notoriety which her manners produced. Should mankind be destroyed, the last thing to disappear would probably be human vanity, which, like the grin of the Cheshire cat in "Alice," would linger after the race was gone. Vanity in the individual is nourished by the notice of others; and if Miss Wentstile became more and more confirmed in her impertinences, it is hardly to be doubted that increase of vanity was the cause most active. She outwardly resented the implication that she was eccentric; but as she contrived continually and even complacently to become steadily more so, society might be excused for not thinking her resentment particularly deep. Dislike for notoriety perhaps never cured any woman of a fault; and certainly in the case of Miss Wentstile it was not in the least corrective.

The relations between Miss Wentstile and Alice Endicott were well known. Alice was the doubly orphaned daughter of a gallant young officer killed in a plucky skirmish against superior force in the Indian troubles, and of the wife whose heart broke at his loss. At six Alice was left, except for a small pension, practically penniless, and with no nearer relative than Miss Wentstile. That lady had undertaken the support of the child, but had kept her much at school until the girl was sixteen. Then the niece became an inmate of her aunt's house, and outwardly, at least, the mere slave of the older lady's caprices. Miss Wentstile was kind in her fashion. In all that money bought she was generous. Alice was richly dressed, she might have what masters she wished, be surrounded by whatever luxuries she chose. As if the return for these benefits was to be implicit obedience, Miss Wentstile was impatient of any show toward herself of independence. If Alice could be imagined as bearing herself coldly and haughtily toward the world in general,—a possibility hardly to be conceived of,—Miss Wentstile might be pictured glorying in such a display of proper spirit; but toward her aunt the girl was expected to be all humility and concession. As neither was without the pride which belonged to the Wentstile blood, it is easy to see that perfect harmony was not to be looked for between the pair. Alice had all the folly of girlhood, which is so quick to refuse to be bullied into affection; which is so blind as not to perceive that an elder who insists upon its having no will of its own is providing excellent lessons in the high graces of humility and meekness. Clever observers—and society remains vital chiefly in virtue of its clever observers—detected that Miss Wentstile chafed with an inward consciousness that the deference of her niece was accorded as a courtesy and not as a right. The spinster had not the tact to avoid betraying her perception that the submission of Alice was rather outward than inward, and the public sense of justice was somewhat appeased in its resentment at her domineering treatment by its enjoyment of her powerlessness either to break the girl's spirit or force her into rebellion.

The fondness of Alice for Jack Neligage was the one tangible thing with which Miss Wentstile could find fault; and this was so intangible after all that it was difficult to seize upon it. Nobody doubted that the two were warmly attached. Jack had never made any effort to hide his admiration; and while Alice had been more circumspect, the instinct of society is seldom much at fault in a matter of this sort. For Miss Wentstile to be sure that her niece favored the man of all others most completely obnoxious, and to bring the offense home to the culprit were, however, matters quite different. Now that Miss Wentstile had outdone herself in eccentricity by boldly adopting the foreign fashion of a *mariage de convenance*, there was every reason to believe that the real power of the spinster would be brought to the test. Nobody doubted that behind this absurd attempt to make a match between Alice and Count Shimbowski lay the determination to separate the girl from Jack Neligage; and it was inevitable that the struggle should be watched for with eager interest.

The first instant that there was opportunity for a confidential word, May Calthorpe rushed precipitately upon the subject of the reported engagement.

"Oh, Alice," she said, in a hurried half-whisper, "do you know that Miss Wentstile says she has arranged an engagement between you and that horrid Hungarian Count."

Alice turned her long gray eyes quickly to meet those of her companion.

"Has she really told of it?" she demanded almost fiercely.

"They were all talking of it before you came in," May responded.

Her voice was deepened, apparently by a tragic sense of the gravity of the subject under discussion; yet she was a bud in her first season, so that it was impossible that there should not also be in her tone some faint consciousness of the delightfully romantic nature of the situation.

An angry flush came into the cheek of Miss Endicott. She was not a girl of striking face, although she had beautiful eyes; but there was a dignity in her carriage, an air of birth and breeding, which gave her distinction anywhere. She possessed, moreover, a sweet sincerity of character which made itself subtly felt in her every tone and movement. Now she knit her forehead in evident perplexity and resentment.

"But did they believe it?" she asked.

"Oh, they would believe anything of Miss Wentstile, of course," May replied. "We all know Aunt Sarah too well not to know that she is capable of the craziest thing that could be thought of."

She picked out a fat bonbon as she spoke, and nibbled it comfortably, as if thoroughly enjoying herself.

"But what can I do?" demanded Alice pathetically. "I can't stand up here and say: 'Ladies and gentlemen, I really have no idea of marrying that foreign thing Aunt Sarah wants to buy for me.'"

Whatever reply May might have made was interrupted by the arrival of a gentleman with an empty teacup. The new-comer was Richard Fairfield, a young man of not much money but of many friends, and of literary aspirations. As he crossed the drawing-room Mrs. Neligage carelessly held out to him her cup and saucer.

"As you are going that way, Richard," she said without preface of salutation, "do you mind taking my cup to the table?"

"Delighted, of course," he answered, extending his hand for it.

"If Mrs. Neligage will permit me," broke in Mr. Bradish, darting forward. "I beg ten thousand pardons for not perceiving—"

"But Mrs. Neligage will not permit you, Mr. Bradish," she responded brightly. "I have already commissioned Richard."

Fairfield received the cup, and bore it away, while Bradish cast upon the widow a glance of reproach and remonstrance.

"You women all pet a rising author," he said. "I suppose it's because you all hope to be put in his books."

"Oh, no. On the contrary it is because we hope to be left out."

"I don't see," he went on with little apparent relevancy, "why you need begrudge me the pleasure of doing you a small favor."

"I don't wish you to get too much into the habit of doing small favors," she responded over her shoulder, as she turned back to the group with which she had been chatting. "I am afraid that if you do, you'll fail when I ask a great one."

Fairfield made his way to the table where Alice was dispensing tea. He was by her welcomed cordially, by May with a reserve which was evidently absent-minded regret that he should break in upon her confidences with her cousin. He exchanged with Alice the ordinary greetings, and then made way for a fresh arrival who wished for tea. May responded rather indifferently to his remarks as he took a chair at the end of the sofa upon which she was seated, seeming so absorbed that in a moment he laughed at some irrelevant reply which she gave.

"You did not understand what I said," he remarked. "I didn't mean—"

"I beg your pardon," she interrupted, turning toward him. "I was thinking of something I was talking about with Alice, and I didn't mind what you did say."

"I am sorry that I interrupted."

"Oh, everybody interrupts at an afternoon tea," she responded, smiling. "That is what we are here for, I suppose. I was simply in a cloud—"

Fairfield returned her smile with interest.

"Is that an allusion?"

May flushed a little, and put her hand consciously to the carnation at her throat.

"Oh, no," she answered, with a little too much eagerness. "I can talk of something beside that book. Though of course," she added, "I do think it is a perfectly wonderful story. There is so much heart in it. Why, I have read it so much that I know parts of it almost word for word."

"Then you don't think it is cynical?"

"Oh, not the least in the world! How can anybody say that? I am ashamed of you, Mr. Fairfield."

"I didn't mean that I thought it cynical; but lots of folk do, you know."

May tossed her hands in a girlish gesture of disdain.

"I hate people that call everything cynical. It is a thing that they just say to sound wise. 'Love in a Cloud' is to me one of the truest books I ever read. Why, you take that scene where she tells him she cares for him just the same in spite of his disgrace. It brings the tears into my eyes every time I read it."

A new light came into the young man's face as she spoke in her impulsive, girlish fashion. He was a handsome fellow, with well-bred face. He stroked his silky mustache with an air not unsuggestive of complacency.

"It is delightful," said he, "to find somebody who really appreciates the book for what is best in it. Of course there are a great many people who say nice things about it, but they don't seem to go to the real heart of it as you do."

"Oh, the story has so much heart," she returned. Then she regarded him quizzically. "You speak almost as if you had written it yourself."

"Oh, I—That is—Why, you see," he answered, in evident confusion, "I suppose that my being an embryo literary man myself makes it natural for me to take the point of view of the author. Most readers of a novel, you know, care for nothing but the plot, and see nothing else."

"Oh, it is not the plot," May cried enthusiastically. "I like that, of course, but what I really care for is the feeling in the book."

Jack Neligage, with his eyes on Alice Endicott, had made his way over to the tea-table, and came up in time to hear this.

"The book, Miss Calthorpe?" he repeated. "Oh, you must be talking of that everlasting novel. I wish I had had the good luck to write it."

"Oh, I should adore you if you had, Mr. Neligage."

"By Jove, then I'll swear I did write it."

Fairfield regarded the girl with heightened color.

"You had better be careful, Miss Calthorpe," he commented. "The real author might hear you."

She started in pretty dismay, and covered with her hand the flower nestling under her chin.

"Oh, he is not here!" she cried.

"How do you know that?" demanded Jack laughingly.

She sank back into the corner of the sofa with a blush far deeper than could be called for by the situation.

"Oh, I just thought so," she said. "Who is there here that could have written it?"

"Why, Dick here is always scribbling," Neligage returned, with a chuckle. "Perhaps you have been telling him what you thought of his book."

The face of Fairfield grew suddenly sober.

"Come, Jack," he said, rising, "that's too stupid a joke to be worthy of you."

He was seized at that moment by Mrs. Harbinger, who presented him to Miss Wentstile. Fairfield had been presented to Miss Wentstile a dozen times in the course of the two winters since he had graduated at Harvard and settled in Boston; but since she never seemed to recognize him, he gave no sign of remembering her.

"Miss Wentstile," the hostess said, "don't you know Mr. Fairfield? He is one of our literary lights now, you know."

"A very tiny rushlight, I am afraid," the young man commented.

Miss Wentstile examined him with critical impertinence through her lorgnette.

"Are you one of the Baltimore Fairfields?" she asked.

"No; my family came from Connecticut."

"Indeed!" she remarked coolly. "I do not remember that I ever met a person from Connecticut before."

The lips of the young man set themselves a little more firmly at this impertinence, and there came into his eyes a keen look.

"I am pleased to be the humble means of increasing your experience," he said, with a bow.

Miss Wentstile had the appearance of being anxious to quarrel with somebody, a fact which was perhaps due to the conversation which she had had with her niece as they came to the house. Alice had been ordered to be especially gracious to Count Shimbowski, and had respectfully but succinctly declared her intention to be as cold as possible. Miss Wentstile had all her life indulged in saying whatever she felt like saying, little influenced by the ordinary restraints of conventionality and not at all by consideration for the feelings of others. She had gone about the room that afternoon being as disagreeable as possible, and her rudeness to Fairfield was milder than certain things which were at that very moment being resented and quoted in the groups which she had passed. She glared at the young man now as if amazed that he had dared to reply, and unfortunately she ventured once more.

"Thank you," she said. "Even the animals in the Zoo increase one's experience. It is always interesting to meet those that one has heard chattered about."

He made her a deeper bow.

"I know," he responded with a manner coolly polite. "I felt it myself the first half dozen times I had the honor to be presented to you; but even the choicest pleasures grow stale on too frequent repetition."

Miss Wentstile glared at him for half a minute, while he seemed to grow pale at his own temerity. Then a humorous smile lightened her face, and she tapped him approvingly on the shoulder with her gold lorgnette.

"Come, come," she said briskly but without any sharpness, "you must not be impertinent to an old woman. You will hold your own, I perceive. Come and see me. I am always at home on Wednesdays."

Miss Wentstile moved on looking less grim, but her previous sins were still to be atoned for, and Mrs. Neligage, who knew nothing of the encounter between the spinster and Fairfield, was watching her opportunity. Miss Wentstile came upon the widow just as a burst of laughter greeted the conclusion of a story.

"And his wife is entirely in the dark to this day," Mrs. Neligage ended.

"That is—ha, ha!—the funniest thing I've heard this winter," declared Mr. Bradish, who was always in the train of Mrs. Neligage.

"I think it's horrid!" protested Mrs. Croydon, with an entirely unsuccessful attempt to look shocked. "I declare, Miss Wentstile, they are gossiping in a way that positively makes me blush."

"So you see that the age of miracles is not past after all," put in Mrs. Neligage.

"Mrs. Neligage has lived abroad so much," Miss Wentstile said severely, "that I fear she has actually forgotten the language of civility."

"Not to you, my dear Miss Wentstile," was the incorrigible retort. "My mother taught me to be civil to you in my earliest youth."

And all that the unfortunate lady, thus cruelly attacked, could say was,—

"I wish you remembered all your mother taught you half as well!"

V

THE BLAZING OF RANK

The usual mass of people came and went that afternoon at Mrs. Harbinger's. It was not an especially large tea, but in a country where the five o'clock tea is the approved method of paying social grudges there will always be a goodly number of people to be asked and many who will respond. The hum of talk rose like the clatter of a factory, the usual number of conversations were begun only to end as soon as they were well started; the hostess fulfilled her duty of interrupting any two of her guests who seemed to be in danger of getting into real talk; presentations were made with the inevitable result of a perfunctory exchange of inanities; and in general the occasion was very like the dozen other similar festivities which were proceeding at the same time in all the more fashionable parts of the city.

As time wore on the crowd lessened. Many had gone to do their wearisome duty of saying nothing at some other five o'clock; and the rooms were becoming comfortable again. The persons who had come early were lingering, and one expert in social craft might have detected signs that their remaining so long was not without some especial reason.

"If he is coming," Mrs. Neligage observed to Mr. Bradish, "I wish he would come. It is certainly not very polite of him not to arrive earlier if he is really trying to pass as the slave of Alice."

"Oh, he is always late," Bradish answered. "If you had not been in Washington you would have heard how he kept Miss Wentstile's dinner waiting an hour the other day because he couldn't make up his mind to leave the billiard table."

Mrs. Neligage laughed rather mockingly.

"How did dear Miss Wentstile like that?" asked she. "It is death for any mortal to dare to be late at her house, and she does not approve of billiards."

"She was so taken up with berating the rest of us for his tardiness that when he appeared she had apparently forgotten all about his being to blame in anything."

"She loves a title as she loves her life," Mrs. Neligage commented. "She would marry him herself and give him every penny she owns just to be called a countess for the rest of her life."

A stir near the door, and the voice of Graham announcing "Count Shimbowski" made them both turn. A brief look of intelligence flashed across the face of the widow.

"It is he," she murmured as if to herself.

"Do you know him?" demanded Bradish.

"Oh, I used to see him abroad years ago," was her answer. "Very likely he will have forgotten me."

"That," Bradish declared, with a profound bow, "is impossible."

The Count made his way across the drawing-room with a jaunty air not entirely in keeping with the crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes. He was tall and wiry, with sandy hair and big mustaches. He showed no consciousness that he was being stared at, but with admirable self-possession saluted his hostess.

"How do you do, Count?" Mrs. Harbinger greeted him. "We began to think you were not coming."

"Ah, how do, Mees Harbeenger. Not to come eet would be to me too desolate. *Bon jour*, my deear Mees Wentsteele. I am so above-joyed to encountair you'self here. My deear Mees Endeecott, I kees your feengair."

"Beast!" muttered Jack Neligage to Fairfield. "I should like to cram a fistful of his twisted-up sentences down his snaky throat!"

"He must open his throat with a corkscrew in the morning," was the reply.

Miss Wentstile was smiling her most gracious.

"How do you feel to-day, Count?" she asked. "Does our spring weather affect you unpleasantly?"

The Count made a splendid gesture with both his hands, waving in the right the monocle which he more often carried than wore.

"Oh, what ees eet de weder een one land w'ere de peoples so heavenly keent ees?" he demanded oratorically. "Only eet ees Mees Endeecott do keel me wid her so great cheelleeness."

Miss Endicott looked up from her seat at the tea-table beside which the group stood. Her air was certainly sufficiently cold to excuse the Count for feeling her chilliness; and she answered without a glimmer of a smile.

"I'm not cruel," she said. "I wouldn't hurt a worm."

"But," the Count responded, shaking his head archly, "eet ees dat I be not a worm."

"I thought that all men were worms of the dust," Mrs. Harbinger observed.

The Count bowed his tall figure with finished grace.

"And all de weemens," he declared, "aire angles!"

"It is our sharpness, then, that is to be admired," Alice commented.

"Of course, Alice," Miss Wentstile corrected vixenishly, "the Count means angels."

"So many men," Alice went on without showing other sign of feeling than a slight flush, "have turned a woman from an angel into an angle."

"I do comprehend not," the Count said.

"It is no matter, Count," put in the hostess. "She is only teasing you, and being rude into the bargain. You will take tea? Alice, pour the Count some tea."

Alice took up a cup.

"How many lumps?" she asked.

"Loomps? Loomps? Oh, eet weel be sugaire een de tea. Tree, eef you weel be so goot weedeen eet."

Just as the Count, with profuse expressions of overwhelming gratitude to have been permitted so great an honor, had received his tea from the hand of Miss Endicott, and Miss Wentstile was clearing her throat with the evident intention of directing toward him some profound observation, Mrs. Neligage came briskly forward with outstretched hand.

"It would be generous of you, Count," she said, "to recognize an old friend."

He stared at her with evident astonishment.

"*Ciel!*" he exclaimed. "Ah, but eet weel be de *belle* Madame Neleegaze!"

She laughed as she shook hands, her dark eyes sparkling with fun.

"As gallant as ever, Count. It is good of you to remember me after so many years."

The Count regarded her with a look so earnest that he might easily be supposed to remember from the past, whatever and whenever it had been, many things of interest. Miss Wentstile surveyed the pair with an expression of keen suspicion.

"Louisa," she demanded, "where did you know the Count?"

The Count tried to speak, but Mrs. Neligage was too quick for him.

"It was at—Where was it, Count? My memory for places is so bad," she returned mischievously.

"Yees," he said eagerly. "Eet weel have been Paris *certainement*, ees eet not?"

She laughed more teasingly yet, and glanced swiftly from him to Miss Wentstile. She was evidently amusing herself, though the simple question of the place of a former meeting might not seem to give much opportunity.

"That doesn't seem to me to have been the place," she remarked. "Paris? Let me see. I should have said that it was—"

The remark was not concluded, for down went the Count's teacup with a splash and a crash, with startings and cries from the ladies, and a hasty drawing away of gowns. Miss Endicott, who had listened carefully to the talk, took the catastrophe coolly enough, but with a darkening of the face which seemed to show that she regarded the accident as intentional. The Count whipped out his handkerchief, and went down on his knee instantly to wipe the hem of Miss Wentstile's spattered frock; while Mrs. Neligage seemed more amused than ever.

"Oh, I am deesconsolate forever!" the Count exclaimed, in tones which were pathetic enough to have made the reputation of an actor. "I am broken een de heart, Mees Wentsteele."

"It is no matter," Miss Wentstile said stiffly.

A ring of the bell brought Graham to repair the damage as far as might be, and in the confusion the Count moved aside with the widow.

"That was not done with your usual skill, Count," she said mockingly. "It was much too violent for the occasion."

"But for what you speak of Monaco here?" he demanded fiercely. "De old Mees Wentsteele say dat to play de card for money ees villain. She say eet is murderous. She say she weel not to endure de man dat have gamboled."

"And you have gamboled in a lively manner in your time, Count. It's an old pun, but it would be new to you if you could understand it."

"I don't understand," he said savagely in French.

"No matter. It wasn't worth understanding," she answered, in the same tongue. "But you needn't have been afraid. I'm no spoil-sport. I shouldn't have told."

"She is an old prude," he went on, smiling, and showing his white teeth. "If she knew I had been in a duel, she would know me no more."

"She will not know from me."

"As lovely and as kind as ever," he responded. "Ah, when I remember those days, when I was young, and you were just as you are now—"

"Old, that is."

"Oh, no; young, always young as when I knew you first. When I was at your feet with love, and your countryman was my rival—"

Mrs. Neligage began to look as if she found the tables being turned, and that she had no more wish to have the past brought up than had the Count. She turned away from her companion. Then she looked back over her shoulder to observe, still in French, as she left him:—

"I make it a point never to remember those days, my friend."

VI

THE MISCHIEF OF A WIDOW

There were now but ten guests left, the persons who have been named, and who seemed for the most part to be lingering to observe the Count or Alice Endicott. May Calthorpe had all the afternoon kept near Alice, and only left her place when the sopping up of the Count's tea made it necessary for her to move. Mrs. Harbinger took her by the arm, and looked into her face scrutinizingly.

"Well," she asked, "did your unknown author come?"

"Nobody has come with a carnation. Oh, I am so disappointed!"

"I am glad of it, my dear."

"But he said he would come if I'd give him a sign, and I wrote to him while I was waiting for you yesterday."

"So you told me."

"Well," May echoed dolefully; "I think you might be more sympathetic."

"What did you do with the letter?" asked Mrs. Harbinger.

"I gave it to Graham to post."

"Then very likely no harm is done. Graham never in his life posted a letter under two days."

"Oh, do you think so?" May asked, brightening visibly at the suggestion. "You don't think he despised me, and wouldn't come?"

Mrs. Harbinger gave her a little shake.

"You hussy!" she exclaimed, with too evident an enjoyment of the situation to be properly severe. "How was it addressed?"

"Just to Christopher Calumus, in care of the publishers."

"Well, my dear," the hostess declared, "your precious epistle is probably in the butler's pantry now; or one of the maids has picked it up from the kitchen floor. I warn you that if I can find it I shall read it."

"Oh, you wouldn't!" exclaimed May in evident distress.

"Um! Wouldn't I, though? The way you take the suggestion shows that it's time somebody looked into your correspondence with this stranger."

May opened her lips to protest again, but the voice of Graham was heard announcing Mr. Barnstable, and Mrs. Harbinger turned to greet the late-coming stranger. The gentleman's hair had apparently been scrubbed into sleekness, but had here and there broken through the smooth outer surface as the stuffing of an old cushion breaks through slits in the covering. His face was red, and his air full of self-consciousness. When he entered the drawing-room Mr. Harbinger was close behind him, but the latter stopped to speak with Bradish and Mrs. Neligage, and Barnstable advanced alone to where Mrs. Harbinger stood with May just behind her.

"Heavens, May," the hostess said over her shoulder. "Here is your carnation. I hope you are pleased with the bearer."

Barnstable stood hesitating, looking around as if to discover the hostess. On the face of Mrs. Croydon only was there sign of recognition. She bowed at him rather than to him, with an air so distant that no man could have spoken to her after such a frigid salutation. The stranger turned redder and redder, made a half step toward Mrs. Croydon, and then stopped. Fortunately Mr. Harbinger hastened up, and presented him to the hostess. That lady greeted him politely, but she had hardly exchanged the necessary commonplaces, before she put out her hand to where May stood watching in dazed surprise.

"Let me present you to Miss Calthorpe," she said. "Mr. Barnstable, May."

She glided away with a twinkle in her eye which must have implied that she had no fear in leaving the romantic girl with a lover that looked like that. May and Barnstable stood confronting each other a moment in awkward silence, and then the girl tossed her head with the air of a young colt that catches the bit between his teeth.

"I had quite given you up," she said in a voice low, but distinct.

"Eh?" he responded, with a startled look. "Given me up?"

"I have been watching for the carnation all the afternoon."

"Carnation?" he echoed, trying over his abundant chins to get a glimpse of the flower in his buttonhole. "Oh, yes; I generally wear a carnation. They keep, don't you know; and it was always the favorite flower of my wife."

"Your wife?" demanded Miss Calthorpe.

Her cheeks grew crimson, and she drew herself up haughtily.

"Yes," Barnstable replied, looking confused. "That is, of course, she that was my wife."

"I should never have believed," May observed distantly, "that 'Love in a Cloud' could have been written by a widower."

Barnstable began to regard her as if he were in doubt whether she or he himself had lost all trace of reason.

"'Love in a Cloud,'" he repeated, "'Love in a Cloud'? Do you know who wrote that beastly book?"

Her color shot up, and the angry young goddess declared itself in every line of her face. Her pose became instantly a protest.

"How dare you speak of that lovely book in that way?" she demanded. "It is perfectly exquisite!"

"But who wrote it?" he demanded in his turn, growing so red as to suggest awful possibilities of

apoplexy.

"Didn't you?" she stammered. "Are you running it down just for modesty?"

"I! I! I write 'Love in a Cloud'?" cried Barnstable, speaking so loud that he could be heard all over the room. "You insult me, Miss—Miss Calthump! You—"

His feelings were evidently too much for him. He turned with rude abruptness, and looking about him, seemed to become aware that the eyes of almost everybody in the room were fixed on him. He cast a despairing glance to where Mrs. Harbinger and Mrs. Croydon were for the moment standing together, and then started in miserable flight toward the door. At the threshold he encountered Graham the butler, who presented him with a handful of letters.

"Will you please give the letters to Mrs. Harbinger?" Graham said, and vanished.

Barnstable looked after the butler, looked at the letters, looked around as if his head were swimming, and then turned back into the drawing-room. He walked up to the hostess, and held out the letters in silence, his fluffy face a pathetic spectacle of embarrassed woe.

"What are these?" Mrs. Harbinger asked.

He shook his head, as if he had given up all hope of understanding anything.

"The butler put them in my hands," he murmured.

"Upon my word, Mrs. Harbinger," spoke up Mrs. Croydon, seeming more offended than there was any apparent reason for her to be, "you have the most extraordinary butler that ever existed."

Mrs. Harbinger threw out her hands in a gesture by which she evidently disclaimed all responsibility for Graham and his doings.

"Extraordinary! Why, he makes my life a burden. There is no mistake he cannot make, and he invents fresh ones every day. Really, I know of no reason why the creature is tolerated in the house except that he makes a cocktail to suit Tom."

"Dat ees ver' greet veertue," Count Shimbowski commented genially.

"I do not agree with you, Count," Miss Wentstile responded stiffly.

The spinster had been hovering about the Count ever since his accident with the teacup, apparently seeking an opportunity of snubbing him.

"Oh, but I die but eef Mees Wentsteele agree of me!" the Count declared with his hand on his heart.

Mrs. Croydon in the meanwhile had taken the letters from the hand of Barnstable, and was looking at them with a scrutiny perhaps closer than was exactly compatible with strict good-breeding.

"Why, here is a letter that has never been posted," she said.

Mr. Harbinger took the whole bundle from her hand.

"I dare say," was his remark, "that any letter that's been given to Graham to mail in the last week is there. Why, this letter is addressed to Christopher Calumus."

May Calthorpe moved forward so quickly that Mrs. Harbinger, who had extended her hand to take the letters from her husband, turned to restrain the girl. Mrs. Croydon swayed forward a little.

"That is the author of 'Love in a Cloud,'" she said with a simper of self-consciousness.

Mrs. Neligage, who was standing with Bradish and Alice at the moment, made a grimace.

"She'll really have the impudence to take it," she said to them aside. "Now see me give that woman a lesson."

She swept forward in a flash, and deftly took the letter out of Tom Harbinger's hand before he knew her intention. Flourishing it over her head, she looked them all over with eyes full of fun and mischief.

"Honor to whom honor is due," she cried. "Ladies and gentlemen, be it my high privilege to deliver this to its real and only owner. Count," she went on, sweeping him a profound courtesy, "let your light shine. Behold in Count Shimbowski the too, too modest author of 'Love in a Cloud.'"

There was a general outburst of amazement. The Count looked at the letter which had been thrust into his hand, and stammered something unintelligible.

"*Vraiment*, Madame Neleegaze," he began, "eet ees too mooch of you—"

"Oh, don't say anything," she interrupted him. "I have no other pleasure in life than doing mischief."

Mrs. Croydon looked from the Count to Mrs. Neligage with an expression of mingled doubt and

bewilderment. Her attitude of expecting to be received as the anonymous author vanished in an instant, and vexation began to predominate over the other emotions visible in her face.

"Well," she said spitefully, "it is certainly a day of wonders; but if the letter belongs to the Count, it would be interesting to know who writes to him as Christopher Calumus."

Mrs. Harbinger answered her in a tone so cold that Mrs. Croydon colored under it.

"Really, Mrs. Croydon," she said, "the question is a little pointed."

"Why, it is only a question about a person who doesn't exist. There isn't any such person as Christopher Calumus. I'm sure I'd like to know who writes to literary men under their assumed names."

May was so pale that only the fact that everybody was looking at Mrs. Harbinger could shield her from discovery. The hostess drew herself up with a haughty lifting of the head.

"If it is of so great importance to you," she said, "it is I who wrote the letter. Who else should write letters in this house?"

She extended her hand to the Count as she spoke, as if to recover the harmless-looking little white missive which was causing so much commotion, but the Count did not offer to return it. Tom Harbinger stood a second as if amazement had struck him dumb. Then with the air of a puppet pronouncing words by machinery he ejaculated:—

"You wrote to the Count?"

His wife turned to him with a start, and opened her lips, but before she could speak a fresh interruption prevented. Barnstable in the few moments during which he had been in the room had met with so many strange experiences that he might well be bewildered. He had been greeted by May as one for whom she was waiting, and then had been hailed as the author of the book which he hated; the eccentric Graham had made of him a sort of involuntary penny-post; he had been in the midst of a group whisking a letter about like folk in the last act of a comedy; and now here was the announcement that the Count was the anonymous libeler for whom he had been seeking. He dashed forward, every fold of his chins quivering, his hair bristling, his little eyes red with excitement. He shook his fist in the face of the Count in a manner not often seen in a polite drawing-room.

"You are a villain," he cried. "You have insulted my wife!"

Bradish and Mr. Harbinger at once seized him, and between them he was drawn back gesticulating and struggling. The ladies looked frightened, but with the exception of Mrs. Croydon they behaved with admirable propriety. Mrs. Croydon gave a little yapping screech, and fell back in her chair in hysterics. More complete confusion could hardly have been imagined, and Mrs. Neligage, who looked on with eyes full of laughter, had certainly reason to congratulate herself that if she loved making mischief she had for once at least been most instantly and triumphantly successful.

VII

THE COUNSEL OF A MOTHER

If an earthquake shook down the house in which was being held a Boston function, the persons there assembled would crawl from the ruins in a manner decorous and dignified, or if too badly injured for this would compose with decency their mangled limbs and furnish the addresses of their respective family physicians. The violent and ill-considered farce which had been played in Mrs. Harbinger's drawing-room might elsewhere have produced a long-continued disturbance; but here it left no trace after five minutes. Mr. Barnstable, babbling and protesting like a lunatic, was promptly hurried into confinement in the library, where Mr. Harbinger and Bradish stood guard over him as if he were a dangerous beast; while the other guests made haste to retire. They went, however, with entire decorum. Mrs. Croydon was, it is true, a disturbing element in the quickly restored serenity of the party, and was with difficulty made to assume some semblance of self-control. Graham, being sent to call a carriage, first caught a forlorn herdic, which was prowling about like a deserted tomcat, and when the lady would none of this managed to produce a hack which must have been the most shabby in the entire town. The Count was taken away by Miss Wentstile, who in the hour of his peril dropped the stiffness she had assumed at his recognition of Mrs. Neligage. She dragged Alice along with them, but Alice in turn held on to May, so that the Count was given no opportunity to press his suit. They all retired in good order, and however they talked, they at least behaved beautifully.

As Neligage took his hat in the hall Fairfield caught him by the arm.

"Jack," he said under his breath, "do you believe Mrs. Harbinger wrote me those letters?"

"Of course not," Jack responded instantly. "Not if they are the sort of letters you said. Letty Harbinger is as square as a brick."

"Then why did she say she did?"

Jack rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"The letter was evidently written here," he said. "She must know who did write it."

"Ah, I see!" exclaimed the other. "She was shielding somebody."

Jack regarded him with sudden sternness.

"There was nobody that it could be except—"

He broke off abruptly, a black look in his face, and before another word could be exchanged Mrs. Neligage called him. He went off with his mother, hastily telling his friend he would see him before bedtime.

Mrs. Neligage was hardly up to her son's shoulder, but so well preserved was she that she might easily have been mistaken for a sister not so much his senior. She was admirably dressed, exquisitely gloved and booted, to the last fold of her tailor-made frock entirely correct, and in her manner provokingly and piquantly animated.

"Who in the world was that horror that made the exhibition of himself?" she asked. "I never saw anything like that at the Harbingers' before."

"I know nothing about him except that his name is Barnstable, and that he came from the West somewhere. He's joined the Calif Club lately. How he got in I don't understand; but he seems to have loads of money."

"He is a beast," Mrs. Neligage pronounced by way of dismissing the subject. "What did Mrs. Harbinger mean by thanking you for arranging something with the Count? What have you to do with him?"

"Oh, that is a secret."

"Then if it is a secret tell it at once."

"I'll tell you just to disappoint you," Jack returned with a grin. "It is only about some etchings that the Count brought over. Mrs. Harbinger has bought a couple as a present for Tom."

"She had better be careful," Mrs. Neligage observed. "Tom thinks more of the collection now than he does of anything else in the world. But what are you mixed up in the Count's transactions for?"

"She asked me to fix it, and besides the poor devil needed to sell them to raise the wind. I'm too used to being hard up myself not to feel for him."

"But you wrote me that you detested the Count."

"So I do, but you can't help doing a fellow a good turn, can you, just because you don't happen to like him?"

She laughed lightly.

"You are a model of good nature. I wish you'd show it to May Calthorpe."

Her son looked down at her with a questioning glance.

"She is always at liberty to admire my virtues, of course; but she can't expect me to put myself out to make special exhibitions for her benefit."

The faces of both mother and son hardened a little, as if the subject touched upon was one concerning which they had disagreed before. The change of expression brought out a subtle likeness which had not before been visible. Jack Neligage was usually said to resemble his father, who had died just as the boy was entering his teens, but when he was in a passion—a thing which happened but seldom—his face oddly took on the look of his mother. The change, moreover, was not entirely to his disadvantage, for as a rule Jack showed too plainly the easy-going, self-indulgent character which had been the misfortune of the late John Neligage, and which made friends of the family declare with a sigh that Jack would never amount to anything worth while.

Mother and son walked on in silence a moment, and then the lady observed, in a voice as dispassionate as ever:—

"She is a silly little thing. I believe even you could wind her round your finger."

"I haven't any intention of trying."

"So you have given me to understand before; but now that I am going away you might at least let me go with the consolation of knowing you'd provided for yourself. You must marry somebody with money, and she has no end of it."

He braced back his shoulders as if he found it not altogether easy not to reply impatiently.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Oh, to Europe. Anywhere out of the arctic zone of the New England conscience. I've had as long

a spell of respectability as I can stand, my boy."

Something in her manner evidently irritated him more and more. She spoke with a little indefinable defiant swagger, as if she intended to anger him. He looked at her no longer, but fixed his gaze on the distance.

"When you talk of giving up respectability," he remarked in an aggrieved tone, "I should think you might consider me."

Her eyes danced, as if she were delighted to see him becoming angry.

"Oh, I do, Jack, I assure you; but I really cannot afford to be respectable any longer. Respectability is the most expensive luxury of civilization; and how can I keep it up when I'm in debt to everybody that'll trust me."

"Then you might economize."

"Economize! Ye gods! This from you, Jack! Where did you hear the word? I'm sure you know nothing of the thing."

He laughed in evident self-despite.

"We are a nice pair of ruffianly adventurers," he responded; "a regular pair of genteel paupers. But we've both got to pull up, I tell you."

"Oh, heavens!" was his mother's reply. "Don't talk to me of pulling up. What fun do I have as it is but quarreling with Miss Wentstile and snubbing Harry Bradish? I've got to keep up my authority in our set, or I should lose even these amusements."

Jack flashed her a swift, questioning look, and with a new note in his voice, a note of doubt at once and desperation, blurted out a fresh question.

"How about flirting with Sibley Langdon?"

Mrs. Neligage flushed slightly and for a brief second contracted her well-arched eyebrows, but in an instant she was herself again.

"Oh, well," she returned, with a pretty little shrug, "that of course is a trifle better, but not much. Sibley really cares for himself so entirely that there's very little to be got out of him."

"But you know how you make folks talk."

"Oh, folks always talk. There is always as much gossip about nothing as about something."

"But he puts on such a damnable air of proprietorship," Jack burst out, with much more feeling than he had thus far shown. "I know I shall kick him some time."

"That is the sort of thing you had better leave to the Barnstable man," she responded dryly. "Sibley only has the air of owning everything. That's just his nature. He's really less fun than good old Harry Bradish. But such as he is, he is the best I can do. If that stuffy old invalid wife of his would only die, I think I'd marry him out of hand for his money."

Jack threw out his arm with an angry gesture.

"For Heaven's sake, mother," he said, "what are you after that you are going on so? You know you drive me wild when you get into this sort of a talk."

"Or I might elope with him as it is, you know," she continued in her most teasing manner; but watching him intently.

"What in the deuce do you talk to me like that for!" he cried, shaking himself savagely. "You're my mother!"

Mrs. Neligage grew suddenly grave. She drew closer to her son, and slipped her hand through his arm.

"So much the worse for us both, isn't it, Jack? Come, we may as well behave like rational beings. Of course I was teasing you; but that isn't the trouble. It's yourself you are angry with."

"What have I to be angry with myself about?"

"You are trying to make up your mind that you're willing to be poor for the sake of marrying Alice Endicott; but you know you wouldn't be equal to it. If I thought you would, I'd say go ahead. Do you think you'd be happy in a South End apartment house with the washing on a line between the chimneys, and a dry-goods box outside the window for a refrigerator?"

Jack mingled a groan and a laugh.

"You can't pay your debts as it is," she went on remorselessly. "We are a pair of paupers who have to live as if we were rich. You see what your father made of it, starting with a fortune. You can't suppose you'd do much better when you've nothing but debts."

"I think I'll enlist, or run away to sea," Jack declared, tugging viciously at his mustache.

"No, you'll accept your destiny. You'll like it better than you think, when you're settled down to it.

You'll stay here and marry May Calthorpe."

"You must think I'm a whelp to marry a girl just for her money."

"Oh, you must fall in love with her. Any man is a wretch who'd marry a girl just for her money, but a man's a fool that can't fall in love with a pretty girl worth half a million."

Jack dropped his mother's hand from his arm with more emphasis than politeness, and stopped to face her on the corner of the street.

"The very Old Boy is in you to-day, mother," he said. "I won't listen to another word."

She regarded him with a saucy, laughing face, and put out her hand.

"Well, good-night then," she said. "Come in and see me as soon as you can. I have a lot of things to tell you about Washington. By the way, what do you think of my going there, and setting up as a lobbyist? They say women make no end of money that way."

He swung hastily round, and left her without a word. She went on her way, but her face turned suddenly careworn and haggard as she walked in the gathering twilight toward the little apartment where she lived in fashionable poverty.

VIII

THE TEST OF LOVE

One of the distinctive features of "good society" is that its talk is chiefly of persons. Less distinguished circles may waste precious time on the discussion of ideas, but in company really select such conversation is looked upon as dull and pedantic. One of the first requisites for entrance into the world of fashion is a thorough knowledge of the concerns of those who are included in its alluring round; and not to be informed in this branch of wisdom marks at once the outsider. It follows that concealment of personal affairs is pretty nearly impossible. Humanity being frail, it frequently happens that fashionable folk delude themselves by the fond belief that they have escaped the universal law of their surroundings; but the minute familiarity which each might boast of all that relates to his neighbors should undeceive them. That of which all the world talks is not to be concealed.

Everybody in their set knew perfectly well that Jack Neligage had been in love with Alice Endicott from the days when they had paddled in the sand on the walks of the Public Garden. The smart nursery maids whose occupation it was to convey their charges thither and keep them out of the fountains, between whiles exchanging gossip about the parents of the babies, had begun the talk. The opinions of fashionable society are generally first formed by servants, and then served up with a garnish of fancifully distorted facts for the edification of their mistresses; and in due time the loves of the Public Garden, reported and decorated by the nursery maids, serve as topics for afternoon calls. Master Jack was known to be in love with Miss Alice before either of them could have written the word, and in this case the passion had been so lasting that it excited remark not only for itself as an ordinary attachment, but as an extraordinary case of unusual constancy.

Society knew, of course, the impossibility of the situation. It was common knowledge that neither of the lovers had anything to marry on. Jack's handsome and spendthrift father had effectually dissipated the property which he inherited, only his timely death preserving to Mrs. Neligage and her son the small remnant which kept them from actual destitution. Alice was dependent upon the bounty of her aunt, Miss Wentstile. Miss Wentstile, it is true, was abundantly able to provide for Alice, but the old lady seriously disapproved of Jack Neligage, and of his mother she disapproved more strongly yet. Everybody said—and despite all the sarcastic observations of that most objectionable class, the satirists, what everybody says nobody likes to disregard—that if Jack and Alice were so rash as to marry they would never touch a penny of the aunt's money. Jack, moreover, was in debt. Nobody blamed him much for this, because he was a general favorite, and all his acquaintance recognized how impossible it was for a young man to live within an income so small as from any rational point of view to be regarded as much the same thing as no income at all; but of course it was recognized also that it is not well in the present day to marry nothing upon a capital of less than nothing. It has been successfully done, it is true; but it calls for more energy and ingenuity than was possessed by easy-going Jack Neligage. In view of all these facts, frequently discussed, society was unanimously agreed that Jack and Alice could never marry.

This impossibility excited a faint sort of romantic sympathy for the young couple. They were invited to the same houses and thrown together, apparently with the idea that they should play with fire as steadily and as long as possible. The unphrased feeling probably was that since the culmination of their hopes in matrimony was out of the question, it was only common humanity to afford them opportunities for getting from the ill-starred attachment all the pleasure that was to be had. Society approves strongly of romance so long as it stops short of disastrous marriages; and since Jack and Alice were not to be united, to see them dallying with the temptation of making an imprudent match was a spectacle at once piquant and diverting.

On the evening of the day when the news of Alice's pseudo-engagement had been discussed at Mrs. Harbinger's tea, Jack called on her. She received him with composure, coming into the room a little pale, perhaps, but entirely free from self-consciousness. Alice was not considered handsome by her friends, but no one could fail to recognize that her face was an unusual one. The Count, in his distorted English, had declared that Miss Endicott "have een her face one Madonna," and the description was hardly to be bettered. The serene oval countenance, the dark, clear skin, the smooth hair of a deep chestnut, the level brows and long lashes, the high, pure forehead, all belonged to the Madonna type; although the sparkle of humor which now and then gleamed in the full, gray eyes imparted a bewitching flavor of humanity. To-night she was very grave, but she smiled properly, the smile a well-instructed girl learns as she learns to courtesy. She shook hands in a way perhaps a little formal, since she was greeting so old an acquaintance.

"Sit down, please," she said. "It is kind of you to come in. I hardly had a chance to say a word to you this afternoon."

Jack did not return her greeting, nor did he accept her invitation to be seated. He stooped above the low chair into which she sank as she spoke.

"What is this amazing story that you are engaged to Count Shimbowski?" he demanded abruptly.

She looked up to him with a smile which was more conventional than ever.

"What right have you to ask me a question like that?" she returned.

He waved his hand as if to put aside formalities.

"But is it true?" he insisted.

"What is it to you, Jack, if it were?"

She grew visibly paler, and her fingers knit themselves together. He, on the contrary, flushed and became more commanding in his manner.

"Do you suppose," he answered, "that I should be willing to see a friend of mine throw herself away on that old roué? He is old enough to be your father."

"But you know," said she, assuming an air of raillery which did not seem to be entirely genuine, "that the proverb says it's better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave."

Jack flung himself into a chair with an impatient exclamation, and immediately got up again to walk the floor.

"I wouldn't have believed it of you, Alice. How can you joke about a thing like that!"

"Why, Jack; you've told me a hundred times that the only way to get through life comfortably is to take everything in jest."

"Oh, confound what I've told you! That's good enough philosophy for me, but it's beneath you to talk so."

"What is sauce for the goose—"

"Keep still," he interrupted. "If you can't be serious—"

"You are so fond of being serious," she murmured, interrupting in her turn.

"But I am serious now. Haven't we always been good friends enough for me to speak to you in earnest without your treating me as if I was either impertinent or a fool?"

He stopped his restless walk to stand before her again. She was silent a moment with her glance fixed on the rug. Then she raised her eyes to his, and her manner became suddenly grave.

"Yes, Jack," she said, "we have always been friends; but has any man, simply because he is a friend, a right to ask a girl a question like that?"

"You mean—"

"I mean no more than I say. There are other men with whom I've been friends all my life. Is there any one of them that you'd think had a right to come here to-night and question me about my engagement?"

"I'd break his head if he did!" Jack retorted savagely.

"Then why shouldn't he—whoever he might be—break yours?"

He flung himself into his chair again, his sunny face clouded, and his brows drawn down. He met her glance with a look which seemed to be trying to fathom the purpose of her mood.

"Why, hang it," he said; "with me it's different. You know I've always been more than a common friend."

"You have been a good friend," she answered with resolute self-composure; "but only a friend after all."

"Then you mean that I cannot be more than a friend?"

She dropped her eyes, a faint flush stealing up into her pale cheeks.

"You do not wish to be; and therefore you have no right—"

He sprang up impulsively and seized both her hands in his.

"Good God, Alice," he exclaimed, "you drive me wild! You know that if I were not so cursedly poor —"

She released herself gently, and with perfect calmness.

"I know," she responded, "that you have weighed me in the balance against the trouble of earning a living, and you haven't found me worth the price. In the face of a fact like that what is the use of words?"

He thrust his empty hands into his pockets, and glowered down on her.

"You know I love you, Alice. You know I've been in love with you ever since I began to walk; and you—you—"

She rose and faced him proudly.

"Well, say it!" she cried. "Say that I was foolish enough to love you! That I knew no better than to believe in you, and that I half broke my heart when you forced me to see that you weren't what I thought. Say it, if you like. You can't make me more ashamed of it than I am already!"

"Ashamed—Alice?"

"Yes, ashamed! It humiliates me that I should set my heart on a man that cared so little for me that he set me below his polo-ponies, his bachelor ease, his miserable little self-indulgences! Oh, Jack," she went on, her manner suddenly changing to one of appeal, and the tears starting into her eyes, "why can't you be a man?"

She put her hand on his arm, and he covered it affectionately with one of his while she hurried on.

"Do break away from the life you are living, and do something worthy of you. You are good to everybody else; there's nothing you won't do for others; do this for yourself. Do it for me. You are throwing yourself away, and I have to hear them talk of your debts, and your racing and gambling, and how reckless you are! It almost kills me!"

The full sunniness of his smile came back as he looked down into her earnest face, caressing her hand.

"Dear little woman," he said; "are you sure you have got entirely over being fond of me?"

"I couldn't get over being fond of you. You know it. That's what makes it hurt so."

He raised her hand tenderly, and kissed it. Then he dropped it abruptly, and turned away.

"You must get over it," he said, so brusquely that she started almost as if from a blow.

She sank back into her seat, and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, while he walked back to his chair and sat down with an air of bravado.

"It's no use, Alice," he said, "I'm not worth a thought, and it isn't in me to—Well, the fact is that I know myself too well. I know that if I promised you to-night that to-morrow I'd begin better fashions, I'm not man enough to live up to it. I couldn't involve you in—Oh, don't, don't!"

He broke off to turn to toy with some of the ornaments on the table. In a moment Alice had suppressed her sobs, and he spoke again, but without meeting her look. His voice was hard and flippant.

"You see I have such a good time that I wouldn't give it up for the world. I think I'd better keep on as I'm going. The time makes us, and we have to abide by the fashion of the time."

"If that is the way you feel," she said coldly, "it is I who have presumed on old friendship."

He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed harshly.

"We have both been a little unnecessarily tragic, it seems to me," was his rejoinder. "Love isn't for a poor man unless he'll take it on the half-shell without dressing; and I fancy neither of us would much care for it that way. My bank-account is a standing reason why I shouldn't marry anybody."

"The sentiment does credit to Mr. Neligage's head if not to his heart," commented the sneering voice of Miss Wentstile, who at that moment came through the portières from the library. "I hope I don't intrude?"

"Certainly not," Alice answered with spirit. "Mr. Neligage was giving me a lesson in the social economics of matrimony; but I knew before all he has to tell."

"Then, my dear," her aunt said, "I trust he will excuse you. It is time we went to Mrs. Wilson's. I promised the Count that we would be there early."

IX

THE MISCHIEF OF A GENTLEMAN

The Goddess of Misfortune sometimes capriciously takes a spite against an entire family, so that all of its members are at the same time involved in one misadventure or another. She shows a malicious impulse to wreak her disfavor on all of a connection at once, apparently from a knowledge that misery begets misery, and that nothing so completely fills to overflowing the cup of vexation as the finding that those from whom sympathy would naturally be expected are themselves in a condition to demand rather than to give it. She apparently amuses herself in mere wantonness of enjoyment of the sufferings of her victims when no one of them is in a condition to cheer the others. She illustrated this unamiable trait of her celestial character next day in her dealing with the Neligages, mother and son.

It was a beautiful spring day, not too warm in the unseasonable fashion which often makes a New England April so detestable, but with a fresh air full of exhilaration. Even in the city the cool, invigorating morning was refreshing. It provoked thoughts of springing grass and swelling buds, it suggested the marsh-marigolds preparing their gold down amid the roots of rushes, it teased the sense with vague yet disquieting desires to be in the open. The sun called to mind the amethystine foliage, half mist and half leaves, which was beginning to appear in the woods, as if trailing clouds had become entangled among the twig-set branches. The wind brought a spirit of daring, as if to-day one could do and not count the cost; as if adventures were the normal experience of man, and dreams might become tangible with the foliage which was condensing out of the spring air. It was one of those rare days which put the ideal to shame.

The windows of Mrs. Neligage's little parlor were open, and the morning air with all its provoking suggestions was floating in softly, as she rose to welcome a caller. He was not in the first springtime of life, yet suggested a season which was to spring what Indian summer is to autumn. A certain brisk jauntiness in face, dress, and manner might mean that he had by sheer determination remained far younger than his years. He had a hard, handsome face, with cleanly cut features, and side whiskers which were perhaps too long and flowing. His hair was somewhat touched with gray, but it was abundant, and curled attractively about his high, white forehead. His dress was perfection, and gave the impression that if he had moral scruples—about which his hard, bright eyes might raise a doubt—it would be in the direction of being always perfectly attired. His manner as he greeted Mrs. Neligage was carefully genial, yet the spring which was in the air seemed in his presence to be chilled by an untimely frost.

"How bright you are looking this morning, Louise," Mr. Sibley Langdon said, kissing her hand with an elaborate air of gallantry. "You are really the incarnation of the spring that is upon us."

She smiled languidly, drawing away her hand and moving to a seat.

"You know I am getting old enough to like to be told I am young, Sibley," was her answer. "Sit down, and tell me what has happened in the month that I've been in Washington."

"Nothing can happen while you are away," he responded, with a smile. "We only vegetate, and wait for your return. You don't mind if I smoke?"

"Certainly not. How is Mrs. Langdon?"

He drew out a cigarette-case of tortoise-shell and gold, helped himself to a cigarette, and lighted it before he answered.

"Mrs. Langdon is as usual," he replied. "She is as ill and as pious as ever."

"For which is she to be pitied the more?"

"Oh, I don't know that she is to be pitied for either," Langdon responded, in his crisp, well-bred voice. "Both her illness and her piety are in the nature of occupations to her. One must do something, you know."

Mrs. Neligage offered no reply to this, and for half a moment the caller smoked in silence.

"Tell me about yourself," he said. "You cruelly refuse to write to me, so that when you are away I am always in the dark as to what you are doing. I've no doubt you had all Washington at your feet."

"Oh, there were a few unimportant exceptions," Mrs. Neligage returned, her voice a little hard. "I don't think that if you went on now you'd find the capital draped in mourning over my departure."

Langdon knocked the ashes from his cigarette with the deliberation which marked all his movements. Then he looked at his hostess curiously.

"You don't seem to be in the best of spirits this morning, Louise," he said. "Has anything gone wrong?"

She looked at him with contracting brows, and ignored his question as she demanded abruptly:—

"What did you come to say to me?"

"To say to you, my dear? I came as usual to say how much I admire you, of course."

She made an impatient gesture.

"What did you come to say?" she repeated. "Do you think I don't know you well enough to see when you have some especial purpose in mind?"

Sibley Langdon laughed lightly,—a sort of inward, well-bred laugh,—and again with care trimmed his cigarette.

"You are a person of remarkable penetration, and it is evidently of no use to hope to get ahead of you. I really came for the pleasure of seeing you, but now that I am here I may as well mention that I have decided to go abroad almost at once."

"Ah," Mrs. Neligage commented. "Does Mrs. Langdon go with you?"

He laughed outright, as if the question struck him as unusually droll.

"You really cannot think me so selfish as to insist upon her risking her fragile health by an ocean voyage just for my pleasure."

"I suspected that you meant to go alone," she said dryly.

"But, my dear child," he answered with no change of manner, "I don't mean to go alone."

She changed color, but she did not pursue the subject. She took up from the table a little Japanese ivory carving, and began to examine it with close scrutiny.

"You do not ask whom I hope to take with me," Langdon said.

She looked at him firmly.

"I have no possible interest in knowing," she responded.

"You are far too modest, Louise. On the contrary you have the greatest. I had hoped—"

He half hesitated over the sentence, and she interrupted him by rising and moving to the open window.

"It is so nice to have the windows open again," she said. "I feel as if I were less alone when there is nothing between me and the world. That big fat policeman over there is a great friend of mine."

"We are all your slaves, you see," Langdon responded, rising languidly and joining her. "By the way, I had a letter from Count Marchetti the other day."

Mrs. Neligage flushed and paled, and into her eye came a dangerous sparkle. She moved away from him, and went back to her seat, leaving him to follow again. She did not look at him, but she spoke with a determined manner which showed that she was not cowed.

"Before I go to bed to-night, Sibley," she said, "I shall write to the Countess the whole story of her necklace. I was a fool not to do it before."

He smiled indulgently.

"Oh, did I call up that old unpleasantness?" he observed. "I really beg your pardon. But since you speak of it, what good would it do to write to her now? It would make no difference in facts, of course; and it wouldn't change things here at all."

She sprang up and turned upon him in a fury.

"Sibley Langdon," she cried, "you are a perfect fiend!"

He laughed and looked at her with admiration so evident that her eyes fell.

"You have told me that before, and you are so devilish handsome when you say it, Louise, that I can't resist the temptation sometimes of making you repeat it. Come, don't be cross. We are too wise if not too old to talk melodrama."

"I shall act melodrama if you keep on tormenting me! What did you come here for this morning? Say it, and have done."

"If you take it that way," returned he, "I came only to say good-morning."

His coolness was unshaken, and he smiled as charmingly as ever.

"Tell me," he remarked, flinging his cigarette end into the grate and taking out his case again, "did you see the Kanes in Washington?"

He lighted a fresh cigarette, and for half an hour talked of casual matters, the people of their set in Washington, the new buildings there, the decorations, and the political scandals. His manner became almost deferential, and Mrs. Neligage as they chatted lost gradually all trace of the excitement which she had shown. At length the talk came round to their neighbors at home.

"I met Count Shimbowski at the club the other day," Langdon remarked, "and he alluded to the old days at Monte Carlo almost with sentiment. It is certainly amusing to see him passed round

among respectable Boston houses."

"He is respectable enough according to his standards," she responded. "It is funny, though, to see how much afraid he is that Miss Wentstile should know about his past history."

"I suppose there's no doubt he's to marry Alice Endicott, is there?"

"There is Alice herself," Mrs. Neligage answered. "I should call her a pretty big doubt."

"At any rate," her companion observed, "Jack can't marry her. Miss Wentstile would never give them a penny."

"I have never heard Jack say that he wished to marry her," Mrs. Neligage responded coolly. "You are quite right about Miss Wentstile, though; she regards Jack as the blackest sheep imaginable."

Langdon did not speak for a moment or two, and when he did break silence his manner was more decided than before.

"What line do you like best to cross by?" he asked.

"I have been on so many," she answered, "that I really can't tell."

"It is safe to say then that you like a fast boat."

She made no reply, and only played nervously with the clever carving in her hand, where little ivory rats were stealing grain with eternal motionless activity.

"Of course if you were going over this spring," Langdon said, "we should be likely to meet somewhere on the other side; Paris, very possibly. It is a pity that people gossip so, or we might go on the same steamer."

She looked him squarely in the face.

"I am not going abroad this summer," she said distinctly.

"Oh, my dear Louise," returned he half mockingly, half pleadingly, "you really can't mean that. Europe would be intolerably dull without you."

She looked up, pale to the eyes.

"My son would be dull here without me," she said.

"Oh, Jack," returned the other, shrugging his shoulders, "he'll get on very well. If you were going, you know, you might leave him something—"

She started to her feet with eyes blazing.

"You had better go," she said in a low voice. "I have endured a good deal from you, Sibley; and I've always known that the day would come when you'd insult me. It will be better for us both if you go."

He rose in his turn, as collected as ever.

"Insult you, my dear Louise? Why, I wouldn't hurt your feelings for anything in the world. I give you leave to repeat every word that I have said to any of your friends,—to Miss Wentstile, or Letty Harbinger, or to Jack—"

"If I repeated them to Jack," she interrupted him, "he'd break every bone in your body!"

"Would he? I doubt it. At any rate he would have to hear me first; and then—"

Mrs. Neligage, all her brightness quenched, her face old and miserable, threw out her hands in despairing supplication.

"Go!" she cried. "Go! Or I shall do something we'll both be sorry for! Go, or I'll call that policeman over there."

He laughed lightly, but he moved toward the door.

"Gad!" he ejaculated. "That would make a pretty item in the evening papers. Well, if you really wish it, I'll go; but I hope you'll think over what I've said, or rather think over what I haven't said, since you haven't seemed pleased with my words. I shall come at one to drive you to the County Club."

He bade her an elaborate good-morning, and went away, as collected, as handsome, as debonaire as ever; while Mrs. Neligage, the hard, bright little widow who had the reputation of being afraid of nothing and of having no feelings, broke down into a most unusual fit of crying.

X

THE BUSINESS OF A CLUBMAN

The first game of polo for the season at the County Club was to be played that Saturday. The unusually early spring had put the turf in condition, and the men had had more or less practice. It was too soon, of course, for a match, but there was to be a friendly set-to between the County Club team and a team from the Oracle Club. It was not much more than an excuse for bringing the members out, and for having a mild gala, with fresh spring toilettes and spring buoyancy to add to the zest of the day.

Amusement is a business which calls for a good deal of brains if it is to be carried on successfully. Of course only professionals can hope to succeed in a line so difficult, and in America there are few real professionals in the art of self-amusement. Most men spoil their chances of complete success by dallying more or less with work of one sort or another; and this is fatal. Only he who is sincere in putting amusement first, and to it sacrifices all other considerations, can hope for true preëminence in this calling. Jack Neligage was one of the few men in Boston entirely free from any weakness in the way of occupation beyond that of pleasure-seeking; and as a consequence he was one of the few who did it well.

All forms of fashionable play came easily and naturally to Jack, and in them all he bore a part with tolerable grace. He was sufficiently adept at tennis in its day; and when that had passed, he was equally adroit in golf and in curling; he could lead a german better than anybody else; nobody so well managed assemblies and devised novel surprises in the way of decorations; nobody else so well arranged coaching trips or so surely made the life of a house party. All these things were part of his profession as a pleasure-seeker, and they were all done with a quick and merry spirit which gave to them a charm not to be resisted.

It was on the polo-field, however, that Jack was at his best. No man who hopes to keep up with the fashions can afford to become too much interested in any single sport, for presently the fad will alter, and he must perforce abandon the old delights; but polo held its own very well, and it was evidently the thing in which Jack reveled most. He was the leading player not of his club only, but of all the clubs about. His stud of polo-ponies was selected with more care than has often gone to the making of a state constitution, for the matters that are really important must be attended to with zeal, while public politics may be expected more or less to take care of themselves. His friends wondered how Neligage contrived to get hold of ponies so valuable, or how he was able to keep so expensive an outfit after he had obtained it; but everybody was agreed that he had a most wonderful lot.

The question of how he managed might have been better understood by any one who had chanced to overhear a conversation between Jack and Dr. Wilson, which took place just before luncheon that day. Dr. Wilson was chairman of the board of managers of the club. He was a man who had come into the club chiefly as the husband of Mrs. Chauncy Wilson, a lady whose stud was one of the finest in the state, and he was somewhat looked down upon by the men of genuine old family. He was good-humored, however; shrewd if a little unrefined; and he had been rich long enough to carry the burden of his wife's enormous fortune without undue self-consequence. To-day it became his duty to talk to Jack on an unpleasant matter of business.

"Jack," he said, "I've got to pitch into you again."

"The same old thing, I suppose."

"Same old thing. Sometimes I've half a mind to resign from the club, so as to get rid of having to drub you fellows about your bills."

Jack gnawed his mustache, twisting his cigar in his fingers in a way that threatened to demolish it altogether.

"I've told you already that I can't do anything until—"

"Oh, I know it," Wilson broke in. "I'm satisfied, but the committee is getting scared. The finances of the club are in an awful mess; there's no denying that. Some of the men on the committee, you see, are afraid of being blamed for letting the credits run on so."

Jack did not take advantage of the pause which gave him an opportunity to speak, and the other went on again.

"I'm awfully sorry, old man; but there's got to be an end somewhere, and nobody's been given the rope that you have."

"I can resign, of course," Jack said shortly.

"Oh, dry up that sort of talk! Nobody'd listen to your resigning. Everybody wants you here, and we couldn't spare you from the polo team."

"But if I can't pay up, what else can I do?"

"But you can't resign in debt, man."

Jack laughed with savage amusement.

"What the devil am I to do? I can't stay, and I can't leave. That seems to be about the size of it."

Dr. Wilson looked at his companion keenly, and there was in his tone some hesitation as he replied.

"You might sell—"

"Sell my ponies!" broke in Neligage excitedly. "When I do I'll give up playing."

"Oh, nonsense! Don't be so infernally stubborn. Harbinger'll buy one, and I'll buy a couple, and the others it doesn't matter about. You've always had twice as many as you need."

"So you propose that I shouldn't have any."

"You could use them just the same."

Jack swore savagely.

"Thank you," he returned. "I may be a beggar, but I won't be a beat."

Wilson laughed with his oily, chuckling laugh.

"I don't see," he observed with characteristic brusqueness, "why it is any worse to take a favor from a friend that offers it than to get it out of a club that can't help itself."

Jack's cheeks flushed, and he began an angry reply. Then he restrained himself.

"I won't quarrel with you for doing your official duty, Wilson," he said stiffly. "I'll fix things somehow or get out."

"Oh, hang it, man," returned the doctor good-naturedly, "you mustn't talk of getting out. I'll lend you what you need."

"Thank you, but you know I can't pay you."

"That's no matter. Something will turn up, and you may pay me when you get ready."

"No; I'm deep enough in the mire as it is. I won't make it worse by borrowing. That's the only virtue that I ever had,—that I didn't sponge on my friends. I'm just as much obliged to you; but I can't do it."

They had been sitting in the smoking-room before the fireplace where a smouldering log or two took from the air its spring chill. Jack as he spoke flung the stub of his cigar into the ashes, and rose with an air of considering the conversation definitely ended. Wilson looked up at him, his golden-brown eyes more sober than usual.

"Of course it is just as you say, old man," he remarked; "but if you change your mind, you've only to let me know."

Jack moved off with a downcast air unusual to him, but by the time he had encountered two or three men who were about the club-house, and had exchanged with them a jest or a remark about the coming game, his face was as sunny as ever. People were now arriving rather rapidly, and soon the stylish trap of Sibley Langdon came bowling up the driveway in fine style, with Mrs. Neligage sitting beside the owner. Jack was on the front piazza when they drove up, and his mother waved her hand to him gayly.

"Gad, Jack," one of the men said, "your mother is a wonder. She looks younger than you do this minute."

"I don't think she is," Jack returned with a grin; "but you're right. She is a wonderfully young woman to be the mother of a great cub like me."

Not only in her looks did Mrs. Neligage give the impression of youth, but her movements and her unquenchable vivacity might put to a disadvantage half of the young girls. She tripped up the steps as lightly as a leaf blown by the wind, her trim figure swaying as lithely as a willow-shoot. As she came to Jack she said to him in a tone loud enough to be heard by all who were on the piazza:—

"Oh, Jack, come into the house a moment. I want to show you a letter."

She dropped a gay greeting here and there as she led the way, and in a moment they were alone inside the house. Mrs. Neligage turned instantly, with a face from which all gayety had vanished as the color of a ballet-dancer's cheek vanishes under the pall of a green light.

"Jack," she said hastily, "I am desperate. I am in the worst scrape I ever was in, in my life. Can you raise any money?"

He looked at her a moment in amazed silence; then he laughed roughly.

"Money?" he retorted. "I am all but turned out of the club to-day for want of it. This is probably my last game."

"You are not in earnest?" she demanded, pressing closer to him, and putting her hand on his arm. "You are not really going to leave the club?"

"What else can I do? The committee think it isn't possible to let things go any longer."

She looked into his face, her own hardening. She studied him with a keen glance, which he met firmly, yet with evident effort.

"Jack," she said at length, her voice lower, "there is only one way out of it. Last night you wouldn't listen to me; but you must now. You must marry May Calthorpe. If you were engaged to her it would be easy enough to raise money."

"You talk as if she were only waiting for me to say the word, and she'd rush into my arms."

"She will, she must, if you'll have her. You wouldn't take her for your own good, but you've got to do it for mine. You can't let me be ruined just through your obstinacy."

"Ruined? What under the canopy do you mean, mother? You are trying to scare me to make me go your way."

"I'm not, Jack; upon my word I'm not! I tell you I'm in an awful mess, and you must stand by me."

Jack turned away from her and walked toward the window; then he faced her again with a look which evidently questioned how far she was really in earnest. There had been occasions when Mrs. Neligage had used her histrionic powers to get the better of her son in some domestic discussion, and the price of such success is inevitably distrust. Now she faced him boldly, and met his look with a nod of perfect comprehension.

"Yes, I am telling you the truth, Jacky. There is nothing for it but for us both to go to smash if you won't take May."

"Take May," he echoed impatiently, "how you do keep saying that! How can I take her? She doesn't care a straw about me anyway, and I've no doubt she looks on me as one of the old fellows."

"She being eighteen and you twenty-five," his mother answered, smiling satirically. "But somebody is coming. I can't talk to you now; only this one thing I must say. Play into my hands as you can if you will, and you'll be engaged to May before the week's over."

He broke into a roar of laughter which had a sound of being as much nerves as amusement.

"Is this a comic opera?" he demanded.

"Yes, dear Jacky," his mother retorted, resuming her light manner, "that's just what it is. Don't you miss your cue."

She left him, and went gayly forward to greet the new-comers, ladies who had just driven up, and Jack followed her lead with a countenance from which disturbance and bewilderment had not entirely vanished.

XI

THE GAME OF CROSS-PURPOSES

Mrs. Neligage escaped from her friends speedily, with that easy swiftness which is in the power of the socially adroit, and returned to the piazza by a French window which opened at the side of the house, and so was not in sight from the front of the club. There she came upon Count Shimbowski comfortably seated in a sunny corner, smoking and meditating.

"Ah, Count," she said, as he rose to receive her, "this is unexpected pleasure. Are you resting from the strain of continual adulation?"

"What you say?" he responded. Then he dropped into his seat with a despairing gesture. "Dis Eengleesh," he said; "eet ees eemposseeble eet to know. I have told Mees Wentsteele dat she ees very freesh, and—"

He ended with a groan, and a snug little Hungarian oath under his breath.

"Fresh!" echoed Mrs. Neligage, with a laugh like a redbird whisking gayly from branch to branch. "My dear Count, she is anything but fresh. She is as stale as a last year's love-affair. But she ought to be pleased to be told she is fresh."

"Oh, I say: 'You be so freesh, Mees Wentsteele,' and she, she say: 'Freesh, Count Shimbowski? You result me!' Den day teel me freesh mean fooleesh, *sotte*. What language ees dat?"

"Oh, it isn't so bad as you think, Count. It is only *argot* anyway, and it doesn't mean *sotte*, but *naïve*. Besides, she wouldn't mind. She is enough of a woman to be pleased that you even tried to tell her she was young."

"But no more ees she young."

"No more, Count. We are all of us getting to be old enough to be our own grandmothers. Miss Wentstile looks as if she was at the Flood and forgot to go in when it rained."

The Count looked more puzzled than amused at this sally, but his politeness came to his rescue. A compliment is always the resource of a man of the world when a lady puzzles him.

"Eet ees only Madame Neleegaze to what belong eemortal youth," he said with a bow.

She rose and swept him a courtesy, and then took from her dress one of the flowers she was wearing, which chanced to be very portly red carnations.

"You are as gallant as ever, Count," she said, "so that your English doesn't matter. Besides that, you have a title; and American women love a title as a moth loves a candle."

She stuck the carnation into his buttonhole as she spoke, and returned to her seat, where she settled herself with the air of one ready for a serious chat.

"It is very odd to see you on this side of the Atlantic, Count," she remarked. "Tell me, what are you doing in this country,—besides taking the town by storm, that is?"

"I weell range my own self;—say you een Eengleesh 'arrange my own self'?"

"When it means you are going to marry, Count, it might be well to say that you are going to arrange yourself and derange somebody else. Is the lady Miss Endicott?"

"Eet ees Mees Endeecott. Ees she not good for me?"

"She is a thousand times too good for you, my dear fellow; but she is as poor as a church mouse."

"Ah, but her aunt, Mees Wentsteele, she geeve her one *dot*: two thousand hundred dollar. Eet weell be a meellion francs, ees eet not?"

"So you get a million francs for yourself, Count. It is more than I should have thought you worth."

"But de teettle!"

"Oh, the title is worth something, but I could buy one a good deal cheaper. If I remember correctly I might have had yours for nothing, Count."

The Count did not look entirely pleased at this reminiscence, but he smiled, and again took refuge in a compliment.

"To one so *ravissante* as madame all teettles are under her feet."

"I wish you would set up a school for compliments here in Boston, Count, and teach our men to say nice things. Really, a Boston man's compliments are like molasses candy, they are so home-made. But why don't you take the aunt instead of the niece? Miss Wentstile is worth half a million."

"Dat weell be mouche," responded the Count with gravity; "but she have bones."

The widow laughed lightly. The woman who after forty can laugh like a girl is one who has preserved her power over men, and she is generally one fully aware of the fact. Mrs. Neligage had no greater charm than her light-hearted laugh, which no care could permanently subdue. She tossed her head, and then shook it at the Count.

"Yes," she responded, "you are unfortunately right. She has bones. By the way, do you happen to have with you that letter I gave you at Mrs. Harbinger's yesterday?"

"Yes," he answered, drawing from his pocket the note addressed to Christopher Calumus, "I have eet."

"I would like to see it," Mrs. Neligage said, extending her hand.

The Count smiled, and held it up.

"You can see eet," said he, "but eet ees not permeet you weedeen de hand to have eet."

She leaned forward and examined it closely, studying the address with keen eyes.

"It is no matter," was her remark. "I only wanted to make sure."

"Do you de handwrite know?" he demanded eagerly.

"And if I do?"

"You do know," he broke out in French. "I can see it in your face. Tell me who wrote it."

She shook her head, smiling teasingly. Then she rose, and moved toward the window by which she had come from the house.

"No, Count," was her answer. "It doesn't suit my plan to tell you. I didn't think quickly enough yesterday, or I wouldn't have given it to you. It was in your hands before I thought whose writing it was."

The Count, who had risen, bowed profoundly.

"After all," he said, "I need not trouble you. Mrs. Harbinger acknowledged that she wrote it."

Mrs. Neligage flashed back at him a mocking grimace as she withdrew by the window.

"I never expected to live to see you believe a thing because a woman said it," she laughed. "You must have been in strange hands since I used to know you!"

Left alone, the Count thoughtfully regarded the letter for a moment, then with a shrug he restored it to his pocket, and turned to go around the corner of the house to the front piazza. Sounds of wheels, of voices, of talking, and of laughter told of the gathering of pleasure-seekers; and scarcely had the Count passed the corner than he met Mr. Bradish face to face. There were groups of men and women on the piazza and on the lawn, with the horses and dogs in sight which are the natural features in such a picture at an out-of-town club. The Count heeded none of these things, but stepped forward eagerly.

"Ah, Count, you have come out to the games like everybody else, I see," Bradish said pleasantly.

"Eet ees extreme glad to see me, Mr. Bradeesh," the Count returned, shaking him by the hand. "Do you weelleengly come wid us a leettle, for dat I say to you ver' particle?"

Bradish, with his usual kindly courtesy, followed the Count around the corner of the house, out of sight of the arriving company.

"Something particular to say to me, Count?" he observed. "You do me too much honor."

"Eet weell be of honor dat I weell to you speak," the Count responded. "Weell you for myself de condescension to have dat you weell be one friend to one *affaire d'honneur*?"

Bradish stared at him in undisguised amazement.

"An *affaire d'honneur*?" he echoed. "Surely you don't mean that you are going to fight? You can't mean a duel?"

"Oh, *oui, oui*; eet weell be a duel dat eet calls you."

Bradish stared harder than ever, and then sat down as if overcome.

"But, my dear Count, you can't fight duels in America."

"For what weell not een Amereeca fight? He have result me! Me, Count Ernst Shimbowski! Weell I not to have hees blood?"

"I'm afraid you won't," Bradish responded, shaking his head. "That isn't the way we do things here. But who is it has insulted you?"

The Count became more and more excited as he spoke of his wrongs, and with wide gestures he appealed to the whole surrounding region to bear him out in his rage and his resolution. He stood over Bradish like an avenging and furious angel, swaying his body by way of accent to his words.

"You deed see! De ladies day deed see! All de world weell have heard dat he result—he eensult me! De Shimbowski name have been eensult'! Deed he not say 'Veelaine! Veelaine!' Oh, *sacré nom de mon père*! 'Veelaine! Veelaine!' Eet weell not but only blood to wash dat eensult!"

How an American gentleman should behave when he is seriously asked to act as a second in a duel in this land and time is a question which has probably never been authoritatively settled, and which might be reasoned upon with very curious arguments from different points of view. It is safe to say that any person who finds himself in such a position could hardly manage to incur much risk of running into danger, or even of doing violence to any moral scruples with which he may chance to be encumbered. He must always feel that the chances of a duel's actually taking place are so ridiculously small that the whole matter can be regarded only as food for laughter; and that no matter how eager for fight one or both of the possible combatants might be, the end will be peace. So far from making the position of a second more easy, however, this fact perhaps renders it more difficult. It is harder to face the ridiculous than the perilous. If there were any especial chance that a duel would proceed to extremes, that principals would perhaps come to grief and seconds be with them involved in actual danger, even though only the ignoble danger of legal complications, a man might feel that honor called upon him not to fail his friend in extremity. When it is merely a question of becoming more or less ridiculous according to the notoriety of the affair, the matter is different. The demand of society is that a gentleman shall be ready to brave peril, but there is nothing in the social code which goes so far as to call upon him to run the chance of making himself ridiculous. Society is founded upon the deepest principles of human nature, and if it demanded of man the sacrifice of his vanity the social fabric would go to pieces like a house of cards in a whirlwind. Bradish might have been called upon to risk his life at the request of the Count, although they were in reality little more than acquaintances; but he certainly cannot be held to have been under any obligations to give the world a right to laugh at him.

Bradish regarded the Count with a smile half amused and half sympathetic, while the Hungarian poured out his excited protest, and when there came a pause he said soothingly:—

"Oh, sit down and talk it over, my dear Count. I see you mean that stupid dunce of a Barnstable. You can't fight him. Everybody would laugh at the very idea. Besides, he isn't your equal socially. You can't fight him."

"You do comprehend not!" cried the Count. "De Shimbowski name weell eet to have blood for de eensult!"

"But—"

The Count drew himself up with an air of hauteur which checked the words on Bradish's lips.

"Eet ees not for a Shimbowski to beg for favors," he said stiffly. "Eef eet ees you dat do not serve me—"

"Oh, I assure you," interrupted Bradish hastily, "I am more than willing to serve you; but I wanted to warn you that in America we look at things so differently—"

"Een Amereeca even," the Count in his turn interrupted with a superb gesture, "dare weell be gentlemans, ees eet not?"

In the face of that gesture there was nothing more to be said in the way of objection. Time and the chapter of accidents must determine what would come of it, but no man of sensibility and patriotism, appealed to in that grand fashion in the name of the honor of America, could have held out longer. Least of all was it to be expected that Harry Bradish, kindest-hearted of living men, and famous for never being able to refuse any service that was asked of him, could resist this last touch. He rose as if to get out of the interview as speedily as possible.

"Very well then," he said, "if you persist in going on, I'll do what I can for you, but I give you fair warning once more that it'll come to nothing more than making us both ridiculous."

The Count shook hands warmly, but his response was one which might be said to show less consideration than might have been desired for the man who was making a sacrifice in his behalf.

"De Shimbowski name," he declared grandiloquently, yet with evident sincerity, "ees never reedeeculous."

There followed some settling of details, in all of which Bradish evinced a tendency to temporize and to postpone, but in which the ardor of the Count so hurried everything forward that had Barnstable been on the spot the duel might have been actually accomplished despite all obstacles. It was evident, however, that one side cannot alone arrange a meeting of honor, and in the end little could be done beyond the Count's receiving a promise from Bradish that the latter would communicate with Barnstable as soon as possible.

This momentous and blood-curdling decision having been arrived at, the two gentlemen emerged from their retirement on the side piazza, and once more joined the gay world as represented by the now numerous gathering assembled to see the polo at the County Club.

XII

THE WASTING OF REQUESTS

The exhilaration of the spring day, the pleasure of taking up once more the outdoor life of the warm season, the little excitement which belongs to the assembling of merry-makers, the chatter, the laughter, all the gay bustle combined to fill the County Club with a joyous atmosphere. Before the front of the house was a sloping lawn which merged into an open park, here and there dotted with groups of budding trees and showing vividly the red of golf flags. The driveway wound in curves of carefully devised carelessness from the country road beyond the park to the end of the piazza, and all arrivals could be properly studied as they approached. The piazza was wide and roomy, so that it was not crowded, although a considerable number of men and women were there assembled; and from group to group laughter answered laughter.

Mrs. Harbinger in the capacity of chaperone had with her Alice Endicott and May Calthorpe. The three ladies stood chatting with Dick Fairfield, tossing words back and forth like tennis-balls for the sheer pleasure of the exercise.

"Oh, I insist," Fairfield said, "that spring is only a season when the days are picked before they are ripe."

"You say that simply in your capacity of a literary man, Mr. Fairfield," Alice retorted; "but I doubt if it really means anything."

"I am afraid it doesn't mean much," he responded laughing, "but to insist that an epigram must mean something would limit production dreadfully."

"Then we are to understand," Mrs. Harbinger observed, "that what you literary men say is never to be taken seriously."

"Oh, you should make a distinction, Mrs. Harbinger. What a literary man says in his professional capacity you are at liberty to believe or not, just as you choose; but of course in regard to what is said in his personal capacity it is different."

"There, I suppose," she retorted, "he is simply to be classed with other men, and not to be believed at all."

"Bless me, what cynicism! Where is Mr. Harbinger to defend his reputation?"

"He is so absorbed in getting ready for the game that he has forgotten all about any reputation but that of a polo-player," Mrs. Harbinger returned. "And that reminds me that I haven't seen his new pony. Come, Alice, you appreciate a horse. We must go and examine this new wonder from

Canada."

"We are not invited apparently," May said, seating herself in a piazza chair. "It is evidently your duty, Mr. Fairfield, to stay here and entertain me while they are gone."

"I remain to be entertained," he responded, following her example.

Mrs. Harbinger and Alice went off to the stables, and the pair left behind exchanged casual comments upon the day, the carriages driving up, the smart spring gowns of the ladies, and that sort of verbal thistledown which makes up ordinary society chit-chat. A remark which Fairfield made on the attire of a dashing young woman was the means of bringing the talk around again to the subject which had been touched upon between them on the previous afternoon.

"I suppose," Miss Calthorpe observed, "that a man who writes stories has to know about clothes. You do write stories, I am sure, Mr. Fairfield."

He smiled, and traced a crack in the piazza floor with his stick.

"Which means, of course," he said, "that you have never read any of them. That is so far lucky for me."

"Why is it lucky?"

"Because you might not have liked them."

"But on the other hand I might have liked them very much."

"Well, perhaps there is that chance. I don't know, however, that I should be willing to run the risk. What kind of a story do you like?"

"I told you that yesterday, Mr. Fairfield. If you really cared for my opinion you would remember."

"You said that you liked 'Love in a Cloud.' Is that what you mean?"

"Then you do remember," she remarked with an air of satisfaction. "Perhaps it was only because you liked the book yourself."

"Why not believe that it was because I put so much value on your opinion?"

"Oh, I am not so vain as that, Mr. Fairfield," she cried. "If you remember, it was not on my account."

He laughed without replying, and continued the careful tracing of the crack in the floor as if the occupation were the pleasantest imaginable. May watched him for a moment, and then with the semblance of pique she turned her shoulder toward him. The movement drew his eyes, and he suddenly stopped his occupation to straighten up apologetically.

"I was thinking," he said, "what would be the result of your reading such stories of mine as have been published—there have been a few, you know, in the magazines—if you were to test them by the standard of 'Love in a Cloud.' I'm afraid they might not stand it."

She smiled reassuringly, but perhaps with a faint suggestion of condescension.

"One doesn't expect all stories to be as good as the best," she observed.

Fairfield turned his face away for a quick flash of a grin to the universe in general; then with perfect gravity he looked again at his companion.

"I am afraid," he said, "that even the author of 'Love in a Cloud' wouldn't expect so much of you as that you should call his story the best."

"I do call it the best," she returned, a little defiantly. "Don't you?"

"No," he said slowly, "I couldn't go so far as that."

"But you spoke yesterday as if you admired it."

"But that isn't the same thing as saying that there is nothing better."

Miss Calthorpe began to tap her small foot impatiently.

"That is always the way with men who write," she declared. "They always have all sorts of fault to find with everything."

"Have you known a great many literary men?" he asked.

There are few things more offensive in conversation, especially in conversation with a lady, than an insistence upon logic. To ask of a woman that she shall make only exact statements is as bad as to require her to be always consistent, and there is small reason for wonder if at this inquiry Miss Calthorpe should show signs of offense.

"I do not see what that has to do with the matter," she returned stiffly. "Of course everybody knows about literary men."

The sun of the April afternoon smiled over the landscape, and the young man smiled under his mustache, which was too large to be entirely becoming. He glanced up at his companion, who did

not smile in return, but only sat there looking extremely pretty, with her flushed cheeks, her dark hair in pretty willful tendrils about her temples, and her dark eyes alight.

"Perhaps you have some personal feeling about the book," he said. "You know that it is claimed that a woman's opinion of literature is always half personal feeling."

She flushed more deeply yet, and drew herself up as if he were intruding upon unwarrantable matters.

"I don't even know who wrote the book," she replied.

"Then it is only the book itself that you admire, and not the author?"

"Of course it is the book. Haven't I said that I don't even know who the author is? I can't see," she went on somewhat irrelevantly, "why it is that as soon as there is anything that is worth praising you men begin to run it down."

He looked as if he were a trifle surprised at her warmth.

"Run it down?" he repeated. "Why, I am not running it down. I said that I admired the novel, didn't I?"

"But you said that you didn't think it was one of the best," she insisted.

"But you might allow a little for individual taste, Miss Calthorpe."

"Oh, of course there is a difference in individual tastes, but that has to do with the parts of the story that one likes best. It's nothing at all to do with whether one isn't willing to confess its merits."

He broke into a laugh of so much amusement that she contracted her level brows into a frown which made her prettier than ever.

"Now you are laughing at me," she said almost pouting. "It is so disappointing to find that I was deceived. Of course I know that there is a good deal of professional jealousy among authors, but I shouldn't have thought—"

She perhaps did not like to complete her sentence, and so left it for him to end with a fresh laugh.

"I wish I dared tell you how funny that is!" he chuckled.

She made no reply to this, but turned her attention to the landscape. There was a silence of a few moments, in which Fairfield had every appearance of being amused, while she equally showed that she was offended. The situation was certainly one from which a young author might derive a good deal of satisfaction. It is not often that it falls to the lot of a writer to find his work so sincerely and ardently admired that he is himself taken to task for being jealous of its success. Such pleasure as comes from writing anonymous books must be greatly tempered by the fact that in a world where it is so much more easy to blame than to praise the author is sure to hear so much more censure of his work than approbation. To be accused by a young and pretty girl of a fault which one has not committed and from which one may be clear at a word is in itself a pleasing pastime, and when the imaginary fault is that of not sufficiently admiring one's own book, the titillation of the vanity is as lively as it is complicated. The spirit which Miss Calthorpe had shown, her pretty vehemence, and her marked admiration for "Love in a Cloud" might have seemed charming to any man who had a taste for beauty and youthful enthusiasm; upon the author of the book she praised it was inevitable that they should work mightily.

The pair were interrupted by the return of Mrs. Harbinger and Alice, who reported that there were so many men about the stables, and the ponies were being so examined and talked over by the players, that it was plainly no place for ladies.

"It was evident that we weren't wanted," Mrs. Harbinger said. "I hope that we are here. Ah, here comes the Count."

The gentleman named, fresh from his talk with Harry Bradish, came forward to join them, his smile as sunny as that of the day.

"See," May whispered tragically to Mrs. Harbinger as the Hungarian advanced, "he has a red carnation in his buttonhole."

"He must have read the letter then," Mrs. Harbinger returned hastily. "Hush!"

To make the most exciting communication and to follow it by a command to the hearer to preserve the appearance of indifference is a characteristically feminine act. It gives the speaker not only the last word but an effective dramatic climax, and the ever-womanly is nothing if not dramatic. The complement of this habit is the power of obeying the difficult order to be silent, and only a woman could unmoved hear the most nerve-shattering remarks with a manner of perfect tranquillity.

"Ah, eet ees so sweet loovly ladies een de landscape to see," the Count declared poetically, "where de birds dey twatter een de trees and things smell you so mooch."

"Thank you. Count," Mrs. Harbinger responded. "That is very pretty, but I am afraid that it means

nothing."

"What I say to you, Madame," the Count responded, with his hand on his heart, "always eet mean mooch; eet ees dat eet mean everyt'ing!"

"Then it is certainly time for me to go," she said lightly. "It wouldn't be safe for me to stay to hear everything. Come, girls: let's walk over to the field."

The sitters rose, and they moved toward the other end of the piazza.

"It is really too early to go to the field," May said, "why don't we walk out to the new golf-holes first? I want to see how they've changed the drive over the brook."

"Very well," Mrs. Harbinger assented. "The shortest way is to go through the house."

They passed in through a long window, and as they went Alice Endicott lingered a little with the Count. That part of the piazza was at the moment deserted, and so when before entering the house she dropped her parasol and waited for her companion to pick it up for her, they were practically alone.

"Thank you, Count," she said, as he handed her the parasol. "I am sorry to trouble you."

"Nodings what eet ees dat I do for Mees Endeecott ees trouble."

"Is that true?" she asked, pausing with her foot on the threshold, and turning back to him. "If I could believe it there are two favors that I should like to ask."

"Two favors?" he repeated. "Ah, I weell be heavenlee happee eef eet ees dat I do two favors."

"One is for myself," she said, "and the other is for Miss Wentstile. I'm sure you won't refuse me."

"Who could refuse one ladee so loovlaie!"

"The first is," Alice went on, paying no heed to the Count's florid compliments, "that you give me the letter Mrs. Neligage gave you yesterday."

"But de ladee what have wrote eet—"

"The lady that wrote it," Alice interrupted, "desires to have it again."

"Den weell I to her eet geeve," said the Count.

"But she has empowered me to receive it."

"But dat eet do not empower me eet to geeve."

"Then you decline to let me have it, Count?"

"Ah, I am desolation, Mees Endeecott, for dat I do not what you desaire; but I weell rather to do de oder t'ing what you have weesh."

"I am afraid, Count, that your willingness to oblige goes no farther than to let you do what you wish, instead of what I wish. I only wanted to know where you have known Mrs. Neligage."

"Ah," he exclaimed, "dat is what Mees Wentsteele have ask. My dear young lady, eet ees not dat you can be jealous dat once I have known Madame Neleegaze?"

She faced him with a look of astonishment so complete that the most simple could not misunderstand it. Then the look changed into profound disdain.

"Jealous!" she repeated. "I jealous, and of you, Count!"

Her look ended in a smile, as if her sense of humor found the idea of jealousy too droll to admit of indignation, and she turned to go in through the window, leaving the Count hesitating behind.

XIII

THE WILE OF A WOMAN

Before the Count had recovered himself sufficiently to go after Miss Endicott despite her look of contempt and her yet more significant amusement, Jack Neligage came toward him down the piazza, and called him by name.

"Oh, Count Shimbowski," Jack said. "I beg your pardon, but may I speak with you a moment?"

The Count looked after Miss Endicott, but he turned toward Neligage.

"I am always at your service," he said in French.

"I wanted to speak to you about that letter that my mother gave you yesterday. She made a mistake."

"A mistake?" the Count echoed, noncommittally.

"Yes. It is not for you."

"Well?"

"Will you give it to me, please?" Jack said.

"But why should I give it to you? Are you Christopher Calumus?"

"Perhaps," answered Jack, with a grin. "At least I can assure you that it is on the authority of the author of 'Love in a Cloud' that I ask for the letter."

"But I've already refused that letter to a lady."

"To a lady?"

"To Miss Endicott."

"Miss Endicott!" echoed Jack again, in evident astonishment. "Why should she want it?"

"She said that she had the authority of the writer, as you say that you have the authority of the man it was written to."

"Did you give it to her?"

"No; but if I did not give it to her, how can I give it to you?"

Neligage had grown more sober at the mention of Miss Endicott's name; he stood looking down, and softly beating the toe of his boot with his polo mallet.

"May I ask," he said at length, raising his glance to the Count's face, "what you propose to do with the letter?"

The other waved his hands in a gesture which seemed to take in all possible combinations of circumstances, while his shrug apparently expressed his inner conviction that whichever of these combinations presented itself Count Shimbowski would be equal to it.

"At least," he returned, "as Mrs. Harbinger has acknowledged that she wrote it, I could not give it up without her command."

Neligage laughed, and swung his mallet through the air, striking an imaginary ball with much deftness and precision.

"She said she wrote it, I know; but I think that was only for a lark, like mother's part in the play. I don't believe Mrs. Harbinger wrote it. However, here she comes, and you may ask her. I'll see you again. I must have the letter."

He broke into a lively whistle, and went off down the walk, as Mrs. Harbinger emerged through the window which a few moments before she had entered.

"I decided that I wouldn't go down to the brook," she said. "It is too warm to walk. Besides, I wanted to speak to you."

"Madame Harbeenger do to me too mooch of *honneur*," the Count protested, with his usual exuberance of gesture. "Eet ees to be me at her sarveece."

She led the way back to the chairs where her group had been sitting shortly before, and took a seat which placed her back toward the only other persons on the piazza, a couple of men smoking at the other end.

"Sit down, Count," she said, waving her hand at a chair. "Somebody will come, so I must say what I have to say quickly. I want that letter."

The Count smiled broadly, and performed with much success the inevitable shrug.

"You dat lettaire weesh; Madame Neleegaze dat lettaire weesh; Mr. Neleegaze dat lettaire weesh; everybody dat lettaire weesh. Count Shimbowski dat lettaire he keep, weell eet not?"

"Mrs. Neligage and Jack want it?" Mrs. Harbinger exclaimed. "What in the world can have set them on? Did they ask you for it?"

"Eet ees dat they have ask," the Count answered solemnly.

"I cannot understand that," she pursued thoughtfully. "Certainly they can't know who wrote it."

"Ees eet not dat you have said—"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Harbinger interrupted him, with a smile, "I forgot that they were there when I confessed to it."

The Count laid his hand on his heart and rolled up his eyes,—not too much.

"I have so weesh' to tell you how dat I have dat beauteous lettaire adore," he said. "I have wear de lettaire een de pocket of my heart."

This somewhat startling assertion was explained by his pushing aside his coat so that the top of a

letter appeared peeping out of the left pocket of his waistcoat as nearly over his heart as the exigencies of tailoring permitted.

"I shouldn't have let you know that I wrote it," she said.

"But eet have geeve to me so joyous extrodinaire eet to know!"

She regarded him shrewdly, then dropping her eyes, she asked:—

"Was it better than the other one?"

"De oder?" he repeated, evidently taken by surprise. "Ah, dat alone also have I treasured too mooch."

Mrs. Harbinger broke out frankly into a laugh.

"Come," she said, "I have caught you. You know nothing about any other. We might as well be plain with each other. I didn't write that letter and you didn't write 'Love in a Cloud,' or you'd know about the whole correspondence."

"Ah, from de Eden*garten*," cried the Count, "de weemens ees too mooch for not to fool de man. Madame ees for me greatly too clevaire."

"Thank you," she said laughingly. "Then give me the letter."

He bowed, and shrugged, and smiled deprecatingly; but he shook his head.

"So have Mees Endeecott say. Eef to her I geeve eet not, I can geeve eet not to you, desolation as eet make of my heart."

"Miss Endicott? Has she been after the letter too? Is there anybody else?"

"Madame Neleegaze, Mr. Neleegaze, Mees Endeecott, Madame Harbeenger," the Count enumerated, telling them off on his fingers. "Dat ees all now; but eef I dat lettaire have in my heart-pocket she weell come to me dat have eet wrote. Ees eet not so? Eet ees to she what have eet wrote dat eet weell be to geeve eet. I am eenterest to her behold."

"Then you will not give it to me?" Mrs. Harbinger said, rising.

He rose also, a mild whirlwind of apologetic shrugs and contortions, contortions not ungraceful, but as extraordinary as his English.

"Eet make me desolation een de heart," he declared; "but for now eet weell be for me to keep dat lettaire."

He made her a profound bow, and as if to secure himself against farther solicitation betook himself off. Mrs. Harbinger resumed her chair, and sat for a time thinking. She tapped the tip of her parasol on the railing before her, and the tip of her shoe on the floor, but neither process seemed to bring a solution of the difficulty which she was pondering. The arrivals at the club were about done, and although it still wanted some half hour to the time set for the polo game, most of those who had been about the club had gone over to the polo-field. The sound of a carriage approaching drew the attention of Mrs. Harbinger. A vehicle easily to be recognized as belonging to the railway station was advancing toward the club, and in it sat Mr. Barnstable. The gentleman was landed at the piazza steps, and coming up, he stood looking about him as if in doubt what to do next. His glance fell upon Mrs. Harbinger, and the light of recognition flooded his fluffy face as moonlight floods the dunes of a sandy shore. He came forward abruptly and awkwardly.

"Beg pardon, Mrs. Harbinger," he said. "I came out to find your husband. Do you know where I can see him?"

"He is all ready to play polo now, Mr. Barnstable," she returned. "I don't think you can see him until after the game."

She spoke rather dryly and without any cordiality. He stood with his hat in his two hands, pulling nervously at the brim.

"You are very likely angry with me, Mrs. Harbinger," he blurted out abruptly. "I ought to apologize for what I did at your house yesterday. I made a fool of myself."

Mrs. Harbinger regarded him curiously, as if she could hardly make up her mind how such a person was to be treated.

"It is not customary to have scenes of that kind in our parlors," she answered, smiling.

"I know it," he said, with an accent of deep despair. "It was all my unfortunate temper that ran away with me. But you don't appreciate, Mrs. Harbinger, how a man feels when his wife has been made the subject of an infamous libel."

"But if you'll let me say so, Mr. Barnstable, I think you are going out of your way to find trouble. You are not the only man who has been separated from his wife, and the chances are that the author of 'Love in a Cloud' never heard of your domestic affairs at all."

"But he must have," protested Barnstable with growing excitement, "why—"

"Pardon me," she interrupted, "I wasn't done. I say that the chance of the author of that book knowing anything about your affairs is so small as to be almost impossible."

"But there were circumstances so exact! Why, all that scene—"

"Really, Mr. Barnstable," Mrs. Harbinger again interrupted, "you must not go about telling what scenes are true. That is more of a publishing of your affairs than any putting them in a novel could be."

His eyes stared at her from the folds and undulations of his face like two remarkably large jellyfish cast by the waves among sand heaps.

"But—but," he stammered, "what am I to do? How would you feel if it were your wife?"

She regarded him with a glance which gave him up as incorrigible, and half turned away her head.

"I'm sure I can't say," she responded. "I never had a wife."

Barnstable was too much excited to be restrained by the mild jest, and dashed on, beginning to gesticulate in his earnestness.

"And by such a man!" he ran on. "Why, Mrs. Harbinger, just look at this. Isn't this obliquitous!"

He pulled from one pocket a handful of letters, dashed through them at a mad speed, thrust them back and drew another handful from a second pocket, scrabbled through them, discarded them for the contents of a third pocket, and in the end came back to the first batch of papers, where he at last hit upon the letter he was in search of.

"Only this morning I got this letter from a friend in New York that knew the Count in Europe. He's been a perfect rake. He's a gambler and a duelist. There, you take it, Mrs. Harbinger, and read it. You'll see, then, how I felt when that sort of a man scandaled my wife."

"But I thought that you received the letter only this morning," suggested Mrs. Harbinger, with a smile.

Her companion was too thoroughly excited to be interrupted, and dashed on.

"You take the letter, Mrs. Harbinger, and read it for yourself. Then you show it to your friends. Let people know what sort of a man they are entertaining and making much of. Damme—I beg your pardon; my temper's completely roused up!—it makes me sick to see people going on so over anything that has a title on it. Why, damme—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Harbinger; I really beg your pardon!—in America if a man has a title he can rob henroosts for a living, and be the rage in society."

Mrs. Harbinger reached out her hand deliberately, and took the letter which was thus thrust at her. She had it safe in her possession before she spoke again.

"I shall be glad to see the letter," she said, "because I am curious to know about Count Shimbowski. That he is what he pretends to be in the way of family I am sure, for I have seen his people in Rome."

"Oh, he is a Count all right," Barnstable responded; "but that doesn't make him any better."

"As for the book," she pursued calmly, "you are entirely off the track. The Count cannot possibly have written it. Just think of his English."

"I've known men that could write English that couldn't speak it decently."

"Besides, he hasn't been in the country long enough to have written it. If he did write it, Mr. Barnstable, how in the world could he know anything about your affairs? It seems to me, if I may say so, that you might apply a little common sense to the question before you get into a rage over things that cannot be so."

"I was hasty," admitted Barnstable, an expression of mingled penitence and woe in his face. "I'm afraid I was all wrong about the Count. But the book has so many things in it that fit, things that were particular, why, of course when Mrs.—that lady yesterday—"

"Mrs. Neligage."

"When she said the Count wrote it, I didn't stop to think."

"That was only mischief on her part. You might much better say her son wrote it than the Count."

"Her son?" repeated Barnstable, starting to his feet. "That's who it is! Why, of course it was to turn suspicion away from him that his mother—"

"Good heavens!" Mrs. Harbinger broke in, "don't make another blunder. Jack Neligage couldn't —"

"I see it all!" Barnstable cried, not heeding her. "Mr. Neligage was in Chicago just after my divorce. I heard him say he was there that winter. Oh, of course he's the man."

"But he isn't a writer," Mrs. Harbinger protested.

She rose to face Barnstable, whose inflammable temper had evidently blazed up again with a suddenness entirely absurd.

"That's why he wrote anonymously," declared the other; "and that's why he had to put in real things instead of making them up! Oh, of course it was Mr. Neligage."

"Mr. Barnstable," she said with seriousness, "be reasonable, and stop this nonsense. I tell you Mr. Neligage couldn't have written that book."

He glared at her with eyes which were wells of obstinacy undiluted.

"I'll see about that," he said.

Without other salutation than a nod he walked away, and left her.

She gazed after him with the look which studies a strange animal.

"Well," she said softly, aloud, "of all the fools—"

XIV

THE CONCEALING OF SECRETS

Where a number of persons are in the same place, all interested in the same matter, yet convinced that affairs must be arranged not by open discussion but by adroit management, the result is inevitable. Each will be seeking to speak to some other alone; there will be a constant shifting and rearranging of groups as characters are moved on and off the stage in the theatre. Life for the time being, indeed, takes on an artificial air not unlike that which results from the studied devices of the playwright. The most simple and accurate account of what takes place must read like the arbitrary conventions of the boards; and the reader is likely to receive an impression of unreality from the very closeness with which the truth has been followed.

At the County Club that April afternoon there were so many who were in one way or another interested in the fate of the letter which in a moment of wild fun Mrs. Neligage had handed over to the Count, that it was natural that the movements of the company should have much the appearance of a contrived comedy. No sooner, for instance, had Barnstable hastened away with a new bee in his bonnet, than Mrs. Harbinger was joined by Fairfield. He had come on in advance of the girls, and now at once took advantage of the situation to speak about the matter of which the air was full.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but I left the young ladies chatting with Mrs. Staggchase, and they'll be here in a minute. I wanted to speak to you."

She bestowed the letter which she had received from Barnstable in some mysterious recess of her gown, some hiding-place which had been devised as an attempted evasion of the immutable law that in a woman's frock shall be no real pocket.

"Go on," she said. "I am prepared for anything now. After Mr. Barnstable anything will be tame, though; I warn you of that."

"Mr. Barnstable? I didn't know you knew him till his circus last night."

"I didn't. He came to me here, and I thought he was going to apologize; but he ended with a performance crazier than the other."

"What did he do?" asked Fairfield, dropping into the chair which Barnstable had recently occupied. "He must be ingenious to have thought of anything madder than that. He might at least have apologized first."

"I wasn't fair to him," Mrs. Harbinger said. "He really did apologize; but now he's rushing off after Jack Neligage to accuse him of having written that diabolical book that's made all the trouble."

"Jack Neligage? Why in the world should he pitch upon him?"

"Apparently because I mentioned Jack as the least likely person I could think of to have written it. That was all that was needed to convince Mr. Barnstable."

"The man must be mad."

"We none of us seem to be very sane," Mrs. Harbinger returned, laughing. "I wonder what this particular madman will do."

"I'm sure I can't tell," answered Fairfield absently. Then he added quickly: "I wanted to ask you about that letter. Of course it isn't you that's been writing to me, but you must know who it is."

She stared at him in evident amazement, and then burst into a peal of laughter.

"Well," she said, "we have been mad, and no mistake. Why, we ought to have known in the first

place that you were Christopher Calumus. How in the world could we miss it? It just shows how we are likely to overlook the most obvious things."

Fairfield smiled, and beat his fist on the arm of his chair.

"There," he laughed, "I've let it out! I didn't mean to tell it."

"What nonsense!" she said, as if not heeding. "To think that it was you that May wrote to after all!"

"May!" cried Fairfield. "Do you mean that Miss Calthorpe wrote those letters?"

The face of Mrs. Harbinger changed color, and a look of dismay came over it.

"Oh, you didn't know it, of course!" she said. "I forgot that, and now I've told you. She will never forgive me."

He leaned back in his chair, laughing gayly.

"A Roland for an Oliver!" he cried. "Good! It is only secret for secret."

"But what will she say to me?"

"Say? Why should she say anything? You needn't tell her till she's told me. She would have told me sometime."

"She did tell you in that wretched letter; or rather she gave you a sign to know her by. How did you dare to write to any young girl like that?"

The red flushed into his cheeks and his laughter died.

"You don't mean that she showed you my letters?"

"Oh, no; she didn't show them to me. But I know well enough what they were like. You are a pair of young dunces."

Fairfield cast down his eyes and studied his finger-nails in silence a moment. When he looked up again he spoke gravely and with a new firmness.

"Mrs. Harbinger," he said, "I hope you don't think that I meant anything wrong in answering her letters. I didn't know who wrote them."

"You must have known that they were written by a girl that was young and foolish."

"I'm afraid I didn't think much about that. I had a letter, and it interested me, and I answered it. It never occurred to me that—"

"It never occurs to a man that he is bound to protect a girl against herself," Mrs. Harbinger responded quickly. "At least now that you do know, I hope that there'll be no more of this nonsense."

Fairfield did not reply for a moment. Then he looked out over the landscape instead of meeting her eyes.

"What do you expect me to say to that?" he asked.

"I don't know that I expect anything," she returned dryly. "Hush! They are coming."

He leaned forward, and spoke in a hurried whisper.

"Does she know?" he demanded.

"Of course not. She thinks it's the Count, for all I can tell."

The arrival of Alice and May put an end to any further confidential discourse. Fairfield rose hastily, looking dreadfully conscious, but as the two girls had some interesting information or other to impart to Mrs. Harbinger, he had an opportunity to recover himself, and in a few moments the party was on its way to the polo-field.

With the game this story has nothing in particular to do. It was not unlike polo games in general. The playing was neither especially good nor especially bad. Jack Neligage easily carried off the honors, and the men pronounced his playing to be in remarkable form for so early in the season. Fairfield sat next to Miss Calthorpe, but he was inclined to be quiet, and to glance at Mrs. Harbinger when he spoke, as if he expected her to be listening to his conversation. Now and then he fixed his attention on the field, but when the game was over, and the clever plays were discussed, he showed no signs of knowing anything about them. To him the game had evidently been only an accident, and in no way a vital part of the real business of the day.

There was afternoon tea at the club-house,—groups chatted and laughed on the piazza and the lawn; red coats became more abundant on the golf links despite the lateness of the hour; carriages were brought round, one by one took their freights of pleasure-seekers, and departed. Fairfield still kept in the neighborhood of Miss Calthorpe, and although he said little he looked a great deal. Mrs. Harbinger did not interfere, although for the most part she was within ear-shot. Fairfield was of good old family, well spoken of as a rising literary man, and May had money enough for two, so that there were no good grounds upon which a chaperone could have made

herself disagreeable, and Mrs. Harbinger was not in the least of the interfering sort.

Before leaving the County Club Mrs. Harbinger had a brief talk with Mrs. Neligage.

"I wish you'd tell me something about the Count's past," she said. "You knew him in Europe, didn't you?"

"Yes, I met him in Rome one winter; and after that I saw a good deal of him for a couple of seasons."

"Was he received?"

"Oh, bless you, yes. He's real. His family tree goes back to the tree in the Garden of Eden."

"Perhaps his ancestor then was the third person there."

Mrs. Neligage laughed, and shook her head.

"Come, Letty," she said, "that is taking an unfair advantage. But really, the Count is all right. He's as poor as a church mouse, and I've no doubt he came over here expressly to marry money. That is a foreign nobleman's idea of being driven to honest toil,—to come to America and hunt up an heiress."

Mrs. Harbinger produced the letter which she had received from Barnstable earlier in the afternoon.

"That crazy Mr. Barnstable that made an exhibition of himself at my house yesterday has given me a letter about the Count. I haven't read much of it; but it's evidently an attack on the man's morals."

"Oh, his morals," Mrs. Neligage returned with a pretty shrug; "nobody can find fault with the Count's morals, my dear, for he hasn't any."

"Is he so bad then?" inquired Mrs. Harbinger with a sort of dispassionate interest.

"Bad, bless you, no. He's neither good nor bad. He's what all his kind are; squeamishly particular on a point of honor, and with not a moral scruple to his name."

Mrs. Harbinger held the letter by the corner, regarding it with little favor.

"I'm sure I don't want his old letter," she observed. "I'm not a purveyor of gossip."

"Why did he give it to you?"

"He wanted me to read it, and then to show it to my friends. He telegraphed to New York last night, Tom said, to find out about the Count, and the letter must have come on the midnight."

"Characters by telegraph," laughed Mrs. Neligage. "The times are getting hard for adventurers and impostors. But really the Count isn't an impostor. He'd say frankly that he brought over his title to sell."

"That doesn't decide what I am to do with this letter," Mrs. Harbinger remarked. "You'd better take it."

"I'm sure I don't see what I should do with it," Mrs. Neligage returned; but at the same time she took the epistle. "Perhaps I may be able to make as much mischief with this as I did with that letter yesterday."

The other looked at her with serious disfavor expressed in her face.

"For heaven's sake," she said, "don't try that. You made mischief enough there to last for some time."

XV

THE MISCHIEF OF A LETTER

The meditations of Mrs. Neligage in the watches of the night which followed the polo game must have been interesting, and could they be known might afford matter for amusement and study. It must be one of the chief sources of diversion to the Father of Evil to watch the growth in human minds and hearts of schemes for mischief. He has the satisfaction of seeing his own ends served, the entertainment of observing a curious and fascinating mental process, and all the while his vanity may be tickled by the reflection that it is he who will receive the credit for each cunningly developed plot of iniquity. That the fiend had been agreeably entertained on this occasion was to be inferred from the proceedings of Mrs. Neligage next morning, when the plans of the night were being carried into effect.

As early in the day as calling was reasonably possible, Mrs. Neligage, although it was Sunday, betook herself to see May Calthorpe. May, who had neither father nor mother living, occupied the family house on Beacon street, opposite the Common, having as companion a colorless cousin

who played propriety, and for the most part played it unseen. The dwelling was rather a gloomy nest for so bright a bird as May. Respectability of the most austere New England type pervaded the big drawing-room where Mrs. Neligage was received. The heavy old furniture was as ugly as original sin, and the pictures might have ministered to the Puritan hatred for art. Little was changed from the days when May's grandparents had furnished their abode according to the most approved repulsiveness of their time. Only the brightness of the warm April sun shining in at the windows, and a big bunch of dark red roses in a crystal jug, lightened the formality of the stately apartment.

When May came into the room, however, it might have seemed that she had cunningly retained the old appointments as a setting to make more apparent by contrast her youthful fresh beauty. With her clear color, her dark hair, and sparkling eyes, she was the more bewitching amid this stately, sombre furniture, and in this gloomy old lofty room.

"My dear," Mrs. Neligage said, kissing her affectionately, "how well you look. I was dreadfully afraid I should find you worried and unhappy."

May returned her greeting less effusively, and seemed somewhat puzzled at this address.

"But why in the world should I look worried?" she asked.

Mrs. Neligage sat down, and regarded the other impressively in silence a moment before replying.

"Oh, my dear child," she said dramatically, "how could you be so imprudent?"

May became visibly paler, and in her turn sank into a chair.

"I don't know what you mean," she faltered.

"If you had lived in society abroad as much as I have, May," was the answer, delivered with an expressive shake of the head, "you would know how dreadfully a girl compromises herself by writing to a strange gentleman."

May started up, her eyes dilating.

"Oh, how did you know?" she demanded.

"The Count thinks the most horrible things," the widow went on mercilessly. "You know what foreigners are. It wouldn't have been so bad if it were an American."

Poor May put her hands together with a woeful gesture as if she were imploring mercy.

"Oh, is it the Count really?" she cried. "I saw that he had a red carnation in his buttonhole yesterday, but I hoped that it was an accident."

"A red carnation?" repeated Mrs. Neligage.

"Yes; that was the sign by which I was to know him. I said so in that letter."

It is to be doubted if the Recording Angel at that moment wrote down to the credit of Mrs. Neligage that she regretted having by chance stuck that flower in the Count's coat at the County Club.

"You poor child!" she murmured with a world of sympathy in her voice.

The touch was too much for May, who melted into tears. She was a simple-hearted little thing or she would never have written the unlucky letters to Christopher Calumus, and in her simplicity she had evidently fallen instantly into the trap set for her. She dabbed resolutely at her eyes with her handkerchief, but the fountain was too free to be so easily stanched.

"It will make a horrid scandal," Mrs. Neligage went on by way of comfort. "Oh, I do hate those dreadful foreign ways of talking about women. It used to make me so furious abroad that I wanted to kill the men."

May was well on the way to sobs now.

"Such things are so hard to kill, too," pursued the widow. "Everybody here will say there is nothing in it, but it will be repeated, and laughed about, and it will never be forgotten. That's the worst of it. The truth makes no difference, and it is almost impossible to live a thing of that sort down. You've seen Laura Seaton, haven't you? Well, that's just what ruined her life. She wrote some foolish letters, and it was found out. It always is found out; and she's always been in a cloud."

Mrs. Neligage did not mention that the letters which the beclouded Miss Seaton had written had been to a married man and with a full knowledge on her part who her correspondent was.

"Oh, Mrs. Neligage," sobbed May. "Do you suppose the Count will tell?"

"My dear, he showed me the letter."

"Oh, did he?" moaned the girl, crimson to the eyes. "Did you read it?"

"Read it, May? Of course not!" was the answer, delivered with admirable appearance of indignation; "but I knew the handwriting."

May was by this time so shaken by sobs and so miserable that her condition was pitiful. Mrs. Neligage glided to a seat beside her, and took the girl in her arms in a fashion truly motherly.

"There, there, May," said she soothingly. "Don't give way so. We must do something to straighten things out."

"Oh, do you think we could?" demanded May, looking up through her tears. "Can't you get that letter away from him?"

"I tried to make him give it to me, but he refused."

It really seemed a pity that the widow was not upon the stage, so admirably did she show sympathy in voice and manner. She caressed the tearful maiden, and every tone was like an endearment.

"Somebody must get that letter," she went on. "It would be fatal to leave it in the Count's possession. He is an old hand at this sort of thing. I knew about him abroad."

She might have added with truth that she had herself come near marrying him, supposing that he had a fortune to match his title, but that she had luckily discovered his poverty in time.

"But who can get it?" asked May, checking her tears as well as was possible under the circumstances.

"It must be somebody who has the right to represent you," Mrs. Neligage responded with an air of much impressiveness.

"Anybody may represent me," declared May. "Couldn't you do it, Mrs. Neligage?"

"My dear," the other answered in a voice of remonstrance, "a lady could hardly go to a man on an errand like that. It must be a man."

May dashed her hands together in a burst of impatience and despair.

"Oh, I don't see what you gave it to him for," she cried in a lamentable voice. "You might have known that I wouldn't have written it if I'd any idea that that old thing was Christopher Calumus."

"And I wouldn't have given it to him," returned Mrs. Neligage quietly, "if I'd had any idea that you were capable of writing to men you didn't know."

May looked as if the tone in which this was said or the words themselves had completed her demoralization. She was bewitching in her misery, her eyes swimming divinely in tears, large and pathetic and browner than ever, her hair ruffled in her agitation into tiny rings and pliant wisps all about her temples, her cheeks flushed and moist. Her mouth, with its trembling little lips, might have moved the sternest heart of man to compassion and to the desire at least of consoling it with kisses. The more firm and logical feminine mind of Mrs. Neligage was not, however, by all this loveliness of woe turned away from her purpose.

"At any rate," she went on, "the thing that can't be altered is that you have written the letter, and that the Count has it. I do pity you terribly, May; and I know Count Shimbowski, so I know what I'm saying. I came in this morning to say something to you, to propose something, that is; but I don't know how you'll take it. It is a way out of the trouble."

"If there's any way out," returned May fervently, "I'm sure I don't care what it is; I'm ready for it, if it's to chop off my fingers."

"It isn't that, my dear," Mrs. Neligage assured her with a suggestion of a laugh, the faint suggestion of a laugh, such as was appropriate to the direful situation only alleviated by the possibility which was to be spoken. "The fact is there's but one thing to do. You must let Jack act for you."

"Oh, will he, Mrs. Neligage?" cried May, brightening at once.

It has been noted by more than one observer of life that in times of trouble the mere mention of a man is likely to produce upon the feminine mind an effect notably cheering. Whether this be true, or a mere fanciful calumny of those heartless male writers who have never been willing to recognize that the real glory of woman lies in her being able entirely to ignore the existence of man, need not be here discussed. It is enough to record that at the sound of Jack's name May did undoubtedly rouse herself from the abject and limp despair into which she was completely collapsing. She caught at the suggestion as a trout snaps at the fisherman's fly.

"He will be only too glad to," said Mrs. Neligage, "if he has the right."

She paused and looked down, playing with the cardcase in her hands. She made a pretty show of being puzzled how to go on, so that the most stupid observer could not have failed to understand that there was something of importance behind her words. May began to knit her white forehead in an evident attempt to comprehend what further complication there might be in the affair under discussion.

"I must be plain," the widow said, after a slight, hesitating pause. "What I have to say is as awkward as possible, and of course it's unusual; but under the circumstances there's no help for it. I hope you'll understand, May, that it's only out of care for you that I'm willing to come here

this morning and make a fool of myself."

"I don't see how you could make a fool of yourself by helping me," May said naïvely.

The visitor smiled, and put out a trimly gloved hand to pat the fingers of the girl as they lay on the chair-arm.

"No, that's the truth, May. I am trying to help you, and so I needn't mind how it sounds. Well, then; the fact is that there's one thing that makes this all very delicate. Whoever goes to the Count must have authority."

"Well, I'm ready to give Jack authority."

"But it must be the authority of a betrothed, my dear."

"What! Oh, Mrs. Neligage!"

May sat bolt upright and stiffened in her chair as if a wave of liquid air had suddenly gone over her.

"To send a man for the letters under any other circumstances would be as compromising as the letters in the first place. Besides, the Count wouldn't be bound to give them up except to your *fiancé*."

"That horrid Count!" broke out May with vindictive irrelevancy. "I wish it was just a man we had to deal with!"

"Now Jack has been in love with you for a long time, my dear," pursued Jack's mother.

"Jack! In love with me? Why, he's fond of Alice."

"Oh, in a boy and girl way they've always been the best of friends. It's nothing more. He's in love with you, I tell you. What do you young things know about love anyway, or how to recognize it? I shouldn't tell you this if it weren't for the circumstances; but Jack is too delicate to speak when it might look as if he were taking advantages. He is furious about the letter."

"Oh, does he know too?" cried poor May. "Does everybody know?"

Her tears began again, and now Mrs. Neligage dried them with her own soft handkerchief, faintly scented with the especial eastern scent which she particularly affected. Doubtless a mother may be held to know something of the heart and the opinions of her only son, but as Jack had not, so far as his mother had any means of knowing, in the least connected May Calthorpe with the letter given to Count Shimbowski, it is perhaps not unfair to conclude that her maternal eagerness and affection had in this particular instance led her somewhat far. It is never the way of a clever person to tell more untruths than are actually needed by the situation, and it was perhaps by way of not increasing too rapidly her debit account on the books of the Recording Angel that Mrs. Neligage replied to this question of May's with an evasion,—an evasion, it is true, which was more effective than a simple, direct falsehood would have been.

"Oh, May dear, you don't know the horrid way in which those foreign rakes boast of what they call their conquests!"

The idea of being transformed from a human, self-respecting being into a mere conquest, the simple, ignominious spoils of the chase, might well be too much for any girl, and May became visibly more limp under it.

"The simple case is here," proceeded the widow, taking up again her parable with great directness. "Jack is fond of you; he is too delicate to speak of it, and he knows that this is a time when nobody but a *fiancé* has a right to meddle. If you had a brother, of course it would be different; but you haven't. Something must be done, and so I came this morning really to beg you, for Jack's sake and your own, to consent to an engagement."

"Did Jack send you?" demanded May, looking straight into the other's eyes.

Mrs. Neligage met the gaze fairly, yet there was a little hesitation in her reply. It might be that she considered whether the risk were greater in telling the truth or in telling a lie; but in the end it was the truth that she began with. Before she had got half through her sentence she had distorted it out of all recognition, indeed, but it is always an advantage to begin with what is true. It lends to any subsequent falsifying a moral support which is of inestimable value.

"He knows nothing of it at all," she confessed. "He is too proud to let anybody speak for him, just as under the circumstances he is too proud to speak for himself. Besides, he is poor, and all your friends would say he was after your money. No, nothing would induce him to speak for himself. He is very unhappy about it all; but he feels far worse for you than for himself. Dear Jack! He is the most generous fellow in the world."

"Poor Jack!" May murmured softly.

"Poor Jack!" the widow echoed, with a deep-drawn sigh. "It frightens me so to think what might happen if he hears the Count boasting in his insolent way. Foreigners always boast of their conquests! Why, May, there's no knowing what he might do! And the scandal of it for you! And what should I do if anything happened to Jack?"

Perhaps an appeal most surely touches the feminine heart if it be a little incoherent. A pedant might have objected that Mrs. Neligage in this brief speech altered the point of view with reckless frequency, but the pedant would by the effect have been proved to be wrong. The jumble of possibilities and of consequences, of woe to Jack, harm to May, and of general inconsolability on the part of the mother finished the conquest of the girl completely. She was henceforth only eager to do whatever Mrs. Neligage directed, and under the instigation of her astute counsellor wrote a note to the young man, accepting a proposal which he had never heard of, and imploring him as her accepted lover to rescue from the hands of Count Shimbowski the letter addressed to Christopher Calumus. It is not every orator, even among the greatest, who can boast of having achieved a triumph so speedy and so complete as that which gladdened the heart of Mrs. Neligage when, after consoling and cheering her promised daughter-in-law, she set out to find her son.

XVI

THE DUTY OF A SON

Simple were this world if it were governed by frankness, albeit perchance in some slight particulars less interesting. Certainly if straightforwardness ruled life, Mrs. Neligage would have fared differently in her efforts that morning. She would have had no opportunity in that case of displaying her remarkable astuteness, and she would have left the life-threads of divers young folk to run more smoothly. Knots and tangles in the lives of mortals are oftener introduced by their fellows than by the unkindly fingers of the Fates, although the blame must be borne by the weird sisters. The three might well stand aghast that forenoon to see the deftness with which Mrs. Neligage wrought her mischief. A fisherman with his netting-needle and a kitten playing with the twine together produce less complication of the threads than the widow that day brought about by the unaided power of her wits.

Jack Neligage had chambers with Fairfield in a semi-fashionable apartment-house. Both the young men had a certain position to maintain, and neither was blessed with means sufficient to do it without much stretching. Fairfield was industrious and Neligage was idle, which in the end was more favorable to the reputation of the former and to the enjoyment of the latter. Jack fared the better in material things, because the man who is willing to run into debt may generally live more expensively than he who strives to add to an inadequate income by the fruit of his toil.

On this particular morning Dick had gone to church in the vain hope of seeing May Calthorpe, while Jack was found by his mother smoking a cigarette over the morning paper. He had just finished his late breakfast, and opened his letters. The letters lay on the uncleared breakfast table in various piles. The largest heap was one made of bills torn to bits. Jack made it a matter of principle to tear up his bills as soon as they came. It saved trouble, and was, he said, a business-like habit. The second heap was composed of invitations to be answered; while advertisements and personal letters made the others. Jack received his mother with his usual joyous manner. It had been said of him that his continual good nature was better than an income to him. It certainly made him a favorite, it procured for him many an invitation, and it had even the effect of softening the hard heart of many a creditor. He was in appearance no less cheerful this morning for his talk with Wilson at the County Club or for the mysterious hints of ill which his mother had given him. It was all confoundedly awkward, he had commented to Fairfield before retiring on the previous night, but hang it, what good would it do to fret about it?

"Good-morning, mater," he greeted her. "You must have something mighty important on your mind to come flying round here at this time in the day."

"I have," she said, "and I want you to try for once in your life to take things seriously."

"Seriously!" was his answer. "Don't I always take things seriously? Or if I don't, it can't be in me, for I'm sure I have enough to make me serious. Look at that pile of bills there."

Mrs. Neligage walked to the table, inspected first the invitations, which she looked over with truly feminine attention, and then began to pick up pieces of the torn-up bills.

"How in the world, Jack, do you ever know what you owe?" she asked.

"Know what I owe? Gad! I wouldn't know that for the world. Sit down, and tell me what disagreeable thing brought you here."

"Why is it necessarily disagreeable?" she demanded, seating herself beside the table, and playing with the torn paper.

"You said yesterday that you were in a mess."

"Yes," she replied slowly; "but that was yesterday."

"Does that mean that you are out of it? So much the better."

Mrs. Neligage clasped her hands in her lap, and regarded her son with a strong and eager look.

"Jack," she began, "I want you to listen to me, and not interrupt. You must hear the whole thing before you begin to put in your word. In the first place, you are engaged to May Calthorpe."

The exclamation and the laugh which greeted this piece of information were so nearly simultaneous that Jack might be given the benefit of the doubt and so evade the charge of swearing before a lady.

"Why in the world, mother," he said, "must you come harping on that string again? You know it's of no use."

"You are engaged now, Jack, and of course that makes a difference."

"Oh, bother! Do speak sensibly. What are you driving at?"

The widow regarded him with a serene face, and settled herself more comfortably in her chair.

"I came to congratulate you on your engagement to Miss May Calthorpe," she said, with all possible coolness and distinctness.

"Indeed? Then I am sorry to tell you that you have wasted your labor. I haven't even seen May since we left the County Club yesterday."

"Oh, I knew that."

"What in the world are you driving at, mother? Perhaps you don't mind telling me who told you of the engagement."

"Oh, not in the least. May told me."

"May Calthorpe!"

It was not strange that Jack should receive the announcement with surprise, but it was evident that there was in his mind more bewilderment. He stared at his mother without further word, while she pulled off her gloves and loosened her coat as if to prepare herself for the explanation which it was evident must follow.

"Come, Jack," she remarked, when she had adjusted these preliminaries, "we may as well be clear about this. I made an offer in your name to May, and she has accepted it."

Jack rose from his seat, and stood over her, his sunny face growing pale.

"You made an offer in my name?" he demanded.

"Sit down," she commanded, waving her hand toward his chair. "There is a good deal to be said, and you'll be tired of standing before I tell it all. Is there any danger that Mr. Fairfield may come in?"

Jack walked over to the door and slipped the catch.

"He is not likely to come," he said, "but it's sure now. Fire away."

He spoke with a seriousness which he used seldom. There were times when lazy, good-tempered Jack Neligage took a stubborn fit, and those who knew him well did not often venture to cross him in those moods. The proverb about the wrath of a patient man had sometimes been applied to him. When these rare occasions came on which his temper gave way he became unusually calm and self-possessed, as he was now. It could not but have been evident to his mother that she had to do with her son in one of the worst of his rare rages. Perhaps the vexations of the previous days, the pile of torn bills on the table, the icy greeting Alice Endicott had given him yesterday, all had to do with the sudden outbreak of his anger, but any man might have been excused for being displeased by such an announcement as had just been made to Jack.

"I'm not going into your financial affairs, Jack," Mrs. Neligage remarked, with entire self-possession, "only that they count, of course."

"I know enough about them," he said curtly. "We'll take them for granted."

"Very well then—we will talk about mine. You've hinted once or twice that you didn't like the way I flirted with Sibley Langdon. I owe him six thousand dollars."

If the widow had been planning a theatrical effect in her coolly pronounced words, she had no reason to be disappointed at the result. Jack started to his feet with an oath, and glared at her with angry eyes.

"More than that," she went on boldly, though she cast down her glance before his, "the money was to save me from the consequences of—"

Her voice faltered and the word died on her lips. Jack stood as if frozen, staring with a hard face and lips tightly shut.

"Oh, Jack," she burst out, "why do you make me shame myself! Why can't you understand? I'm no good, Jack; but I'm your mother."

Actual tears were in her eyes, and her breath was coming quickly. It is always peculiarly hard to see a self-contained, worldly woman lose control of herself. The strength of emotion which is needed to shake such a nature is instinctively appreciated by the spectator, and affects him with

a pain that is almost too cruel to be borne. Jack Neligage, however, showed no sign of softening.

"You must tell me the whole now," he said in a hard voice.

The masculine instinct of asserting the right to judge a woman was in his tone. She wiped away her tears, and choked back her sobs. A little tremor ran over her, and then she began again, speaking in a voice lower than before, but firmly held in restraint.

"It was at Monte Carlo five years ago," she said. "I was there alone, and the Countess Marchetti came. I'd known her a little for years, and we got to be very intimate. You know how it is with two women at a hotel. I'd been playing a little, just to keep myself from dying of dullness. Count Shimbowski was there, and he made love to me as long as he thought I had money, but he fled when I told him I hadn't. Well, one day the countess had a telegram that her husband had been hurt in hunting. She had just half an hour to get to the train, and she took her maid and went. Of course she hadn't time to have things packed, and she left everything in my care. Just at the last minute she came rushing in with a jewel-case. Her maid had contrived to leave it out, and she wouldn't take it. The devil planned it, of course. I told her to take it, but she wouldn't, and she didn't; and I played, and I lost, and I was desperate, and I pawned her diamond necklace for thirty thousand francs."

"And of course you lost that," Jack said in a hard voice, as she paused.

"Oh, Jack, don't speak to me like that! I was mad! I know it! The worst thing about the whole devilish business was the way I lost my head. I look back at it now, and wonder if I'm ever safe. It makes me afraid; and I never was afraid of anything else in my life. I'm not a 'fraid-cat woman!"

He gave no sign of softening, none of sympathy, but still sat with the air of a judge, cold and inexorable.

"What has all this to do with Sibley Langdon?" he asked.

"He came there just when the countess sent for her things. I was wild, and I went all to pieces at the sight of a home face. It was like a plank to a shipwrecked fool, I suppose. I broke down and told him the whole thing, and he gave me the money to redeem the necklace. He was awfully kind, Jack. I hate him—but he was kind. I really think I should have killed myself if he hadn't helped me."

"And you have never paid him?"

"How could I pay him? I've been on the ragged edge of the poorhouse ever since. I don't know if the poorhouse has a ragged edge," she added, with something desperately akin to a smile, "but if it has edges of course they must be ragged."

Few persons have ever made a confession, no matter how woeful the circumstances, without some sense of relief at having spoken out the thing which was festering in the secret heart. Shame and bitter contrition may overwhelm this feeling, but they do not entirely destroy it. Mrs. Neligage would hardly have been likely ever to tell her story save under stress of bitter necessity, but there was an air which showed that the revelation had given her comfort.

"Has he ever spoken of it?" asked Jack, unmoved by her attempted lightness.

"Never directly, and never until recently has he hinted. Jack," she said, her color rising, "he is a bad man!"

He did not speak, but his eyes plainly demanded more.

"The other day,—Jack, I've known for a long time that it was coming. I've hated him for it, but I didn't know what to do. It was partly for that that I went to Washington."

"Well?"

Mrs. Neligage was not that day playing a part which was entirely to be commended by the strict moralist. Certainly in her interview with May she had left much to be desired on the score of truthfulness and consideration for others. Hard must be the heart, however, which might not have been touched by the severity of the ordeal which she was now undergoing. Jack's clear brown eyes dominated hers with all the force of the man and the judge, while hers in vain sought to soften them; and the pathos of it was that it was the son judging the mother.

"I give you my word, Jack," she said, leaning toward him and speaking with deep earnestness, "that he has never said a word to me that you might not have heard. Silly compliments, of course, and fool things about his wife's not being to his taste; but nothing worse. Only now—"

Ruthless is man toward woman who may have violated the proprieties, but cruel is the son toward his mother if she may have dimmed the honor which is his as well as hers.

"Now?" he repeated inflexibly.

"Now he has hinted, he has hardly said it, Jack, but he means for me to join him in Europe this summer."

The red leaped into Jack's face and the blaze into his eyes. He rose deliberately from his chair, and stood tall before her.

"Are you sure he meant it?" he asked.

"He put in nasty allusions to the countess, and—Oh, he did mean it, Jack; and it frightened me as I have never been frightened in my life."

"I will horsewhip him in the street!"

She sprang up, and caught him by the arm.

"For heaven's sake, Jack, think of the scandal! I'd have told you long ago, but I was afraid you'd make a row that would be talked about. When I came home from Europe, and realized that all my property is in the hands of trustees so that I couldn't pay, I wanted to tell you; but I didn't know what you'd do. I'm afraid of you when your temper's really up."

He freed himself from her clasp and began to pace up and down, while she watched him in silence. Suddenly he turned to her.

"But this was only part of it," he said. "What was that stuff you were talking about my being engaged?"

She held out to him the note that May had written, and when he had read it explained as well as she could the scene which had taken place between her and May. She did not, it is true, present an account which was without variations from the literal facts, but no mortal could be expected to do that. She at least made it clear that she had bargained with the girl that the letter should be the price of an engagement. Jack heard her through, now and then putting in a curt question. When he had heard it all, he laughed angrily, and threw the letter on the floor.

"You have brought me into it too," he said. "We are a pair of unprincipled adventurers together. I've been more or less of a beat, but I've never before been a good, thorough-paced blackguard!"

She flashed upon him in an outburst of anger in her turn.

"Do you mean that for me?" she demanded. "The word isn't so badly applied to a man that can talk so to his mother! Haven't I been saving you as well as myself? As to May, any girl will love a husband that has character enough to manage her and be kind to her."

He was silent a moment, and when he spoke he waived the point.

"Do I understand," he said, "that you expect me to go to Count Shimbowski and announce myself as May's representative, and demand her letter?"

"Not at all," she answered, a droll expression of craftiness coming over her face. "Sit down, and let me tell you."

She resumed her own seat, and Jack, after whirling his chair around angrily, sat down astride of it, with his arms crossed on the back.

"There are letters and letters," Mrs. Neligage observed with a smile. "When Mrs. Harbinger gave me this one last night I began to see that it might be good for something. You are to exchange this with the Count. You needn't mention May's name."

Jack took the letter, and looked at it.

"This is to Barnstable," he said.

"Yes; he gave it to Letty to be shown to people. Barnstable is the silliest fool that there is about."

"And you think the Count would give up that letter for this?"

"I am sure he would if he thought there was any possibility that this might fall into the hands of Miss Wentstile."

"If it would send the damned adventurer about his business," growled Jack, "I'd give it to Miss Wentstile myself."

"Oh, don't bother about that. I can stop that affair any time," his mother responded lightly. "I've only to tell Sarah Wentstile what I've seen myself, and that ends his business with her."

"Then you'd better do it, and stop his tormenting Alice."

"I'll do anything you like, Jack, if you'll be nice about May."

He got up from his seat and walked back and forth a few turns, his head bowed, and his manner that of deep thought. Then he went to his desk and wrote a couple of notes. He read them over carefully, and filled out a check. He lit a cigarette, and sat pondering over the notes for some moments. At last he brought them both to his mother, who had sat watching him intently, although she had turned her face half away from him. Jack put the letters into her hand without a word.

The first note was as follows:—

> Dear May,—My mother has just brought me your note, and I am going out at once to find the Count. I hope to bring you the letter before night. I need not tell you that I am very proud of the confidence you have shown in me and of the honor you do me. Until I

see you it will, it seems to me, be better that you do not speak of our engagement.

Very sincerely yours,

JOHN T. NELIGAGE.

The second note was this:—

SIBLEY LANGDON, ESQ.

Sir,—I have just heard from my mother that she is indebted to you for a loan of $6000. I inclose check for that amount with interest at four per cent. As Mrs. Neligage has doubtless expressed her gratitude for your kindness I do not know that it is necessary for me to add anything.

JOHN T. NELIGAGE.

"You are right, of course," he said. "I can't show him that I know his beastly scheme without a scandal that would hurt you. He'll understand, though. But why in the world you've let him browbeat you into receiving his attentions I cannot see."

"I felt so helpless, Jack. I didn't know what he would do; and he could tell about the necklace, you see. He's been a millstone round my neck. He's never willing I should do anything with anybody but himself."

Jack ground his teeth, and held out his hand for the letters.

"But, Jack," Mrs. Neligage cried, as if the thought had just struck her. "You can't have $6000 in the bank."

"I shall have when he gets that check," Jack returned grimly. "If father hadn't put all our money into the hands of trustees—"

"We should neither of us have anything whatever," his mother interrupted, laughing. "It is bad enough as it is, but it would have been worse if we'd had our hands free."

Her spirits were evidently once more high; she seemed to have cast off fear and care alike.

"Well," she said, rising, "I must go home. You want to go and find the Count, of course."

She went up to her son, and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Dear boy," she said, "I'm not really so bad as I seem. I was a fool to gamble, but I never did anything else that was very bad. Oh, you don't know what a weight it is off my shoulders to have that note paid. Of course it will be hard on you just now, but we must hurry on the marriage with May, and then you'll have money enough."

He smiled down on her with a look in which despite its scrutiny there was a good deal of fondness. Worldly as the Neligages were, there was still a strong bond of affection between them.

"All right, old lady," he said, stooping forward to kiss her forehead. "I'm awfully sorry you've had such a hard time, but you're out of it now. Only there's one thing I insist on. You are to tell nobody of the engagement till I give you leave."

She studied his face keenly.

"If I don't announce it," she said frankly, "I'm afraid you'll squirm out of it."

He laughed buoyantly.

"You are a born diplomat," he told her. "What sort of a concession do you want to make you hold your tongue?"

"Jack," she said pleadingly, changing her voice into earnestness, "won't you marry May? If you only knew how I want you to be rich and taken care of."

"Mr. Frostwinch has offered me a place in the bank, mater, with a salary that's about as much as I've paid for the board of one of my ponies."

"What could you do on a salary like that? You won't break the engagement when you see May this afternoon, will you? Promise me that."

"She may break it herself."

"She won't unless you make her. Promise me, Jack."

He smiled down into her face as if a sudden thought had come to him, and a gleam of mischief lighted his brown eyes.

"The engagement, such as it is," he returned, "may stand at present as you've fixed it, if you'll give me your word not to mention it or to meddle with it."

"I promise," she said rapturously, and pulled him down to kiss him fervently before departing.

Then in the conscious virtue of having achieved great things Mrs. Neligage betook herself home

to dress for a luncheon.

XVII

THE BUSINESS OF A LOVER

Jack's first care, after his mother had left him, was to dispatch a messenger to May with his note.

Then he set out in search of Dr. Wilson. After a little hunting he discovered the latter lunching at the club. Jack came straight to his business without any beating about the bush.

"Wilson," he said, "I've come on an extraordinary errand. I want you to lend me $6000 on the spot."

The other whistled, and then chuckled as was his good-humored wont.

"That's a good round sum," he answered.

"I know that a deuced sight better than you do," Neligage returned. "I've had more experience in wanting money. I'm in a hole, and I ask you to help me out of it. Of course I'm taking a deal of advantage of your good nature yesterday; and you may do as you like about letting me have the money. All the security I can give is to turn over to you the income of the few stocks I have. They 're all in the hands of trustees. My father left'em so."

"Gad, he knew his son," was the characteristic comment.

"You are right. He did. Can you let me have the money?"

The other considered a moment, and then said with his usual bluntness:—

"I suppose it's none of my business what you want of it?"

Jack flushed.

"It may be your business, Wilson, but I can't tell you."

The other laughed.

"Oh, well," he said, "if you've been so big a fool that you can't bear to tell of it, I'm not going to insist. I can't do anything better than to send you a check to-morrow. I haven't that amount in the bank."

Jack held out his hand.

"You're a trump, Wilson," he said. "I'd tell you the whole thing if it was my secret, but it isn't. Of course if you lose anything by moving the money, I'll be responsible for it. Besides that I want you to buy Starbright, if you care for him. Of course if you don't I can sell him easily enough. He's the best of the ponies."

"Then you're going to sell?"

"Clean out the whole thing; pay my debts, and leave the club."

"Oh, you mustn't do that."

"I'm going into a bank, and of course I shan't have any time to play."

Wilson regarded him with an amused and curious smile, playing with his fork meanwhile. Wilson was not by birth of Jack's world, having come into social position in Boston by his marriage with Elsie Dimmont, the richest young woman of the town. He and Jack had never been especially intimate, but Jack had always maintained that despite traces of coarseness in manner Wilson was sound at heart and essentially a good fellow. Perhaps the fact that in times past Neligage had not used his opportunities to patronize Wilson had something to do with the absence of anything patronizing in the Doctor's manner now.

"Well," Wilson said at length, "don't do anything rash. Your dues for the whole year are paid,—or will be when you square up, and you might as well get the worth of them. We need you on the team, so you mustn't go back on us if you can help it."

Matters being satisfactorily arranged both in relation to the loan and to the sale of the pony, Jack left Wilson, and departed in search of Count Shimbowski. Him he ultimately found at another club, and at once asked to speak with him alone on business.

"Count," he began when they were in one of the card-rooms, "I want to add a word to what I said to you yesterday."

"Each one word of Mr. Neleegaze eet ees treasured," the Count responded with a polite flourish of his cigarette.

"Since you wouldn't give me that letter," pursued Jack, acknowledging the compliment with a grin and a bow, "perhaps you'll be willing to exchange it."

"Exchange eet?" repeated the Hungarian. "For what weell eet be exchange'?"

Jack produced Barnstable's letter.

"I thought that you'd perhaps be willing to exchange it for this letter that's otherwise to be read and passed about. I fancy that the person who got it had Miss Wentstile particularly in mind as likely to be interested in it."

The touch showed Jack to be not without some of the astuteness of his mother.

"What weell eet be?" inquired the Count.

"I haven't read it," answered Jack, slowly drawing it from the envelope. "It is said to contain a full account of the life of Count Shimbowski."

"*Sacré!*"

"Exactly," acquiesced Jack. "It's a devilish shame that things can't be forgotten when they're done. I've found that out myself."

"But what weell be weetheen dat lettaire?"

Jack ran his eye down a page.

"This seems to be an account of a duel at Monaco," he returned. "On the next page—"

The Count stretched out his hand in protest.

"Eet ees not needed dat you eet to read," he said. "Eet ees leeklie lees."

"Oh, very likely it is lies. No story about a fellow is ever told right; but the worst things always get believed; and Miss Wentstile is very particular. She's deucedly down on me for a lot of things that never happened."

"Oh, but she ees extr'ordeenaire particle!" exclaimed the Count, with a shrug and a profane expletive. "She does not allow dat money be play for de card, she have say eet to me. She ees most extr'ordeenaire particle!"

"Then I am probably right, Count, in thinking you wouldn't care to have her read this letter?"

The Count twisted his silky mustache, looking both angry and rather foolish.

"Eet ees not dat eet ees mooch dat I have done," he explained. "You know what eet ees de leefe. A man leeves one way. But she, she ees so particle damned!"

Jack burst into a laugh that for the moment threatened to destroy the gravity with which he was conducting the interview; but he controlled his face, and went on.

"Since she is so damned particular," said he, "don't you think you'd better let me have the other letter for this? Of course I hate to drive you to a bargain, but I must have that other letter. I don't mind telling you that I'm sent after it by the one who wrote it."

"Den you weell know who have wrote eet?"

"Yes, of course I know, but I'm not going to tell."

The Count considered for a moment, and then slowly drew out the letter addressed to Christopher Calumus. He looked at it wistfully, with the air of a man who is reluctantly abandoning the clue to an adventure which might have proved enchanting.

"But eet weell look what I was one great villaine dat fear," he said.

"Nonsense," returned Neligage, holding out the letter of Barnstable for exchange. "We know both sides of the business. All there is to it is that we both understand what a crochety old maid Miss Wentstile is."

Count Shimbowski smiled, and the exchange was effected. Jack turned May's letter over in his hand, and found it unopened.

"You're a gentleman, Count," he said, offering his hand.

"Of de course," the other replied, with an air of some surprise. "I am one Shimbowski."

"Well, I'm obliged to you," observed Jack, putting the letter in his pocket. "I'll try to keep gossip still."

"Oh, eet ees very leek," Shimbowski returned, waving his hand airily, "dat when I have read heem I geeve eet to Mees Wentsteele for one's self. Eet ees very leekly."

"All right," Jack laughed. "I'd like to see her read it. So long."

With the vigor which belongs to an indolent man thoroughly aroused, Jack hunted up Tom Harbinger before the day was done, and sold to him his second best pony. Then he went for a drive, and afterward dined at the club with an appetite which spoke a conscience at ease or not allowed to make itself heard. He did not take the time for reflection which might have been felt necessary by many men in preparation for the interview with May Calthorpe which must come

before bedtime. Indeed he was more than usually lively and busy, and as he had a playful wit, he had some difficulty in getting the men at the club to let him go when soon after eight in the evening he set out for May's. He had kept busy from the moment his mother had left him in the morning, and on his way along Beacon street, he hummed to himself as if still resolved to do anything rather than to meditate.

May came into the sombre drawing-room looking more bewitchingly pretty and shy than can be told in sober prose. She was evidently frightened, and as she came forward to give her hand to Neligage the color came and went in her cheeks as if she were tremblingly afraid of the possibilities of his greeting. Jack's smile was as sunny as ever when he stepped forward to take her hand. He simply grasped it and let it go, a consideration at which she was visibly relieved.

"Well, May," Jack said laughingly, "I understand that we are engaged."

"Yes," she returned faintly. "Won't you sit down?"

She indicated a chair not very near to that upon which she took her own seat, and Jack coolly accepted the invitation, improving on it somewhat by drawing his chair closer to hers.

"I got the letter from the Count," he went on.

She held out her hand for it in silence. He took the letter from his pocket, and held it as he spoke again, tapping it on his knee by way of emphasis.

"Before I give it to you, May," he remarked in a voice more serious than he was accustomed to use, "I want you to promise me that you will never do such a thing again as to write to a stranger. You are well out of this—"

She lifted her eyes with a quick look of fear in them, as if it had flashed into her mind that if she were out of the trouble over the letter she had escaped this peril only to be ensnared into an engagement with him. The thought was so plain that Jack burst into a laugh.

"You think that being engaged to me isn't being well out of anything, I see," he observed merrily and mercilessly; "but there might be worse things than that even. We shall see. You'll be awfully fond of me before we are through with this."

The poor girl turned crimson at this plain reading of her thought. She was but half a dozen years younger than Jack, but he had belonged to an older set than hers, and under thirty half a dozen years seems more of a difference in ages than appears a score later in life. It was not to be expected that she would be talkative in this strange predicament in which she found herself, but what little command she had of her tongue might well vanish if Jack was to read her thoughts in her face. She rallied her forces to answer him.

"I know that for doing so foolish a thing," she said, "I deserved whatever I get."

"Even if it's being engaged to me," responded he with a roar. "Well, to be honest, I think you do. I don't know what the Count might have done if he had read the letter, but—"

"Oh," cried May, clasping her hands with a burst of sunshine in her face, "didn't he read it? Oh, I'm so glad!"

"No," Jack answered, "the Count's too much of a gentleman to read another man's letters when he hasn't been given leave. But what have you to say about my reading this letter?"

"Oh, you can't have read it!" May cried breathlessly.

"Not yet; but as we are engaged of course you give me leave to read it now."

She looked for a moment into his laughing eyes, and then sprang up from her chair with a sudden burst of excitement.

"Oh, you are too cruel!" she cried. "I hate you!"

"Come," he said, not rising, but settling himself back in his chair with a pose of admiring interest, "now we are getting down to nature. Have you ever played in amateur theatricals, May?"

She stood struck silent by the laughing banter of his tone, but she made no answer.

"Because, if you ever do," he continued in the same voice, "you'll do well to remember the way you spoke then. It'll be very fetching in a play."

The color faded in her cheeks, and her whole manner changed from defiance to humiliation; her lip quivered with quick emotion, and an almost childish expression of woe made pathetic her mobile face. She dropped back into her chair, and the tears started in her eyes.

"Oh, I don't think you've any right to tease me," she quavered in a voice that had almost escaped from control. "I'm sure I feel bad enough about it."

Jack's face sobered a little, although the mocking light of humor did not entirely vanish from his eyes.

"There, there," he said in a soothing voice; "don't cry, May, whatever you do. The modern husband hates tears, but instead of giving in to them, he gets cross and clears out. Don't cry before the man you marry, or," he added, a fresh smile lighting his face, "even before the man

you are engaged to."

"I didn't mean to be so foolish," May responded, choking down her rebellious emotions. "I'm all upset."

"I don't wonder. Now to go back to this letter. Of course I shouldn't think of reading it without your leave, but I supposed you'd think it proper under the circumstances to tell me to read it. I thought you'd say: 'Dearest, I have no secrets from thee! Read!' or something of that sort, you know."

He was perhaps playing now to cheer May up, for he delivered this in a mock-heroic style, with an absurd gesture. At least the effect was to evoke a laugh which came tear-sparkling as a lark flies dew-besprent from a hawthorn bush at morn.

She rallied a little, and spoke with more self-command.

"Oh, that was the secret of a girl that wasn't engaged to you," she said, "and had no idea of being; no more," she added, dimpling, "than I had."

Jack showed his white teeth in what his friends called his "appreciative grin."

"Perhaps you're right," he returned. "By the way, do you know who Christopher Calumus really is?"

She colored again, and hung her head.

"Yes," she murmured, in a voice absurdly low. "Mrs. Harbinger told me last night. He told her yesterday at the County Club."

"Does he know who wrote to him?"

Her cheeks became deeper in hue, and her voice even lower yet.

"Yes, he found out from Mrs. Harbinger."

"Well, I must say I thought that Letty Harbinger had more sense!"

"She didn't mean to tell him."

"No woman ever meant to tell anything," he retorted in good-humored sarcasm; "but they always do tell everything. Then if you and Dick both know all about it, perhaps I had better give the letter to him."

He offered to put the letter into his pocket, but she held out her hand for it beseechingly.

"Oh, don't give it to anybody else," she begged. "Let me put it into the fire, and be through with it. It's done mischief enough!"

"It may have done some good too," he said enigmatically. "I hope nothing worse will ever happen to you, May, than to be engaged to me. I give you my word that, as little as you imagine it, it's your interest and not my own I'm looking after. However, that's neither here nor there."

He put the letter into his pocket without farther comment, disregarding her imploring look. Then he rose, and held out his hand.

"Good-night," he said. "Some accepted lovers would ask for a kiss, but I'll wait till you want to kiss me. You will some time. Good-night. You'll remember what I wrote you about mentioning our engagement."

She had at the mention of kisses become more celestial rosy red than in the whole course of that blushful interview, but at his last word her color faded as quickly as it had come.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she said, "I had told one person before your note came. She won't tell though."

"Being a 'she,'" he retorted mockingly.

"Oh, it was only Alice," May explained, "and of course she can be trusted."

It was his turn to become serious, and in the cloud on his sunny face there was not a little vexation.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "Of all the women in Boston why must you pick out the one that I was most particular shouldn't know! You girls have an instinct for mischief."

"But I wrote to her as soon as your note came; besides, she has promised not to say anything. She won't tell."

"No; she won't tell," he echoed moodily. "What did she say?"

May cast down her eyes in evident embarrassment.

"Oh, it's no matter," Jack went on. "She wouldn't say half as hard things as she must think. However, it's all one in the end. Good-night."

With this abrupt farewell he left his betrothed, and went hastily out into the spring night, with its

velvety darkness and abundant stars. The mention of Alice Endicott had robbed him of the gay spirits in which he had carried on his odd interview with May. The teasing jollity of manner was gone as he walked thoughtfully back to his chambers.

He found Fairfield in their common parlor.

"Dick," he said without preface, "congratulate me. I'm engaged."

"Engaged!" exclaimed the other, jumping up and extending his hand. "Congratulations, old fellow. Of course it's Alice Endicott."

"No," his friend responded coolly; "it's May Calthorpe."

"What!" cried Fairfield, starting back and dropping his hand before Neligage had time to take it. "Miss Calthorpe? What do you mean?"

"Just as I say, my boy. The engagement is a secret at present, you understand. I thought you'd like to know it, though; and by the way, it'll show that I've perfect confidence in you if I turn over to you the letter that May wrote to you before we were engaged. That one to Christopher Calumus, you know."

"But," stammered his chum, apparently trying to collect his wits, scattered by the unexpected news and this strange proposition, "how can you tell what's in it?"

"Tell what's in it, my boy? It isn't any of my business. That has to do with a part of her life that doesn't belong to me, you know. It's enough for me that she wrote the letter for you to have, and so here it is."

He put the envelope into the hands of Dick, who received it as if he were a post-box on the corner, having no choice but to take any missive thrust at him.

"Good-night," Jack said. "I'm played out, and mean to turn in. Thanks for your good wishes."

And he ended that eventful day, so far as the world of men could have cognizance, by retiring to his own room.

XVIII

THE MISCHIEF OF MEN

Barnstable seemed bound to behave like a bee in a bottle, which goes bumping its idiotic head without reason or cessation. On Monday morning after the polo game he was ushered into the chambers of Jack and Dick, both of whom were at home. He looked more excited than on the previous day, and moved with more alacrity. The alteration was not entirely to his advantage, for Mr. Barnstable was one of those unfortunates who appear worse with every possible change of manner.

"Good-morning, Mr. Fairfield," was the visitor's greeting. "Damme if I'll say good-morning to you, Mr. Neligage."

Jack regarded him with languid astonishment.

"Well," he said, "that relieves me of the trouble of saying it to you."

Barnstable puffed and swelled with anger.

"Damme, sir," he cried, "you may try to carry it off that way, but—"

"Good heavens, Mr. Barnstable," interrupted Fairfield, "what in the world do you mean?"

"Is it your general custom," drawled Jack, between puffs of his cigarette, "to give a Wild West show at every house you go into?"

Dick flashed a smile at his chum, but shook his head.

"Come, Mr. Barnstable," he said soothingly, "you can't go about making scenes in this way. Sit down, and if you've anything to say, say it quietly."

Mr. Barnstable, however, was not to be beguiled with words. He had evidently been brooding over wrongs, real or fancied, until his temper had got beyond control.

"Anything to say?" he repeated angrily,—"I've this to say: that he has insulted my wife. I'll sue you for libel, damme! I've a great mind to thrash you!"

Jack grinned down on the truculent Barnstable from his superior height. Barnstable stood with his short legs well apart, as if he had to brace them to bear up the enormous weight of his anger; Jack, careless, laughing, and elegant, leaned his elbow on the mantle and smoked.

"There, Mr. Barnstable," Fairfield said, coming to him and taking him by the arm; "you evidently don't know what you're saying. Of course there's some mistake. Mr. Neligage never insulted a

lady."

"But he has done it," persisted Barnstable. "He has done it, Mr. Fairfield. Have you read 'Love in a Cloud'?"

"'Love in a Cloud'?" repeated Dick in manifest astonishment.

"You must know the book, Dick," put in Jack wickedly. "It's that rubbishy anonymous novel that's made so much talk lately. It's about a woman whose husband's temper was incompatible."

"It's about my wife!" cried Barnstable. "What right had you to put my wife in a book?"

"Pardon me," Neligage asked with the utmost suavity, "but is it proper to ask if it was your temper that was incompatible?"

"Shut up, Jack," said Dick hastily. "You are entirely off the track, Mr. Barnstable. Neligage didn't write 'Love in a Cloud.'"

"Didn't write it?" stammered the visitor.

"I give you my word he didn't."

Barnstable looked about with an air of helplessness which was as funny as his anger had been.

"Then who did?" he demanded.

"If Mr. Barnstable had only mentioned sooner that he wished me to write it," Jack observed graciously, "I'd have been glad to do my best."

"Shut up, Jack," commanded Dick once more. "Really, Mr. Barnstable, it does seem a little remarkable that you should go rushing about in this extraordinary way without knowing what you are doing. You'll get into some most unpleasant mess if you keep on."

"Or bring up in a lunatic asylum," suggested Jack with the most unblushing candor.

Barnstable looked from one to the other with a bewildered expression as if he were just recovering his senses. He walked to the table and took up a glass of water, looked around as if for permission, and swallowed it by uncouth gulps.

"Perhaps I'd better go," he said, and turned toward the door.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Barnstable," Jack observed as the visitor laid his hand on the door-knob, "does it seem to you that it would be in good form to apologize before you go? If it doesn't, don't let me detain you."

The strange creature turned on the rug by the door, an abject expression of misery from head to feet.

"Of course I'd apologize," he said, "if it was any use. When my temper's up I don't seem to have any control of what I do, and what I do is always awful foolish. This thing's got hold of me so I don't sleep, and that's made me worse. Of course you think I'm a lunatic, gentlemen; and I suppose I am; but my wife—"

The redness of his face gave signs that he was not far from choking, and out of his fishy eyes there rolled genuine tears. Jack stepped forward swiftly, and took him by the hand.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Barnstable," he said. "Of course I'd no idea what you were driving at. Will you believe me when I tell you something? I had nothing to do with writing 'Love in a Cloud,' but I do know who wrote it. I can give you my word that the author didn't have your story in mind at all."

"Are you sure?" stammered Barnstable.

"Of course I'm sure."

"Then there is nothing I can do," Barnstable said, shaking his head plaintively. "I've just made a fool of myself, and done nothing for her."

The door closed behind Barnstable, and the two young men looked at each other a moment. Neither laughed, the foolish tragedy of the visitor's last words not being mirth-provoking.

"Well, of all the fools I've seen in my life," Jack commented slowly, "this is the most unique specimen."

"I'm afraid I can't blame the divorced Mrs. Barnstable," responded Dick; "but there's something pathetic about the ass."

It seemed the fate of Barnstable that day to afford amusement for Jack Neligage. In the latter part of the afternoon Jack sauntered into the Calif Club to see if there were anything in the evening papers or any fresh gossip afloat, and there he encountered the irascible gentleman once more. Scarcely had he nodded to him than Tom Harbinger and Harry Bradish came up to them.

"Hallo, Jack," the lawyer said cordially. "Anything new?"

"Not that I know of," was the response. "How are you, Bradish?"

"How are you?" replied Bradish. "Mr. Barnstable, I've called twice to-day at your rooms."

"I am sorry that I was out," Barnstable answered with awkward politeness. "I have been here since luncheon."

"I'm half sorry to find you now," Bradish proceeded, while Harbinger and Jack looked on with some surprise at the gravity of his manner. "I've got to do an errand to you that I'm afraid you'll laugh at."

"An errand to me?" Barnstable returned.

Bradish drew out his pocket-book, and with deliberation produced a note. He examined it closely, as if to assure himself that there was no mistake about what he was doing, and then held out the missive to Barnstable.

"Yes," he said, "I have the honor to be the bearer of a challenge from the Count Shimbowski, who claims that you have grossly insulted him. Will you kindly name a friend? There," he concluded, looking at Harbinger and Neligage with a grin, "I think I did that right, didn't I?"

"Gad!" cried Jack. "Has the Count challenged him? What a lark!"

"Nonsense!" Harbinger said. "You can't be serious, Bradish?"

"No, I'm not very serious about it, but I assure you the Count is."

"Challenged me?" demanded Barnstable, tearing open the epistle. "What does the dago mean? He says—what's that word?—he says his honor ex—expostulates my blood. Of course I shan't fight."

Bradish shook his head, although he could not banish the laughter from his face.

"Blood is what he wants. He says he shall have to run you through in the street if you won't fight."

"Oh, you'll have to fight!" put in Jack.

"The Count's a regular fire-eater," declared Tom. "You wouldn't like to be run through in the street, Barnstable."

Barnstable looked from one to another as if he were unable to understand what was going on around him.

"Curse it!" he broke out, his face assuming its apoplectic redness. "Curse those fellows that write novels! Here I've got to be assassinated just because some confounded scribbler couldn't keep from putting my private affairs in his infernal book! It's downright murder!"

"And the comic papers afterward," murmured Jack.

"But what are you going to do about it?" asked Tom.

"You might have the Count arrested and bound over to keep the peace," suggested Bradish.

"That's a nice speech for the Count's second!" cried Jack with a roar.

"What am I going to do?" repeated Barnstable. "I'll fight him!"

He struck himself on the chest, and glared around him, while they all stood in astonished silence.

"My wife has been insulted," he went on with fresh vehemence, "and I had a right to call the man that did it a villain or anything else! I owe it to her to fight him if he won't take it back!"

"Gad!" said Jack, advancing and holding out his hand, "that's melodrama and no mistake; but I like your pluck! I'll back you up, Barnstable!"

"Does that mean that you'll be his second, Jack?" asked Harbinger, laughing.

"There, Tom," was the retort, "don't run a joke into the ground. When a man shows the genuine stuff, he isn't to be fooled any longer."

Bradish followed suit, and shook hands with Barnstable, and Harbinger after him.

"You're all right, Barnstable," Bradish observed; "but what are we to do with the Count?"

"Oh, that ass!" Jack responded. "I'd like to help duck him in a horse-pond; but of course as he didn't write the book, Mr. Barnstable won't mind apologizing for a hasty word said by mistake. Any gentleman would do that."

"Of course if you think it's all right," Barnstable said, "I'd rather apologize; but I'd rather fight than have any doubt about the way I feel toward the whelp that libelized my wife."

Jack took him by the shoulder, and spoke to him with a certain slow distinctness such as one might use in addressing a child.

"Do have some common sense about this, Barnstable," he said. "Do get it out of your head that the man who wrote that book knew anything about your affairs. I've told you that already."

"I told him too," put in Harbinger.

"I suppose you know," Barnstable replied, shaking his head; "but it is strange how near it fits!"

Bradish took Barnstable off to the writing room to pen a suitable apology to the Count, and Jack and Harbinger remained behind.

"Extraordinary beggar," observed Jack, when they had departed.

"Yes," answered the other absently. "Jack, of course you didn't write 'Love in a Cloud'?"

"Of course not. What an idiotic idea!"

"Fairfield said Barnstable had been accusing you of it, but I knew it couldn't be anything but his crazy nonsense. Of course the Count didn't write it either?"

Jack eyed his companion inquiringly.

"Look here, Tom," he said, "What are you driving at? Of course the Count didn't write it. You are about as crazy as Barnstable."

"Oh, I never thought he was the man; but who the deuce is it?"

"Why should you care?"

Harbinger leaned forward to the grate, and began to pound the coal with the poker in a way that bespoke embarrassment. Suddenly he turned, and broke out explosively.

"I should think I ought to care to know what man my wife is writing letters to! You heard her say she wrote that letter to Christopher Calumus."

Jack gave a snort of mingled contempt and amusement.

"You old mutton-head," he said. "Your wife didn't write that letter. I know all about it, and I got it back from the Count."

"You did?" questioned Harbinger with animation. "Then why did Letty say she wrote it?"

"She wanted to shield somebody else. Now that's all I shall tell you. See here, are you coming the Othello dodge?"

Tom gave a vicious whack at a big lump which split into a dozen pieces, all of which guzzled and sputtered after the unpleasant fashion of soft coal.

"There's something here I don't understand," he persisted.

Jack regarded him curiously a moment. Then he lighted a fresh cigarette, and lay back in his chair, stretching out his legs luxuriously.

"It's really too bad that your wife's gone back on you," he observed dispassionately.

"What?" cried Tom, turning violently.

"Such a nice little woman as Letty always was too," went on Jack mercilessly. "I wouldn't have believed it."

"What in the deuce do you mean?" Tom demanded furiously, grasping the poker as if he were about to strike with it. "Do you dare to insinuate—"

Jack sat up suddenly and looked at him, his sunny face full of earnestness.

"What the deuce do you mean?" he echoed. "What can a man mean when he begins to distrust his wife? Heavens! I'm beastly ashamed of you, Tom Harbinger! To think of your coming to the club and talking to a man about that little trump of a woman! You ought to be kicked! There, old man," he went on with a complete change of manner, "I beg your pardon. I only wanted to show you how you might look to an unfriendly eye. You know you can't be seriously jealous of Letty."

The other changed color, and looked shame-facedly into the coals.

"No, of course not, Jack," he answered slowly. "I'm as big an idiot as Barnstable. I do hate to see men dangling about her, though. I can't help my disposition, can I?"

"You've got to help it if it makes a fool of you."

"And that infernal Count with his slimy manners," Tom went on. "If he isn't a rascal there never was one. I'm not really jealous, I'm only—only—"

"Only an idiot," concluded Jack. "If I were Letty I'd really flirt with somebody just to teach you the difference between these fool ideas of yours and the real thing."

"Don't, Jack," Tom said; "the very thought of it knocks me all out."

XIX

What might be the result of such a match as that of May Calthorpe and Jack Neligage must inevitably depend largely upon the feelings of one or the other to another love. If either were constant to a former flame, only disaster could come of the *mariage de convenance* which Mrs. Neligage had adroitly patched up. If both left behind forgotten the foolish flares of youthful passion, the married pair might arrange their feelings upon a basis of mutual liking comfortable if not inspiring. What happened to Jack in regard to Alice and to May's silly attraction toward the unknown Christopher Calumus was therefore of much importance in influencing the future.

Since Alice Endicott knew of the engagement of May and Jack it was not to be supposed that the malicious fates would fail to bring her face to face with her former lover. The meeting happened a couple of days after. Jack was walking down Beacon street, and Alice came out of May's just in front of him. He quickened his steps and overtook her.

"Good-morning," he said; "you've been in to May's, I see. How is she to-day?"

The tone was careless and full of good-nature, and his face as sunny as the bright sky overhead. Alice did not look up at him, but kept her eyes fixed on the distance. To one given to minute observation it might have occurred that as she did not glance at him when he spoke she must have been aware of his approach, and must have seen him when she came out from the house. That she had not shown her knowledge of his nearness was to be looked upon as an indication of something which was not indifference.

"Good-morning," she answered. "May didn't seem to be in particularly good spirits."

"Didn't she? I must try to find time to run in and cheer her up. I'm not used to being engaged, you see, and I'm not up in my part."

He spoke with a sort of swagger which was obviously intended to tease her, and the heightened color in her cheeks told that it had not missed the mark.

"I have no doubt that you will soon learn it," she returned. "You were always so good in amateur theatricals."

He laughed boisterously, perhaps a little nervously.

"'Praise from Sir Hubert,'" he quoted. "And speaking of engagements, is it proper to offer congratulations on yours?"

She turned to him with a look of indignant severity.

"You know I am not engaged, and that I don't mean to be."

"Oh, that's nothing. I didn't mean to be the other day."

"I am not in the market," she said cuttingly.

"Neither am I any more," Jack retorted coolly. "I've sold myself. That's what they mean, I suppose, by saying a girl has made her market."

Alice had grown more and more stern in her carriage as this talk proceeded. Jack's tone was as flippant as ever, and he carried his handsome head as jauntily as if they were talking of the merriest themes. His brown eyes were full of a saucy light, and he switched his walking-stick as if he were light-heartedly snapping off the heads of daisies in a country lane. The more severe Alice became the more his spirits seemed to rise.

As they halted at a corner to let a carriage pass Alice turned and looked at her companion, the hot blood flushing into her smooth cheek.

"There is nothing in the world more despicable than a fortune-hunter!" she declared with emphasis.

"Oh, quite so," Jack returned, apparently full of inward laughter. "Theoretically I agree with you entirely. Practically of course there are allowances to be made. The Count has been brought up so, and you mustn't be too hard on him."

"You know what I mean," she said, unmoved by the cunning of his speech.

"Yes, of course I can make allowances for you. You mean, I suppose, that as long as you know he's really after you and not your money you can despise public opinion; but naturally it must vex you to have the Count misjudged. Everybody will think Miss Wentstile hired him to marry you."

She parted her lips to speak, then restrained herself, and altered her manner. She turned at bay, but she adopted Jack's own tactics.

"You are right," she said. "I understand that the Count is only acting according to the standards he's been brought up to. May hasn't that consolation. I'm sure I don't see, if you don't mind my saying so, on what ground she is going to contrive any sort of an excuse for her husband."

"She'll undoubtedly be so fond of him," Jack retorted with unabashed good-nature, "that it won't occur to her that he needs an excuse. May hasn't your Puritanical notions, you know. Really, I might be afraid of her if she had."

It was a game in which the man is always the superior of the woman. Women will more cleverly and readily dissemble to the world, but to the loved one they are less easily mocking and insincere than men. Alice, however, was plucky, and she made one attempt more.

"Of course May might admire you on the score of filial obedience. It isn't every son who would allow his mother to arrange his marriage for him."

"No," Jack responded with a chuckle, "you're right there. I am a model son."

She stopped suddenly, and turned on the sidewalk in quick vehemence.

"Oh, stop talking to me!" she cried. "I will go into the first house I know if you keep on this way! You've no right to torment me so!"

The angry tears were in her eyes, and her face was drawn with her effort to sustain the self-control which had so nearly broken down. His expression lost its roguishness, and in his turn he became grave.

"No," he said half-bitterly, "perhaps not. Of course I haven't; but it is something of a temptation when you are so determined to believe the worst of me."

She regarded him in bewilderment.

"Determined to believe the worst?" she echoed. "Aren't you engaged to May Calthorpe?"

He took off his hat, and made her a profound and mocking bow.

"I apparently have that honor," he said.

"Then why am I not to believe it?"

He looked at her a moment as if about to explain, then with the air of finding it hopeless he set his lips together.

"If you will tell me what you mean," Alice went on, "I may understand. As it is I have your own word that you are engaged; you certainly do not pretend that you care for May; and you know that your mother made the match. You may be sure, Jack," she added, her voice softening a little only to harden again, "that if there were any way of excusing you I should have found it out. I'm still foolish enough to cling to old friendship."

His glance softened, and he regarded her with a look under which she changed color and drew away from him.

"Dear Alice," he said, "you always were a brick."

She answered only by a startled look. Then before he could be aware of her intention she had run lightly up the steps of a house and rung the bell. He looked after her in amazement, then followed.

"Alice," he said, "what are you darting off in that way for?"

"I have talked with you as long as I care to," she responded, the color in her cheeks, and her head held high. "I am going in here to see Mrs. West. You had better go and cheer up May."

Before he could reply a servant had opened the door. Jack lifted his hat.

"Good-by," said he. "Remember what I said about believing the worst."

Then the door closed behind her, and he went on his way down the street.

That the course of true love never ran smooth has been said on such a multitude of occasions that it is time for some expert in the affections to declare whether all love which runs roughly is necessarily genuine. The supreme prerogative of young folk who are fond is of course to tease and torment each other. Alice and Jack had that morning been a spectacle of much significance to any student in the characteristics of love-making. Youth indulges in the bitter of disagreement as a piquant contrast to the sweets of the springtime of life. True love does not run smooth because love cannot really take deep hold upon youth unless it fixes attention by its disappointments and woes. Smooth and sweet drink quickly cloys; while the cup in which is judiciously mingled an apt proportion of acid stimulates the thirst it gratifies. If Jack was to marry May it was a pity that he and Alice should continue thus to hurt each other.

XX

THE FAITHFULNESS OF A FRIEND

The friendship between Jack Neligage and Dick Fairfield was close and sincere. For a man to say that the friendships of men are more true and sure than those of women would savor of cynicism, and might be objected to on the ground that no man is in a position to judge on both sides of the matter. It might on the other hand be remarked that even women themselves give the impression

of regarding masculine comradeship as a finer product of humanity than feminine, but comparisons of this sort have little value. It is surely enough to keep in mind how gracious a gift of the gods is a genuine affection between two right-hearted men. The man who has one fellow whom he loves, of whose love he is assured; one to whom he may talk as freely as he would think, one who understands not only what is said but the things which are intended; a friend with whom it is possible to be silent without offense or coldness, against whom there need be no safeguards, and to whom one may turn alike in trouble and in joy—the man who has found a friend like this has a gift only to be outweighed by the love of her whose price is far above rubies and whose works praise her in the gates. Such a friendship is all but the most precious gift of the gods.

To evoke and to share such a friendship, moreover, marks the possession of possibilities ethically fine. A man may love a woman in pure selfishness; but really to love his male friend he must possess capabilities of self-sacrifice and of manliness. It is one of the charms of comradeship that it frankly accepts and frankly gives without weighing or accounting. In the garden of such a friendship may walk the soul of man as his body went in Eden before the Fall, "naked and not ashamed." He cannot be willing to show himself as he is if his true self have not its moral beauties. It may be set down to the credit both of Dick and of Jack that between them there existed a friendship so close and so trustful.

Even in the closest friendships, however, there may be times of suspension. Perhaps in a perfect comradeship there would be no room for the faintest cloud; but since men are human and there is nothing perfect in human relations, even friendship may sometimes seem to suffer. For some days after the announcement of Jack's engagement there was a marked shade between the friends. Jack, indeed, was the same as ever, jolly, careless, indolent, and apparently without a trouble in the world. Dick, on the other hand, was at times absent, constrained, or confused. To have his friend walk in and coolly announce an engagement with the girl whose correspondence had fired Dick's heart was naturally trying and astonishing. Dick might have written a bitter chapter about the way in which women spoiled the friendships of men; and certain cynical remarks which appeared in his next novel may be conceived of as having been set down at this time.

More than a week went by without striking developments. The engagement had not been announced, nor had it, after the first evening, been mentioned between the two friends. That there should be a subject upon which both must of necessity reflect much, yet of which they did not speak, was in itself a sufficient reason for a change in the mental atmosphere of their bachelor quarters, which from being the cheeriest possible were fast becoming the most gloomy.

One morning as Dick sat writing at his desk, Jack, who since breakfast had been engaged in his own chamber, came strolling in, in leisurely fashion, smoking the usual cigarette.

"I hope I don't disturb you, old man," he said, "but there's something I'd like to ask you, if you don't mind."

Dick, whose back was toward the other, did not turn. He merely held his pen suspended, and said coldly:—

"Well?"

Jack composed himself in a comfortable position by leaning against the mantel, an attitude he much affected, and regarded his cigarette as if it had some close connection with the thing he wished to say.

"You remember perhaps that letter that I gave you from May?"

Dick laid his pen down suddenly, and sat up, but he did not turn.

"Well?" he said again.

"And the other letters before it?"

"Well?"

"It has occurred to me that perhaps I ought to ask for them,—demand them, don't you know, the way they do on the stage."

Dick said nothing. By keeping his back to his chum he missed sight of a face full of fun and mischief.

"Of course I don't want to seem too bumptious, but now I'm engaged to Miss Calthorpe—"

He paused as if to give Fairfield an opportunity of speaking; but still Dick remained silent.

"Well," observed Jack after a moment, "why the dickens don't you say something? I can't be expected to carry on this conversation all alone."

"What do you want me to say?" Fairfield asked, in a tone so solemn that it was no wonder his friend grinned more than ever.

"Oh, nothing, if that's the way you take it."

"You knew about those letters when I got them," Fairfield went on. "I read them to you before I knew where they came from."

"Oh, my dear fellow, hold on. You never read me any but the first one."

"At any rate," rejoined Dick, obviously disturbed by this thrust, "I told you about them."

"Oh, you did? You told me very little about the second, and nothing about the third. I didn't even know how many you had."

Fairfield rose from his seat, thrust his hands into his pockets, and began to pace up and down the room. Jack smoked and watched.

"Look here, Jack," Dick said, "we've been fencing round this thing for a week, and it's got to be talked out."

"All right; heave ahead, old man."

Fairfield stopped in his walk and confronted his friend.

"Are you really fond of Miss Calthorpe, Jack?"

"Oh, I don't object to her; but of course the marriage is for purely business reasons."

"You're not in love with her?"

"Not the least in the world, old man," Jack responded cheerfully, blowing a ring of smoke and watching it intently as it sailed toward the ceiling. "But then she doesn't love me, so there's no bother of pretending on either side."

The color mounted in Dick's cheeks.

"Do you think it's the square thing to marry a young girl like that, and tie her up for life when she doesn't know what she's doing?"

"Oh, girls never know what they are doing. How should they know about marriage in any case? The man has to think for both, of course."

"But suppose she shouldn't be happy."

"Oh, I'll be good to any girl I marry. I'm awfully easy to live with. You ought to know that."

"But suppose," Dick urged again, "suppose she—"

"Suppose she what?"

"Why, suppose she—suppose she—she liked somebody else?"

Jack looked shrewdly at Dick's confused face, and burst into a laugh.

"I guessed those letters were pretty fair," he burst out, "but they must have been much worse than I even suspected!"

"What do you mean?" stammered Dick.

"Mean? Oh, nothing,—nothing in the world. By the way, as the matter relates to my *fiancée*, I hope you won't mind my asking if she's written to you since our engagement."

"Why—"

"Then she has written," pronounced Jack, smiling more than ever at the confusion of his friend. "You haven't the cheek to bluff a baby, Dick. I should hate to see you try to run a kelter through."

"She only wrote to say that she was glad the Count didn't write 'Love in a Cloud,' and a few things, you know, that she wanted to say."

Jack flung the end of his cigarette away and stepped swiftly forward to catch his chum by the shoulders behind. He whirled Dick about like a teetotum.

"Oh, Dick, you old fool," he cried, "what an ass you are! Do you suppose I'm such a cad as really to propose to marry May when she's fond of you and you're fond of her? It doesn't speak very well of your opinion of me."

Dick stared at him in half-stupefied amazement for an instant; then the blood came rushing into his cheeks.

"You don't mean to marry her?" he cried amazedly.

"Never did for a minute," responded Jack cheerfully. "Don't you know, old man, that I've sold my polo ponies, and taken a place in the bank?"

"Taken a place in the bank!" exclaimed Dick, evidently more and more bewildered. "Then what did you pretend to be engaged to her for?"

"Confound your impudence!" laughed Jack, "I was engaged to her, you beast! I am engaged to her now, and if you're n't civil I'll keep on being. You can't be engaged to her till I break my engagement!"

"But, Jack, I don't understand what in the deuce you mean."

"Mean? I don't know that I meant anything. I was engaged to her without asking to be, and when a lady says she is engaged to you you really can't say you're not. Besides, I thought it might help you."

"Help me?"

"Of course, my boy. There is nothing to set a girl in the way of wishing to be engaged to the right man like getting engaged to the wrong one."

Dick wrung his friend's hand.

"Jack," he said, "I beg your pardon. You're a trump!"

"Oh, I knew that all the time," responded Jack. "It may comfort you a little to know that it hasn't been much of an engagement. I've been shamefully neglectful of my position. Now of course an engaged man is supposed to show his ardor, to take little liberties, and be generally loving, you know."

Dick grew fiery red, and shrank back. Jack laughed explosively.

"Jealous, old man?" he demanded provokingly. "Well, I won't tease you any more. I haven't so much as kissed her hand."

Dick's rather combative look changed instantly into shamefacedness, and he shook hands again. He turned away quickly, but as quickly turned back again once more to grasp the hand of his chum.

"Jack Neligage," he declared, "you're worth more than a dozen of my best heroes, and a novelist can't say more than that!"

"Gad! You'd better put me in a novel then," was Jack's response. "They won't believe I'm real though; I'm too infernally virtuous."

A knock at the door interrupted them, and proved to be the summons of the janitor, who announced that a lady wished to see Mr. Fairfield.

"Don't let her stay long," Jack said, retreating to his room. "I can't get out till she is gone, and I want to go down town. I've got to order the horses to take my *fiancée* out for a last ride. It's to break my engagement, so you ought to want it to come off."

XXI

THE MISCHIEF OF A FIANCÉ

The lady proved to be Alice Endicott. She came in without shyness or embarrassment, with her usual air of quiet refinement, and although she must have seen the surprise in Dick's face, she took no notice of it. Alice was one of those women so free from self-consciousness, so entirely without affectations, yet so rare in her simple dignity, that it was hard to conceive her as ever seeming to be out of place. She was so superior to surroundings that her environment did not matter.

"Good-morning, Mr. Fairfield," she said. "I should apologize for intruding. I hope I am not disturbing your work."

"Good-morning," he responded. "I am not at work just now. Sit down, please."

She took the chair he offered, and came at once to her errand.

"I came from Miss Calthorpe," she said.

"Miss Calthorpe?" he repeated.

"Yes. She thought she ought not to write to you again; and she asked me to come for her letters; those she wrote before she knew who you were."

"But why shouldn't she write to me for them?"

"You forget that she is engaged, Mr. Fairfield."

"I—Of course, I did forget for the minute; but even if she is, I don't see why so simple a thing as a note asking for her letters—"

Alice rose.

"I don't think that there is any need of my explaining," she said. "If I tell you that she didn't find it easy to write, will that be sufficient? Of course you will give me the letters."

"I must give them if she wishes it; but may I ask one question first? Doesn't she send for them because she's engaged?"

"Isn't that reason enough?"

"It is reason enough," Dick answered, smiling; "but it isn't a reason here. She isn't engaged any more. That is, she won't be by night."

Alice stared at him in astonishment.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"I mean that Jack never meant to marry her, and that he is going to release her from her engagement."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me himself."

They stood in silence a brief interval looking each other in the face. Fairfield was radiant, but Miss Endicott was very pale.

"I beg your pardon," she said presently. "Is Mr. Neligage in the house?"

"Yes; he's in his room."

"Will you call him, please?"

Fairfield hesitated a little, but went to call his chum.

"Miss Endicott wants to speak to you," he said abruptly.

"What does she want?"

"I haven't any idea."

"What have you been telling her?"

The necessity of answering this question Dick escaped by returning to the other room; and his friend followed.

"Jack," Alice cried, as soon as he appeared, "tell me this moment if it's true that you're not to marry May!"

He faced her stiff and formal in his politeness.

"Pardon me if I do not see that you have any right to ask me such a question."

"Why, I came to ask Mr. Fairfield for May's letters because she is engaged to you, and he told me —"

She broke off, her habitual self-control being evidently tried almost beyond its limit.

"I took the liberty, Jack," spoke up Fairfield, "of saying—"

"Don't apologize," Neligage said. "It is true, Miss Endicott, that circumstances have arisen which make it best for May to break the engagement. I shall be obliged to you, however, if you don't mention the matter to her until she brings it up."

Alice looked at him appealingly.

"But I thought—"

"We are none of us accountable for our thoughts, Miss Endicott, nor perhaps for a want of faith in our friends."

She moved toward him with a look of so much appeal that Dick discreetly turned his back under pretense of looking for something on his writing-table.

"At least," she said, her voice lower than usual, "you will let me apologize for the way in which I spoke to you the other morning."

"Oh, don't mention it," he returned carelessly. "You were quite justified."

He turned away with easy nonchalance, as if the matter were one in which he had no possible interest.

"At least," she begged, "you'll pardon me, and shake hands."

"Oh, certainly, if you like," answered he; "but it doesn't seem necessary."

Her manner changed in the twinkling of an eye. Indignation shone in her face and her head was carried more proudly.

"Then it isn't," she said. "Good-morning, Mr. Fairfield."

She went from the room as quickly as a shadow flits before sunlight. The two young men were so taken by surprise that by the time Dick reached the door to open it for his departing caller, it had already closed behind her. The friends stared a moment. Then Jack made a swift stride to the door; but when he flung it open the hall without was empty.

"Damn it, Dick," he ejaculated, coming back with a face of anger, "what did you let her go off like

that for?"

"How in the world could I help it?" was all that his friend could answer.

Jack regarded Dick blackly for the fraction of a second; then he burst into a laugh, and clapped him on the shoulder.

"I beg your pardon, old man," he said, as cheerily as ever. "I'm going off my nerve with all these carryings on. If you hadn't written that rotten old novel of yours, we shouldn't have had these continual circuses."

He went for his hat as he spoke, and without farther adieu took his way down town. Men in this peculiar world are to be envied or pitied not so much for their fortunes as for their dispositions; and if outward indications were to be trusted, Jack Neligage was one of those enviable creatures who will be cheerful despite the blackest frowns of fate. From indifference or from pluck, from caring little for the favors of fortune or from despising her spite, Jack took his way through life merrily, smiling and sunny; up hill or down dale as it chanced he followed the path, with a laugh on his lip and always a kindly greeting for his fellow travelers. This morning, as he walked out into the sunlight, handsome, well-groomed, debonaire, and jocund, certainly no one who saw him was likely to suspect that the world did not go smoothly with him. Least of all could one suppose that his heart or his thought was troubled concerning the favor or disfavor of any woman whatsoever.

Jack in the afternoon took May for a drive. The engagement had thus far been a somewhat singular one. Jack had been to see May nearly every day, it is true, but either by the whimsical contrivance of fate or by his own cunning he had seldom seen her alone. She either had callers or was out herself; and as no one but Mrs. Neligage and Alice knew of the engagement there was no chance for that sentiment which makes callers upon a lady feel it necessary to retreat as speedily as possible upon the appearance of her acknowledged lover. So well settled in the public mind was the conviction that Jack was in love with Alice Endicott, that nobody took the trouble to notice that he was calling on May Calthorpe or to get out of his way that he might be alone with her. This afternoon, in the face of all the world, in a stylish trap, on the open highway, they were at last together without other company.

Had not the mind of May been provided with an object of regret and longing in the person of Fairfield, there might have been danger that Jack would engage her fancy by sheer indifference. Any girl must be puzzled, interested, piqued, and either exasperated or hurt according to her nature, when the man to whom she is newly betrothed treats her as the most casual of acquaintances. If nothing else moved her there would be the bite of unsatisfied curiosity. To be engaged without even being able to learn by experience what being engaged consists in may well wear on the least inquisitive feminine disposition. The *fiancé* who does not even make pretense of playing the lover is an object so curious that he cannot fail to attract attention, to awake interest, and the chances are largely in favor of his developing in the breast of his fair the determination to see him really aroused and enslaved. Many a woman has succumbed to indifference who would have been proof against the most ardent wooing.

"Well, May," Jack said, smiling upon her as they drove over the Mill Dam, "how do you like being engaged?"

She looked at him with a sparkle in her eyes which made her bewitching.

"I don't see that it's very different from not being engaged," she said.

"It will be if you keep on looking so pretty," he declared. "I shall kiss you right here in the street, and that would make folks talk."

The color came into her cheeks in a way that made her more charming still.

"Now you color," Jack went on, regarding her with a teasing coolness, "you are prettier yet. Gad! I shall have to kiss you!"

His horses shied at something at that instant, and he was forced to attend to them, so that May had a moment's respite in which to gather up her wits. When he looked back, she took the aggressive.

"It is horrid in you to talk that way," she remarked. "Besides, you said that I needn't kiss you until I wanted to."

"Well, I didn't promise not to kiss you, did I?"

"How silly you are to-day!" she exclaimed. "Isn't there anything better to talk about than kissing?"

Jack regarded her with a grin; a grin in which, it must be confessed, there was something of the look with which a boy watches a kitten he is teasing.

"Anything better?" repeated he. "When you've had more experience, May, perhaps you won't think there is anything better."

May began to look sober, and even to have the appearance of feeling that the conversation was becoming positively improper.

"I think you are just horrid!" she declared. "I do wish you'd behave."

He gave her a respite for some moments, and they drove along through the sunlight of the April afternoon. The trees as they came into the country were beautiful with the buds and promise of nearing summer; the air soft with that cool smoothness which is a reminder that afar the breeze has swept fragments of old snowdrifts yet unmelted; the sky moist with the mists of snow-fields that have wasted away. All the landscape was exquisite with delicate hues.

The supreme color-season of New England begins about the middle of March, and lasts—at the very latest—until the middle of May. Its climax comes in late April, when pearly mists hover among the branches that are soon to be hidden by foliage. Glowing tints of amethyst, luminous gray, tender green, coral, and yellow white, make the woods a dream of poetic loveliness beside which the gorgeous and less varied hues of autumn are crude. Something dreamlike, veiled, mysterious, is felt in these tints, this iridesence of the woods in spring; as if one were looking at the luminous, rosy mists within which, as Venus amid the rainbow-dyed foam of the sea, is being shaped to immortal youth and divine comeliness the very goddess of spring. The red of the maple-buds shows from afar; the russet leaflets of the ash, the vivid green, the amber, the pearl, and the tawny of the clustering hardwood trees, set against the heavy masses of the evergreens, are far more lovely than all the broad coloring of summer or the hot tints of autumn.

Under the afternoon sun the woods that day were at their best, and presently May spoke of the colors which spread down the gentle slopes of the low hills not far away.

"Isn't it just too lovely for anything!" she said. "Just look at that hill over there. It is perfectly lovely."

Jack glanced at the hill, and then looked at her teasingly.

"That's right," he remarked. "Of course spoony people ought to talk about spring, and how perfectly lovely everything is."

"I didn't say that because we're engaged," returned May, rather explosively. "I really meant it."

"Of course you did. That shows that you are in the proper frame of mind. Now I'm not. I don't care a rap to talk about the whole holy show. It's pretty, of course; but I'm not going in for doing the sentimental that way."

She looked up with mingled indignation and entreaty.

"Now you are going to be horrid again," she protested. "Why can't you stop talking about our being engaged?"

"Stop talking about it? Why, good heavens, we're expected to talk about it. I never was engaged before, but I hope I know my business."

"But I don't want to talk about it!"

"Oh, you really do, only you are shy about owning it."

"But I won't talk about it!"

"Oh, yes, you will, my dear; for if I say things you can't help answering 'em."

"I won't say another word!"

"I'll bet you a pair of gloves that the next thing I say about our being engaged you'll not only answer, but you'll answer in a hurry."

"I'll take your bet!" cried May with animation. "I won't answer a word."

Jack gave a wicked chuckle, and flicked his horses into a brisk run. In a moment or two he drew them down to an easy trot, and turned to May with a matter-of-fact air.

"Of course now we have been engaged a week," he said, "I am at liberty to read that letter you wrote to Christopher Calumus?"

"Read it!" she cried. "Oh, I had forgotten that you kept it! Oh, you mustn't read it! I wouldn't have you read it for the world."

"Would you have me read it for a pair of gloves?" inquired Jack wickedly. "You've lost your bet."

"I don't care anything about my bet," she retorted, with an earnestness so great as to suggest that tears were not so far behind. "I want that letter."

"I'm sorry you can't have it," was his reply; "but the truth is, I haven't got it."

"Haven't got it? What have you done with it?"

"Delivered it to the one it was addressed to,—Christopher Calumus."

"Delivered it? Do you mean you gave it to Mr. Fairfield?"

"Just that. You wrote it to him, didn't you?"

Poor May was now so pale and miserable that a woman would have taken her in her arms to be kissed and comforted, but Jack, the unfeeling wretch, continued his teasing.

"I didn't want you to think I was a tyrant," he went on. "Of course I'm willing you should write to anybody that you think best."

"But—but I wrote that letter to Mr. Fairfield before I knew who he was!" gasped May.

"Well, what of it? Anything that you could say to a stranger, of course you could say to a man you knew."

For reply May put up one hand to her eyes, and with the other began a distressing and complicated search for a handkerchief. Jack bent forward to peer into her face and instantly assumed a look of deep contrition.

"Oh, I say," he remonstrated, "it's no fair to cry. Besides, you'll spoil your gloves, and now you've got to pay me a pair you can't afford to be so extravagant."

The effect of this appeal was to draw from May a sort of hysterical gurgle, a sound indescribably funny, and which might pass for either a cry of joy or of woe.

"I think you are too bad," she protested chokingly. "You know I didn't want Mr. Fairfield to have that letter when I was engaged to you!"

"Oh, is that all?" he returned lightly. "Then that's easily fixed. Let's not be engaged any more, and then there'll be no harm in his having it."

Apparently astonishment dried her tears. She looked at him in a sort of petrified wonder.

"I really mean it, my dear," he went on with a paternal air which was exceedingly droll in Jack Neligage. "I'll say more. I never meant for a minute to marry you. I knew you didn't want to have me, and I'd no notion of being tied to a dragooned wife."

"A dragooned wife?" May repeated.

She was evidently so stupefied by the turn things had taken that she could not follow him.

"A woman dragooned into marrying me," Jack explained, with a jovial grin; "one that was thinking all the time how much happier she would be with somebody else."

"And you never meant to marry me? Then what did you get engaged to me for?"

"I didn't. You wrote me that you were engaged to me, and of course as a gentleman I couldn't contradict a lady, especially on a point so delicate as that."

May flushed as red as the fingers of dawn.

"Your mother—" she began; but he interrupted her.

"Isn't it best that we don't go into that?" he said in a graver voice. "I confess that I amused myself a little, and I thought that you needed a lesson. There were other things, but no matter. I never was the whelp you and Alice thought me."

"Oh, Alice!" cried May, with an air of sudden enlightenment.

"Well, what about her?" Jack demanded.

"Nothing," replied May, smiling demurely to herself, "only she will be glad that the engagement is broken. She said awfully hard things about you."

"I am obliged to her," he answered grimly.

"Oh, not really awful," May corrected herself quickly, "and anyway it was only because she was so fond of you."

To this he made no reply, and for some time they drove on in silence. Then Jack shook off his brief depression, and apparently set himself to be as amusing as he could. He aroused May to a condition of mirth almost wildly joyous. They laughed and jested, told each other stories, and the girl's eyes shone, her dimples danced in and out like sun-flecks flashing on the water, the color in her cheeks was warm and delightful. Not a word more was said on personal matters until Jack deposited her at her own door once more.

"I never had such a perfectly lovely ride in my life!" she exclaimed, looking at him with eyes full of animation and gratitude.

"Then you see what you are losing in throwing me over," he returned. "Oh, you've had your chance and lost it!"

She laughed brightly, and held out her hand.

"But you see," she said mischievously, "the trouble is that the best thing about the ride was just that loss!"

"I like your impudence!" he chuckled. "Well, you're welcome. Good-by. I'll send Fairfield round to talk with you about the letter."

And before she could reply he was away.

XXII

THE COOING OF TURTLE-DOVES

There is nothing like the possibility of loss to bring a man to his bearings in regard to a woman. Dick Fairfield had told Jack that of course he was not a marrying man, that he could not afford to marry a poor woman, and that nothing would induce him to marry a rich one; he had even set down in his diary on the announcement of Jack's engagement that he could never have offered his hand to a girl with so much money; what his secret thought may have been no sage may say, but he had all the outward signs of a man who has convinced himself that he has no idea of trying to secure the girl he loves. Now that the affair had shaped itself so that May was again free, he hurried to her with a precipitation which had in it a choice flavor of comedy.

May always told him afterward that he did not even do her the honor to ask her for her hand, but that he coolly walked in and took up the engagement of Jack Neligage where it had been dropped. It was at least true that by nine o'clock that very evening they were sitting side by side as cosy and as idiotically blissful as a young couple newly betrothed should be. However informally the preliminaries had been conducted, the conclusion seemed to be eminently satisfactory.

"To think that this is the result of that little letter that I found on my table one rainy night last February," Dick observed rapturously. "I remember just how it looked."

"It was horrid of me to write it," May returned, with a demure look which almost as plainly as words added: "Contradict me!"

"It was heavenly of you," Dick declared, rising to the occasion most nobly. "It was the nicest valentine that ever was."

Some moments of endearments interesting to the participants but not edifying in narration followed upon this assertion, and then the little stream of lover-talk purled on again.

"Oh, Mr. Fairfield," May began with utter irrelevancy, "I—"

"You promised not to call me that," he interrupted.

"But it's so strange to say Dick. Well, Dick, then—"

The slight interruption of a caress having been got over, she went on with her shattered observation.

"What was I going to say? You put me all out, with your 'Dick'—I do think it's the dearest name!—Stop! I know what I was going to say. I was frightened almost to death when Mrs. Neligage said the Count wrote 'Love in a Cloud.' Oh, I wanted to get under the tea-table!"

"But you didn't really think he wrote my letters?"

"I couldn't believe it; but I didn't know what to think. Then when he wore a red carnation the next day, I thought I should die. I thought anyway he'd read the letter; and that's what made me so meek when Mrs. Neligage took hold of me."

"But you never suspected that I wrote the book?" Fairfield asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes it seems to me as if I really did know all the time. Don't you remember how we talked about the book at Mrs. Harbinger's tea?"

"That's just your intuition," Dick returned. "I know I didn't suspect you, for it troubled me tremendously that I cared so much for you when I thought I was in love with my unknown correspondent. It didn't seem loyal."

"But of course it was, you know, because there was only one of us."

Dick laughed, and bestowed upon her an ecstatic little hug.

"You dear little Paddy! That's a perfect bull!"

She drew herself away, and pretended to frown with great dignity.

"I don't care if it is a bull!" protested she. "I won't be called a Paddy!"

Dick's face expressed a consternation and a penitence so marked that she burst into a trill of laughter and flung herself back into his arms.

"I was just teasing," she said. "The truth is that Jack Neligage has teased me so awfully that I've caught it like the measles."

The tender follies which make up the talk of lovers are not very edifying reading when set down in the unsympathetic blackness of print. They are to be interpreted, moreover, with the help of many signs, trifling in themselves but essential to a correct understanding. Looks, caresses, sighs, chuckles, giggles, pressures and claspings, intonations which alter or deny the word spoken, a thousand silly becks, and nods, and wreathèd smiles, all go to make up the

conversation between the pair, so that what may be put into print is but a small portion of the ecstatic whole. May Calthorpe and Dick Fairfield were not behind in all the enchanting idiocy which belongs to a wooing, where each lover, secure in being regarded as perfection, ventures for once in a lifetime to be frankly childish, to show self without any mask of convention.

"Oh, I knew you were a man of genius the very first time I saw you," May cried, in an entirely honest defiance of all facts and all evidence.

"I wish I were for your sake," Dick replied, with an adoring glance, and a kiss on the hand which he held. "And to think that this absurdly small hand wrote those beautiful letters."

"You didn't suppose I had an amanuensis, did you?" laughed May.

Then Dick laughed, and together they both laughed, overpowered by the exquisite wit of this fine jest.

"Really, though," Dick said, "they came to me like a revelation. I never had such letters before!"

May drew away her hand, and sat upright with an air of offended surprise.

"Well, I should hope you never did!" she cried. "The idea of any other woman's daring to write to you!"

"But you were writing to a stranger; some other woman—"

"Now, Richard," declared May resolutely, "this has got to be settled right here. If you are going to twit me all my life with having written to you—"

He effectually stopped her speech.

"I'll never speak of it again," he said; "or at least only just often enough so that it shan't be entirely forgotten."

"You are horrid!" declared she with a pout. "You mean to tease me with—"

"Tease you, May? Heavens, how you mistake! I only want all my life to be kept your slave by remembering—"

The reader is at liberty from experience to supply as many hours of this sort of talk as his taste calls for. There were, however, some points of real interest touched upon in the course of the evening. Dick confided to May the fact that Jack Neligage had sold his ponies, was paying his debts, and had accepted a place in a bank. Mr. Frostwinch, a college friend of Jack's father, had offered the situation, and although the salary was of course not large it gave Neligage something to live on.

"Oh, I'll tell that to Alice to-morrow," May said. "She will be delighted to know that Jack is going to do something. Alice is awfully fond of him."

The conversation had to be interrupted by speculations upon the relative force of the attachment between Alice and Jack and the love which May and Dick were at that moment confirming; and from this the talk drifted away to considerations of the proper manner of disclosing the engagement. May's guardian, Mr. Frostwinch, Dick knew well, and there was no reason to expect opposition from him unless on the possible ground of a difference of fortune. It was decided that Dick should see him on the morrow, and that there should be no delay in announcing the important news.

"It will take us two or three days to write our notes, of course," May said, with a pretty air of being very practical in the midst of her sentiment. "We'll say next Wednesday."

Dick professed great ignorance of the social demands of the situation, and of course the explanation had to be given with many ornamental flourishes in the way of oscular demonstrations. May insisted that everything should be done duly and in order; told him upon whom of her relatives he would have to call, to whom write, and so many other details that Dick accused her of having been engaged before.

"You horrid thing!" she pouted. "I've a great mind to break the engagement now. I have been engaged, though," she added, bursting into a laugh of pure glee. "You forget that I woke up this morning engaged to one man and shall go to sleep engaged to another."

"Dear old Jack!" Fairfield said fervently. "Well, I must go home and find him. I want to tell him the news. Heavens! I had no idea it was so late!"

"It isn't late," May protested, after the fashion of all girls in her situation, both before and since; but when Dick would go, she laughingly said: "You tell Jack if he were here I'd kiss him. He said I'd want to some time."

And after half an hour of adieus and a brisk walk home, Dick delivered the message.

XXIII

THE BUSINESS OF A MUSE

The decadence of literature began insensibly with the invention of printing, and has been proceeding ever since. How far it has proceeded and whether literature yet exists at all are questions difficult if not impossible to answer at the present time, because of the multitude of books. No living man can have more than a most superficial knowledge of what is being done in what was formerly the royalty and is now the communism of letters. A symphony played in the midst of a battle would stand much the same chance of being properly appreciated as would to-day a work of fine literary worth sent forth in the midst of the innumerous publications of the age.

Men write, however, more than ever. There is perhaps a difference, in that where men of the elder day deluded themselves or hoped to delude others with impressive talk about art and fame and other now obsolete antiquities, the modern author sets before him definite and desirable prizes in the shape of money and of notoriety which has money's worth. The muse of these days is confronted on the door of the author with a stern "No admittance except on business," and she is not allowed to enter unless she bring her check-book with her. The ideal of art is to-day set down in figures and posted by bankers' clerks. Men once foolishly tried to live to write; now they write to live. If men seek for Pegasus it is with a view to getting a patent on him as a flying-machine; and the really progressive modern author has much the same view of life as the rag-picker, that of collecting any sort of scraps that may be sold in the market.

Dick Fairfield had much the attitude of other writers of his day and generation. He had set out to make a living by writing, because he liked it, and because, in provincial Boston at least, there is still a certain sense of distinction attached to the profession of letters, a legacy from the time when the public still respected art. Fairfield had been for years struggling to get a foothold of reputation sufficiently secure to enable him to stretch more vigorously after the prizes of modern literary life, where notoriety commands a price higher than genius could hope for. He had done a good deal of hack work, of which that which he liked least, yet which had perhaps as a matter of training been best for him, had been the rewriting of manuscripts for ambitious authors. A bureau which undertakes for a compensation to mend crude work, to infuse into the products of undisciplined imagination or incompetency that popular element which shall make a work sell, had employed Fairfield to reconstruct novels which dealt with society. In this capacity he had made over a couple of flimsy stories of which Mrs. Croydon claimed the credit, on the strength of having set down the first draught from events which had happened within her own knowledge. So little of the original remained in the published version, it may be noted in passing, that she might have been puzzled to recognize her own bantlings. The success of these books had given Dick courage to attempt a society novel for himself; and by one of those lucky and inexplicable flukes of fortune, "Love in a Cloud" had gained at least the success of immediate popularity.

Fairfield had published the novel anonymously partly from modesty, partly from a business sense that it was better to have his name clear than associated with a failure. He had been deterred from acknowledging the book after its success by the eagerness with which the public had set upon his characters and identified each with some well known person. If the scene of a novel be laid in a provincial city its characters must all be identified. That is the first intellectual duty of the readers of fiction. To look at a novel from a critical point of view is no longer in the least a thing about which any reader need concern himself; but it would be an omission unpardonably stupid were he to remain unacquainted with some original under the disguise of every character. A single detail is sufficient for identification. If a man in a tale have a wart on his nose, the intelligent reader should not rest until he think of a dweller in the town whose countenance is thus adorned. That single particular must thenceforth be held to decide the matter. If the man in the novel and the man in the flesh differ in every other particular, physical and mental, that is to be held as the cunning effort of the writer to disguise his real model. The wart decides it, and the more widely the copy departs in other characteristics from the chosen person the more evident is it that the novelist did not wish his original to be known. The more striking therefore is the shrewdness which has penetrated the mystery. The reader soddens in the consciousness of his own penetration as the sardine, equally headless, soaks in oil. Fairfield was now waiting for this folly of identification to pass before he gave his name to the novel, and in the mean time he was tasting the delight of a first literary success where the pecuniary returns allowed his vanity to glow without rebuke from his conscience.

Fairfield was surprised, one morning not long after the polo game, by receiving a call from Mrs. Croydon. He knew her slightly, having met her now and then in society, and his belief that she was entirely ignorant of his share in her books might naturally invest her with a peculiar interest. She was a Western woman who had lived in the East but a few years, and her blunders in regard to Eastern society as they appeared in her original manuscripts had given him a good deal of quiet amusement. Why she should now have taken it upon herself to come to his chambers could only become evident by her own explanation.

"You are probably surprised to see me here, Mr. Fairfield," she began, settling herself in a chair with the usual ruffling of rag-tag-and-bobbery without which she never seemed able to move.

"I naturally should not have been vain enough to foresee that I should have such an honor," he responded, with his most elaborate society manner.

She smirked, and nodded.

"That is very pretty," she said. "Well, I'll tell you at once, not to keep you in suspense. I came on business."

"Business?" repeated he.

"Yes, business. You see, I have just come from the Cosmopolitan Literary Bureau."

Fairfield did not look pleased. He had kept his connection with that factory of hack-work a secret, and no man likes to be reminded of unpleasant necessities.

"They have told me," she went on, "that you revised the manuscript of my novels. I must say that you have done it very satisfactorily. We women of society are so occupied that it is impossible for us to attend to all that mere detail work, and it is a great relief to have it so well done."

Fairfield bowed stiffly.

"I am glad that you were satisfied," he replied; "but it is a violation of confidence on the part of the bureau."

"Oh, you are one of us now," Mrs. Croydon observed with gracious condescension. "It isn't as if they had told anybody else. They told me, you see, that you wrote 'Love in a Cloud.'"

"That is a greater violation of confidence still," Fairfield responded. "Indeed, it was a most ungentlemanly thing of Mr. Cutliff. He only knew it because a stupid errand boy carried him the manuscript by mistake. He had no right to tell that. I shall give him my opinion of his conduct."

Mrs. Croydon accomplished a small whirlwind of ribbon ends, and waved her plump hand in remonstrance.

"Oh, I beg you won't," she protested. "It will get me into trouble if you do. He especially told me not to let you know."

Fairfield smiled rather sardonically.

"The man who betrays a confidence is always foolish enough to suppose his confidence will be sacred. I think this is an outrageous breach of good faith on Mr. Cutliff's part."

Mrs. Croydon gave a hitch forward as if she were trying to bring her chair closer to that of Fairfield.

"As I was saying," she remarked, "we society women have really so little time to give to literature, and literature needs just our touch so much, that it has been especially gratifying to find one that could carry out my ideas so well."

The young man began to regard her with a new expression in his face. As a literary woman she should have recognized the look, the expression which tells of the author on the scent of material. Whether Fairfield ever tried his hand at painting Mrs. Croydon or not, that look would have made it plain to any well-trained fellow worker that her peculiarities tempted his literary sense. Any professional writer who listens with that gleam in his eyes is inevitably examining what is said, the manner of its saying, the person who is speaking, in the hope that here he has a subject for his pen; he is asking himself if the reality is too absurd to be credible; how much short of the extravagance of the original he must come to keep within the bounds of seeming probability. Fairfield was confronted with a subject which could not be handled frankly and truthfully. Nobody would believe the tone of the woman or her remarks to be anything but a foolish exaggeration; if she had had the genuine creative instinct, the power of analysis, the recognition of human peculiarities, Mrs. Croydon must have seen in his evident preoccupation the indication that he was deliberating how far toward the truth it would in fiction be possible to go.

"It is very kind of you," he murmured vaguely.

"Oh, don't mention it," responded she, more graciously than ever. "You are really one of us now, as I said; and I always feel strongly the ties of the literary guild."

"The guild owes you a great deal," Fairfield observed blandly.

Mrs. Croydon waved her hand engagingly in return for this compliment, incidentally with a waving of various adornments of her raiment which gave her the appearance in little of an army with banners.

"I didn't come just for compliments," she observed with much sweetness. "I am a business woman, and I know how to come to the point. My father left me to manage my own property, and so I've had a good deal of experience. When I see how women wander round a thing without being able to get at it, it makes me ashamed of them all. I don't wonder that men make fun of them."

"You are hard on your sex."

"Oh, no harder than they deserve. Why, in Chicago there are a lot of women that do business in one way or another, and I never could abide 'em. I never could get on with them, it was so hard to pin them down."

"I readily understand how annoying it must have been," Fairfield observed with entire gravity.

"Did you say that you had business with me?"

"Yes," she answered. "I suppose that I might have written, but there are some things that are so much better arranged by word of mouth. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, there's no doubt of it."

"Besides," she went on, "I wanted to tell you how much I like your work, and it isn't easy to express those things on paper."

It would be interesting to know whether to Fairfield at that moment occurred the almost inevitable reflection that for Mrs. Croydon it was hard, if her manuscripts were the test, to express anything on paper.

"You are entirely right," he said politely. "It is easy enough to put facts into words, but when it comes to feelings such as you express, it is different, of course."

He confided to Jack Neligage later that he wondered if this were not too bold a flout, but Mrs. Croydon received it as graciously as possible.

"There is so complete a difference," she observed with an irrelevance rather startling, "between the mental atmosphere in Boston and that I was accustomed to in Chicago. Here there is a sort of —I don't know that I can express it exactly; it's part of an older civilization, I suppose; but I don't think it pays so well as what we have in Chicago."

"Pays so well?" he repeated. "I don't think I understand."

"It doesn't sell so well in a book," she explained. "I thought that it would be better business to write stories of the East for the West to buy; but I've about made up my mind that it'll be money in my pocket to write of the West for the eastern market."

Fairfield smiled under his big mustache, playing with a paper-knife.

"Pardon my mentioning it," he said, "but I thought you wrote for fame, and not for money."

"Oh, I don't write for money, I assure you; but I was brought up to be a business woman, and if I'm going to write books somebody ought to pay for them. Now I wanted to ask you what you will sell me your part in 'Love in a Cloud' for."

Whether this sudden introduction of her business or the nature of it when introduced were the more startling it might have been hard to determine. Certain it is that Fairfield started, and stared at his visitor as if he doubted his ears.

"My part of it?" he exclaimed. "Why, I wrote it."

"Yes," she returned easily, "but so many persons have supposed it to be mine, that it is extremely awkward to deny it; and you have become my collaborateur, of course, by writing on the other novels."

"I hadn't realized that," Dick returned with a smile.

"You've put so much of your style into my other books," she pursued, "that it's made people attribute 'Love in a Cloud' to me, and I think you are bound now not to go back on me. I don't know as you see it as I do, but it seems to me that since you took the liberty of changing so much in my other stories you ought to be willing to bear the consequences of it, especially as I'm willing to pay you well."

"But as long as you didn't write the book," Dick observed, "I should think you'd feel rather queer to have it said you did."

"I've thought of that," Mrs. Croydon said, nodding, with a flutter of silken tags, "but I reason that the ideas are so much my own, and the book is so exactly what I would have written if social duties hadn't prevented, that that ought not to count. The fact that so many folks think I wrote it shows that I might have written it."

"But after all you didn't write it," Fairfield objected. "That seems to make it awkward."

"Why, of course it would have been better if I had given you a sketch of it," Mrs. Croydon returned, apparently entirely unmoved; "but then of course you got so much of the spirit of 'Love in a Cloud' out of my other books—"

This was perhaps more than any author could be expected to endure, and least of all a young author in the discussion of his first novel.

"Why, how can you say that?" he demanded indignantly.

"Do you suppose," she questioned with a benign and patronizing smile, "that so many persons would have taken your book for mine in the first place if you hadn't imitated me or taken ideas from my other books?"

Dick sprang to his feet, and then sat down, controlling himself.

"Well," he said coldly, "it makes no difference. It is too late to do anything about it now. An edition of 'Love in a Cloud' with my name on the title-page comes out next Wednesday. If folks

say too much about the resemblance to your books, I can confess, I suppose, my part in the others."

She turned upon him with a burst of surprise and indignation which set all her ribbon-ends waving in protest.

"That," she said, "is a professional secret. No man of honor would tell it."

She rose as she spoke, her face full of indignation.

"You have not treated me fairly," she said bitterly. "You must have seen that the book was attributed to me, and you knew the connection between 'Love in a Cloud' and my other books—"

"Other books!" exclaimed Dick.

Mrs. Croydon waved him into silence with a magnificent gesture, but beyond that took no notice of his words.

"You saw how everybody looked at me that day at Mrs. Harbinger's," she went on. "If you were going to give your name to the book why didn't you do it then?"

"I didn't think of you at all," was his answer. "I was too much amused in seeing that absurd Barnstable make a fool of himself with Count Shimbowski. Did you know that the Count actually challenged him?"

Wrath of celestial goddesses darkened the face of Mrs. Croydon as a white squall blackens the face of the sky. Her eyes glared with an expression as fierce if not as bright as the lightning.

"What do you say?" she screamed. "Challenge my husband?"

"Your husband!" ejaculated Dick, a staring statue of surprise.

"Yes, my husband," she repeated vehemently. "He didn't make a fool of himself that day! A man can't come to the defense of a woman but you men sneer at him. Do you mean that that beastly foreign ape dared to challenge him for that? I'd like to give him my opinion of him!"

When a man finds himself entertaining a wildcat unawares he should either expel the beast or himself take safety in flight. Dick could apparently do neither. He stood speechless, gazing at the woman before him, who seemed to be waxing in fury with every moment and every word. She swept across the short space between them in a perfect hurricane of streamers, and almost shook her fists in his face.

"I understand it all now," she said. "You were in it from the beginning! I suppose that when you worked on my books you took the trouble to find out about me, and that's where your material came from for your precious 'Love in a Cloud.' Oh, my husband will deal with you!"

Fairfield looked disconcerted enough, as well he might, confronted with a woman who was apparently so carried away by anger as to have lost all control of herself.

"Mrs. Croydon," he said, with a coldness and a dignity which could not but impress her, "I give you my word that I never knew anything about your history. That was none of my business."

"Of course it was none of your business!" she cried. "That's just what makes it so impertinent of you to be meddling with my affairs!"

Fairfield regarded her rather wildly.

"Sit down, please," he said beseechingly. "You mustn't talk so, Mrs. Croydon. Of course I haven't been meddling with your affairs, and—"

"And not to have the courage to say a word to prevent my husband's being dragged into a duel with that foreigner! Oh, it does seem as if I couldn't express my opinion of you, Mr. Fairfield!"

"My dear Mrs. Croydon—"

"And as for Erastus Barnstable," she rushed on to say, "he's quick-tempered, and eccentric, and obstinate, and as dull as a post; he never understood me, but he always meant well; and I won't have him abused."

"I hadn't any idea of abusing him," Dick pleaded humbly. "Really, you are talking in an extraordinary fashion."

She stopped and glared at him as if with some gleam of returning reason. Her face was crimson, and her breath came quickly. Women of society outside of their own homes so seldom indulge in the luxury of an unbecoming rage that Dick had perhaps never before seen such a display. Any well-bred lady knows how to restrain herself within the bounds of personal decorum, and to be the more effective by preserving some appearance of calmness. Mrs. Croydon had evidently lacked in her youth the elevating influence of society where good manners are morals. It was interesting for Dick, but too extravagantly out of the common to be of use to him professionally.

"I hope you are proud of your politeness this morning," Mrs. Croydon ended by saying; and without more adieu she fluttered tumultuously to the door.

XXIV

THE MISCHIEF OF A CAD

The fierce light of publicity which nowadays beats upon society has greatly lessened the picturesqueness of life. There is no longer the dusk favorable to crime, and the man who wishes to be wicked, if careful of his social standing, is constantly obliged to be content with mere folly, or, if desperate, with meanness. It is true that from time to time there are still those, even in the most exclusive circles, who are guilty of acts genuinely criminal, but these are not, as a rule, regarded as being in good form. The days when the Borgias invited their enemies to dinner for the express purpose of poisoning them, or visited nobles rich in money or in beautiful wives and daughters with the amiable intent to rob them of these treasures, are over, apparently forever. In the sixteenth century—to name a time typical—success made an excuse more than adequate for any moral obliquity; and the result is that the age still serves thrillingly the romantic dramatist or novel-writer. To-day success is held more than to justify iniquity in politics or commerce, but the social world still keeps up some pretext of not approving. There is in the best society really a good deal of hesitation about inviting to dinner a man who has murdered his grandmother or run away with the wife of his friend. Society is of course not too austere in this respect; it strives to be reasonable, and it recognizes the principle that every transaction is to be judged by the laws of its own class. In the financial world, for instance, conscience is regulated by the stock market, and society assumes that if a crime has been committed for the sake of money its culpability depends chiefly upon the smallness of the amount actually secured. Conservative minds, however, still object to the social recognition of a man who has notoriously and scandalously broken the commandments. He who has not the skill or the good taste to display the fruits of his wickedness without allowing the process by which they were obtained to be known, is looked at askance by these prudish souls. In all this state of things is great loss to the romancer, and not a little disadvantage to bold and adventurous spirits. Were the latter but allowed the freedom which was enjoyed by their forerunners of the sixteenth century, they would do much to relieve the tedium under which to-day the best society languishes.

This tendency of the age toward the suppression of violent and romantic transgressions in good society was undoubtedly largely responsible for the course taken by Sibley Langdon. Foiled in his plan of blackmailing Mrs. Neligage into being his companion on a European tour, he attempted revenge in a way so petty that even the modern novelist, who stops at nothing, would have regarded the thing as beneath invention.

Mr. Langdon had sent Mrs. Neligage her canceled note, with a floridly worded epistle declaring that its real value, though paid, was lost to him, since it lay in her signature and not in the money which the document represented. This being done, he had called once or twice, but the ignominy of living at the top of a speaking-tube carries with it the advantage of power to escape unwelcome callers, and he never found Mrs. Neligage at home. When they met in society Mrs. Neligage treated him with exactly the right shade of coolness. She did not give rise to any gossip. The infallible intuition of her fellow women easily discovered, of course, that there was an end of the old intimacy between the widow and Mr. Langdon, but nobody had the satisfaction of being able to perceive anything of the nature of a quarrel.

They met one evening at a dinner given by Mrs. Chauncy Wilson. The dinner was not large. There were Mr. and Mrs. Frostwinch, Mrs. Neligage, Alice Endicott, Count Shimbowski, and Mr. Langdon. The company was somewhat oddly assorted, but everybody understood that Mrs. Wilson did as she pleased, leaving social considerations to take care of themselves. She had promised Miss Wentstile, who still clung to the idea of marrying Alice to the Count, that she would ask the pair to dinner; and having done so, she selected her other guests by some principle of choice known only to herself.

The dinner passed off without especial incident. The Count took in Alice, and was by her treated with a cool ease which showed that she had come to regard him as of no consequence whatever. She chatted with him pleasantly enough at the proper intervals, but more of her attention was given to Mr. Frostwinch, her neighbor on the other side. She would never talk with the Count in French, although she spoke that tongue with ease, and his wooing, such as it was, had to be carried on in his joint-broken English. The engagement of May Calthorpe and Dick Fairfield, just announced, and the appearance of "Love in a Cloud" with the author's name on the title-page, were the chief subjects of conversation. The company were seated at a round table, so that the talk was for the most part general, and each person had something to add to the little ball of silken-fibred gossip as it rolled about. Mr. Frostwinch was May's guardian, and a man of ideas too old-fashioned to discuss his ward or her affairs in any but the most general way; yet even he did now and then add a word or a hint.

"They say," Mrs. Wilson observed, "that there's some kind of a romantic story behind the engagement. Mrs. Neligage, you ought to know—is it true that Richard Fairfield got Jack to go and propose for him?"

"If he did," was the answer, "neither you nor I will ever know it from Jack. He's the worst to get anything out of that I ever knew. I think he has some sort of a trap-door in his memory to drop things through when he doesn't want to tell them. I believe he contrives to forget them himself."

"You can't conceive of his holding them if he did remember them, I suppose," chuckled Dr.

Wilson.

"Of course he couldn't. No mortal could."

"That's as bad as my husband," observed Mrs. Frostwinch, with a billowy motion of her neck, a movement characteristic and perhaps the result of unconscious cerebration induced by a secret knowledge that her neck was too long. "I tried to get out of him what Mr. Fairfield said when he came to see him about May; and I give you my word that after I'd worn myself to shreds trying to beguile him, I was no wiser than before."

"I tell you so entirely all my own secrets, Anna," her husband answered, "that you might let me keep those of other people."

"Indeed, I can't help your keeping them," was her reply. "That's what I complain of. If I only had a choice in the matter, I shouldn't mind."

"If Jack Neligage is in the way of proposing," Langdon observed in his deliberate manner, "I should think he'd do it for himself."

"Oh, bless you," Mrs. Neligage responded quickly, "Jack can't afford to marry. I've brought him up better than to suppose he could."

"Happy the man that has so wise a mother," was Langdon's comment.

"If you don't believe in marriages without money, Mrs. Neligage," asked Mrs. Wilson, "what do you think of Ethel Mott and Thayer Kent?"

"Just think of their marrying on nothing, and going out to live on a cattle ranch," put in Mrs. Frostwinch. "I wonder if Ethel will have to milk?"

Dr. Wilson gave a laugh full of amusement.

"They don't milk on cattle ranches," he corrected. "She may have to mount a horse and help at a round-up, though."

"Well, if she likes that kind of a burial," Mrs. Neligage said, "it's her own affair, I suppose. I'd rather be cremated."

"Oh, it isn't as bad as that," Mr. Frostwinch observed genially. "They'll have a piano, and that means some sort of civilization."

"I suppose she'll play the *ranz des vaches* on the piano," Mrs. Wilson laughed.

"Of course it's madness," Langdon observed, "but they'll like it for a while. I can't understand, though, how Miss Mott can be so foolish. I always supposed she was rather a sensible girl."

"Does this prove that she isn't?" asked Alice.

"Don't you think a girl that leaves civilization, and goes to live in the wilderness just to follow a man, shows a lack of cleverness?"

The seriousness of the tone in which Alice had asked her question had drawn all eyes in her direction, and it might easily be that the knowledge of the interest which she was supposed to have in penniless Jack Neligage would in any case have given to her words especial mark.

"That depends on what life is for," Alice answered now, in her low, even voice. "If she is happier with Thayer Kent on a cattle ranch than she would be anywhere else without him, I think she shows the best kind of sense."

"But think what a stupid life she'll lead," Langdon persisted. "She doesn't know what she's giving up."

"Eet ees *très romanesque*," declared the Count, "but eet weel to be *triste*. Weell she truthfully ride de cow?"

Politely veiled laughter greeted this sally, except from Dr. Wilson, who burst into an open guffaw.

"She'll be worth seeing if she does!" he ejaculated.

Mrs. Frostwinch bent toward Alice with undulating neck.

"You are romantic, of course, Alice," she remarked, "and you look at it like a girl. It's very charming to be above matter-of-fact considerations; but when the edge is worn off—"

She sighed, and shook her head as if she were deeply versed in all the misfortunes resulting from an impecunious match; her manner being, of course, the more effective from the fact that everybody knew that she had never been able to spend her income.

"But what is life for?" Alice said with heightened color. "If people are happy together, I don't believe that other things matter so much."

"For my part," Mrs. Wilson declared, "I think it will be stunning! I wish I were going out to live on a ranch myself, and ride a cow, as the Count says. Chauncy, why don't we buy a ranch? Think how I'd look on cow-back!"

She gave the signal to rise, and the ladies departed to the drawing-room, where they talked of many things and of nothing until the gentlemen appeared. Mr. Langdon placed himself so that he faced Mrs. Neligage across the little circle in which the company chanced to arrange itself.

"We've been talking of adventures," he said, "and Mr. Frostwinch says that nobody has any nowadays."

"I only said that they were uncommon," corrected Mr. Frostwinch. "Of course men do have them now and then, but not very often."

"Men! Yes, they have them," Mrs. Wilson declared; "but there's no chance nowadays for us poor women. We never get within sight of anything out of the common."

"You're enough out of the common to do without it, Elsie," laughed her husband.

"Madame Weelson ees an adventure eetself," the Count put in gallantly.

Mr. Langdon raised his head deliberately, and looked over to Mrs. Neligage.

"You could tell them differently, Mrs. Neligage," he said. "Your experience at Monte Carlo, now; that was far enough out of the common."

Her color went suddenly, but she met his eyes firmly enough.

"My adventures?" she returned. "I never had an adventure. I'm too commonplace a person for that."

"You don't do yourself justice," Langdon rejoined. "You haven't any idea how picturesque you were that night."

Telepathy may or may not be established on a scientific basis, but it is certain that there exists some occult power in virtue of which intelligence spreads without tangible means of communication. There was nothing in the light, even tones of Langdon to convey more intimation than did his words that mischief was afoot, yet over the group in Mrs. Wilson's drawing-room came an air of intentness, of alert suspense. No observer could have failed to perceive the general feeling, the perception that Langdon was preparing for some unusual stroke. The atmosphere grew electric. Mr. Frostwinch and his wife became a shade more grave than was their wont. They were both rather proper folk, and proper people are obliged to be continually watching for indecorums, lest before they are aware their propriety have its fine bloom brushed away. The Count moved uneasily in his chair. The unpleasant doubts to which he had been exposed as to how his own past would affect a Boston public might have made him the more sympathetic with Mrs. Neligage, and the fact that he had seen her at the tables at Monte Carlo could hardly fail to add for him a peculiar vividness to Langdon's words. Doctor and Mrs. Wilson were both openly eager. Alice watched Mrs. Neligage intently, while the widow faced Langdon with growing pallor.

"Madame Neleegaze ees all teemes de peecture," declared Count Shimbowski gallantly. "When more one teeme eet ees de oder?"

"She was more picturesque that time than another," laughed Langdon, by some amazing perception getting at the Count's meaning. "I'm going to tell it, Mrs. Neligage, just to show what you are capable of. I never admired anything more than I did your pluck that night. It's nonsense to say that women have less grit than men."

"Less grit!" cried Mrs. Wilson. "They have a hundred times more. If men had the spunk of women or women had the strength of men—"

"Then amen to the world!" broke in her husband. "Don't interrupt. I want to hear Langdon's story."

Alice Endicott had thus far said nothing, but as Langdon smiled as if to himself, and parted his lips to begin, she stopped him.

"No," she said, "he shan't tell it. If it is Mrs. Neligage's adventure, she shall tell it herself."

Mrs. Neligage flashed a look of instant comprehension, of gratitude, to Alice, and the color came back into her cheeks. She had been half cowering before the possibility of what Langdon might be intending to say, but this chance of taking matters into her own hands recalled all her self-command. Her eyes brightened, and she lifted her head.

"It isn't much to tell," she began, "and it isn't at all to my credit."

"I protest," interpolated Langdon. "Of course she won't tell a story about herself for half its worth."

"Be quiet," Alice commanded.

The eyes of all had been turned toward Mrs. Neligage at her last words, but now everybody looked at Alice. It was not common to see her take this air of really meaning to dominate. In her manner was a faint hint of the commanding manner of her aunt, although without any trace of Miss Wentstile's arrogance. She was entirely cool and self-possessed, although her color was somewhat brighter than usual. The words that had been spoken were little, yet the hearer heard behind them the conflict between herself and Langdon.

"I am not to be put down so," he persisted. "I don't care much about telling that particular story, but I can't allow you to bully me so, Miss Endicott."

"Go on, Mrs. Neligage, please," Alice said, quite as if she were mistress of ceremonies, and entirely ignoring Langdon's words except for a faint smile toward him.

"My adventure, as Mr. Langdon is pleased to call it," Mrs. Neligage said, "is only a thing I'm ashamed of. He is trying to make me confess my sins in public, apparently. He came on me one night playing at Monte Carlo when I lost a lot of money. He declares he watched me an hour before I saw him, but as I didn't play more than half that time—"

"I told you she would spoil the story," interrupted Langdon, "I—"

"You shall not interrupt, Mr. Langdon," Alice said, as evenly and as commandingly as before.

"Oh, everybody he play at Monte Carlo," put in the Count. "Not to play, one have not been dere."

"I've played," Mrs. Wilson responded. "I think it's the greatest fun in the world. Did you win, Mrs. Neligage?"

"Win, my dear," returned the widow, who had recovered perfectly her self-command; "I lost all that I possessed and most that I didn't. I wonder I ever got out of the place. The truth is that I had to borrow from Mr. Langdon to tide me over till I could raise funds. Was that what you wanted to tell, Mr. Langdon? You were the real hero to lend it to me, for I might have gone to playing again, and lost that too."

Langdon was visibly disconcerted. To have the tables so turned that it seemed as if he were seeking a chance to exploit his own good deeds left him at the mercy of the widow. Mrs. Neligage had told in a way everything except the matter of the necklace, and no man with any pretense of being a gentleman could drag that in now. It might have been slid picturesquely into the original story, whether that were or were not Mr. Langdon's intention; but now it was too late.

"I don't see where the pluck came in," pronounced Dr. Wilson.

"Oh, I suppose that was the stupid way in which I kept on losing," Mrs. Neligage explained. "I call it perfect folly."

"Again I say that I knew she'd spoil the story," Langdon said with a smile.

The announcement of carriages, and the departure of the Frostwinches brought the talk to an end. When Mrs. Neligage had said good-night and was leaving the drawing-room, Langdon stood at the door.

"You got out of that well," he said.

She gave him a look which should have withered him.

"It is a brave man that tries to blacken a woman's name," she answered; and went on her way.

In the dressing-room was Alice, who had gone a moment before. Mrs. Neligage went up to her and took her by the arms.

"How did you know that I needed to have a plank thrown to me?" she demanded. "Did I show it so much?"

Alice flushed and smiled.

"If I must tell the truth," she answered, "you looked just as I saw Jack look once in a hard place."

Mrs. Neligage laughed, and kissed her.

"Then it was Jack's mother you wanted to help. You are an angel anyhow. I had really lost my head. The story was horrid, and I knew he'd tell it or hint it. It wasn't so bad," she added, as Alice half shrank back, "but that I'll tell it to you some time. Jack knows it."

XXV

THE WAKING OF A SPINSTER

Miss Wentstile was as accustomed to having her way as the sun is to rising. She had made up her mind that Alice was to marry Count Shimbowski, and what was more, she had made her intention perfectly plain to her friends. It is easily to be understood that her temper was a good deal tried when it became evident that she could not force her niece to yield. Miss Wentstile commanded, she remonstrated, she tried to carry her will with a high hand by assuming that Alice was betrothed, and she found herself in the end utterly foiled.

"Then you mean to disobey me entirely," she said to Alice one day.

"I have tried all my life to do what you wanted, Aunt Sarah," was the answer, "but this I can't do."

"You could do it if you chose."

Alice was silent; and to remain silent when one should offer some sort of a remark that may be disputed or found fault with or turned into ridicule is one of the most odious forms of insubordination.

"Why don't you speak?" demanded Miss Wentstile sharply. "Haven't I done enough for you to be able to get a civil answer out of you?"

"What is there for me to say more, Aunt Sarah?"

"You ought to say that you would not vex and disobey me any more," declared her Aunt. "Here I have told everybody that I should pass next summer at the Count's ancestral castle in Hungary, and how can I if you won't marry him?"

"You might marry him yourself."

Her aunt glared at her angrily, and emitted a most unladylike snort of contempt.

"You say that to be nasty," she retorted; "but I tell you, miss, that I've thought of that myself. I'm not sure I shan't marry him."

Alice regarded her in a silence which drew forth a fresh volley.

"I suppose you think that's absurd, do you? Why don't you say that I'm too old, and too ugly, and too ridiculous? Why don't you say it? I can see that you think it; and a nice thing it is to think, too."

"If you think it, Aunt Sarah," was the demure reply, "there's no need of my saying it."

"I think it? I don't think it! I'm pleased to know at last what you think of me, with your meek ways."

The scene was more violent than usually happened between aunt and niece, as it was the habit of Alice to bear in silence whatever rudeness it pleased Miss Wentstile to inflict. Not that the spinster was accustomed to be unkind to the girl. So long as there was no opposition to her will, Miss Wentstile was in her brusque way generous and not ill-natured. Now that her temper was tried to the extreme, her worst side made itself evident; and Alice was wise in attempting to escape. She rose from the place where she had been sewing, and prepared to leave the room.

"Go to your room by all means," the spinster said bitterly, regarding her with looks of marked disfavor. "All I have to say is this: if I do marry the Count, and you find yourself without a home, you'll have nobody but yourself to thank for it. I'm sure you've had your chance."

Whether the antique heart of the spinster had cherished the design of attempting to glide into the place in the Count's life left vacant by the refusal of her niece is a fact known only to her attendant angels, if she had any. Certain it is that within twenty-four hours she had summoned that nobleman to her august presence.

"Count," she said to him, "I can't express to you how distressed I am that my niece has put such a slight on you. She is absolutely determined not to marry."

The Count as usual shrugged his shoulders, and remarked in mangled English that in America there was no authority; and that in his country the girl would not have been asked whether she was determined to marry or not. Her determination would have made no difference.

"That is the way it should be here," Miss Wentstile observed with feeling; "but it isn't. The young people are brought up to have their own way, no matter what their elders wish."

"Then she weell not to marry wid me?" he asked.

"No, there's no hope of it. She is as obstinate as a rock."

There was a brief interval of silence in which the Count looked at Miss Wentstile and Miss Wentstile looked at the floor.

"Count Shimbowski," she said at last, raising her eyes, "of course it doesn't make much difference to you who it is you marry if you get the money."

He gave a smile half of deprecation, and spread out his hands.

"One Shimbowski for de *dot* marries," he acknowledged, "but eet ees not wid all weemeens. Dat ees not honor."

"Oh, of course I mean if your wife was a lady."

"Eet ees for de *dot* only one Shimbowski would wid all Amereecans marry," he returned with simple pride.

Miss Wentstile regarded him with a questioning look.

"I am older than my niece," she went on, "but my *dot* would be half a million."

The whole thing was so entirely a matter of business that perhaps it was not strange that she spoke with so little sign of emotion. Most women, it is true, would hardly come so near to

proposing to a man without some frivolous airs of coquetry; but Miss Wentstile was a remarkable and exceptional woman, and her air was much that in which she might have talked of building a new house.

"Ees eet dat de wonderful Mees Wentsteele would marry wid me for all dat *dot*?"

Miss Wentstile took him up somewhat quickly.

"I don't say that I would, Count," she returned; "but since you've been treated so badly by my niece, I thought I would talk with you to see how the idea struck you."

"Oh, eet weell be heavenly sweet to know what we weell be mine for all dat *dot*," the Count asserted, bowing with his hand on his heart.

She smiled somewhat acidly, and yet not so forbiddingly as to daunt him.

"If we are yours what is there left for me?" she asked.

"Ah," the Count sighed, with a shake of his head, "dat Engleesh—"

"Never mind," she interrupted, "I understand that if I do marry you I get the name and not much else."

"But de name!" he cried with fervor. "De Shimbowski name! Oh, eet ees dat de name weell be older dan dere was any mans een dees country."

"I dare say that is true," she responded, smiling more pleasantly. "My sentiments for the name are warm enough."

"De *sentiments* of de esteemfully Mees Wentsteele ees proud for me," he declared, rising to bow. "Ees eet dat we weell marry wid me? Mees Wentsteele ees more detracteeve for me wid her *dot* dan Mees Endeecott. Eet ees mooch more detracteeve."

"Well," Miss Wentstile said, rising also, "I thought I would see how the idea struck you. I haven't made up my mind. My friends would say I was an old fool, but I can please myself, thank heaven."

The Count took her hand and bowed over it with all his courtly grace, kissing it respectfully.

"Ah," he told her, echoing her words with unfortunate precision, "one old fool ees so heavenly keend!"

Miss Wentstile started, but the innocence of his intention was evident, and she offered no correction. She bade him good-by with a beaming kindness, and for the rest of the day carried herself with the conscious pride of a woman who could be married if she would.

For the next few days there was about Miss Wentstile a new atmosphere. She snubbed her niece with an air of pride entirely different from her old manner. She dropped hints about there being likely to be a title in the family after all, and as there could be no mystery what she must mean she attempted mystification by seeming to know things about the Count and his family more magnificent than her niece had ever dreamed of. She sent to a school of languages for an instructor in Hungarian, and when none was to be found at once, she purchased a grammar, and ostentatiously studied it before Alice. Altogether she behaved as idiotically as possible, and whether she really intended to go to the extreme of marrying Count Shimbowski and endowing him with her fortune or not, she at least contrived to make her friends believe that she was prepared to go to any length in her absurdity.

The announcement of the engagement of Dick Fairfield and May Calthorpe, which was made at once, of course produced the usual round of congratulatory festivities. May, as it is the moral duty of every self-respecting Bostonian to be, was related to everybody who was socially anybody, and great were the number of dinners which celebrated her decision to marry. It was too late in the season for balls, but that was of little consequence when she and her betrothed could have dined in half a dozen places on the same night had the thing been physically possible.

The real purpose of offering multitudinous dinners to a couple newly engaged has never been fully made clear. On first thought it might seem as if kindness to young folk newly come to a knowledge of mutual love were best shown by letting them alone to enjoy the transports inevitable to their condition. Society has decided otherwise, and keeps them during the early days of their betrothal as constantly as possible in the public eye. Whether this custom is the result of a fear lest the lovers, if left to themselves, might too quickly exhaust their store of fondness, or of a desire to enhance for each the value of the other by a display of general appreciation, were not easy to decide. A cynic might suggest that older persons feel the wisdom of preventing the possibility of too much reflection, or that they give all publicity to the engagement as a means of lessening the chances of any failure of contract. More kindly disposed reasoners might maintain that these abundant festivities are but testimony to the truth of Emerson's declaration that "all the world loves a lover." Philosophy, in the mean time, leaning neither to cynicism on the one hand nor to over-optimism on the other, can see in these social functions at least the visible sign that society instinctively recognizes in the proposed union a contract really public, since while men and women love for themselves they marry for the state.

Alice Endicott and Jack Neligage were naturally asked to many of these dinners, and so it came about that they saw a good deal of each other during the next few weeks. Their recent disagreement at first bred a faint coolness between them, but Jack was too good-natured long to

keep up even the pretense of malice, and Alice too forgiving to cherish anger. The need, too, of hiding from the public all unpleasantness would in any case have made it necessary for them to behave as usual, and it is one of the virtues of social conventions that the need of being outwardly civil is apt to blunt the edge of secret resentments. Of course a healthy and genuine hate may be nourished by the irksomeness of enforced suavity, but trifling pique dies a natural death under outward politeness. Alice and Jack were not only soon as friendly as ever, but either from the reaction following their slight misunderstanding or from the effect of the sentimental atmosphere which always surrounds an engaged couple, their attitude became more confidential and friendly than ever.

They sat side by side at a dinner in which the Harbingers were officially testifying their satisfaction in the newly announced engagement. Jack had been doing his duty to the lady on the other side, and turned his face to Alice.

"What is worrying you?" he asked, his voice a little lowered.

She looked at him with a smile.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked. "I was flattering myself that I'd been particularly frolicsome all the evening."

"You have; that's just it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that you've had to try."

"You must have watched me pretty closely," she remarked, flushing a little, and lowering her glance.

"Oh, I know you so well that I don't need to; but to be sure I have kept my eyes on you."

She played with her fork as if thinking, while his look was fixed on her face.

"I didn't think I was so transparent," she said. "Do you suppose other people noticed me?"

"Oh, no," he responded. "You don't give me credit for my keenness of perception. But what's the row?"

"Nothing," was her answer, "only—Well, the truth is that I've had a talk with Aunt Sarah that wasn't very pleasant. Jack, I believe she's going to marry the Count."

"I'm glad of it," was his laughing response. "He'll make her pay for all the nasty things she has done. He'll be a sort of public avenger."

Alice became graver. She shook her head, smiling, but with evident disapproval.

"You promised me long ago that you wouldn't say things against Aunt Sarah."

"No, I never did," he declared impenitently. "I only said that I'd try not to say things to you about her that would hurt your feelings."

"Well, weren't you saying them then?"

"That depends entirely upon your feelings; but if they are so sensitive, I'll say I am delighted that the 'venerated Mees Wentsteele,' as the Count calls her, is at last to be benefited by the discipline of having a master."

Alice laughed in spite of herself.

"She won't enjoy that," she declared. "Poor Aunt Sarah, she's been very kind to me, Jack. She's really good-hearted."

"You can't tell from the outside of a chestnut burr what kind of a nut is inside of it," retorted he; "but if you say she is sound, it goes. She's got the outside of the burr all right."

The servant with a fresh course briefly interrupted, and when they had successfully dodged his platter Jack went back to the subject.

"Is it proper to ask what there was in your talk that was especially unpleasant,—not meaning that she was unpleasant, of course, but only that with your readiness to take offense you might have found something out of the way."

Alice smiled faintly as if the question was too closely allied to painful thoughts to allow of her being amused.

"She is still angry with me," she said.

"For giving her a husband? She's grateful."

"No, it isn't that. She can't get over my not doing what she wanted."

"You've done what she wanted too long. She's spoiled. She thinks she owns you."

"Of course it's hard for her," Alice murmured.

"Hard for her? It's just what she needed. What is she going to do about it I'd like to know?"

Alice looked at him with a wistful gravity.

"If I tell you a secret," she said in a low tone, "can I trust you?"

"Of course you can," was the answer. "I should think that by this time, after May's engagement, you'd know I can keep still when I've a mind to."

Jack's chuckle did not call a smile to her face now. She had evidently forgotten for the moment the need of keeping up a smiling appearance in public; her long lashes drooped over cheeks that had little color in them, and her mouth was grave.

"She was very severe to-night," Alice confided to her companion. "She said—Oh, Jack, what am I to do if she goes away and leaves me without a home? She said that as of course I shouldn't want to go with her to Hungary, she didn't know what would become of me. She wanted to know if I could earn my living."

"The infernal old—" began Jack; then he checked himself in time, and added: "You shall never want a home while—" but an interruption stopped him.

"Jack," called Tom Harbinger from the other end of the table, "didn't the Count say: 'Stones of a feather gather no rolls'?"

The society mask slipped in a flash over the faces of Alice and Jack. The latter had ready instantly a breezy laugh which might have disarmed suspicion if any of the company had seen his recent gravity.

"Oh, Tom," he returned, "it wasn't so bad as that. He said: 'Birds of one feder flock to get eet.' I wish I had a short-hand report of all his sayings."

"He told me at the club," put in Mrs. Harbinger, improving on the fact by the insertion of an article, "that Miss Wentstile was 'an ext'rdeenaire particle.' I hope you don't mind, Alice?"

"Nothing that the Count says could affect me," was the answer.

Having the eyes of the ladies in her direction, Mrs. Harbinger improved the opportunity to give the signal to rise, and the talk between Alice and Jack was for that evening broken off.

XXVI

THE WOOING OF A WIDOW

"Jack," Mrs. Neligage observed one morning when her son had dropped in, "I hope you won't mind, but I've decided to marry Harry Bradish."

Jack frowned slightly, then smiled. Probably no man is ever greatly pleased by the idea that his mother is to remarry; but Jack was of accommodating temper, and moreover was not without the common sense necessary for the acceptance of the unpalatable. He trimmed the ashes from the cigarette he was smoking, took a whiff, and sent out into the air an unusually neat smoke-ring. He sat with his eyes fixed upon the involving wreath until it was shattered upon the ceiling and its frail substance dissolved in air.

"Does Bradish know it?" he inquired.

"Oh, he doesn't suspect it," answered she. "He'll never have an idea of such a thing till I tell him, and then he won't believe it."

Jack laughed, blew another most satisfactory smoke-ring, and again with much deliberation watched it ascend to its destruction.

"Then you don't expect him to ask you?" he propounded at length.

"Ask me, Jack? He never could get up the courage. He'd lie down and die for me, but as for proposing—No, if there is to be any proposing I'm afraid I should have to do it; so we shall have to get on without."

"It wouldn't be decorous for me to ask how you mean to manage, I suppose."

"Oh, ask by all means if you want to, Jacky dear; but never a word shall I tell you. All I want of you is to say you aren't too much cut up at the idea."

"I've brought you up so much to have your own way," Jack returned in a leisurely fashion, "that I'm afraid it's too late to begin now to try to control you. I wish you luck."

They were silent for some minutes. Mrs. Neligage had been mending a glove for her son, and when she had finished it, she rose and brought it to him. She stood a minute regarding him with an unwonted softness in her glance.

"Dear boy," she said, with a tender note in her voice, "I haven't thanked you for the money you

sent Langdon."

He threw his cigarette away, half turning his face from her as he did so.

"It's no use to bring that up again," he said. "I'm only sorry I couldn't have the satisfaction of kicking him."

She shook her head.

"I've wanted you to a good many times," returned she, "but that's a luxury that we couldn't afford. It would cost too much." She hesitated a moment, and added: "It must have left you awfully hard up, Jack."

"Oh, I'm going into the bank. I'm a reformed man, you know, so that doesn't matter. If I can't play polo what good is money?"

His mother sighed.

"I do wish Providence would take my advice about giving the money round," she remarked impatiently. "Things would be a great deal better arranged."

"For us they would, I've no doubt," he assented with a grin.

"When do you go into that beastly old bank?" she asked.

"First of the month. After all it won't be so much worse than being married."

"You must be awfully hard up," she said once more regretfully.

"Oh, I'm always hard up. Don't bother about that."

She stooped forward and kissed him lightly, an unusual demonstration on her part, and stood brushing the crisp locks back from his forehead. He took her hand and pulled her down to kiss her in turn.

"Really, mater," he observed, still holding her hand, "we're getting quite spoony. Does the idea of marrying Harry Bradish make you sentimental?"

She smiled and did not answer, but withdrew her hand and returned to her seat by the window. She took up a bit of sewing, and folded down on the edge of the lawn a tiny hem.

"When I am married," she observed, the faint suspicion of a blush coming into her cheek, "I can pay that money back to you. Harry is rich enough, and generous enough."

Jack stopped in the lighting of a fresh cigarette, and regarded her keenly.

"Mother," he said in a voice of new seriousness, "are you marrying him to get that money for me?"

"I mean to get it for you," she returned, without looking up.

Again he began to send rings of smoke to break on the ceiling above, and meanwhile she fixed her attention on her sewing. The noise of the carriages outside, the profanity of the English sparrows quarreling on the trees, and the sound of a distant street-organ playing "Cavalleria" came in through the open window.

"Mother," he said, "I won't have it."

"Won't have what?"

"I won't have you marry Harry Bradish."

"Why not?"

"Do you think," he urged, with some heat, "that I don't see through the whole thing? You are bound to help me out, and I won't have you do it."

The widow let her sewing fall into her lap, and turned her face to the window.

"How will you help it?" she asked softly.

"I'll stop it in one way or another. I tell you—"

But she turned toward him a face full of confusion and laughter.

"Oh, Jack, you old goose, I've been fond of Harry Bradish for years, only I didn't dare show it because—"

"Because what?"

"Because Sibley Langdon was so nasty if I did," she returned, her tone hardening. "You don't know," she went on, the tone changing again like a flute-note, "what a perfect dear Harry is. I've teased him, and snubbed him, and bullied him, and treated him generally like a fiend, and he's been as patient, and as sweet—Why, Jack, he's a saint beside me! He's awkward, and as stupid as a frog, but he's as good as gold."

Jack's face had darkened at the mention of Langdon, but it cleared again, and his sunny smile

came back once more. He sent out a great cloud of smoke with an entire disregard of the possibilities of artistic ring-making which he sacrificed, and chuckled gleefully.

"All right, mater," he said, "if that's the state of things I've nothing more to say. You may even fleece him for my benefit if you want to."

He rose as he spoke, and went over to where his mother was sitting. With heightened color, she had picked up her sewing, and bent over it so that her face was half hidden.

"Who supposed there was so much sentiment in the family," he remarked. "Well, I must go down town. Good-by. I wish you joy."

They kissed each other with a tenderness not customary, for neither was much given to sentimental demonstrations; and Jack went his way.

It has been remarked by writers tinged with cynicism that a widow who wishes to remarry is generally able to do a large part of whatever wooing is necessary. In the present case, where the lady had frankly avowed her intention of doing the whole, there was no reason why the culmination should be long delayed. One day soon after the interview between Mrs. Neligage and her son, the widow and Harry Bradish were at the County Club when they chanced to come into the parlor just in time to discover May Calthorpe and Dick Fairfield, when the lover was kissing his lady's hand. Mrs. Neligage was entirely equal to the situation.

"Yes, Mr. Bradish," she observed, looking upward, "you were right, this ceiling is very ugly."

"I didn't say anything about the ceiling," he returned, gazing up in amazement, while Dick and May slipped out at another door.

She turned to him with a countenance of mischief.

"Then you should have said it, stupid!" she exclaimed. "Didn't you see Dick and May?"

"I saw them go out. What of it?"

"Really, Harry," she said, falling into the name which she had called him in her girlhood, "you should have your wits about you when you stumble on young lovers in a sentimental attitude."

"I didn't see what they were doing. I was behind you."

"Oh, he had her hand," explained she, extending hers.

Bradish took it shyly, looking confused and mystified. The widow laughed in his face.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked.

"What do you suppose he was doing?" Mrs. Neligage demanded. "Now you have my hand, what are you going to do with it?"

He dropped her hand in confusion.

"I—I just took it because you gave it to me," he stammered. "I was only going—I was going to—"

"Then why in the world didn't you?" she laughed, moving quickly away toward the window which opened upon the piazza.

"But I will now," he exclaimed, striding after.

"Oh, now it is too late," she declared teasingly. "A woman is like time. She must be taken by the forelock."

"But, Mrs. Neligage, Louisa, I was afraid of offending you!"

"Nothing offends a woman so much as to be afraid of offending her," was her oracular reply, as she flitted over the sill.

All the way into town that sunny April afternoon Harry Bradish was unusually silent. While Mrs. Neligage, in the highest spirits, rattled on with jest, or chat, or story, he replied in monosyllables or in the briefest phrases compatible with politeness. He was evidently thinking deeply. The very droop of his yellow mustaches showed that. The presence of the trig little groom at the back of the trap was a sufficient reason why Bradish should not then deliver up any confidential disclosures in regard to the nature of his cogitations, but from time to time he glanced at the widow with the air of having her constantly in his thoughts.

Bradish was the most kindly of creatures, and withal one of the most self-distrustful. He was so transparent that there was nothing surprising in the ease with which one so astute as Mrs. Neligage might read his mood if she were so disposed. He cast upon her looks of inquiry or doubt which she gave no sign of perceiving, or now and then of bewilderment as if he had come in his thought to a question which puzzled him completely. During the entire drive he was obviously struggling after some mental adjustment or endeavoring to solve some deep and complicated problem.

The day was enchanting, and in the air was the exciting stir of spring which turns lightly the young man's fancy to thoughts of love. Whether Bradish felt its influence or not, he had at least the air of a man emotionally much stirred. Mrs. Neligage looked more alert, more provoking,

more piquant, than ever. She had, it is true, an aspect less sentimental than that of her companion, but nature had given to Harry Bradish a likeness to Don Quixote which made it impossible for him ever to appear mischievous or sportive, and if he showed feeling it must be of the kindly or the melancholy sort. The widow might be reflecting on the effectiveness of the turnout, the fineness of the horses, the general air of style and completeness which belonged to the equipage, or she might be ruminating on the character of the driver. She might on the other hand have been thinking of nothing in particular except the light things she was saying,—if indeed it is possible to suppose that a clever woman ever confines her thoughts to what is indicated by her words. Bradish, however, was evidently meditating of her.

When he had brought the horses with a proper flourish to Mrs. Neligage's door, Bradish descended and helped her out with all his careful politeness of manner. He was a man to whom courtesy was instinctive. At the stake he would have apologized to the executioner for being a trouble. He might to-day be absorbed and perplexed, but he was not for that less punctiliously attentive.

"May I come in?" he asked, hat in hand.

"By all means," Mrs. Neligage responded. "Come in, and I'll give you a cup of tea."

Bradish sent the trap away with the satisfactory groom, and then accompanied his companion upstairs. They were no sooner inside the door of her apartment than he turned to the widow with an air of sudden determination.

"Louisa," he said with awkward abruptness, "what did you mean this afternoon?"

He grasped her hands with both his; his hat, which he had half tossed upon the table, went bowling merrily over the floor, but he gave it no heed.

"Good gracious, Harry," she cried, laughing up into his face, "how tragic you are! Pick up your hat."

He glanced at the hat, but he did not release her hands. He let her remark pass, and went on with increasing intensity which was not unmixed with wistfulness.

"I've been thinking about it all the way home," he declared. "You've always teased me, Louisa, from the days we were babies, and of course I'm an old fool; but—Were you willing I should kiss your hand?"

He stopped in speechless confusion, the color coming into his cheeks, and looked pathetically into her laughing face.

"Lots of men have," she responded.

He dropped her hands, and grew paler.

"But to-day—" he stammered.

"But what to-day?" she cried, moving near to him.

"I thought that to-day—Louisa, for heaven's sake, do you care for me?"

"Not for heaven's sake," she murmured, looking younger and more bewitching than ever.

Some women at forty-five are by Providence allowed still to look as young as their children, and Mrs. Neligage was one of them. Her airs would perhaps have been ridiculous in one less youthful in appearance, but she carried them off perfectly. Bradish was evidently too completely and tragically in earnest to see the point of her quip. He looked so disappointed and abashed that it was not strange for her to burst into a peal of laughter.

"Oh, Harry," she cried, "you are such a dear old goose! Must I say it in words? Well, then; here goes, despite modesty! Take me!"

He stared at her as if in doubt of his senses.

"Do you mean it?" he stammered.

"I do at this minute, but if you're not quick I may change my mind!"

Then Harry Bradish experienced a tremendous reaction from the excessive shyness of nearly half a century, and gathered her into his arms.

XXVII

THE CLIMAX OF COMEDY

Society has always a kindly feeling toward any person who furnishes material for talk. Even in those unhappy cases where the matter provided to the gossips is of an iniquitous sort, it is not easy utterly to condemn evil which has added a pleasant spice to conversation. It is true that in

word the sinner may be entirely disapproved, but the disapproval is apt to be tempered by an evident feeling of gratitude for the excitement which the sin has provided to talkers. In lighter matters, where there is no reason to regard with reprobation the course discussed, the friendliness of the gossips is often covered with a sauce piquant of doubtful insinuation, of sneer, or of ridicule, but in reality it is evident that those who abuse do so, like Lady Teazle, in pure good nature. To be talked about in society is really to be awarded for the time being such interest as society is able to feel; and the interest of society is its only regard.

The engagement of Mrs. Neligage to Harry Bradish naturally set the tongues of all their acquaintances wagging, and many pretty things were said of the couple which were not entirely complimentary. The loves of elderly folk always present to the eyes of the younger generation an aspect somewhat ludicrous, and the buds giggled at the idea of nuptials which to their infantine minds seemed so venerable. The women pitied Bradish, who had been captured by the wiles of the widow, and the men thought it a pity that so gifted and dashing a woman as Mrs. Neligage should be united to a man so dull as her prospective husband. The widow did not wear her heart on her sleeve, so that daws who wished to peck at it found it well concealed behind an armor of raillery, cleverness, and adroitness. Bradish, on the other hand, was so openly adoring that it was impossible not to be touched by his beaming happiness. On the whole the match was felt to be a suitable one, although Mrs. Neligage had no money; and from the mingled pleasure of gossiping about the pair, and nominally condemning the whole business on one ground or another, society came to be positively enthusiastic over the marriage.

The affairs of Jack Neligage might in time be influenced by his mother's alliance with a man of wealth, but they were little changed at first. It is true that by some subtile softening of the general heart at the thought of matrimony in the concrete, as presented by the spectacle of the loves of Mrs. Neligage and Bradish, his social world was moved to a sort of toleration of the idea of his marrying Alice Endicott in spite of his poverty. People not in the least responsible, who could not be personally affected by such a match, began to wonder after all whether there were not some way in which it might be arranged, and to condemn Miss Wentstile for not making possible the union of two lovers so long and so faithfully attached. Society delights in the romantic in other people's families, and would have rolled as a sweet morsel under its tongue an elopement on the part of Jack and Alice, or any other sort of extravagant outcome. The marriage of his mother gave him a new consequence both by keeping his affairs in the public mind and by bringing about for him a connection with a man of money.

Miss Wentstile was not of a character which was likely sensitively to feel or easily to receive these beneficent public sentiments. She was a woman who was entirely capable of originating her own emotions, a fact which in itself distinguished her as a rarity among her sex. No human being, however, can live in the world without being affected by the opinions of the world; and it is probable that Miss Wentstile, with all her independence, was more influenced by the thought of those about her than could be at all apparent.

Mrs. Neligage declared to Jack that she meant to be very civil to the spinster.

"She's a sort of cousin of Harry's, you know," she remarked; "and it isn't good form not to be on good terms with the family till after you're married."

"But after the wedding," he responded with a lazy smile, "I suppose she must look out."

Mrs. Neligage looked at him, laughing, with half closed eyes.

"I should think that after the marriage she would do well to remember her place," was her reply. "I shall have saved her from the Count by that time, too; and that will give her a lesson."

But Providence spared Mrs. Neligage the task of taking the initiative in the matter of the Count. One day in the latter part of April, just before the annual flitting by which all truly patriotic Bostonians elude the first of May and the assessors, the widow went to call on her prospective relative. Miss Wentstile was at home in the drawing-room with Alice and the Count. Tea had been brought in, and Alice was pouring it.

"I knew I should be just in time for tea," Mrs. Neligage declared affably; "and your tea is always so delicious, Miss Wentstile."

"How do you do, Louisa," was Miss Wentstile's greeting. "I wish you'd let me know when you are at home. I wouldn't have called yesterday if I'd supposed you didn't know enough to stay in to be congratulated."

"I had to go out," Mrs. Neligage responded. "I was sorry not to see you."

"There was a horrid dog in the hall that barked at me," Miss Wentstile continued. "You ought not to let your visitors be annoyed so."

"It isn't my dog," the widow replied with unusual conciliation in her manner. "It belongs to those Stearnses who have the apartment opposite."

"I can't bear other people's dogs," Miss Wentstile declared with superb frankness. "Fido was the only dog I ever loved."

"Where is Fido?" asked the widow. "I haven't heard his voice yet."

Miss Wentstile drew herself up stiffly.

"I have met with a misfortune. I had to send dear Fido away. He would bark at the Count."

Whatever the intentions of Mrs. Neligage to conciliate, Providence had not made her capable of resisting a temptation like this.

"How interesting the instinct of animals is," she observed with an air of the most perfect ingenuousness. "They seem to know doubtful characters by intuition."

"Doubtful characters?" echoed Miss Wentstile sharply. "Didn't Fido always bark at you, Louisa?"

"Yes," returned the caller as innocently as ever. "That is an illustration of what I was saying."

"Oh, Madame Neleegaze ees so continuously to be *drôle*!" commented the Count, with a display of his excellent teeth. "So she have to marry, ees eet not?"

"Do you mean those two sentences to go together, Count?" Alice asked, with a twinkle of fun.

He stood apparently trying to recall what he had said, in order to get the full meaning of the question, when the servant announced Mrs. Croydon, who came forward with a clashing of bead fringes and a rustling of stiff silk. She was ornamented, hung, spangled, covered, cased in jet until she might not inappropriately have been set bodily into a relief map to represent Whitby. She advanced halfway across the space to where Miss Wentstile sat near the hearth, and then stopped with a dramatic air. She fixed her eyes on the Count, who, with his feet well apart, stood near Miss Wentstile, stirring his tea, and diffusing abroad a patronizing manner of ownership.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Wentstile," Mrs. Croydon said in a voice a little higher than common, "I will come to see you again when you haven't an assassin in your house."

There was an instant of utter silence. The remark was one well calculated to produce a sensation, and had Mrs. Croydon been an actress she might at that instant have congratulated herself that she held her audience spellbound. It was but for a flash, however, that Miss Wentstile was paralyzed.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the spinster, recovering the use of her tongue.

"I mean," retorted Mrs. Croydon, extending her bugle-dripping arm theatrically, and pointing to the Count, "that man there."

"Me!" cried the Count.

"The Count?" cried Miss Wentstile an octave higher.

"Ah!" murmured Mrs. Neligage very softly, settling herself more comfortably in her chair.

"He tried to murder my husband," went on Mrs. Croydon, every moment with more of the air of a stage-struck amateur. "He challenged him!"

"Your husband?" the Count returned. "Eet ees to me thees teeme first know what you have one husband, madame."

"I thought your husband was dead, Mrs. Croydon," Miss Wentstile observed, in a voice which was like the opening of an outside door with the mercury below zero.

Mrs. Croydon was visibly confused. Her full cheeks reddened; even the tip of her nose showed signs of a tendency to blush. Her trimmings rattled and scratched on the silk of her gown.

"I should have said Mr. Barnstable," she corrected. "He was my husband once when I lived in Chicago."

The Count, perfectly self-possessed, smiled and stirred his tea.

"Ees eet dat de amiable Mrs. Croydon she do have a deeferent husband leek a sailor mans een all de harbors?" he asked with much deference.

Mrs. Neligage laughed softly, leaning back as if at a comedy. Alice looked a little frightened. Miss Wentstile became each moment more stern.

"Mr. Barnstable and I are to be remarried immediately," Mrs. Croydon observed with dignity. "It was for protecting me from the abuse of an anonymous novel that he offended you. You would have killed him for defending me."

The Count waved his teaspoon airily.

"He have eensult me," he remarked, as if disposing of the whole subject. "Then he was one great cowherd. He have epilogued me most abject."

Mrs. Neligage elevated her eyebrows, and turned her glance to Mrs. Croydon, who stood, a much overdressed goddess of discord, still in the middle of the floor.

"That is nonsense, Mrs. Croydon," she observed honeyedly. "Mr. Barnstable behaved with plenty of pluck. The apology was Jack's doing, and wasn't at all to your—your *fiancé's* discredit."

Miss Wentstile turned with sudden severity to Mrs. Neligage.

"Louisa," she demanded, "do you know anything about this affair?"

"Of course," was the easy answer. "Everybody in Boston knew it but you."

The Count put his teacup on the mantelpiece. He had lost the jauntiness of his air, but he was still dignified.

"Eet was one *affaire d'honneur*," he said.

"But why was I not told of this?" Miss Wentstile asked sharply.

"You?" Mrs. Croydon retorted with excitement. "Everybody supposed—"

Mrs. Neligage rose quickly.

"Really," she said, interrupting the speaker, "I must have another cup of tea."

The interruption stopped Mrs. Croydon's remark, and Miss Wentstile did not press for its conclusion.

"Count," the spinster asked, turning to that gentleman, who towered above her tall and lowering, "have you ever fought a duel?"

The Count shrugged his shoulders.

"All Shimbowski ees *hommes d'honneur*."

She made him a frigid bow.

"I have the honor to bid you good day," she said, with a manner so perfect that the absurdity of the situation vanished.

The Count drew himself up proudly. Then he in his turn bowed profoundly.

"You do eet too much to me honor," he said, with a dignity which was worthy of his family. "Ladies, *votre serviteur*."

He made his exit in a manner to be admired. Mrs. Croydon feigned to shrink aside as he passed her, but Mrs. Neligage looked at her with so open a laugh at this performance that confusion overcame the dame of bugles, and she moved forward disconcerted. She had not yet gained a seat, when Miss Wentstile faced her with all her most unrestrained fashion.

"I shouldn't think, Mrs. Croydon, that you, with the stain of a divorce court on you, were in position to throw stones at Count Shimbowski. He has done nothing but follow the customs to which he's been brought up."

"Perhaps that's true of Mrs. Croydon too," murmured Mrs. Neligage to Alice.

"If you wanted to tell me," Miss Wentstile went on, "why didn't you tell me when he was not here? No wonder foreigners think we are barbarians when a nobleman is insulted like that."

"I didn't mean to tell you," Mrs. Croydon stammered humbly. "It just came out."

"Why didn't you mean to tell me?" demanded Miss Wentstile, whose anger had evidently deprived her for the time being of all coolness.

"Why, I thought you were engaged to him!" blurted out Mrs. Croydon, fairly crimson from brow to chin.

"Engaged!" echoed Miss Wentstile, half breathless with indignation.

Mrs. Neligage came to the rescue, cool and collected, entirely mistress of herself and of the situation.

"Really, Mrs. Croydon," she suggested, smiling, "don't you think that is bringing Western brusqueness home to us in rather a startling way? We don't speak of engagements until they are announced, you know."

"But Miss Wentstile told me the other day that she might announce one soon," persisted Mrs. Croydon, into whose flushed face had come a look of baffled obstinacy.

Mrs. Neligage threw up her hands in a graceful little gesture. She played private theatricals infinitely better than Mrs. Croydon. There was in their art all the difference between the work of the most clumsy amateur and a polished professional.

"There is nothing to do but to tell it," she said, as if appealing to Miss Wentstile and Alice. "The engagement was that of Miss Endicott and my son. Miss Wentstile never for a moment thought of marrying the Count. She knew from me that he gambled and was a famous duelist."

Alice put out her hand suddenly, and caught that of the widow.

"Oh, Mrs. Neligage!" she cried.

The widow patted the girl's fingers. The face of Miss Wentstile was a study for a novelist who identifies art with psychology.

"Of course I ought not to have told, Alice," Mrs. Neligage went on; "but I'm sure Mrs. Croydon is to be trusted. It isn't fair to your aunt that this nonsensical notion should be abroad that she

meant to marry the Count."

Mrs. Croydon was evidently too bewildered to understand what had taken place. She awkwardly congratulated Alice, apologized to Miss Wentstile for having made a scene, and somehow got herself out of the way.

"What an absolutely incredible woman! With the talent both she and Mr. Barnstable show for kicking up rows in society," observed Mrs. Neligage, as soon as the caller had departed, "I should think they would prevent any city from being dull. I trust they will pass the time till their next divorce somewhere else than here."

XXVIII

THE UNCLOUDING OF LOVE

Miss Wentstile sat grimly silent until they heard the outer door downstairs close behind the departing guest. Then she straightened herself up.

"I thank you, Louisa," she said gravely; "you meant well, but how dared you?"

"Oh, I had to dare," returned Mrs. Neligage lightly. "I'm coming into the family, you know, and must help keep up its credit."

"Humph!" was the not entirely complimentary rejoinder. "If you cared for the credit of the family why didn't you tell me about the Count sooner? Is he really a fast man?"

"He's been one of the best known sports in Europe, my dear Miss Wentstile."

"Why didn't you tell me then?"

"Why should I? I wasn't engaged to Harry then, and if the Count wanted to reform and settle down, you wouldn't have had me thwart so virtuous an inclination, would you?"

"I thought you wanted him to marry Alice!"

"I only wanted Alice out of the way of Jack," the widow confessed candidly.

"Why?" Miss Wentstile asked.

The spinster was fond of frankness, and appreciated it when it came in her way.

"Because I hated to have Jack poor, and I knew that if Alice married him you'd never give them a cent to live on."

Alice, her face full of confusion and pain, moved uneasily, and put her hand on the arm of Mrs. Neligage once more, as if to stop her. The widow again patted the small hand reassuringly, but kept her eyes fixed full on those of the aunt.

"You took a different turn to-day," the spinster observed suspiciously.

"I had to save you to-day," was the ready answer; "and besides I can't do anything with Jack. He's bound to marry Alice whether you and I like it or not, and he's going to work in a bank in the most stupid manner."

To hear the careless tone in which this was said nobody could have suspected that this speech was exactly the one which could most surely move the spinster, and that the astute widow must have been fully aware of it.

"So you are sure I won't give Alice anything if she marries Jack, are you?" Miss Wentstile said. "Well, Alice, you are to marry Jack Neligage to save me from the gossips."

"It seems to me," Alice said, blushing very much, "that if I can't have any voice in the matter, Jack might be considered."

"Oh, my dear," returned Mrs. Neligage quickly, "do you suppose that if I made an alliance for Jack, he would be so undutiful as to object?"

Alice burst into a laugh, but Miss Wentstile, upon whom, in her ignorance of the engagement between Jack and May, the point was lost, let it pass unheeded.

"Well," she said, "I think I'll surprise you for once, Louisa. If Jack will stick faithfully to his place in the bank for a year, I'll give him and Alice the *dot* I promised the Count."

Mrs. Neligage got away from Miss Wentstile's as soon as possible, leaving Alice to settle things with her aunt, and taking a carriage at the next corner, drove to Jack's lodgings. She burst into his room tumultuously, fortunately finding him at home, and alone.

"Oh, Jack," she cried, "I didn't mean to, but I've engaged you again!"

He regarded her with a quizzical smile.

"Matchmaking seems to be a vice which develops with your age," he observed. "I got out of the other scrape easily enough, and I won't deny that it was rather good fun. I hope that this isn't any worse."

"But, Jack, dear, this time it's Alice!"

"Alice!" he exclaimed, jumping up quickly.

"Yes, it's Alice, and you ought to be grateful to me, for she's going to have a fortune, too."

With some incoherency, for she was less self-contained than usual, Mrs. Neligage told him what had happened.

"See what it is to have a mother devoted to your interests," she concluded. "You'd never have brought Miss Wentstile to terms. You ought to adore me for this."

"I do," he answered, laughing, but kissing her with genuine affection. "I hope you'll be as happy as Alice and I shall be."

"I only live for my child," returned she in gay mockery. "For your sake I'm going to be respectable for the rest of my life. What sacrifices we parents do make for our children!"

Late that evening Jack was taking his somewhat extended adieus of Alice.

"After all, Jack," she said, "the whole thing has come out of the novel. We'll have a gorgeously bound copy of 'Love in a Cloud' always on the table to remind us—"

"To remind us," he finished, taking the words out of her mouth with a laugh, "that our love has got out of the clouds."

The Riverside Press
PRINTED BY H. O. HOUGHTON & CO.
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.
U.S.A.

HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN & CO.
BOSTON AND NEW YORK.

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may

copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do

copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™’s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation’s EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state’s laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.