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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GUY KENMORE'S WIFE, AND THE ROSE AND THE LILY ***

CONTENTS

Guy Kenmore's Wife; or, Her Mother's Secret

- [Chapter I.](#)
- [Chapter II.](#)
- [Chapter III.](#)
- [Chapter IV.](#)
- [Chapter V.](#)
- [Chapter VI.](#)
- [Chapter VII.](#)
- [Chapter VIII.](#)
- [Chapter IX.](#)
- [Chapter X.](#)
- [Chapter XI.](#)
- [Chapter XII.](#)
- [Chapter XIII.](#)
- [Chapter XIV.](#)
- [Chapter XV.](#)
- [Chapter XVI.](#)
- [Chapter XVII.](#)
- [Chapter XVIII.](#)
- [Chapter XIX.](#)
- [Chapter XX.](#)
- [Chapter XXI.](#)
- [Chapter XXII.](#)
- [Chapter XXIII.](#)
- [Chapter XXIV.](#)
- [Chapter XXV.](#)
- [Chapter XXVI.](#)
- [Chapter XXVII.](#)
- [Chapter XXVIII.](#)
- [Chapter XXIX.](#)
- [Chapter XXX.](#)
- [Chapter XXXI.](#)
- [Chapter XXXII.](#)
- [Chapter XXXIII.](#)
- [Chapter XXXIV.](#)
- [Chapter XXXV.](#)
- [Chapter XXXVI.](#)
- [Chapter XXXVII.](#)
- [Chapter XXXVIII.](#)
- [Chapter XXXIX.](#)
- [Chapter XL.](#)
- [Chapter XLI.](#)
- [Chapter XLII.](#)
- [Chapter XLIII.](#)

[Chapter XLIV.](#)
[Chapter XLV.](#)
[Chapter XLVI.](#)
[Chapter XLVII.](#)
[Chapter XLVIII.](#)
[Chapter XLIX.](#)
 [Chapter L.](#)
 [Chapter LI.](#)
 [Chapter LII.](#)

The Rose and the Lily; or, Love Wins Love

[Chapter I.](#)
[Chapter II.](#)
[Chapter III.](#)
[Chapter IV.](#)
[Chapter V.](#)
[Chapter VI.](#)
[Chapter VII.](#)
[Chapter VIII.](#)
[Chapter IX.](#)
[Chapter X.](#)
[Chapter XI.](#)
[Chapter XII.](#)
[Chapter XIII.](#)
[Chapter XIV.](#)
[Chapter XV.](#)
[Chapter XVI.](#)
[Chapter XVII.](#)
[Chapter XVIII.](#)
[Chapter XIX.](#)
[Chapter XX.](#)
[Chapter XXI.](#)
[Chapter XXII.](#)
[Chapter XXIII.](#)
[Chapter XXIV.](#)
[Chapter XXV.](#)
[Chapter XXVI.](#)
[Chapter XXVII.](#)
[Chapter XXVIII.](#)



GUY KENMORE'S WIFE AND THE ROSE AND THE LILY

BY MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER

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- ..177—A True Aristocrat. By Mrs. Georgie Sheldon.
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..114—Half a Truth. By a popular author.
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Guy Kenmore's Wife

OR

HER MOTHER'S SECRET

BY

MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER

AUTHOR OF

"Jaquelina," "An Old Man's Darling," "A Little Southern Beauty,"
"The Senator's Bride," etc.



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GUY KENMORE'S WIFE;

[Pg 1]

OR,

HER MOTHER'S SECRET.

By MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER.

CHAPTER I.

"The moonlight lay on the garden wall,
And bathed each path in a silver glow;
And over the towers of the grey hall
Its pearly banner was trailing low."

It was a night of nights. Moonlight—the silvery, mystical, entrancing, love-breathing, moonlight of exquisite June—fairest daughter of the year—lay over all the land. The bay—our own beautiful Chesapeake—shone gloriously in the resplendent light, and rolled its foam-capped, phosphorescent waves proudly on to the grand Atlantic.

"Ten thousand stars were in the sky,
Ten thousand in the sea.

"For every wave with dimpled crest
That leaped upon the air,
Had caught a star in its embrace,
And held it trembling there!"

A wind from the sea—cool, and salty, and delicious—came up to Bay View House, and stole in with the moonlight to the lace-draped windows of the parlor where a crumpled little figure crouched in a forlorn white heap on the wide, old-fashioned window sill, sobbing desperately through the plump little hands, in which the girlish face was hidden.

The spacious parlor with its handsome, old-fashioned furniture, and open piano, was deserted, and the weeping of the girl echoed forlornly through the room, and blended strangely with the whispers of the wind, and the sounds of the sea.

Old Faith put her grotesque, white-capped head inside the parlor door.

"Miss Irene, darling, won't you come and take your tea now?" said she, persuasively. "There's strawberry short-cake, and the reddest strawberries, and yellowest cream," added she, artfully appealing to the young lady's well-known epicurean tastes.

A sharp little voice answered back from the window seat:

"I won't take a thing, Faith; I mean to starve myself to death!"

"Oh, fie, my dearie, don't, now," cried Faith. "Come up-stairs, and let me tuck you in your little white bed, there's a love!" [Pg 2]

"I won't, so there! Go away and leave me alone, Faith," cried the girl, through her stifled, hysterical sobs.

Exit Faith.

The wind stirred the yellow curls on the drooping head, and the moonlight touched them with fingers of light, bringing out their glints of gold. The great magnolia tree outside the window shook a gust of strong, sweet perfume from the large white waxen flowers, and the scent of June roses and lilacs came up from the old-fashioned garden. But the sweetness and beauty of the night seemed lost on little Irene, for her grieved sobs only burst forth afresh when Faith had departed. The girlish bosom heaved, the tears rained through her fingers, her smothered wail disturbed the harmony of the beautiful night.

Another step came along the hall, a hand turned the door-knob and a handsome old man came into the room.

"Irene, my pet, my darling, where are you hiding? Come to papa," he called, glancing around the dimly-lighted room.

With a scream of joy the little figure sprang down from its high perch in the window, and ran precipitately into his arms.

"Oh, papa, dear papa, you are home again!" she exclaimed, laughing and crying together, and patting his grey whiskers with her loving white hands.

"Yes, but you aren't glad to see me one bit. You're crying because I've come home. Shall I go back to the city, eh?" he inquired, softly pinching her cheek, and looking at her with kind, blue eyes full of love.

Irene hid her lovely face on his broad breast and sobbed aloud.

"Why, what ails my little girl?" he exclaimed. "Who's been teasing my pet? Where are mamma and the girls?"

With a fresh rain of tears, Irene sobbed out:

"All g—gone to the b—ball, and would not let—let—me g—go, after you'd told them all I might, papa."

The old man's genial face clouded over instantly with some intangible annoyance.

"Why wouldn't they let you go?" he inquired.

"Bertha said if I went, *she* wouldn't," replied Irene, hushing her sobs, and answering in a high-pitched, indignant young voice; "she said children had no business at a ball! The idea of calling *me* a child! I was *sixteen*, yesterday! Oh, papa, have you brought me a birthday present from the city?" she inquired, eagerly, forgetting for a moment her grievance.

"Yes, dear. And so Bertha wouldn't let you go to the ball?" he said, taking a seat, and drawing her down upon his knee.

"It was mamma, too. *She* took Bertha's part, and said I shouldn't come out until the girls were married. Two Miss Brookes were quite enough in the market at one time she said. As if I wanted to marry any of their ridiculous beauxs, with their lisps, and their eye-glasses, and their black coats. I despise them!" cried Irene, indignantly.

"That's because, as Bertha said, you're nothing but a child," laughed Mr. Brooke. "When you grow older you'll quite adore these black-coated dandies, I dare say;" then he added, in a graver tone: "Did Elaine forbid your going, too?" [Pg 3]

"No, she didn't say one word for, or against it. She only pursed up her lips and looked out of the window. I never saw such a coward as Elaine," pursued the girl, angrily. "Bertha and mamma have everything their own way, and ride rough-shod over Elaine, and she daren't say her soul's her own!"

"Hush, Irene—you musn't talk so disrespectfully of your—sister," her father said, reprovingly.

"Well, but, papa, do you think it is right for Ellie to be ruled so by Bertha? She's older than Bert, you know," said the girl, laying her soft, round cheek against his, coaxingly.

A strange, sad look came into Mr. Brooke's face at her words.

"My dear, we won't discuss it," he said, uneasily. "Elaine is so gentle and quiet, she will not take her own part, perhaps. But about this ball, my pet. I'm sorry they wouldn't let you go. I brought you some pretty fal-lals to wear."

He handed her several parcels as he spoke, and turned up the lamps to a brighter blaze. Irene Brooke began unwrapping the parcels, with little feminine shrieks of delight.

"A baby-blue sash; oh, oh, you dear, old darling!" she cried, letting the rich lengths of wide, blue satin ribbon ripple splendidly over her white dress. "A fan! Ivory sticks, and blue and white feathers! Oh, thank you a hundred times, papa! And what is this tiny parcel? Oh, a bang-net! You ridiculous old papa, what do you think I want of a bang-net?" with a ripple of girlish laughter.

"The shop-woman recommended it. She said they were very fashionable," said Mr. Brooke, vaguely.

"I don't care! I'll never put *my* yellow curls under a bang-net," laughed Irene, whose tears were dried now as if they had never been. "Ellie may have it. And, oh, this little box! I had almost missed it."

She opened it with a little girlish shriek of joy and amaze.

"A gold chain and locket! Oh, papa, let me kiss you a hundred times!" she cried, running to him and half smothering him with energetic caresses.

"Your birthday present, my love. Look in the locket and see if you like the pictures," said Mr. Brooke as soon as he could get his breath.

She left off choking him a moment to obey.

"Your picture and Elaine's—the very ones I would have wished for! And how true, how perfect, how beautiful!" she cried, kissing the pictured faces. "Dear papa, how did you know that I would far rather have your picture and Ellie's than mamma's and Bert's?" she inquired, smiling fondly at him.

"I knew you liked us best because we spoil you the most," he replied.

"That is true of you, papa, but not to my elder sister," replied Irene, with a touch of seriousness softening for the moment her childish face. "Ellie is very kind to me, but she never spoils me. She reads me long lectures in private, and I believe she loves me dearly, but she never takes my part against mamma and Bert, when they scold and fret me. She only looks tearful and miserable! Oh, why should she be afraid of them?"

[Pg 4]

"Hush, Irene, I will not listen to such ridiculous fancies," said Mr. Brooke, half sternly. "You must not imbibe such foolish notions! and, remember, I forbid you, on pain of my extreme displeasure, ever to mention these idle notions to your sister."

"Indeed I never will, papa, I would not hurt Ellie's feelings for the world," the girl said, earnestly. Then she went to his side and put her arm around his neck.

"Papa," she said, looking up at him, with arch, beautiful eyes that sparkled like purple-blue pansies under their shady, golden-brown lashes, "papa, it isn't an hour yet since they went to the ball."

"Well?" he said, half-comprehendingly, smiling down into the eager, charming face, and passing his hand caressingly over the wealth of golden curls that adorned the dainty head.

"Let us go to the ball—you and I, papa?" she said, audaciously.

"What? Why, that would be rank rebellion! What would mamma and the girls say when we sneaked into the ball-room? Wouldn't they march us home and put us in irons for disobeying orders?" inquired Mr. Brooke in pretended alarm, though Irene did not lose the humorous twinkle in his eye.

"No, sir, you know they won't say a word if you take my part! You know they never do. They're afraid of my dear old papa. Oh, how amazed and how angry they would be if you and I were to walk in presently, and have a dance together! And serve them right, too, for their selfishness! Oh, papa, dearest, *do* take me! I never, never saw a ball in my life, and I had so set my heart on this one!"

The tearful eyes and coaxing lips conquered the old man's heart as they always did, against his better judgment.

"Well, well, they didn't treat you right," he said, "and you shall have your revenge on them. Go along now, and tell old Faith to put your new white frock and blue sash on you in fifteen minutes while I am getting ready."

CHAPTER II.

Every lady knows that fifteen minutes is a totally inadequate time in which to make a ball toilet. It was at least half an hour before Irene, with the assistance of the old housekeeper, had adorned herself with all the finery at her command. Then she came flying down the steps in joyous haste, and burst into the parlor with the refrain of a happy song upon her girlish lips.

Old Faith followed more leisurely with a little white nubia and shawl thrown over her arm.

"Ah! dearie me, dearie me," she sighed, as she waddled uncomfortably down the wide stairs, "the child's too pretty and too willful, and Mr. Brooke spoils her too much! Harm will come of it, I fear me. Poor Miss Ellie, poor Irene!"

She laid the wrappings of her young mistress across the hat-rack in the hall ready for her, and

[Pg 5]

went back to her own domain and her own duties. Meanwhile Irene had danced blithely into the parlor.

"Papa," she said, to the dark, masculine figure that stood at the window with its back to her, "I'm ready now. Don't I look nice?"

The figure turned around from its contemplation of the moonlighted bay, and looked at her. It was not Mr. Brooke at all. It was a younger, handsomer man, whose brown eyes danced with irresistible mirth at her pardonable vanity.

"Nice enough to eat," he answered coolly, and Irene gave a little, startled shriek.

"Oh, dear, it isn't papa at all. Are you a bear, sir, that you talk of eating me?" she inquired, demurely.

The stranger came forward into the light, and stood before her.

"Do I look like one?" he inquired, with a smile that lit up his face indescribably.

Then, for a moment, they stared straight at each other, taking a mental inventory of each other's appearance.

Ladies first—so we will try to give you some faint idea of how Irene Brooke appeared in Guy Kenmore's eyes, though it is no easy task, for beauty like hers, varying from light to shadow with

"Sudden glances, sweet and strange,
Delicious spites and darling angers,
And airy forms of flitting change,"

defies all formal attempts at description.

She was a sixteen-year-old girl, with the graceful slenderness of that exquisite age, and the warm, blonde beauty of the south. Her eyes were deeply, darkly, beautifully blue, and appeared almost black beneath the long, thick fringes of the beautiful, golden-brown lashes, and the slender, arched brows of a darker hue. These arched brows, and the faint, very faint, *retroussé* inclination of the pretty little nose, gave an air of piquancy and spirit to the young face that was heightened by the proud curve of the short upper lip. The round, dimpled chin, and soft cheeks were tinted with the soft pink of the sea shell. The waving, rippling mass of glorious curls was of that warm, rich, golden hue the old masters loved to paint. Put on such a fair young girl a dress of soft white muslin and lace—just short enough to show the tiny, high-arched feet in white kid slippers—girdle the slim waist with a broad, blue ribbon, and fancy to yourself, reader mine, how sweet a vision she appeared in the eyes of the stranger.

For him, he was tall, large, and graceful, with a certain air of indolence and gracious ease, not to say laziness. He was decidedly handsome, with a well-shaped head of closely-clipped brown hair, good features, laughing brown eyes, and a drooping brown mustache. His summer suit of soft, light-gray cloth was infinitely becoming.

But in much less time than it took for these cursory descriptions, Irene has spoken:

"No, you do not look like a bear," she says, with charming frankness. "You look like—see how good I am at guessing—like Bertha's city beau! You are—*aren't* you?"

Something in this childish frankness touches him with faint annoyance. He chews the end of his long mustache after an old habit, and answers, rather stiffly: [Pg 6]

"My name is—"

"Norval, from the Grampian hills," she quotes, with audacious laughter.

"No,—it is plain Guy Kenmore," he answers, stifling his rising vexation, and laughing with her.

"There, didn't I say so? Pray sit down, Mr. Kenmore," sweeping him a mocking, ridiculous little courtesy. "I hope you will make yourself quite at home at Bay View. I have a great liking for you, Mr. Kenmore."

He takes a chair with readiness, while she paces, a little restlessly, up and down the floor.

"Thank you," he says, languidly. "May I inquire to what circumstances I owe the honor of your regard?"

"You may," shooting him a swift, arch glance. "You're going to take Bert off our hands, and I consider you in the light of my greatest benefactor."

He laughs and colors at the cool speech of this strange girl.

"Indeed?" he says, with a peculiar accent on the word. "Why?"

"Oh, because," she pauses in her restless walk, and looks gravely at him a moment with those dark blue eyes, "because Bert is so wretchedly selfish she won't let me go anywhere until *she* is married off. Now to-night there was a ball. Papa had said I might go, but when he was called unexpectedly away to the city what did Bert and mamma do but forbid my going! After my dress and gloves and slippers were all bought, too. Wasn't that too bad? And if you were me shouldn't you just love the man that would take Bertha away?"

"A spoiled child, who hasn't the least business out of the school-room yet," mentally decides the visitor. Aloud he says, curiously:

"Do you know you have the advantage of me? I haven't the least idea who you are."

The blue eyes grow very large and round indeed. "Haven't you, really? Did Bertha never tell you about me—her little sister, Irene?"

"Never. She must have forgotten your existence," he answered, with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"It is like her selfishness!" flashed Irene. "Never mind, I'll pay her out for her crossness this evening. Only think, Mr. Kenmore, papa came home just after they had gone, and said *he* would take me to the ball. I wonder if he is ready yet. It's quite time we were starting," she adds, looking anxiously at the door.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Brooke. Your dazzling *entree* put everything out of my mind for a moment. Your father was in here about fifteen minutes ago. He left a message for you."

"Why didn't you tell me, ah, why didn't you?" she demands, stamping her little foot in impatient wrath.

"You talked so fast I quite forgot," he answers coolly.

"Well, are you going to tell me now?" she inquires, flashing her large eyes at him superbly.

[Pg 7]

"Yes, if you will keep still long enough," he answers, provokingly, and openly amused at the impatient anger, so like that of a sadly spoiled child.

Irene folds her bare white arms over her heaving breast, and shuts her red lips tightly over her busy little tongue; but her eyes look through him with a glance that says plainer than words:

"Go on, now, I'm waiting."

With a stifled laugh, he obeys:

"Mr. Brooke said that he had been most unexpectedly called away on a little matter of business, but that he would certainly return inside an hour and take you to the ball."

He expected some expression of disappointment, but he was scarcely prepared for the dire effect of his communication.

Irene ran precipitately to the darkest corner of the room, flung herself down on a sofa, and dissolved into tears.

Feminine tears are an abomination to most men. Our hero is no exception to the rule. He fidgets uneasily in his chair a moment, then rises and goes over to the window, and listening to the low, sad murmur of the sea tries to lose the sound of that disconsolate sobbing over there in the dark corner.

"I never saw such a great, spoiled baby in my life," he says, vexedly, to himself. "How childish, how silly! She's as pretty as a doll, and that's all there is to her!"

But he cannot shut out easily the sound of her childish weeping. It haunts and vexes him.

"Oh, I say, Miss Brooke," he says, going over to her at last, "I wouldn't cry if I were in your place. Your father will be back directly."

Irene, lifting her head, looks at him with tearful blue eyes shining under the tangle of golden love-locks that half obscures her round, white forehead.

"No, he will not," she answers, stifling her sobs. "When men go out on business they never come back for hours and hours—and hours!" dolefully. "It was too bad of papa to treat me so!"

"But he was *called* away—don't you understand that? He wouldn't have gone of himself," says Mr. Kenmore, doing valiant battle for his fellow-man.

"I don't care. He shouldn't have gone after he'd promised me, and I was all ready," Irene answers, obstinately and with a fresh sob.

"Little goosie!" the young man mutters between his teeth, and feeling a strong desire to shake the unreasonable child.

But suddenly she springs up, dashing the tears from her eyes.

"I won't *wait* for papa, so there!" she flashes out, determinedly. "All the best dances will be over if we go so late. *You* shall take me."

"*I'm* not invited, you know," he says, blankly.

"No matter. They'll make you welcome, for Bert's sake. Any friend of Miss Bertha's, you know, etc.," she says, with a little, malicious laugh. "Yes, you shall go with me. It is a splendid idea. I wonder you didn't suggest it yourself."

He smiles grimly.

[Pg 8]

"Indeed, Miss Brooke, I'm not at all in ball costume," he objects, glancing down at his neat, light suit.

"All the better. I despise their ugly black coats," she replies, warmly. "Do you know," with startling candor, "you are handsomer and nicer-looking than any of the black-coated dandies that dawdle around Ellie and Bert? Come, you *will* go, just to please me, won't you?" she implores, pathetically.

"No gentleman ever refuses a lady's request," he replies, with rather a sulky air.

Irene scarcely notices his sulky tone. Her heart is set on this daring escapade. Smarting under

the sense of the injuries sustained at Bertha's hands, she longs to avenge herself, and show her selfish sister that she will go her way despite her objections. It is a child's spite, a child's willfulness, and all the more obstinate for that reason.

"Oh, thank you," she says, brightly. "We shall have a charming time, sha'n't we?"

"You may. I am not rapturous over the prospect," he replies, laconically.

The willful girl regards him with sincere amazement. "Why, you must be very stupid indeed, not to care for a ball," she observes, with all the candor and freshness of an *enfant terrible*.

"You are very candid," he replies, feeling a strong desire to seize his hat and leave the house.

"Now you are vexed with me. What have I done?" she inquires, fixing on him the innocent gaze of her large, soft eyes. "I hope you haven't a bad temper," she goes on, earnestly, almost confidently, "for Bert isn't an angel, I can assure you; and if you're both cross, won't you have a lovely time when you marry."

Vexation at this aggravating little beauty almost gets the better of the young man's politeness.

"Miss Brooke, if you weren't such a pretty child, I should like to shake you soundly, and send you off to your little bed!" he exclaims.

She flushes crimson, flashes him an angry glance from her lovely eyes, and curls her red lips into a decided and deliberate *moue* at him. Then, holding her pretty head high, she walks from the room.

"Has she taken me at my word?" he asks himself, rather blankly.

But no; Irene has only gone to the housekeeper's room, to leave a message for her father that she has gone to the ball with Mr. Kenmore. It does not enter her girlish mind that she is doing an improper thing, or that her father would object to it.

Old Faith, wiser in this world's lore than her willful little mistress, raises vehement objections.

"You mustn't do no such thing, Miss Irene, darling," she says. "Miss Bertha will be downright outrageous about you coming there along of her beau."

The pansy-blue eyes flash, the red lips pout mutinously.

"All the better," she answers, wickedly. "I want to make her mad! That's why I'm going! I'm going to the ball with her beau; and I mean to keep him all to myself, and to flirt with him outrageously, just to see how Bert's black eyes will snap!"

[Pg 9]

CHAPTER III.

"Oh, Irene, my darling, why have you done this mad, disobedient thing? Mamma and Bertha are terribly angry! When Bertha first saw you, dancing with her lover, too, I thought she would have fainted. Her eyes flashed lightning. I believe she could have killed you! Child, child, you will break my heart by your willfulness! Oh, you cannot dream what this may bring upon you!"

The sweet voice broke in almost a wail of pain, and beautiful Elaine Brooke drew her sister further into the shaded alcove of the bay-window as she waited anxiously to hear her reply.

Pretty little Irene shrugged her dimpled white shoulders, and pouted her rosy lips.

"Now, Ellie, you needn't begin to scold," she said. "You know you all treated me unfairly, and so papa said when he came home!"

"Papa *has* come, then?" asked Miss Brooke, in a tone of relief.

"Yes, and he gave me leave to come, so you needn't lecture any more, Ellie," said the girl, with an arch, pleading glance.

But a long and bitter sigh drifted over the grave, sweet lips of Elaine Brooke.

"Then why, ah, why *didn't* papa bring you himself?" she said, wringing her slender white hands together. "He should have known that Bertha would be enraged at your coming with Mr. Kenmore."

"Don't scold any more, Ellie, *please* don't," said her little sister, impatiently; "papa *was* coming, but, while I was up-stairs dressing, he was called away for an hour. So when I came down to the parlor there was Mr. Kenmore, and I made him go with me. Please let me go now. I want to dance some more."

"Oh, Irene, indeed you must not dance again to-night! Promise me you will not!" exclaimed her sister, anxiously.

Irene shook the white hand off her shoulder, dismayed and rebellious.

"I'm engaged to Mr. Kenmore for ever so many dances," she exclaimed, "and I don't want to break my word! You're selfish, Ellie, and want to have all the pleasure to yourself!"

"Selfish," Elaine echoed, with almost a moan. "Oh, child, you don't understand!" then she added, almost piteously: "Irene, in the large parlor next to the dancing-room there are some young people like yourself who are not dancing at all, but playing games and having charades and

tableaux. Darling, won't you join them, and keep out of Bert's and mamma's sight? Perhaps they won't be so angry, then."

"I'm not afraid of them—" Irene began, rebelliously, but stopped short as she saw a glittering tear splash down on her sister's cheek. "Oh, Ellie, you great baby," she said, "must I give up all my pleasure just to please you?"

[Pg 10]

"Yes, for this once, love," answered Elaine, tremblingly. "I'll try to make it up to you, indeed I will, some other time, dear," and drawing Irene further into the shadow of the lace curtain, she bent down and kissed the fresh young lips.

"But here comes Mr. Kenmore, now. What shall I say to him about our dances?" asked the girl, with a sigh of disappointment.

"Oh, I'll make your excuses," Elaine answered, readily, as Mr. Kenmore came toward them, not looking very eager, certainly, over the dances he was fated to lose.

His handsome brown eyes lighted with admiration as they fell upon Elaine Brooke, and she was well worthy of it, for in her maturer style she was as lovely as the girlish Irene.

The family Bible registered the eldest Miss Brooke as thirty-two years old, and she had all the repose and dignity of the age, with all the charms of ripe loveliness. Men called her a "magnificent woman," envious girls sneeringly dubbed her an old maid. This latter was her own fault, certainly, for she had admirers by the score who went wild over her rare blonde beauty. But Miss Brooke, unknown to all, treasured a broken dream in her heart like her hapless namesake:

"Elaine the fair, Elaine the lovable;
Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat."

So the years went and came, and Elaine answered no to all her suitors, though her mother frowned and her father sighed, while deep down in her heart she echoed the "Lily Maid's" song:

"Sweet is true love, though given in vain, in vain,
And sweet is death who puts an end to pain."

But none of this pain was visible on Elaine's face as she looked up at Guy Kenmore with that calm, sweet smile, softly bright, like the moonlight that shone on the outer world.

"Mr. Kenmore, I know you will excuse Irene from her dances," she said sweetly. "She wants to go and play games with the other children in the parlor."

"*The other children,*" Irene muttered ominously, and before Mr. Kenmore could murmur his ready assent, she exclaimed, in a tone of witching *diablerie*:

"Yes, but I'm not going to desert my partner! Come along, Mr. Kenmore, and you shall be my play-fellow with the children."

With a gay little laugh and a triumphant glance at her sister, Irene slipped her hand in his arm, and led her captive away, leaving Elaine gazing after them in silent dismay and despair. Irene had outwitted her after all, and her artful scheme for keeping her apart from Bertha's lover was an ignominious failure.

With a sinking heart and a face as pale as death, she turned away to convey the tidings of her failure to her mother.

Mrs. Brooke, a still handsome woman of the brunette type, received the news with an ominous flash of her large black eyes.

"Little minx! she shall pay for it, dearly," she muttered, between her teeth. [Pg 11]

"Oh, mamma, it is only thoughtlessness I think. She doesn't really mean to be disobedient," faltered Elaine, tremulously.

Her mother gave her a swift, displeased glance that silenced the excusing words on her lips.

Bertha came up, flushed from the dance, a dark, haughty beauty, three years younger than Elaine, but never owning to more than twenty years.

"Where is Mr. Kenmore? I left him with you, mamma," she said.

"He left me to seek his partner for the next dance," Mrs. Brooke answered, in a tone of repressed fury.

Bertha turned her large, flashing dark eyes on her elder sister.

"I thought mamma sent you to get Irene out of the way," she said, imperiously.

"I did my best, Bertha," Elaine answered, gently. "I persuaded her to go and play games in the parlor. Unfortunately Mr. Kenmore came up as she was going, and she playfully carried him off with her. I am sure he will return to us directly. He regards Irene as the merest child."

"She is as old as you were when she was—" Bertha sneered in her sister's ear, making the last word so low it was inaudible.

Beautiful Elaine's cool, white cheeks crimsoned, then grew paler than before. She answered not a word.

"Hush, Bertha. Are you crazy, making such remarks in this crowded room?" whispered her mother, in angry haste.

"I shall not be answerable for what I say or do unless you get my lover away from that wretched girl," the dark-eyed beauty retorted furiously in her ear.

"Come, then, let us go and see their games," Mrs. Brooke answered, soothingly, to allay the young lady's violent rage. "He will leave Irene and come to you as soon as he sees you."

The three moved away to the crowded parlor where the girls from twelve to sixteen, and the lads from sixteen to twenty, were enjoying themselves, to the top of their bent. Having exhausted everything else, they had determined on having a wedding. Mr. Kenmore being the most grown-up of the gentlemen, was selected for the groom, and Irene Brooke for the bride.

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. Kenmore, having vainly protested at first against making a show of himself, has now resigned himself to his fate, and stands awaiting his martyrdom with a rather bored look on his handsome face. Irene, on the point of a vehement refusal to enact the bride's part, suddenly catches a glimpse of Bertha's face glowering on her from the door, and on the instant her mood changes.

Never so willing a bride as she.

After that one glance she does not seem to see Bertha. She stands with lowered eyelids waiting while the gay young girls fasten a square of tulle on her hair with a spray of real orange blossoms from the pet orange tree that is the pride of the hostess. No one sees the mischief dancing under the demurely drooping lashes.

[Pg 12]

"Poor old Bert—how mad she is," the girl is saying to herself. "I think I've almost paid her out now for her meanness. As soon as the wedding is over she shall have her fine beau back. I believe I have almost teased her enough."

"Who will be the preacher?" she inquires, glancing around at the lads.

"Mr. Clavering, Mr. Clavering!" cried half a dozen voices. "He looks the parson to the life, with his black coat and little white tie. There he is on the balcony. Go and ask him, Mr. Kenmore."

Guy Kenmore steps lazily through the low window and addresses the little, clerical-looking figure standing meditatively in the moonlight.

"Excuse me," he says, in his bored tone. "We are going to have a marriage, by way of a diversion for the young people. Will you come in and perform the ceremony for us?"

Mr. Clavering turns a pale, dreamy, rather delicate face, toward the speaker.

"Isn't it rather sudden?" he inquires.

"Rather," Mr. Kenmore asserts, with a careless laugh, and without more words they step through the window into the parlor, where the babel of shrill young voices goes on without cessation.

The bride, and a giggling string of attendants, are already on the floor awaiting them. Guy Kenmore laughingly steps to his place. Somebody puts a prayer-book into Mr. Clavering's hand and merrily introduces him to the bride and groom. He bows, and, with quite an assumption of gravity, opens the book and begins to read the beautiful marriage service.

To Bertha Brooke, glaring with scarce repressed rage at the mock marriage, it all seems horribly real. Irene has put on a shy, frightened look, supposed to be natural to brides, and no one takes note of the suppressed merriment dancing in her blue eyes, as she pictures to herself Bertha's silent rage. Mr. Kenmore, impressed beyond his will by the solemn marriage words, looks a little graver than his wont. The babel of voices is momentarily still, while bright eyes gaze entranced on the beautiful scene. It seems to Bertha as if she can no longer bear it; as if she must scream out aloud as she hears Guy Kenmore's deep, full voice repeating after Mr. Clavering:

"I, Guy, take thee, Irene, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

"Mamma, for God's sake, stop it," Bertha utters, in a fierce whisper, clutching her mother's arm.

"Don't be a fool, Bertha! It is nothing but child's play," Mrs. Brooke replies, impatiently, and, in a minute more the ring is slipped over Irene's finger, and the minister utters, in tones that sound too solemn for this pretty mockery:

[Pg 13]

"Whom God had joined together, let no man put asunder."

Gay congratulations followed, and Irene, a little paler than her wont, slipped over to Elaine, who was white as death, with the dew of unshed tears glittering on her long, thick lashes.

"You dear old owl, how solemn you look," she said. "But I didn't like it myself. It sounded too horribly real. Once I had half a mind to break loose, and run away!"

Mrs. Brooke glared at her youngest pride in silent rage. The vials of her wrath were reserved till to-morrow.

Irene darted to Mr. Kenmore's side and looked at him with laughing eyes:

"You may go and stay with Bert now," she said, carelessly, "I believe I have teased her quite

enough, and I mean to be good the remainder of the night."

He looked at the bright, arch face curiously a minute, then moved away to join Bertha.

She received him with a curling lip, and an irrepressible flash of her proud, dark eyes.

"I did not know you were so fond of juvenile society, Mr. Kenmore," she said, in a tone of pique.

"I am not; I was rather forced into this affair, Miss Bertha," he replied, languidly, and with a rather bored expression. "But come, let us promenade the balcony in the moonlight. Or would you prefer to dance?"

"The balcony by all means," answered Bertha, remembering what an opportunity it would afford for a sentimental *tete-a-tete*, and also that a pretty woman never looks more lovely than by moonlight.

"When did you leave Baltimore?" she inquired, as they stepped through the low French window, and walked arm-in-arm along the moonlighted balcony.

"Only to-day," he answered. "I remembered my promise to visit you at Bay View, and thought it a good time to keep my word, not dreaming that you would be absent. I half-feared you would have forgotten me, it has been so long since your visit to the city," he added, half-quizzically, for Irene's innocent prattle that evening had let in some light upon his mind. He understood that Bertha claimed him openly as her lover, and fully calculated on marrying him, while the truth was that though he had a lazy admiration for the beautiful brunette, he had never dreamed of aspiring for her hand. His intimate friends did not consider him "a marrying man."

"As if I could ever forget my visit to Baltimore," said Bertha, sentimentally, with an effective upward glance into his face from her dark, long-lashed eyes.

Mr. Kenmore returned the coquettish glance with interest. He was an adept at flirting himself when he could conquer his natural indolence enough to exercise the art.

"I hope it will not be long before you visit the city again," he said. "Your friend, Miss Leigh, sent you as much love as I could conveniently transport, and an urgent message to come again."

[Pg 14]

"I shall be delighted," exclaimed Bertha, who was fast forgetting Irene's naughtiness, and recovering her spirits in the charm of her admirer's presence. Now that she had him all to herself, her horrible fears of her younger sister's rivalry grew less, and she resolved to make the very most of this glorious *tete-a-tete* under the beautiful moonlight with the soft notes of the entrancing dance-music blending with the murmuring of the melancholy sea.

She was succeeding almost beyond her expectations. Mr. Kenmore was lending himself to her efforts to charm with unqualified approval.

He had dropped his indolent air of being bored by everything, and his dark eyes sparkled with interest, when suddenly the scene was changed, and Bertha's sentimentalisms interrupted by a little flying white figure that came through the window with a rush, and clutched Mr. Kenmore's arm frantically, with two desperate young hands, and looked up at him with eyes that were wide and dark with horror.

"Mr. Kenmore, oh, Mr. Kenmore," panted the sharp, shrill, frightened young voice, "do you know what they are saying in yonder?—what Mr. Clavering is saying? That—that—he is a *real minister*, and that it was a *real marriage*! It isn't true! Oh, my God, it can't be! Go, and make them say it is all a wretched joke to frighten me!"

There was a moment's stunned silence broken only by a scream of dismay from Bertha. Irene was gazing with a blanched face, and wild, beseeching eyes, up into the handsome, startled face of the man. Suddenly he pushed the white hands from his arm, broke loose from Bertha's clasp, and strode hastily through the window.

Irene fell upon the floor, all her childishness stricken from her by this terrible blow, and grovelled in abject terror.

Haughty Bertha spurned the little white figure with her dainty slippers foot.

"Get up," she said, harshly. "Get up, Irene, and tell me the truth! Is it true what you were saying, or only one of your miserable jokes?"

Irene dragged herself up miserably from the floor, and clung to the balcony rail around which clambered a white rose vine. The snowy, scented roses were not whiter than her haggard young face.

"Oh, Bertha—Bertha, it is true," she said, despairingly. "That stupid Clavering didn't know we were joking. He is a minister—really a minister—but no one in the room knew it, because he is a stranger about here, you know, and staying at the hotel for his health. Oh, Bertha—Bertha, what shall I do? I don't like Mr. Kenmore! I don't want to be his wife!"

Bertha shook from head to foot with jealous rage.

"Listen to me, Irene Brooke," she said, in a hoarse, low voice of concentrated fury. "If this is true, if you really are Guy Kenmore's wife, I am your bitterest foe as long as you live! I'll make you repent this night's work in dust and ashes to your dying day!"

[Pg 15]

As the cruel words left her writhing lips, Mr. Kenmore came out, followed by Mrs. Brooke and her eldest daughter.

Irene's wild eyes searched the man's face imploringly,

"Yes, it is true," he said to her abruptly, almost harshly. "The man is an ordained minister, licensed to marry. You are really my wife!"

A piercing shriek, full of the sharpest anguish, followed on the last cold word. Irene threw up her white arms wildly in the air and fell like one dead at the bridegroom's feet.

CHAPTER V.

When Irene Brooke recovered her senses she was lying on a sofa in the old familiar home-parlor which she had quitted such a little while ago a careless, happy, willful child. The soft locks that hung about her forehead were all wet and dabbled with *eau de cologne*, and Elaine bent over her with the face of a pitying angel, bathing her cheeks and temples with the refreshing perfume. The clock in the hall chimed the midnight hour, and lifting her head, that felt strangely dull and heavy, she gazed wonderingly around her.

In the subdued light that flooded the spacious parlor, Mr. Kenmore was walking slowly up and down with his hands behind his back. He came and knelt down by her side.

"You are better," he said, gently.

All her troubles rushed overwhelmingly over Irene, and she turned from him with a shudder.

"Ellie, where is papa? I want papa," she said, longing to lean in her trouble on the grand strength of the father who was dearer to her than all the world.

"He has never come home yet," Elaine answered in a troubled tone.

"Not yet, and he promised to return within the hour!" Irene exclaimed in vague alarm.

"He has been detained, doubtless," Mr. Kenmore said, soothingly. "You know you said to-night, Irene, that when men went out on business they never came back for hours and hours."

Irene looked at him in wonder, his tone was so kind and gentle. A great, deep pity shone in his speaking eyes. He laid his strong white hand lightly on hers. She could not understand why his touch thrilled her through and through, and pulled her hand quickly away.

"Irene, do not turn from me so coldly," he said, in the same gentle tone at which she had wondered so much, "I have something to say to you. Will you listen to me?"

She lifted her dark blue eyes to his face, inquiringly.

"Since we brought you home, and while you lay unconscious, my child, I have been talking to your sister," he said. "I think—we both think—that you and I will have to accept the situation."

Elaine rose delicately and went to the window. Irene answered not a word. He went on, holding her gaze within his steady, grave, brown eyes:

[Pg 16]

"Through our carelessness and love of fun, we have fettered ourselves so effectually that we cannot break our bonds without exposing ourselves to a notoriety that would be galling alike to the pride of the Brookes and the Kenmores. Do you understand me, my child?" he inquired, pausing, and waiting for her reply.

"I understand—you mean—," she said, then paused, sensitively, while her cheeks grew very white, and her dry lips refused to go on.

"That it is doubtful if the law will free us from the marriage vows we so unthinkingly uttered," he said. "If it did, it would only be at the expense of a newspaper notoriety that would be galling to our pride and a death-blow to sensitiveness. I own that I am proud," a deep flush coloring his face for a moment. "I cannot bear the thought of making the subject of numberless inane witticisms and newspaper paragraphs. I had rather accept the consequences of my folly."

"You are taking all the blame upon yourself," she said, in a low, strange voice that sounded very womanly for Irene, "when you know that it was all my fault."

"Do you think so? No, I was too careless, I should not have been led into their child's play," he said. "Well, no matter, let us make the best of it. I will be your faithful husband if you will be my true little wife, Irene."

The tone was very kind, but it was not that of a lover. Irene, though she had never been wooed, instinctively felt the subtle difference.

"You do not care for me—that way," she said, "and I—do not like you!"

"I have heard it said that it is best to begin with a little aversion," he answered, in a tone of patient good-humor.

"You belong to Bertha," she said.

"I belong to you," he retorted.

Elaine came slowly back from the window, looking like some tall, fair goddess in her shimmering pearl-gray silk. The tears were shining in her azure eyes.

"Irene, Mr. Kenmore is very kind," she said. "Believe me, he has made the wisest decision, if only you will acquiesce in it."

"Ellie, I don't wish to be married," cried the child.

"You are married already," Elaine answered, with a sigh, quickly repressed.

The beautiful child, who, by her own willfulness, had brought this doom upon her head, struggled up to a sitting posture. The sweet blue eyes had a dazed look. Grief had strangely changed her already.

"Let me alone, Ellie, and you, Mr. Kenmore, for a little while," she said, pitifully. "Wait until papa comes. He shall tell me what is best. Oh, it cannot be right that two lives should be spoiled by such a little mistake! Three lives, I mean," she added, wildly, "for Bertha loves him, and he belongs to her."

"Yes, he belongs to me," said a low, menacing voice in the door-way. "He belongs to me, Irene [Pg 17] Brooke. Do not dare to take him from me!"

CHAPTER VI.

It was Bertha's voice. She had been to her room, to indulge in a fit of mad passion and jealousy, but had returned and stood listening at the door for some moments—long enough indeed to hear all that had been spoken since Irene had recovered consciousness. Mad with passion she stood before them.

"He is mine," she said again, hoarsely. "Woe be to you, Irene Brooke, if you take him from me!"

She looked like some mad creature with the loosened coils of her shining hair falling down like long black serpents over the corsage of her ruby satin robe, and her black eyes flashing forth jealousy and defiance. The jeweled serpents that wreathed her white arms seemed to dart menace from their gleaming emerald eyes as she shook her hand.

Slowly Guy Kenmore turned and looked at her, honest amazement stamped on his handsome features.

"Miss Brooke, your assertion is a most strange one," he said. "I cannot understand why you should wish to complicate this unhappy affair still further by such a palpable injustice. On what grounds do you base your claim?"

Her flashing eyes fell a moment before the proud wonder in his. Then she asked, with a heaving breast and in deep agitation:

"Do you deny that you have made love to me? That you came to Bay View to woo me?"

A deep, warm color drifted over his face.

"Is it possible, Miss Bertha, that you have taken our idle flirtation in earnest?" he exclaimed, shame, surprise and self-reproach struggling together in his voice. "If you have, I beg your forgiveness a thousand times, for I thought you were simply amusing yourself, as I was. I admired you, certainly, but I never dreamed of love, I never thought of marriage."

If love changed to hatred could have slain, Guy Kenmore would have fallen dead before the vengeful lightnings of the brunette's eyes. Strong man though he was he shivered under their baleful glare. Her very voice was changed when she spoke again. It seemed to cut the air like a keen-bladed knife.

"So you were only amusing yourself," she said. "You made a plaything of a woman's heart! Did you ever hear of playing with edged tools? Ah, beware, Guy Kenmore, beware! My love would have been a thousand times better than my hate! And do you pretend to love *that* creature?" pointing a scornful finger at the drooping form of Irene.

Instinctively he moved a step nearer to his girl-bride, as if to shield her from some threatening danger.

"I make no idle pretences," he answered. "Irene is my wife. Love will come."

"Love," she sneered. "Love! Your cold, selfish heart is incapable of that divine passion! I understand why you would hold that willful child to the fetters so unwittingly forged! It is the Kenmore pride, that is afraid of being dragged through the mire of the divorce court! You will never love her, never make her happy! You only take her to save your overweening pride."

"Oh, Bertha, hush! It is the best way out of our trouble," pleaded Elaine, gently.

"Best—ah, yes, you never dreamed of such a marriage for your *fatherless child*? A Kenmore—rich, honorable, high-born—to mate with the child of shame, the *nameless creature* whom we have shielded with our own honest name to save our family honor! Ha, ha, Guy Kenmore, are you not proud of your high-born bride—Elaine's base-born child, who never had a father?" screamed Bertha, wild with jealousy and anger, and flashing the lurid lightning of her great black eyes upon their blanched faces.

Like some beautiful enraged tigress, Irene sprang from the sofa, and ran to Bertha. She clutched her small white fingers in the brunette's round white arm, and their frantic clasp sunk deep into the flesh.

"You wicked, cruel woman, how dare you utter such a fiendish lie?" she panted, hoarsely. "How

dare you malign the honor of my beautiful, pure-hearted Ellie? How dare you name us—Ellie and me—the honest daughters of old Ronald Brooke—in the same breath with dishonor!"

"I dare because it is true," hissed Bertha, breaking loose from the child's frantic grasp, and laughing like a beautiful demon. "Don't take my word for it! Ask that woman there whom my very words have crushed down to the earth! Ask her if she is not your mother! Ask her the name of your father! Ha, ha, Guy Kenmore, accept my congratulations on your brilliant marriage," she sneered, as she rushed from the room.

Elaine Brooke had indeed sunk wretchedly to the floor at her sister's terrible charge. She crouched there forlornly, her face hidden in her trembling hands, her golden hair falling loose, and streaming in sad beauty over her quivering, prostrate form. Guy Kenmore, with blanched face and starting eyes, recalled Arthur's words to his faithless Guinevere. They seemed to fit this crushed woman:

"Yet think not that I come to urge thy crimes;
I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,
I, whose vast pity almost makes me die
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,
My pride in happier summers, at my feet."

With a single bound Irene reached the prostrate form. Her small hand fell heavily on Elaine's white, quivering shoulder.

"Ellie, Ellie, look at me," she said; "I want to see your face! I want to see the truth in your eyes!"

With a groan Elaine obeyed the imperious mandate of the sharp, young voice. She raised her head and looked into Irene's clear, searching eyes with a woful, white, white, face, on which the very agonies of death could not have written such despair.

"Irene, my love, my darling, do not curse me," she moaned. "It is true! I am your wretched mother!"

The beautiful, kneeling figure reeled backward with one hand pressed on her heart as if it had been pierced by a sword-point. [Pg 19]

"My mother—Elaine Brooke my mother," she groaned. "Oh, God, was ever sin and shame hidden beneath such true, sweet eyes and the face of an angel before? Do not ask me not to curse you! God may forgive you, but I never can! Now I know why they hate me, your mother and your sister. I have no right in the world, I have no name, no place, I am the living badge of my mother's dishonor! Great God, pity me! Strike me dead this moment at the feet of my guilty, shameless mother," she prayed, wildly lifting her wild, white face and anguished eyes to Heaven.

Guy Kenmore gazed like one paralyzed at the unhappy mother and daughter. He could not speak one word to either. The shocking disclosure of the maddened Bertha had almost stunned him. He was a proud man, as he had said. It was horrible to think of the stain on the girl he had wedded—the willful, naughty, yet beautiful girl whom with all her faults he had been proud to think was nobly born as the Kenmores.

CHAPTER VII.

Elaine dragged herself up from the floor, and held out her arms imploringly to the lovely, imperious young creature, who regarded her with angry, scornful eyes.

"Irene, hear me," she said, humbly.

But Irene pushed off the clinging hands, cruelly.

"Do not touch me," she said, bitterly. "I am bad enough myself. The brand of shame is on me, and I have no name and no right in the world; but it is no sin of mine. *You—you* are the guilty one! The touch of your hand would burn me! Oh, God! oh, God! how came she by that angel's face and devil's heart?"

She had forgotten Guy Kenmore's presence as she hurled her denunciations at the lovely, despairing, sinful woman before her. Elaine did indeed have the face of an angel. Even in this moment, when her long-hidden and shameful secret became revealed to her child, her exquisite face had on it no remorseful shame. The rather it was touched with the despairing resignation of some pure, high heart which has found itself cast down and destroyed in its struggle against the wicked world. She lifted her sweet, sad, violet eyes, and cast a look of pathetic reproach upon Irene.

"My child, do you indeed believe me so vile and wicked?" she asked, mournfully.

"I am forced to judge you by your confession," Irene answered, with passionate shame.

"I have made no confession yet, I wish to do so now, if you will listen to me, Irene," said the beautiful woman in a tone of sad patience. "I am not guilty as you think me, oh, no, no, no!" she cried, shudderingly.

"You are my mother, and you are ashamed to claim me! You are a wretched sinner, and instead of hiding your disgraced head in seclusion, and trying to win the pardon and mercy of offended

Heaven, you flaunt your beautiful face before the world, unforgiven and unrepentant!" cried out Irene, with all the hard severity of a young mentor.

Elaine wrung her beautiful, jeweled hands together, and tears fell one after another in a rapid stream down her cheeks upon the corsage of her dress, spotting and staining the rich silk.

"Irene, will you indeed be so hard and unforgiving?" she cried. "Will you judge and condemn me without hearing? Are you the sweet, loving child, whom I could always lead and persuade with a kind word?"

"I am no longer a child!" the girl cried out, bitterly. "I am a woman now. The events of to-night have laid years on my head and a burden on my heart! You might have led me by one thread of your golden hair while I believed you to be my pure, true-hearted sister who bore your mother's and sister's tyranny like an angel because you were too gentle to resent it. I understand it all now. You were afraid of them. Conscience made a coward of you, and they held your shameful secret like a whip-lash over your head and drove you hither and yon at the bent of their own wills! Oh, shame, shame!" cried Irene, withering her mother by her sharp scorn.

"Yes, I have been a slave, a coward," Elaine murmured, mournfully. "But, oh, Irene, my poor child, I bore it all for my father's sake. He, at least, was kind and forgiving!"

The words recalled to Irene's mind the fond, indulgent old man whom she adored with all the strength of her ardent young heart. Mrs. Brooke and Bertha had been too harsh and cold to command her love, Elaine had vexed her impetuous spirit by her shrinking cowardice. But her father—the loving old man who has ever taken her part bravely against them all—it rushed over her with a chill like that of death that he belonged to her no longer, by that dear filial tie that had been the one unalloyed joy of her willful life, and a cry of exceeding bitter pain fell from her white lips.

"Papa, oh, my dear, my darling, I must lose you with the rest," she cried out in a voice sharp and shrill with despair. "Nothing of all I thought mine belongs to me! I must lose you, too, whom I loved with all my soul—lose you through the sin of her who brought me into a world where I have no place, no name! Oh, God, I cannot bear it! I wish that I were dead!" wailed Irene, in the bitterness of her despair.

Elaine gazed at her daughter like one dazed. All the youth, the joy, the childishness seemed stricken from her forever by the terrible revelation of to-night. The slender young figure stood apart from her in desperate grief, seeking no friendly arm to lean on in its terrible isolation; the beautiful young face was cold and rigid with despair; the blue eyes, black now with her soul's emotion, flashed scorn through proud tears that would not fall. A woman's outraged soul, forlorn yet proud, shone through the tense young form.

Suddenly a firm touch fell on Irene's arm.

"Irene," said Guy Kenmore, low and sternly, "no more of these wild reproaches to your mother! [Pg 21] You shall hear her offered confession first."

CHAPTER VIII.

There was a moment's perfect silence in the room. The sound of the sea came to them soft and low, the wind stirred the flowers in the garden, and sent a gust of exquisite perfume through the windows. In the stillness Elaine moved a little nearer to her daughter, looking at the stern young face with unutterable love and longing in her eyes.

Irene turned coldly from that yearning glance and looked at Mr. Kenmore with a rebellious flash in her eyes.

He was very pale, the sparkle of mirth had died out from his dark eyes, his lips were compressed sternly.

"Hear your mother's story first," he repeated, gravely. "Do not condemn her before you know her whole sad secret. See how she suffers."

The calm, grave, masterful tone influenced Irene against her will. She glanced reluctantly at Elaine's face, and saw how terribly she suffered beneath the fiery lash of her daughter's scorn, but she spoke no word of comfort, only lowered her white-lidded eyes to shut out that harrowing sight.

"Why should I listen to her?" she said, almost sullenly. "What can she say to excuse her sin?"

"Hear me, and judge, Irene," said Elaine, creeping a little nearer, with a wistful gaze at the obstinate girl. "You, too, Mr. Kenmore. You have heard me taunted with my sin. Stay and hear my exculpation."

He bowed silently and placed a chair for her; then he drew Irene down to a seat upon the sofa beside himself. She yielded with strange passiveness, unconscious that while she sat there his arm lay lightly but firmly around her waist, gently detaining her. She was conscious of nothing but a sharp, tearing pain at her heart, and that she was waiting with a sort of numb indifference to hear Elaine's palliation of her sin.

Elaine sat silently a minute, with her white hands locked convulsively in her lap. When she spoke

she seemed to be communing with herself.

"Dear God," she whispered, "I had hoped that the child need never know her mother's secret! Ah, I might have known how hard and cruel Bertha would be some day!"

She lifted her eyes and fixed them in a sort of unwilling fascination on Irene's beautiful, mutinous face.

"I have lived years and years of sorrow and despair," she said, "but when I look back it seems only yesterday that I was a pretty, willful, loving child, such as Irene was until to-night. Ah, so like, so like, that I have sometimes shuddered and wept, fearing her fate would be like mine."

Irene made a passionate gesture of loathing and dissent.

"Ah, my child, you do not know," Elaine said, sadly. "The greatest temptation of woman has never come to you. You have never loved."

The fresh, young lips curled in utter scorn of that master-passion whose fire had never breathed over her young heart. [Pg 22]

"You have never loved," Elaine repeated, with a gesture of despair. "When that master passion first came to me I was a younger girl than you, Irene, and just as willful and headstrong and passionate. Bertha and I were away at boarding-school when I first met my fate."

She paused, trembling like a leaf in the wind, and resumed, mournfully:

"He was a cousin of one of the pupils, and came to a musical festival given by us at the first of the mid-winter term. I sang one or two solos, and it was then and there that this handsome scion of a proud and wealthy house fell in love with me."

"I have never loved as you say," interrupted Irene in her clear, bell-like voice, "but I should hesitate to call that feeling which only aims at the ruin of its object by the pure name of love."

Elaine bowed her golden head wearily.

"Let us say that he pretended to love me, then," she amended, sadly. "But, ah, Irene, if you had seen and heard him you would have believed his vows, too—you would have trusted in him as I did. No girl ever had a handsomer, more adoring lover."

"I was young, romantic, willful," she continued. "It seemed to be a case of true love at first sight. We met several times, and some foolish love-letters passed between us. There are more opportunities for such things than you would guess at the average boarding-school, Mr. Kenmore," she said, turning her blushing face upon him for a moment. "At this one, love-letters, stolen walks, secret meetings were carried on to an alarming extent, one third of the pupils at least being as foolish and romantic as I was."

"I can understand," Mr. Kenmore answered, gently.

"Mamma was a stern and proud woman," Elaine resumed, with a sigh. "She was exceedingly proud of my beauty and my fine voice. A brilliant future was mapped out for me. But first I was to become a perfect prodigy of learning and accomplishments. At sixteen, when I was to finish the course at the Institute where I then was, I was to be sent to the Vassar College for a few years. 'Ossa on Pelion piled,'" she quoted, with a mournful smile.

"I knew that a love affair on my part would not be tolerated for years," she resumed. "My lover, as regards his family, was placed in the same position comparatively. A marriage of convenience was arranged for him, and he was forbidden to think of another. Madly in love with each other, and rebelling against our fetters, we planned an elopement. In three months after I met him we ran away to another State and were married."

"Married?" Irene echoed, with a hopeful start.

"We were married—as *I believed*," said Elaine, with a shudder. "There was a ceremony, a ring, a certificate. I was a child, not sixteen yet, remember, Irene. All appeared satisfactory to me. We went to a luxurious boarding-house where six months passed in a dream of perfect happiness. My husband remained the same fond, faithful lover he had been from the first day we met until the fateful hour when we parted—never to meet again," sobbed Elaine, yielding to a momentary burst of despairing grief that showed how well and faithfully she had loved the traitor who had ruined her life. [Pg 23]

But feeling her daughter's cold, young eyes upon her, she soon stemmed the bitter tide of her hopeless grief.

"Our funds ran low," she continued, after a moment, "and he was compelled to leave me to go to his father and ask pardon and help. We were both young, and having been reared in the enervating atmosphere of luxury, knew not how to earn a penny. He went and—never came again."

"Villain!" Guy Kenmore uttered, indignantly.

"After waiting vainly a week I wrote to him," said Elaine, bowing her lovely head upon her hands. "His father came, full of pity and surprise. My God! I had been deceived by a mock marriage. He whom I loved so dearly, whom I believed my husband, had gone home, wedded the woman of his father's choice, and taken her abroad on a wedding trip. I had been ruthlessly forsaken."

"Then I remembered papa, whom I had loved truly and tenderly as you did, Irene. In my extremity and despair I wrote to him. He came, the dear father I had deserted and forgotten in the flush of my wifely happiness. He pitied and forgave me."

"Mamma and Bertha would not forgive, but they plotted to save the family honor. The affair had never been publicly known. We went abroad, and among strangers, where in a few months you were born, my poor wronged Irene. When we came home mamma claimed my child for her own, and by her stern command I took my place in society and played my part as calmly as if my heart were not broken. Now, Irene, you know the full extent of your mother's sin. I have been wronged as well as you, my darling. You are nameless, but not through sin of mine."

Her faltering voice died into silence. Irene made no answer. She had dropped her face in her small white hands. Guy Kenmore felt the slight form trembling against his arm.

"I was mistaken in my first estimate of her," he thought. "She has more depth, more character than I thought."

Then he turned to Elaine.

"You have indeed been wronged bitterly," he said. "The fault is not yours, save through your disobedience to your parents."

"Yes, I was willful and thoughtless, and I have been most terribly punished for my fault," she replied, sorrowfully.

"Is there no possibility that you have been deceived by your husband's father? Such things have been," said Mr. Kenmore, thoughtfully.

"There was no deception. He was armed with every proof, even the newspaper, with the marriage of his son to the wealthy heiress whom his family had chosen for him," answered Elaine, blushing crimson for her unmerited shame and disgrace.

"Then your lover was a villain unworthy the name of man. He deserved death," exclaimed Guy [Pg 24] Kenmore.

Elaine's angelic face grew pale as death. She sighed heavily, but made no answer.

Suddenly Irene sprang to her feet, with blazing eyes.

"His name!" she cried, wildly, "his name!"

"My poor child, why would you know it?" faltered Elaine.

"That I may hunt him down!" Irene blazed out. "That I may punish him for your wrongs and mine!"

"Alas, my darling, vengeance belongs to Heaven," sighed the martyred Elaine.

"It belongs to you and to me," cried Irene. "His name, his name!"

"I cannot tell you, dear," wept the wronged woman.

"Then I will go to Bertha," flashed the maddened girl.

"Bertha is bound by an oath never to reveal that fatal name," Elaine answered.

The door opened, Mrs. Brooke entered, stern and pale. She glanced scornfully at Irene, then turned to her daughter:

"Elaine, I am sorry this has happened," she said. "I could not keep Bertha from betraying you. The poor girl was driven mad by her wrongs. If Irene had remained away from the ball to-night, as I bade her do, you would have been spared all this. Her disobedience has caused it all."

Old Faith put her head, with its flaring cap-ruffles, inside the door before Elaine could speak.

"Oh, Mrs. Brooke, Mrs. Brooke!" she cried, and wrung her plump old hands disconsolately.

"Well, what is it? Speak!" cried her mistress, sharply.

"Oh, ma'am, some men have come—with news—they found master down on the shore—oh, oh, they told me to break it to you gently," cried the old housekeeper, incoherently.

A flying white figure darted past old Faith and ran wildly down the broad, moon-lighted hall, to the old-fashioned porch, bathed in the glorious beams of the moonlight.

Mrs. Brooke went up to the woman and shook her roughly by the arm.

"What are you trying to tell me, Faith? What of your master?" she exclaimed. "Speak this instant!"

Elaine came up to her other side, and looked at her with wide, startled eyes.

"Oh, Faith, what is it?" she cried.

"They told me to break it gently," whimpered the fat old woman.

At this moment a shrill young voice, sharpened by keenest agony, wild with futile despair, came floating loudly back through the echoing halls:

"Papa, oh, darling papa! Oh, my God, dead, dead, dead!"

CHAPTER IX.

They bore him into the parlor and laid him down. He was dead—the handsome, genial, kind old

father, who had been Elaine's truest friend in her trouble and disgrace. It was strange and terrible to see the women, each of whom had loved the dead man in her own fashion, weeping around him.

Their gala robes looked strangely out of place in this scene of death. There was Bertha in her ruby satin and shining jewels, Elaine in her shimmering silk and blue forget-me-nots, Mrs. Brooke in crimson and black lace, lighted by the fire of priceless diamonds. Saddest of all, little Irene, crouched in a white heap on the floor at his feet, adorned in the modest bravery he had brought her for a birthday gift. Poor little Irene who has lost in this one fatal day all that her heart held dear.

A physician was called to satisfy the family. He only said what was plainly potent before. Mr. Brooke was dead—of heart disease, it appeared, for there were no marks of violence on his person. He was an old man, and death had found him out gently, laying its icy finger upon him as he walked along the shining sand of the bay, in the beautiful moonlight. His limbs were already growing rigid, and he must have been dead several hours.

"Dead! while we laughed and danced, and made merry over yonder in their gay saloons," Elaine wailed out, in impatient despair. "Oh, my God, how horrible to remember!"

Only Guy Kenmore saw that the right hand of the dead man was rigidly clenched.

"What treasure does he clasp in that grasp of death?" he asked himself, and when no one was looking he tried to unclasp the rigid fist. He only succeeded in opening it a little way—just enough to draw from the stiffened fingers a fragment of what had once been a letter—now only one line remained—a line and a name.

Guy Kenmore went to the light, spread the little scrap open on his hand and looked at it. The writing was in a man's hand and the few words were these:

"That the truth may be revealed and my death-bed repentance accepted of Heaven, I pray, humbly."

"Clarence Stuart, Senior."

Suddenly a cold little hand touched his own.

"I saw you," said Irene, in a low, strange voice. "What does it mean?"

"A great deal, or—— nothing," he answered, in a voice as strange as her own.

She read it slowly over. The fragmentary words and the proud name seemed to burn themselves in on her memory.

"Who is Clarence Stuart?" she asked, wonderingly.

"I intend to find out," he answered. "When I do, I shall tell you, little Irene."

In his heart there was a deadly suspicion of foul play. Who had torn from old Ronald Brooke's hand the letter whose fragmentary ending he grasped within that clenched and stiffened hand? Had there been murder most foul?

He went back and looked attentively at the corpse. It was true there was no sign of violence, but was that the face of one who had died from one instant's terrible heart pang, who must have died before he had realized his pain? No, the face was drawn as if in deadly pain, the open eyes stared wide with horror.

"I shall say nothing yet," he said to himself, gravely. "Let them think that death came in the quiet course of nature. But if old Ronald Brooke was murdered I shall bring his murderer to justice."

And on the man's handsome face, usually so gay and debonair, was registered a grim, firm purpose.

Mrs. Brooke and Bertha had been led away to their rooms now. No one remained for the moment but Elaine. She came slowly to her daughter's side.

"Irene, you must come with me now, she said, pleadingly, but the girl broke from her clasp and ran to throw herself on the dead man's breast.

"I cannot leave him yet," she sobbed. "He was my all!"

Elaine shivered, as if some one had struck her a blow. She followed her daughter, and solemnly took the dead man's hand in her feverish, throbbing clasp.

"Irene, my daughter, this, my own father whom I deceived and deserted, whose loving heart I broke by my folly—he pitied and forgave me," she said, mournfully. "My sin against you was far less, for it was not premeditated. Here by papa's cold dead body I ask you, darling, to pity and forgive me. Will you refuse my prayer?"

Irene lifted her head from its chill resting-place and looked at her suppliant mother with a strange, grave gaze.

"We forgive every one when we are dying—do we not?" she asked, slowly.

"Yes, my darling, but you are young and strong. You have many years to live perhaps. I cannot wait till your dying hour for your love and pity. I need it now," sighed poor Elaine.

There was a moment's silence. Irene looked down at the dead man's face as if asking him to counsel her in this sad hour. As the wide, horror-haunted eyes met hers she recoiled in terror.

"He forgave you," she said, solemnly. "He cannot counsel me, but I will follow his example. Mother," she reached across that still form and touched Elaine's hand, "I forgive you, too. Always remember that I pitied and forgave you."

There was a strange, wild light in her eyes. It startled Elaine.

"My darling," she cried, half-fearfully.

"I must leave you now, poor mother," continued Irene, with that strange look. "I must go down to the shore where death waited for papa to-night. He is waiting there for me!"

She turned with the words and ran swiftly from the room. Frightened by her strange looks and words Elaine followed behind her, but her trembling limbs could scarcely carry her body.

Young, light, swift as a wild gazelle, Irene flew down the steps and across the garden. The moon was going down now, and only the flutter of her white dress guided the frantic mother in her wild pursuit. The garden gate unclosed, there was a patter of flying feet along the sands outside, there was a wild, smothered, wailing cry of despair, then—then Elaine heard the horrible splash of the waves as they opened and closed again over her maddened, desperate child.

[Pg 27]

CHAPTER X.

The sound of Irene's pliant young body as it struck the cold waters of the bay, fell on the wretched mother's heart like a death-blow. The horrors of this fatal night culminated in this.

One long, terrible shriek as of some wounded, dying creature, startled the midnight hour with its despairing echoes, then she sprang wildly forward with the desperate intent to share her daughter's watery grave.

The weakness of her overwrought body saved her from the crime of self-destruction. Her head reeled, her limbs failed her. As she pushed the gate open with faltering hands she staggered dizzily and fell like a log on the hard ground. Merciful unconsciousness had stolen upon her.

That prolonged, despairing shriek reached Guy Kenmore's ears in the library, where he was gravely conferring with the men who had found Mr. Brooke dead upon the shore.

His first thought was of Irene. A dreadful foreboding filled his mind. He rushed from the room and followed the sound, the two men behind, all terrified alike by the anguish that rang in that mysterious shriek.

Outside the garden gate they found Elaine, lying like one dead on the hard earth. With tender compassion they lifted the beautiful, rigid form and bore it into the house.

That long, deep, deathly swoon was the beginning of a severe illness for Elaine Brooke. It culminated in an attack of brain fever.

On recovering from her long spell of unconsciousness, Elaine revealed the cause of her illness. Two hours, perhaps, had passed since Irene's maddened plunge into the water. It was too late to save her then. The cold waves kept their treasure, refusing to yield it up to the efforts of those who, headed by Mr. Kenmore, made an ineffectual trial to find even the cold, dead body of the desperate girl. Dawn broke with all the roseate beauty of summer, and the golden light glimmered far over land and sea, but neither the wide waste of waters nor the sandy reaches of shore gave back sign or token of her who had found life too hard to bear, and so had sought Nepenthe from its ills and pains.

Guy Kenmore remained to Mr. Brooke's funeral, then returned to Baltimore a softened, saddened man—a man with a purpose. Two things had confirmed him in his purpose to trace the writer of the fragment found in the dead man's hand.

On the night of Mr. Brooke's death no sign of violence had been discovered on his person. On the day following a purplish mark was discoverable on the old man's temple—a strange, discolored mark. Careless lookers believed it to be the effects of decomposition.

Guy Kenmore, studying it with suspicious eyes, believed that it was caused by a blow—a blow that had caused Ronald Brooke's death.

[Pg 28]

Another thing was, that when Elaine Brooke went into a delirious fever, that terrible dawn that broke on the tragic night, he had stood by her side a few moments, gazing at her in pain and sorrow. While he stood there she had startled him by calling wildly on one name. It was "Clarence, Clarence, Clarence!"

He sought Bertha.

"Will you tell me," he asked, gravely, and without preamble, "the name of the villain who deceived your sister?"

Bertha colored and trembled in shame and agitation.

"I cannot," she answered. "I am under a sacred promise not to reveal it."

"Was it Clarence Stuart?" he asked, coolly, and Bertha gave a terrible start.

"She has revealed it in her delirium," she exclaimed.

"Yes," he answered, calmly, knowing that he had surprised the truth from her reluctant lips.

Walking slowly along the shore, listening to the murmur of the waves, in which his bride of an hour had sought oblivion from the ills of life, Guy Kenmore thought it all out to his own satisfaction. That fragmentary line of a letter had told the whole sad story.

Elaine Brooke had been truly a wife. Her husband's father had deceived her by a trumped up story, and divided her from her young husband. Dying, he had repented his sin, and written a letter of confession to her father.

And here he fitted the second link of the story.

Some person unknown had found it to be against his or her interests that the truth should be revealed. That person had followed the bearer of Clarence Stuart's letter, and had torn it from old Ronald Brooke's grasp, with a blow that meant death to the gentle, kindly old man.

Guy Kenmore honestly believed in the truth and accuracy of these deductions.

"If I can only find out where these Stuarts live, I will discover the guilty party," he said to himself. "I will not ask Mrs. Brooke nor Bertha. They would only believe me impertinent. I must depend on the gentle Elaine for information."

He concluded to return to his home in Baltimore, and await the issue of Elaine's illness.

CHAPTER XI.

The time came weeks after when Elaine, pale, wan, shadowy, the sad ghost of her former beautiful self, came down to the parlor again and joined her mother and sister in the broken family circle whose severed links could never be re-united again.

Mrs. Brooke and Bertha were subtly changed, too. Their black dresses made them look older and graver. Bertha's grief at the loss of a kind, indulgent father, and her chagrin at Guy Kenmore's defection, had combined to plant some fine lines on her hither unruffled brow, and a peevish expression curled her red lips, while her large brilliant black eyes flashed with discontent and scorn. Over Irene's tragic death she had shed not a tear. She had always disliked the girl for her youth and winsome beauty and looked down on her for the stain upon her birth, always deploring that she had not died in infancy. The poor girl's willfulness the night of the ball had changed Bertha's dislike to hate. She was secretly glad Irene was dead. Better that than to have lived to be Guy Kenmore's wife.

[Pg 29]

Mrs. Brooke shared Bertha's feelings, only in a less exaggerated degree.

So Elaine found no sympathy in the loss of the beautiful daughter whom she had secretly worshiped, and over whose pretty defiant willfulness she had oftentimes shed bitter, burning tears of grief and dread.

The old gray hall which her sweet songs and musical laughter had once made gay and joyous was now hushed and silent as the tomb. The few servants glided about as if afraid of awaking the lonely echoes that slept in the wide, dark halls, and quiet chambers. No song nor laugh disturbed the silence. The mistress sat in the parlor pale and grave in her sweeping sables. Her daughters were no less grave and still, sitting in their chairs like dark, still shadows, with averted faces and silent lips, for Elaine had not forgotten Bertha's treacherous betrayal of her shameful secret; and Bertha, while she felt no remorse for her cruel work still felt shame enough to cause her to turn in confusion from the clear, sad light of her sister's eyes.

In the meantime that sad truth that oftentimes makes the pang of bereavement harder to bear, was coming home to them.

Mr. Brooke had died almost insolvent.

Once a man of almost unlimited wealth and position, the old tobacco planter had been almost ruined by the war which had freed his slaves, and left him only his broad-spreading, fertile acres, with no one to till them. His great income was almost gone, for with his losses through the war, he could not afford to replace with hired workmen the skilled labor he had lost.

In order to keep up the dignity of appearances which his proud wife considered necessary to herself and her beautiful young daughters, Mr. Brooke had been forced to sacrifice his land from time to time, until now, at the end, only a few acres remained of his once princely estate. The fine old gray-stone mansion, Bay View, remained as a shelter for their heads, indeed; but the sacrifice of the remaining land would barely support them a year or two. Mrs. Brooke and Bertha were aghast at the prospect. They had expected that the latter would have been married off to some wealthy personage before the dire catastrophe of poverty overtook them. They quailed and trembled now beneath the subdued mutterings of the storm of adversity.

When Elaine came down and mingled with them again, they broke the bad tidings to her rudely enough.

"No more playing fine lady for us," Mrs. Brooke said, bitterly. "We can live on the land a little while, then we must sell our jewels, then our home, and when all is done, we shall have to work for our living like common people."

The aristocratic southern lady, who had never soiled her white, jeweled fingers in useful toil, broke down and sobbed dismally at the grievous prospect.

[Pg 30]

"Oh, I have had more than enough of trouble and sorrow in my life," she complained. "First, there was Elaine's disobedience and disgrace; then, losing our negroes by the war; then my poor husband dying so suddenly, without a farewell word, and now this horrible nightmare, poverty! Oh! I have never deserved these visitations of Providence," asseverated the handsome, selfish widow, energetically.

Bertha joined in these lamentations loudly. She would not know how to work when it came to that, not she. They should have to starve.

Elaine regarded them with troubled eyes.

"Mamma, do not grieve so bitterly," she said. "We are not come to absolute want yet."

"You take it very coolly," Bertha sneered. "When the last few acres of land are sold, how long will the proceeds keep three helpless women, pray?"

Elaine did not answer Bertha—did not even look at her. She went up to her mother's side.

"Mamma, I have foreseen this trouble coming," she said. "We have been living beyond our means for years, and even if poor papa had lived this crash must have come some day; I am very sorry," she repeated, gently.

"Sorrows will not put money into our empty purses," Mrs. Brooke answered, spitefully.

"I know that," Elaine answered, patiently. "But I have a plan by which your money may be made to last a little longer. I am going to leave you, mamma."

"Leave me," Mrs. Brooke echoed, feebly.

"Rats always desert a sinking ship," flung in Bertha with coarse irony.

Again her elder sister had no answer for her.

"I am going away," she repeated. "Even if papa had left us a fortune it would be the same, I could not stay here after—all that has happened."

"You mean,"—said Mrs. Brooke, then paused.

"I mean since I have lost papa and Irene," her daughter answered, sadly. "You know, mamma, you and Bertha have never been kind to me since my great—trouble. You only tolerated me because my father wished it. I have long been in your way. It is all over now. To-morrow I shall leave you forever."

"Forever," Mrs. Brooke repeated, blandly, while Bertha exclaimed with a coarse, spiteful sneer:

"You will return to the life of shame from which papa rescued you perhaps."

"I am going to New York to earn my living by honest work," Elaine said, speaking pointedly to her mother. "You know I have a good voice, and talent for music. I shall give music lessons, probably."

"My daughter giving music lessons! Oh, what a disgrace to the family!" cried the aristocratic lady. "Are you not ashamed to put yourself so low, Elaine?"

[Pg 31]

"Don't be silly, mamma," flashed Bertha, sharply. "It is a very good plan, I think. Besides, it is only right for Elaine to give up the remainder of her property to us. If we had not been burdened with the support of her daughter for sixteen years there would have been more money for me."

"It is quite settled, mamma, I shall go," said poor Elaine, and the selfish mother weakly acquiesced.

The next day she went, glad of her freedom, glad to fling off the slavery of sixteen years.

"I could not have stayed even if poor papa had left me a fortune," she said to herself. "The sound of the waves sighing over Irene's watery grave in the lonesome nights breaks my heart!"

CHAPTER XII.

We must return to Irene Brooke that fatal night, whose accumulating horrors induced a transient madness that drove the wretched girl to seek oblivion from her woes in self-destruction.

Life is sweet, even to the wretched. Irene's sudden, violent plunge into the cold waves cooled the fever of her heart and brain like magic. In that one awful, tragic moment in which the waters closed darkly over her golden head, a sharp remorse, a terrible regret woke to life within her heart.

Out of that swift repentance and awful despair, a cry for pity broke wildly from her almost strangling lips:

"Oh, Lord, pardon and save me!"

As she came back from the depths with a swift rebound to the surface of the water, the girl threw out her white arms gropingly, as if to seize upon some support, however slight and frail, on which to buoy her drenched and sinking frame.

Joy! as if God himself had answered her wild appeal for help and pardon, a strong, wide plank drifted to her reach. Irene grasped it tightly and threw herself upon it, while a cry of thankfulness

broke from her lips. Alone in the dark and rushing waves, her heart filled with relief at the thought of this frail barrier between herself and that mysterious Eternity, to which a moment ago she had blindly hastened.

"If I can only hold on a little while, Elaine will bring me help and rescue," she said to herself, hopefully, and calling her mother by the old familiar sisterly name, for the name of mother was strange to her young lips yet.

Alas, for her springing hopes! Poor Elaine lay white and still in that long, long trance of unconsciousness that followed on her realization of her daughter's suicide. Her locked lips did not unclose to tell her anxious watchers the story of that white form floating on the dark waters, waiting, hoping, praying for rescue, while her strength ebbed, and her arms grew tired and weak, clinging so tightly to that slender plank that floated between her and the death from which she shrunk tremblingly now with all the ardor of a young heart that has found life a goodly thing and fair.

[Pg 32]

No rescue came. The girl floated farther and farther out to sea in that thick darkness that comes before the dawn. Hours that were long as years seemed to pass over her head, and hope died in her breast as the cruel waves beat and buffeted her tender form.

"I am forgotten and deserted," she moaned. "My mother has raised no alarm. Is it possible she was glad to be rid of me, and held her peace?"

A jeering voice seemed to whisper in her ear:

"It is best for all that you die. Bertha and her mother hated you. You were a stumbling block in your mother's path. You had involved Guy Kenmore in a fatal entanglement. You had no right and no place in the world. Not one whom you have left but will be glad that you are dead."

A cry of despair came from the beautiful girlish lips in the darkness.

"Oh, God, and only yesterday life seemed so beautiful and fair! Now I must die, alone and unregretted! Oh, cruel world, farewell," she cried, for she felt her strength forsaking her, and knew that in a moment more her arms would relax their hold and that she would sink forever amid the engulfing waves.

But in that last perilous moment something occurred that seemed to her dazzled and bewildered senses nothing less than a miracle.

In her bodily pain and mental trouble, with eyes blinded by the salt sea waves that mixed with her bitter tears, Irene had not perceived the faint grey light of dawn dispelling the thick darkness of the night. But suddenly, all suddenly, the crest of the waves was illuminated marvellously by a gleam of brightness that shot far and wide across the water; the blank horizon glowed with light.

"And on the glimmering limit far withdrawn
God made Himself an awful rose of dawn."

Startled by the swift and seemingly instant transition from darkness to light, Irene uttered a shrill, sharp cry and looked up. The beautiful, life-giving sun was just peeping across the level green waves, and touching their foamy crests with gold. Through half-dazzled eyes she saw riding, like a thing of beauty on the beautiful water, a stately, white-sailed yacht only a few rods away. Irene could see moving figures on her decks.

There was one awful moment when the girl's breath failed, her heart stood still, and she could scarcely see the moving yacht outlined against the rosy dawn, for the mist that filled her eyes. Then she shook off the trance that threatened to destroy her, and with one last, desperate effort sent her sharp young voice ringing clearly across the waves:

"Help! Help! In God's name, help!"

The cry was heard and answered by the moving figures on the vessel's deck.

CHAPTER XIII.

[Pg 33]

Was it hours or moments before the gallant figure that sprang over the side of the yacht reached Irene's side?

The girl never knew, for even as she watched his progress through the water, and admired his swift and graceful swimming, a dizziness stole over her; her arms relaxed their hold; the friendly plank slipped from beneath her, and she felt herself sinking down, down into the fathomless depths of green water.

It was well that her rescuer was a skillful diver, or our hapless heroine's history must have ended then and there.

But the dauntless swimmer who had gone to her assistance was brave, bold, daring. He redoubled his speed, made a desperate dive beneath the water and reappeared with the form of the exhausted and unconscious girl tightly clasped in one arm.

In the meantime a small boat had been lowered from the yacht, and was coming with rapid strokes to her assistance.

When Irene came to herself again she lay on a pile of blankets upon the deck of the yacht. An anxious group was collected around her, conspicuous among them being one wet and dripping figure whom she instinctively recognized as her gallant preserver.

Irene opened her beautiful eyes, blue as the cerulean vault above, and smiled languidly at the stranger.

The man, who was middle-aged and had the rich, dark, picturesque beauty of the southern climate, started and bent over her. He grew ashy pale beneath his olive skin.

"She recovers," he said, hoarsely. "She will live."

"Clarence, Clarence," cried a thin, peevish, authoritative voice at this moment, "I insist that you shall go and change your wet clothing this moment! You will catch your death of cold standing around here drenched and shivering."

Irene turned her languid eyes and saw a pale, faded, yet rather pretty little woman, clothed in an elegant blue yachting dress with gold buttons. She was looking at Irene's rescuer with a peevish look in her light hazel eyes.

The man scarcely seemed to heed her, so intent was his gaze at Irene. Some one handed him a glass of wine at that moment, and, kneeling down, he lifted the girl's head gently on his arm and held it to her lips.

"Drink," he said, in a voice so kind and musical it thrilled straight through the girl's tender heart. She drank a little of the beautiful, ruby-colored liquid, and it ran like fire through her veins, warming and reviving her chilled frame.

"Clarence," again reiterated the woman's peevish voice, "do oblige me by changing your wet clothing. You seem to think less of your own health than of this total stranger's."

His brow clouded over, but he forced a smile on his handsome face.

"Very well, Mrs. Stuart, I will do so to oblige you," he said; "but pray do not make me ridiculous among my friends by such unfounded apprehensions! I am not a baby to be killed by a bath in salt water!"

He went away, and several ladies came around Irene, gazing curiously at the pale, fair face. They whispered together over her wondrous beauty, which, despite the long hours of suffering endured in the water, shone resplendently as some fair white flower in the beams of the rising sun.

[Pg 34]

"Her clothing should be changed, too," said one, more thoughtful than the rest. "She shall have my bed and dry clothing from my wardrobe. She is about my size, I believe."

Irene smiled her languid gratitude to the kind-hearted lady, then her weary eyes closed again. An overpowering drowsiness and languor was stealing over her. When they had changed her drenched clothing for warm, dry, perfumed garments, and laid her in a soft, warm bed, she could no longer keep awake. She swallowed the warm, fragrant tea they brought her and fell into a long, deep, saving slumber.

The ladies were all burning with curiosity over the beautiful waif so strangely rescued from the cruel waves, but they refrained through delicacy from asking her questions when they saw how weary and exhausted she was. When she was asleep they examined her wet, cast-off linen for her name, but were disappointed, for they found none.

Then, with feminine curiosity, they peeped into the gold locket that hung by its slender chain around Irene's neck.

"What a handsome old man, and what a beautiful woman!" they cried. "Who can the girl be?"

Everyone was eager and interested except the faded, peevish Mrs. Stuart. She openly railed at her husband for risking his life for an utter stranger. She would not allow anyone to praise his bravery in her presence.

"I will not have him encouraged in such bravado and foolhardiness," she said, angrily.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Oh, Mrs. Leslie, isn't she just lovely? And she cannot be much older than I am!"

Irene had slept profoundly for a day and night, being physically and mentally exhausted by her terrible ordeal in the water. When she awoke after twenty-four hours of restful slumber those words of admiration rung in her ears, uttered by a soft, girlish voice, interrupted by an ominous hacking cough.

Irene opened her eyes and glanced languidly around her. Beside her bed she saw Mrs. Leslie, the little lady who had been so kind to her the day before. Next to the lady, in a low, cushioned rocker, sat a girl of thirteen or fourteen, richly and tastefully dressed, but with a thin face as white as alabaster, save for two burning spots of hectic on her hollow cheeks, and with large, brilliant black eyes burning with the feverish fire of consumption.

"So you are awake at last!" cried the girlish voice, joyously, "I thought you were going off into a

regular Rip Van Winkle sleep, and I have been just dying of curiosity over you."

Irene felt the sudden crimson dying her cheeks at the vivacious exclamation of the delicate-looking girl.

[Pg 35]

"Lilia, my love, you startle her," said Mrs. Leslie, gently; then she bent over Irene, saying kindly: "You feel better, I hope, after your long rest. This is Miss Stuart, the daughter of the gentleman who saved your life. She has been very anxious over you."

Irene looked gratefully at the dark-eyed girl who rose impulsively and kissed her.

"You are so pretty, I love you already," she cried, and Mrs. Leslie laughed.

"Pretty is as pretty does," she said, gaily, and Irene crimsoned painfully, as if the words had been a poisoned shaft aimed at her breast.

"Are you going to be well enough to sit up to-day?" pursued Lilia Stuart, anxiously. "Because if you are, I want you to come into my little saloon with me. I will give you my softest lounge to lie on. Aren't you very hungry? Will you take your breakfast now?"

"Yes, to all of your questions," Irene answered, looking in wonder at this girl who was but two years younger than herself, yet who seemed so very light and childish. Alas, poor Irene, that fatal night had forced her into a premature womanhood.

When she had taken a light, appetizing breakfast, and been robed in a white morning-dress, Mrs. Leslie advised her to spend the day in Lilia Stuart's saloon.

"She is a spoiled child," she said, "but we humor her all we can, for hers is a sad fate. She is dying of consumption."

"Dying—so young!" cried Irene with a shudder, remembering how horrible the thought of death had appeared to her while she was struggling in the cold, black waves.

"Yes, poor child, she is surely dying," sighed Mrs. Leslie. "Her father bought this beautiful yacht to take her to Italy by the advice of her physicians. They fancied a sea voyage might benefit her. But I do not believe she will survive the trip. Some days she is very ill. Poor little Lilia. It is very hard. She is Mr. Stuart's only child."

They went to Lilia's luxurious saloon which was fitted up with every comfort, and was exquisitely dainty and charming, though small. Mrs. Stuart was there with her daughter. She gave the stranger a little supercilious nod, and invited Mrs. Leslie to go on deck with her.

Lilia, who had just recovered from a violent spell of coughing, led her visitor to a softly cushioned satin lounge.

"You may rest here," she said. "I am well enough to-day to sit up in my easy-chair, but some days I lie down all day. You may call *me* Lilia. What shall I call you?"

"You may call me Irene," was the answer, while a burning flush mounted to the speaker's forehead.

"Irene—what a soft, sweet name! I like that," said Lilia, and just then the door unclosed and her father came in softly. "Ah, here is papa! you see I have a visitor, papa," she cried.

Mr. Stuart was a handsome, stately-looking man, middle-aged, with abundant threads of silver streaking his dark hair. His mouth, in repose, looked both sad and stern.

[Pg 36]

Irene arose and held out her hands.

"I owe you my life," she said, gratefully.

A transient, melancholy smile lit the grave, dark face.

"You need not thank me," he said, almost brusky. "Wait until years have come and gone, and you have fairly tested life. It will be a question then whether you will award me blame or praise for the turn I did you yesterday."

The large, dark, melancholy eyes held Irene's with a strange fascination.

"Ah! you think that youth is all sunshine and roses," she answered, almost against her will. "I have already learned the reverse of that, and yet I find life sweet."

"How came you to be in the water?" he asked, anxiously, sitting down and drawing Lilia to a seat upon his knee.

The deep color rushed over Irene's pale, lovely face. A deep shame overpowered her, and yet against her will something within her forced her to confess her sin.

"You will be shocked," she said; "but I must tell you the truth. I threw myself in."

"No," he exclaimed, in surprise.

"Yes," she answered, sadly.

"Oh, Irene, why did you do that?" exclaimed little Lilia.

"Why did you do it?" echoed the man.

"I had lost the only friend I had on earth, and I did not wish to live," she answered.

"Then I was right. You will not thank me for saving your life," exclaimed Mr. Stuart.

"Yes, for I repented my rashness as soon as my body struck the cold waves," she answered,

shivering. "I am thankful my life was spared to me. Life is hard, but death is harder."

He looked at the beautiful, agitated girl with deep interest. He began to see that there had been some romance in her life. Her face had a tragedy written on it.

"You will wish to return to your home and your friends?" he said.

An exceedingly bitter expression crossed the lovely young face, and for a moment she was silent. To herself she said: "I have neither home, nor friends, nor name. Those whom I left will be glad to think that I am dead."

Her heart was hardened against them all. She believed that her mother had left her to perish without one effort at rescue.

"She was glad to be rid of her illegitimate child," she said to herself, with inexpressible bitterness.

Mr. Stuart, thinking she had not heard him, repeated his question.

"You will be glad to return to your home and friends?"

She raised her large, beautiful eyes to his face. They were dark with unutterable despair.

"I have neither home nor friends—nor name!" she said.

He started, and looked at her keenly.

"You must have borne some name in the world," he said, almost sternly.

[Pg 37]

"I did; but I had no right to it, and I have renounced it forever. I am called Irene. That is the only name I can rightfully claim," she answered, bitterly, and drooping her shamed eyes from his earnest gaze.

For a moment both were silent.

Mr. Stuart's dark, sad eyes were fixed on her with a look that was almost pain. This fair, mysterious waif from the sea, stirred his soul to its deepest depths. His presence held the same mysterious fascination for her.

Lilia, the most innocent child in the world, and who had been listening with deepest interest, broke the silence, wide-eyed.

"You have only one name," she said. "How strange! I thought everyone had two names. I have. Mine is Lilia Stuart. Mamma's is the same. Papa's name is Clarence Stuart."

She paused, for a stifled cry broke from Irene's lips. The dainty saloon, the faces of the father and child seemed to fade before her. She was back in the parlor of Bay View, that fatal night when they had brought old Ronald Brooke home dead. Again she saw, through the blinding mist of her tears, Guy Kenmore extricating the fragment of paper from the dead hand. Again she looked over his arm and read:

"That the truth may be revealed, and my death-bed repentance accepted of Heaven, I pray humbly.

"CLARENCE STUART, Senior."

"My God! what does it mean?" she asked herself; and Guy Kenmore's ambiguous answer recurred to her mind:

"A great deal—or nothing!"

"Irene, are you ill?" asked Lilia, anxiously. "You almost screamed out, and your face is as white as chalk!"

"I am very nervous. You must not let me frighten you, Lilia," the girl answered, sadly.

Lilia came coaxingly to her side.

"I am going to tell you something," she said, with her pretty air of a spoiled child. "While you were asleep I was very naughty. I peeped at the beautiful lady in your locket!"

"Lilia!" her father exclaimed.

"All the ladies looked, papa," Lilia answered, self-excusingly. "And I am going to have one more peep! Irene will not care, I know!"

She flashed the lid open suddenly before his dazzled eyes. He could not choose but see that fair face, with its haunting eyes, and tremulous smile, and golden hair, Elaine's perfect image, even to the shadow of a tragedy that even a stranger could read on her beauty.

He gazed and gazed, and the breath fluttered sharply over his parted lips. Then, all in a moment, with a smothered cry of despair, he put out his hands and shut out the sight of the lovely face, even as his head fell back against the chair, his breath failed, and he lay all white and corpse-like before the two frightened girls.

Bertha had promised to keep Guy Kenmore informed of the progress of Elaine's illness, and she was glad to keep her word, as it afforded her a pretext for writing to the young man, and thus keeping her memory alive in his heart.

Since the supposed death of poor Irene, the artful Bertha was again laying plans for the capture of Mr. Kenmore. She hoped in time to allay the unfavorable impression she had created in his mind the night of the ball, and to establish an empire over his heart. Mr. Kenmore belonged to one of the wealthiest and most aristocratic families in Baltimore, and it was the hight of her ambition to become his wife.

Though the young man's interest in Elaine afforded her a pretext for corresponding with him, Bertha was vaguely displeased at his anxiety over her sister. It filled her with secret jealousy. Elaine was still young and beautiful enough to win the heart of the man who had married her daughter. Bertha was determined not to tolerate her as a rival.

"There is no accounting for men's tastes," she said, angrily, to her mother. "I supposed that his knowledge of Elaine's shameful secret would utterly disgust him with her. But he is almost as anxious over her as if he were her lover."

"Men regard these things somewhat differently from women," replied Mrs. Brooke. "It is possible he may regard Elaine with pity, rather than disgust. And pity is akin to love, you know."

In her heart Mrs. Brooke was rather elated at Guy's interest in Elaine. If she could not secure him for Bertha, she would be very pleased to have him for her elder daughter.

Bertha saw the bent of her mother's mind, and inwardly raged at it. Day and night her mind was filled with projects for diverting Guy's mind from the charms of her elder sister. On this particular state of her mind Elaine's announcement of leaving Bay View fell like healing balm.

Several days elapsed after her departure before Bertha communicated the fact to Mr. Kenmore in a brief, ambiguous note.

It was no part of her plan that he should become acquainted with their poverty, or with the reason of Elaine going.

So she wrote simply:

"Elaine convalesced more rapidly than was expected, and has left us in anger, declining to live with us longer, and making a mystery of her destination. Come down to Bay View and I will give you the particulars."

The note had the effect she anticipated of bringing Mr. Kenmore down to Bay View without delay.

Then Bertha told her story with well-acted grief and penitence.

"It was all my wretched fault," she sighed. "Elaine would not forgive me for giving way to my jealous passion that dreadful night, and betraying her shameful story. It was all in vain that I declared my penitence on my knees and implored her forgiveness. She would not hear me. She declared that she should hate me so long as she lived, and that the same roof could not shelter us both. So she went away from mamma and me, declaring that it was forever."

[Pg 39]

The arch deceiver here shed some quiet, natural-looking tears into her perfumed, black-bordered handkerchief.

"It was very hard, losing papa and Elaine, and poor little Irene, all, as it were, at one fatal stroke," she declared, sobbingly.

Mr. Kenmore was gravely, sadly silent. He did not think of doubting Bertha's clever tale. It seemed very natural that poor Elaine should resent her sister's cruel betrayal of the long-guarded secret of Irene's birth. He scarcely wondered that she had gone away desperately wounded and unforgiving, in the smart of her bitter pain.

"Oh, if you could know how bitterly I have repented all that I said that dreadful night," sighed Bertha, giving him a sidewise glance under her long, black lashes. "I must have been mad, I think. You know the great poet says, 'There's madness in the moon,' and that night Irene had fairly driven me wild. Oh, if I could only think you had forgotten the unkind things I said to you in my foolish passion!" she pursued, remorsefully.

Her pretty shame and penitence touched him.

"I wish that you could forget it as freely as I forgive it, Miss Brooke," he answered, kindly.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," she cried. "I have repented my folly in bitterness and tears. I let my own heart deceive me. I know now that a woman should not give her heart unasked, still less betray its tender throbings to the cold and careless."

She hid her face in her hands as if she could not bear his kindly gaze. Guy, touched by her tears and sorrow, did not know what to say or do. He was intensely sorry for her, forgetting how much he had disliked her that night when she had shown herself in her true colors.

"Let us forget it all, Miss Brooke," he said, uneasily, anxious to dry up her springing tears.

The beautiful brunette gave him a swift, shy look of gratitude.

"Oh, how gladly I will do so!" she exclaimed, putting out her delicate, white hand to him. "Shall we be friends as we were before—that fatal night?"

"Yes," he replied, pressing her hand kindly, but lightly, for he had no mind to be drawn into the role of a lover again.

"And you will come down to Bay View sometimes? Mamma and I will be so lonely and sad now, after losing so many dear links from our family circle," said the dark-eyed beauty, following up her advantage.

"Sometimes—when I can find leisure," he replied ambiguously.

And with that Bertha was obliged to be content. She hoped great things from the concessions he had already made. Now that Irene was dead, and Elaine gone, she would have no rivals, and surely, surely her beauty, her fascination, her tenderness for him must win him even against his will.

She brought the whole battery of her charms and graces to bear upon him, but was obliged to confess to herself that she had never seen him so sad, so grave, so pale and so *distract*. [Pg 40]

"It cannot be that he is sorry over that child's death. He ought to be glad," she thought to herself. "It must be that he assumes this gravity in deference to my affliction."

Yet she was troubled and chagrined when he left her so indifferently and went down to the shore. She watched him from her window, standing quietly, with folded arms, a tall, dark shape, outlined against the brightness of the summer eve.

"Of what is he thinking?" she asked her heart, uneasily.

It would have seemed strange to her if she had known. It even seemed strange to himself.

He was standing there gazing with dark, heavy eyes at the rolling waves, much as if he had been gazing on a grave.

He was recalling to mind the winsome, changeful, perfect beauty, the fire, the soul, the passion of the girl he had so strangely wedded, the girl who had recklessly flung herself into the deep, relentless waves, leaving him only the memory of the few, brief hours in which she had flashed before him in the extremes of joy and despair—one moment a beautiful, spirited, happy child, the next a passionate, despairing, crushed and broken-hearted woman!

"Poor little Irene," he said to himself. "If she had lived, who knows"—then a sigh, deeper than he knew, finished the regretful words.

CHAPTER XVI.

He stood there a long, long time, listening to the beat of the waves, and thinking of Irene and her mother. Bertha grew tired of watching him and stole away to try the effect of a new mourning bonnet that had just been sent home from the milliner. Guy had forgotten her. He was wrapped in other thoughts. New feelings had come to him since that night, when, indolent, *blase*, careless, he had come face to face with his fate. He was haunted by a voice, a face. Some sad words came to his mind:

"How could I tell I should love thee to-day,
Whom that day I held not dear?
How could I know I should love thee away
When I loved thee not anear?"

"Oh, that word Regret!
There have been nights and morns when we have sighed:
'Let us alone, Regret!'"

He turned away at last warned by the darkening twilight that fell like a pall over his lost bride's "vast and wandering grave."

"I must bid adieu to Mrs. Brooke and Bertha and return home to-night," was the thought in his mind.

Mrs. Brooke was in the parlor alone, Bertha being still absorbed in the new bonnet. A sudden impulse came to Guy Kenmore.

He sat down by the matron's side and gazed sympathetically into her still youthful-looking and handsome face.

"Miss Brooke left you no address when she went away, I presume?" he inquired in a tone of respectful anxiety. [Pg 41]

Mrs. Brooke had received her cue from Bertha and answered accordingly:

"No. She has deserted us most heartlessly, and I fear, I fear"—she broke down and buried her face in her handkerchief.

"You do not suppose that she can have made away with herself?" he cried in low, awe-struck tones.

"No, no; worse, far worse," groaned the apparently deeply agitated woman. "Oh, Mr. Kenmore, pity the grief and shame of a heart-broken mother—I fear that Elaine has returned to her wicked deceiver."

"Impossible!" he exclaimed, in stern and startled tones.

"Would that I could think so," sighed the unjust mother. "But my heart is torn by cruel suspicions. Elaine has never ceased to love that wicked wretch, and to whom else can she have gone?"

To herself she said, self-excusingly: "Poor Elaine, I would not blacken her name still more, only to help Bertha. If she marries him I shall manage to let him find out the real truth about Elaine directly afterward. She shall not lie under that base imposition any longer than is necessary for Bertha's welfare."

She was startled when she saw how reproachfully and sternly his brown eyes gleamed upon her.

"A mother is the last person to impute sin to her child," he said.

Mrs. Brooke only sobbed into her handkerchief by way of answer to this reproach.

"I have become deeply interested in your daughter's sad story, Mrs. Brooke," he went on. "Pray do not think me inquisitive if I ask you one question."

She looked at him in startled surprise.

"It is only this, Mrs. Brooke," he said. "Will you tell me in what city lived the man who so cruelly wronged beautiful Elaine?"

"It can do no good to rake up these old things," she said, half-fretfully.

"It was only a single question. It cannot hurt you to answer," he said, almost pleadingly.

She said to herself that it could not matter indeed, and she did not wish to offend the young man whom she hoped to capture for her son-in-law.

"It is very painful re-opening these old wounds," she sighed; "but since you insist upon it I will answer your question. The young villain lived at Richmond."

He bowed his thanks.

"I already know his name," he said, "and since you have no son to send upon this delicate mission, Mrs. Brooke, I will make it my business to inquire if your elder daughter has indeed deserted you for her base betrayer."

She was about to protest against his doing so on the first pretext she could think of, when [Pg 42] Bertha's entrance suddenly closed the conversation.

He made his adieux and departed, giving an evasive reply to the young lady's wishes for his swift return.

One week later Mrs. Brooke received a letter from him dated at Richmond.

"You wronged your daughter by your unkind suspicions," he wrote; "she is not with the man you thought. Clarence Stuart left Richmond on the very day of your husband's death, in his own yacht, with his wife and daughter, and a party of friends. They were on a pleasure-trip to Italy. You will no doubt be glad to hear that Elaine is not so wicked as you believed her."

Thus the letter closed abruptly. Mrs. Brooke, in a curt note, thanked Mr. Kenmore for his information. She did not dare give way to her indignation at his interference, dreading that it would injure the success of Bertha's husband-hunting.

CHAPTER XVII.

Lilia Stuart was very much frightened by her father's strange seizure. She was about to scream loudly for help when Irene, with a sensitive horror of scenes, laid her white hand gently but firmly over the parted lips.

"Do not be frightened, Lilia," she said. "Get some cold water. That is all that is necessary."

Lilia sprang to the ice-flagon and returned with a glass of cold water in her trembling grasp. Irene thrust her white hand into the cold fluid, and deluged Mr. Stuart's rigid white face with it.

It produced the desired effect. Mr. Stuart shivered, opened his eyes, and stared blankly around him for a moment.

"Oh, papa, you are better," cried Lilia, springing to throw her arms around his neck. "I am so frightened, dearest papa, shall I not call mamma?"

Something like dread or fear flashed for a moment into his open dark eyes.

"No, for Heaven's sake, don't!" he exclaimed, testily; "I detest scenes! There is nothing at all the matter with me! Say nothing to your mother, Lilia. You understand me?"

"Yes, papa," the girl replied, obediently. "But what made you faint?" she continued, curiously.

An expression of deep annoyance clouded Mr. Stuart's handsome face.

"Pooh, I did not faint," he said, sharply. "A mere dizziness overcame me. Don't let your fancies run away with your reason, Lilia."

He rose as he spoke, and without a glance at Irene or the open locket that still swung at her throat, hastily quitted the room. Lilia, forgetting her guest, followed after him.

Irene thus left alone, fell into a startled reverie.

She had not been deceived like Lilia by Mr. Stuart's short assertion of dizziness. She knew that he had actually fainted, and she believed that the bare sight of her mother's face in the locket had been the cause of his agitation.

"He recognized the face, and it had power to stay the very pulses of his life for a moment," she said to herself. [Pg 43]

A terrible suspicion darted into her young mind, chilling the blood in her veins, and driving it coldly back upon her heart.

"Can this man be my father, my mother's base betrayer?" she thought.

She did not like to think so. Her heart had gone out strangely to this man, the savior of her young life. She liked to think that he was noble, good and brave. For the villain who had betrayed her trusting young mother she had nothing in her heart but hatred, and a burning desire for revenge.

Suddenly the saloon door opened softly. Mr. Stuart had eluded Lilia and returned.

He came to her side and sat down again. His dark face was strangely pale still. There was a troubled look in his large, dark eyes.

"You must have thought my agitation strange just now, Irene," he said.

"Yes," she answered, gravely.

"And—you guessed the reason?" he inquired, slowly, fixing a keen glance on her face.

She raised her beautiful, troubled blue eyes steadily to his.

"You recognized the pictures in my locket," she replied, touching it with her trembling hand.

"My God, yes!" he answered hoarsely. "Irene, child, for the love of Heaven, tell me what this man and woman are to you."

She had no answer for him. In her own heart she was saying, dumbly:

"I cannot tell him. It is my mother's secret. She guarded it for sixteen years, and I must not betray her."

He looked at the white, agonized face of the girl, and repeated his question:

"Tell me what this man and woman are to you."

"I cannot tell you, Mr. Stuart," she replied, falteringly.

"You mean you will not," he said, studying her downcast face, with grave, attentive eyes.

"I *cannot*," she replied. "It is a secret that belongs to others. I cannot betray confidence."

A baffled look came into his troubled, marble-white face.

"Do you mean to preserve an utter *incognito* among us?" he asked.

"I must," she answered, while great, trembling tears started beneath her drooping lashes. "I can say no more than what I have told you already. I am homeless, friendless, nameless!"

"How old are you?" he inquired.

"I was sixteen years old but a few days ago," she answered.

He looked again keenly at her face, and bending forward, again looked at the beautiful, pictured face of Elaine Brooke.

A shudder shook his form.

"You are strangely like her—strangely like," he said. "Child, I would give much to hear you say what this beautiful woman is to you."

Irene looked gravely at him, her young bosom shaken by a storm of suspicion. [Pg 44]

"Confidence invites confidence," she said, harshly. "I will tell you what this woman is to me if you tell me what she once was to you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Irene's stern, abrupt question produced a startling effect upon Mr. Stuart. His face grew ashy pale, even to his lips, and he gazed suspiciously, almost angrily, at the girl's grave face. Seeing only an earnest wonder mirrored in her clear, sweet eyes, he sprang abruptly from his seat, and without replying to her question began to pace rapidly up and down the room.

Her grave, troubled eyes followed him slowly up and down, while a terrible pain tore her heart.

He seemed to have forgotten her presence, as with clenched hands and wildly staring eyes he paced up and down, muttering bitter phrases to himself.

Irene caught the echo of some passionate words quoted in a voice of raging scorn:

"Falser than all fancy fathoms,
Falser than all songs have sung,
Puppet to a father's threat,

And servile to a shrewish tongue."

Suddenly he stopped in his wild march, and came back to her side.

"No, child, keep your secret," he said, hoarsely. "Keep your secret, and I will keep mine. God help you if yours be as hard to bear as mine."

She must have pitied the dreary despair of his face and voice if her heart had not been hardened against him by her terrible suspicions. A hard, scornful laugh broke over her lips.

"Remorse is always hard to bear," she said, bitterly, to herself.

He looked at her in wonder.

"We will keep our own sad secrets," he repeated, mournfully. "But you are friendless. I will be your friend. You are homeless. My home shall be yours. You are nameless. You shall be Lilia's sister, and share her name. It is a noble one, and has never been stained by disgrace."

She looked at him gravely, fixedly.

Did he speak the truth? Did not her mother's shame and hers lie at his door?

"Do you accept my proposition?" he inquired, anxiously.

For a moment she was tempted to give him an angry passionate denial, to say bitterly:

"No, I will not have these things on sufferance that should be mine by right. I will not have your favor or your pity, you demon, who blasted my mother's life and mine! I could rather curse you!"

But on a sudden she remembered that her suspicions were merely suspicions. She had no proof that this noble-looking man, who seemed crushed by the weight of some inward sorrow, was her father. Perhaps she wronged him in her thoughts.

[Pg 45]

"I must give him the benefit of the doubt, since he saved my life," she thought, and put out a cold, little hand to him.

"I must perforce accept your kindness," she said, mournfully, "since I have not a friend to turn to in all the wide, wide world."

He crushed the slender fingers in his firm clasp.

"I will be your friend, always—remember that," he said.

Irene would have thanked him feebly, but the saloon door hastily unclosed, admitting Lilia and her faded, peevish-looking mother.

"You here, Clarence!" exclaimed the latter, in a tone of marked displeasure.

He gave her a quick, cold look. Her eyes fell before it. Cowed by her husband's superior will, she vented her spite on Irene.

"Lilia has been telling me that you threw yourself into the water," she said, flashing her eyes full of greenish rage on the pale young girl. "Oh, you wicked, wicked girl!"

"Madam!" exclaimed Irene, in a proud and haughty tone.

Mr. Stuart advanced, and drew his wife's arm through his own.

"Come with me, Mrs. Stuart, I want you," he said, leading her deliberately from the room.

Lilia stood looking at Irene's indignant face, with a strange expression. The child was like a cat, one moment all silky fur and purring fondness, the next ready to attack with teeth and claws.

She saw the resentment at her mother's coarse attack burning in Irene's dark blue eyes, and exclaimed, with peevish childishness:

"Mamma says you must have done something very bad, indeed, or you wouldn't have thrown yourself into the water! She says you are a bad, wicked girl, and that I musn't entertain you in my pretty saloon, so I guess you had better go back to Mrs. Leslie, and let me have my lounge!"

Irene gazed at the child, almost petrified by her startling change from sweetness and affection to spite and rancour. She saw the mother's spirit flashing from the eyes of the child, and rising with a proud step, left the room without a word.

"Is he really my father," she asked herself, "and is that coarse woman the one who was thought better to bear his name than my angel-hearted mother? And that sickly, petted child—does she shed greater lustre on the proud name of Stuart than I would have done?"

She hastened to Mrs. Leslie's tiny apartment, and finding herself alone, threw herself down upon the white bed and burst into a torrent of bitter tears.

Mrs. Leslie entering more than an hour later found her there, still sobbing and weeping in a very abandonment of despair. She stooped down impulsively and kissed the pure, white brow.

"Do not mind Mrs. Stuart, my dear," she said consolingly. "She is a spiteful, jealous cat, and hates you for your fair, young face."

[Pg 46]

Irene looked up, startled. How had Mrs. Leslie learned so much?

"Oh, I have heard about her naughtiness to you just now," smiled the lady. "Do not grieve, Irene. I will be your friend. I am a wealthy widow, and have no one to please but myself. I have fallen in love with you, you mysterious little waif! You shall be my *protege* if you will."

Seeing that Irene could not speak for tears, she slipped a little note into her hand.

"Dry your eyes and read that," she said. "It is my recommendation to your favor."

Irene obeyed her in surprise. It was a pencil scrawl, hastily done.

"My poor, unfortunate child," it ran, "owing to the hardness of my wife I am unable to take you into the bosom of my family, as I wished to do; but I am none the less interested in your welfare. You will be Mrs. Leslie's *protege*. She is one of my oldest friends, and will be like a sister to you, while you may always command me as your best friend. It will be necessary, perhaps, that you should assume some name in order to avoid censure and suspicion. The world is very hard and cold, as you may have learned ere now, and it is best to put every defense possible between you and its sneers. Let Mrs. Leslie assist you in the selection of a suitable name."

The hurried note closed abruptly with the name of Clarence Stuart. Irene raised her eyes wonderingly to the lady's face.

"Why does he take such an interest in me?" she asked.

"He saved your life, my dear, and you seem in some sort to belong to him. Besides, he is naturally one of the noblest and best of men. His heart is full of pity for the weak and helpless," said the lady, enthusiastically.

There was a moment's silence; then Mrs. Leslie said, kindly:

"What do you say, my dear—will you be my little sister, and let me care for you?"

"Yes, until I can act for myself," Irene answered, softly, and pressing her girlish lips gratefully upon the lady's small white hand.

CHAPTER XIX.

Mrs. Leslie smoothed the girl's rippling golden curls tenderly.

"And the name?" she said. "Shall you not take Mr. Stuart's advice about that? It will be far—far better."

Irene was silent, warm blushes drifting over her fair, young face.

"Think," said the gentle lady, "there must surely be some name to which you have a legal right. Is there not, my dear?"

Deeper and warmer grew the blush on the fair, girlish face.

She had suddenly remembered Guy Kenmore, and the ceremony which Mr. Clavering had declared to be binding upon them. [Pg 47]

"My name is Mrs. Kenmore," she said to herself, with a strange feeling trembling at her heart as she recalled the handsome man to whom she was bound.

Then a flash of pride usurped the thrill of almost unconscious tenderness.

"He did not wish for me to be his wife," she said to herself. "I remember he regarded me simply as a spoiled child. I shall not claim his name, shall never trouble him more. He shall think me dead."

She looked up gravely at her kind friend.

"Mrs. Leslie," she said, "there is no name from out my past that I wish to claim. I have severed myself violently from all that once bound me. I have done no wrong, I have sinned no sin, but I have been terribly wronged and sinned against. It is true I have borne a name in the world where I used to move, but when I found it was not mine I flung it away. I will not be called by it, I will have nothing to remind me of the past. Now tell me what I shall do."

Mrs. Leslie was silent a few moments. She wondered who had been so cruel as to wrong this beautiful girl, whose words, whose looks, whose every action was so pure and high-toned.

After a moment's reflection she said:

"My maiden name was Berlin; will you bear that, Irene?"

"You would give your own name to me, an utter stranger?" Irene cried, in grateful surprise.

"Yes, because, as I said just now, I have fallen in love with you. Whatever may be the sad secret of your past I can look into your eyes and see that you are pure and good. The name of Berlin is an old and honorable one, but I do not believe you would disgrace it in the bearing," said the sweet lady, heartily.

"Then I accept the loan of it with sincerest gratitude," replied Irene, through springing tears.

"Then you shall be called Irene Berlin," said Mrs. Leslie. "It is a pretty name, and will suit you. And now we will discuss other affairs. I am going to Italy with the Stuarts. Shall you be willing to go with me?"

"Nothing could please me better than to leave my native land behind me," replied the girl.

"That is settled, then. And now do you feel well enough to go on deck with me? It is a lovely day. The sun is shining softly and brightly. The sea is almost as calm and blue as the sky. The fresh air will do you a world of good."

"I have nothing to wear," said Irene, flushing deeply.

"That is true," laughed Mrs. Leslie. "The party dress in which you came among us is not exactly a yacht costume. But I can remedy that defect, I think, from my own wardrobe. Fortunately we are about the same size."

She brought out from her trunk a dark blue velvet suit and a cap of the same with a jaunty bird's wing on one side. Nothing could have become Irene better. The suit fitted to a charm, and when Mrs. Leslie set the jaunty cap on the streaming curls she exclaimed in wonder at the dazzling loveliness of her *protege*.

"It is no wonder Mrs. Stuart was jealous of you, you are the loveliest creature I ever saw," she exclaimed frankly.

"If I were not so unhappy you would make me vain, Mrs. Leslie," sighed the lovely girl.

"You are too young to be unhappy, my dear. I hope you will soon forget your sorrows. But come, let us go on deck and I will introduce you to your *Compagnons du Voyage*."

They went out and Irene's eyes were dazzled with the beauty of the day. The sky was deeply blue, with little white clouds sailing over it. The sun shone on the blue waves, and white-winged sea-gulls darted here and there. Several ladies and gentlemen were on deck, walking and chatting. They started in surprise—the women envious—the men admiring—at the new comer. She looked like a young princess. Her step was light and proud, her bearing calm and self-possessed. The sun shone on her golden curls, her fair face and her velvet blue eyes, making her look like a perfect picture. Several gentlemen came around Mrs. Leslie, waiting eagerly for an introduction.

[Pg 48]

CHAPTER XX.

Lilia Stuart had not failed to repeat Irene's confession of her namelessness to her mother. Mrs. Stuart, with the malice of a little mind, industriously disseminated the news among her guests. Curiosity and excitement were rife, regarding the mysterious waif from the sea.

So when Irene came upon deck, looking so wondrously lovely in the blue velvet dress and her rippling, waving, golden curls, they all came around her, full of wonder and surprise. They were amazed and disconcerted when Mrs. Leslie, with the cool self-possession that never deserted her under any circumstances, proceeded to introduce her *protege* by the name of Miss Berlin.

"Why, we thought she had no name—that she was a child of shame. Mrs. Stuart certainly said so," the ladies exclaimed to each other in whispers. "Depend upon it there is something wrong. We will be very shy of having anything to do with her."

If Irene had been homely and stupid, they might have pitied her, but her girlish beauty and grace at once enlisted the spite and envy of their little minds. Mrs. Leslie was the only lady on board who did not wish that she had perished in the cold waves. They regarded her as an interloper and unwelcome burden on them.

The gentlemen took a different view of the matter from their feminine friends. They were full of wonder and admiration over the beautiful stranger.

There were three gentlemen beside Mr. Stuart, on board the yacht, as there were three ladies. With two of these men our story has no interest. The third one, who was a distant relative of Mr. Stuart, and who at once fell desperately in love with our heroine, we will slightly describe.

He was tall and slight, with very dark eyes and hair, and a face that though weak and irresolute in expression, was rather handsome, having an effeminate mouth and chin that lent sweetness to his ever-ready smile. His dark eyes had a trick of falling beneath your glance, as if some inner consciousness made him shrink from meeting you with an open, steady gaze. In dress and manner he was rather a dandy, and was counted popular among the fair sex for his obliging disposition, and also a very fair tenor voice, with which he accompanied himself on the guitar. He answered to the name of Julius Revington.

[Pg 49]

On the heart of this handsome ladies'-man, the fair, blonde loveliness of Irene at once committed terrible havoc.

He gazed as if fascinated, on that arch, bright face to which the delicate color mounted in a roseate glow at his ardent gaze.

Mrs. Leslie smiled as she saw how deeply he was smitten with her *protege's* charms, and immediately introduced him.

He acknowledged the introduction with delight, and invited Miss Berlin to promenade the deck with his arm for support.

As Irene gently declined, pleading weariness for excuse, he brought her a comfortable chair and stood beside her ostensibly to shade her face from the too ardent kisses of the wind and sun, but really that he might feast his eyes on her fresh and pearl-fair beauty. Revington holding his umbrella over Irene provoked some mirth and more envy in the breasts of Brown and Jones. The ladies were unanimously disgusted. It was too bad that she should wile Revington from them. Miss Smith, a tall brunette who rather regarded him as her own prey, looked daggers. Mrs. Leslie was secretly amused and delighted. She knew that Mrs. Stuart had been forming a coalition

against Irene, and it pleased her to see how hard they took Revington's desertion to the banner of the newcomer.

But rave as they would, Irene's conquest was potent to everyone but herself. She who had never had a lover in the course of her brief, secluded life, was innocent of coquetry and unversed in the arts of love. She accepted Revington's attentions kindly, and congratulated herself that she had won another friend.

But though she was patient and gentle the beau could not congratulate himself on any rapid progress in her favor. She was strangely sad and grave. The red lips had no smiles for him though they answered him gently when he spoke. The blue eyes did not look at him, though he tried all his arts to win them to meet his gaze. They wandered strainingly across the sea, as if seeking something lost to sight. The lids, with their heavy golden lashes, had a pathetic droop as if unshed tears weighed them down. The lips quivered now and then as if with mute sobs. A story was written on her face—a story of sorrow and pain that clouded somewhat its spring time loveliness as clouds overshad an April sky. Revington, who was poetical, thought of some applicable lines, and bending over her softly repeated them:

"It is raining, little flower;
Be glad of rain—
Too much sun would wither thee—
'Twill shine again.
The clouds are very black, 'tis true,
But just behind them shines the blue.

"Art thou weary, tender heart?
Be glad of pain—
In sorrow sweetest things will grow,
As flowers in rain.
God watches and thou wilt have sun
When clouds their perfect work have done."

[Pg 50]

The sweet words touched her. She had not known before that the sorrow at her heart was reflected on her face. She looked at him then a little wistfully.

"Do I indeed look so sad?" she asked.

"Far too sad for one so young," he answered. "I wish I could teach you to smile."

She did smile then, but the smile was sadder than tears.

"Ah, you should have known me even a week ago," she said, impulsively. "I had never known a real sorrow then. But now, unless I could forget, I do not think I could ever again be glad."

She thought of the old gray head that she had so loved lying low in the dark grave; of Elaine, her mother, who had left her to perish in the dark waves after she had followed her almost to the brink, and a fountain of sorrow, of bitterness, and of shame welled up within her heart.

Revington looking keenly at her, wondered what the sorrow had been that had shadowed her brow and heart.

"I will find it out if I can," he said to himself, "and I will teach her to forget if I can."

He little dreamed how vain a task he had set himself. As the summer days glided softly past, and the white-sailed yacht flew over the blue ocean waves blithely as a bird, Irene began to understand the drift of his attentions.

"Revington is making love to you, my dear," Mrs. Leslie had said, laughing, and thus her young eyes were opened.

It amused her at first, and then she became disgusted. It angered her to see the artful little traps he had set to surprise her secret from her—the secret of her hidden past. From a desire for flirtation at first he had glided into ardent love, and his longing to know the story of her past grew greater daily in accordance with the strength of his passion.

But Irene, from mere friendliness at first had turned to ice. She repelled his attentions now, instead of languidly enduring them. In her heart she contrasted the weakly, handsome face and shrinking eyes with one that was engraved on her memory as possessing of all manly beauty the most.

Mrs. Stuart looked on at the little by-play with coldly disapproving eyes. She had begun with a jealous hatred of Irene, because her husband had saved her life. Her aversion never grew less. Indeed, the beauty, and grace, and romantic mystery that enfolded the girl, only added fuel to the flame of her wrath and jealousy. She knew, although she was chary of expressing it by word or sign, that Mr. Stuart took a great and almost painful interest in the object of her antipathy.

[Pg 51]

It vexed her when she saw Julius Revington losing his heart to the girl, but she never expostulated with him but once, although they were intimate friends. Then he spoke a few words that effectually silenced her, and she learned for the first time how his dark eyes could flash beneath their drooping lids. She let him alone after that, and contented herself with spiteful looks and sneering words behind his back.

In the balmy breezes and salty breath of the summer ocean, Lilia Stuart's insidious disease took a new and flattering turn. She had fewer ill-turns. Her thin cheeks rounded out with something like

healthy plumpness. Her large eyes did not look so large in her childish face. She would have returned to her first enthusiastic admiration and friendship for Irene, but her mother maliciously fostered ill-will and contempt in her mind, and Irene was the recipient of many bitter impertinences from the misguided child, which she received with cold and disdainful scorn. Mrs. Leslie was the only friend she had who dared speak openly and kindly for her. All the rest of the party, except Julius Revington, were weakly dominated by Mrs. Stuart.

They reached Italian shores at last, and Arno was secured for the Stuarts and their guests. There was a short and sharp debate between Mr. Stuart and his wife, who objected to receive Irene as her guest. But the lady knew how far she could transgress against her husband's will, and she found she had reached the limit, and was forced to yield ungraciously to his desires.

A cold and formal invitation was therefore accorded to Miss Berlin as Mrs. Leslie's friend. Irene, burning with resentment and wounded pride, would fain have declined and gone out into the cold, strange world to seek her bread among strangers, but Mrs. Leslie's gentle solicitation prevailed, and she accepted the grudging invitation as reluctantly as it had been given. We will leave her there, in "the land of the orange, the myrtle and vine," and return to Guy Kenmore.

CHAPTER XXI.

Mr. Kenmore, in his pursuit of knowledge, had no difficulty in tracing the Stuarts in Richmond.

At the elegant and fashionable West End of the city, a stylish residence was pointed out to him as the home of Clarence Stuart and his family.

He remained in the city a few days and stored his mind with all the available facts regarding this, to him, interesting family.

It was easy to do. The Stuarts, as wealthy, fashionable and aristocratic people, were well known. The city papers had duly announced their departure for Italy in their own yacht, the *Sea-Bird*. Their movements were considered generally interesting to the public, to judge by the paragraphs that appeared in the daily journals.

Mr. Kenmore heard, incidentally, that Clarence Stuart's wife had been a wealthy heiress when he married her, some fifteen years before. [Pg 52]

Casual inquiry elicited the fact that Clarence Stuart's father had been dead three weeks.

Guy Kenmore was startled by this information. It went far towards confirming his theory of the fragment of letter found in old Ronald Brooke's dead hand, and which he treasured carefully in his pocket-book.

"It was the senior Stuart's death-bed confession," he said to himself. "What could that dying man have to confess to old Ronald Brooke?"

What but the story of a crime that lay so heavy on his dying hours, that he was fain to seek the pardon of God and of man before he dared go out into the terrible unknown?

Who had dared to wrest that important confession from Mr. Brooke's hand, and strike him dead with the secret unrevealed?

Shuddering, Guy Kenmore asked himself this question to which the answer seemed only too clear.

The only persons who could have been vitally interested in old Clarence Stuart's death-bed confession were his son and his family.

Was Clarence Stuart, junior, a guilty man or a wronged man?

Did he or did he not know of his father's death-bed confession?

By whose hand had that confession been sent to old Ronald Brooke?

Who had followed behind the messenger and torn that document from the old man's hand with a death-blow?

These questions rung unceasingly through Guy Kenmore's head. They sickened him with their terrible suggestions of hidden guilt and crime. He believed more and more that Ronald Brooke had been murdered instead of dying a natural death as his physicians had asserted.

But how was he to find the murderer, and how bring his guilt home to him?

Mr. Kenmore, who was naturally indolent and ease-loving, and who had been nurtured in these habits by his life of luxury and indulgence, found himself staggered by these heavy responsibilities that appeared to have been thrust upon him. The blood of Ronald Brooke seemed to cry aloud to him from the earth for vengeance on his murderer.

"Why has Heaven selected me for the instrument of righting Elaine Brooke's wrongs?" he asked himself, in wonder.

He did not relish the duty, but when he would fain have given it up, a voice within him loudly urged him forward in the path of duty.

"What good can it do?" he answered back, impatiently, to that inward monitor. "Mr. Brooke is dead, Irene is dead, her mother has broken loose from all her old ties and associations, and

hidden her life away in the great thronging world. Can vengeance bring the dead back, or give peace to the broken heart of that poor wronged woman?"

Yet in spite of his sophistries and protestations the voice within still loudly echoed: "Go on."

He wrote to Mrs. Brooke informing her of her erroneous supposition concerning Elaine's whereabouts, then he turned his whole attention to the Stuarts. [Pg 53]

"If I could see Clarence Stuart I could form my opinion of him much better," he thought. "I have nothing else to do. Why not follow them to Italy?"

He went home to Baltimore and made his preparations for going abroad. There was no one to oppose his will. His parents were dead, his two sisters were married to wealthy men, and were too much absorbed in fashion and pleasure to miss him greatly. Somewhat reluctantly he went, not remembering that the path of duty is oftentimes the straight road to happiness.

No dream came to him as he walked the deck those beautiful moonlit nights of summer and mused on the repulsive task to which he was going, that fate was leading him straight to the presence of her who had become a sweet and softened memory to his heart; whose childish willfulness and flitting spites had so irked him once, but which now he remembered only as

"Delicious spites and darling angers,
And airy forms of flitting change."

Death had idealized his blue-eyed girl-bride, and he loved her now when it seemed too late.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Italia, oh, Italia, thou who hast
The fatal gift of beauty which became
A funeral dower of present woes and past."

The words fell softly from the lips of Irene as she walked beneath the shade of the orange and olive and lemon trees in the villa garden. The balmy air was sweet with the breath of countless flowers, the birds sang sweetly in the boughs above her head, and the blue waves of the Arno ebbed and flowed at her feet with a pleasant murmur. Overhead the clear blue sky of Italy, which poets have painted in deathless verse and artists on immortal canvas, sparkled and glanced in all its radiant sapphire beauty.

She was musing on the beauty and the sorrow of this lovely hapless land, and the famous words of Byron came aptly to her lips. She repeated them softly and sadly, and someone who had stolen upon her unaware answered musingly:

"Do you believe with Byron that the gift of beauty is always fatal, Miss Berlin?"

She started and flushed with annoyance. It was Julius Revington. He had become her very shadow, seeming unable to exist out of her sight.

The beautiful girl in her white dress with the roses and myrtles in her small hand, turned her face away pettishly.

"How you startled me, Mr. Revington," she said, in a tone of displeasure. "I thought myself alone."

"You are very cruel to hide yourself out here in the orange ground," said the gentleman, sentimentally. "Do you know that I have been searching for you everywhere?"

"No, I did not know it. If I had, I should have hidden myself in a securer place than this," she replied, with all the frank cruelty of a young girl. [Pg 54]

"Miss Berlin, you are very cruel," complained the lover. "Sometimes I really wonder whether you say such sharp things in earnest, or if you are only coquetting."

The blue eyes flashed.

"I know nothing of coquetry," said Irene, sharply. "I mean everything that I say."

He came nearer and looked under the brim of the shady hat at the lovely, irritated face and sparkling eyes.

"Oh, Miss Berlin, why will you treat me so coldly when you know that I love the very ground you walk upon?" he exclaimed, almost abjectly.

"I do not want your love," she answered, stamping her little foot impatiently on the turf, as if the love he confessed for her lay veritably beneath her feet.

His weakly, handsome face grew pale at her impetuous words.

"Wait, Irene, before you so cruelly reject me," he exclaimed. "You are young, but not too young to know that it is wrong to trifle with the human heart."

"I have not trifled with yours," she interrupted, flushing at the imputation.

"But all the same your beauty has wiled my heart from me," he said. "I have loved you from the first hour I saw your charming face. I lay my heart, my hand, my fortune at your feet, Irene. Will

you not take pity on me and be my wife?"

The flowers fell from her hands down upon the sweet, green turf, and her face grew pale with emotion. It was the first time a lover had ever wooed her, yet she was a wife—a wife unwooed and unwon—yet bound, how plainly she recalled the solemn, fateful words, by ties that no man "should put asunder."

She looked at the dark, handsome face that showed at its best with that light of love lingering on it. Between her and it another face arose, languid, careless, indifferent, yet fascinating for the soul that looked out of the bright, yet soft brown eyes. She remembered that she had thought him handsome—handsomer than any of Bertha's and Elaine's beaux—a flush rose slowly to her face as she remembered that she had told him so.

"No wonder he despised me," she said to herself, and she turned back to Mr. Revington trying to forget Guy Kenmore, for she was now ashamed of the willfulness and spite she had displayed before him.

"Will you be my wife, Irene?" repeated her adoring lover.

"I cannot, Mr. Revington. I do not love you," she answered, in a gentler tone than she had used to him before.

He threw himself impetuously at her feet and grasped her hands.

"Let me teach you to love me," he cried, abjectly.

Her crimson lips curled in faint scorn.

"I could not learn the lesson," she replied. "You are not the kind of man whom I could love," and again the handsome face of Guy Kenmore rose before her mind's eye.

"Why do I think of *him*?" she asked herself.

[Pg 55]

"What sort of a man *could* you love, Miss Berlin?" he asked, almost despairingly, and again the proud, handsome, indifferent face of Guy Kenmore rose tormentingly before her.

"Why do I think of *him*?" she asked herself again, in wonder, and forgetting to answer the question of the kneeling man. She had drawn her hand away from his frenzied clasp, and now he gently plucked at her dress to draw her attention.

"Irene, my love, my darling, my beautiful queen, take pity on me, and do not reject me," he cried, pleadingly. "Tell me what manner of man you could love, and I will make myself over by your model. I could do anything, be anything, for your sweet sake!"

Again the blue eyes looked at him in faint scorn, and the red lips curled.

"Do get up from the ground, Mr. Revington," she said. "It is quite undignified; I dislike it very much."

He was too much carried away by his passion to observe the slight inflection of scorn in her tone.

"No, I will not rise," he answered. "I will kneel at your feet, like the veriest slave, until you retract your cruel refusal, and give me leave to hope."

"But I cannot do so," she answered, more gently. "Do be reasonable, and drop the subject, Mr. Revington. It is quite impossible, this that you ask. I do not love you, and I cannot be your wife."

"You might learn to love me," he persisted, almost sullenly.

"Never. You do not realize my ideal," the girl replied, with an unconscious blush.

"Tell me what your ideal is like, Irene," said her kneeling lover.

"I have read some lines that fit him," she replied, half dreamily, half to herself, and still with that soft blush on her beautiful face. "I will repeat them to you."

Yet she seemed to have forgotten him, as she fixed her eyes on the blue, rolling waves of the Arno, and the words fell like music from her beautiful lips:

"He to whom I give affection
Must have princely mein and guise.
If devotion lay below me,
I would stoop not for the prize
Bend down to me very lowly,
But bend always from above;
I would scorn where I could pity,
I must honor where I love.

"Did he come as other lovers
With his praises low and sweet,
Did he woo in the old phrases,
Kneeling humbly at my feet—
How my heart would be unfettered,
And my thoughts soar free and high,
As a bird that beats at morning
'Gainst the gateway of the sky.

"He must hold his perfect manhood,

[Pg 56]

He must keep his place of pride;
Bring me fond words as a lover,
And true words as friend and guide.
So in him my fate would meet me,
Life's surrender all complete,
Fearlessly I'd take my future,
And I'd lay it at his feet!"

Her ideal lover, so unlike himself, sent a blush of shame tingling to his cheeks. He sprang hastily to his feet and looked down at her from his tall height sullenly.

"You are unlike all the women I have ever met before," he said, with repressed anger. "You would have a man play the master, not the slave."

And in his heart he longed to be her master then and compel her love in return for that which glowed in his heart.

She looked up at him with a slight smile.

"You misunderstand me," she replied. "I could not tolerate a master as you mean it—a tyrant. Still less could I love a slave. My ideal must have manly dignity and gracious pride. He must look like Jean Ingelow's Laurance:

"A mouth for mastery and manful work,
A certain brooding sweetness in the eyes,
A brow the harbor of grave thought, and hair
Saxon of hue."

"So I must change my looks as well as my nature before I can please my lady," he said with sudden bitterness.

"Yes," she answered, with a light and careless laugh, for, to do her justice, she did not dream how deep his love lay in his heart. She believed him weak and fickle, as his face indicated, and as he was. If he had won her, lovely and charming as she was, he must have wearied of her in time, as it was his nature to do; but being unattainable she at once became the one thing precious in his sight, without which he could never know happiness.

He went away and left her to her solitude under the orange tree with its glistening green leaves, its waxen-white flowers and golden globes of fruit. She looked a little sadly at the flowers which had fallen from her hands and which her kneeling lover had crushed into the turf.

"The great booby," she said indignantly to herself. "He has remorselessly crushed all my beautiful flowers."

Was it an omen?

CHAPTER XXIII.

Julius Revington went away from the presence of the girl he adored, cast down but not destroyed. He had set his mind doggedly on winning her and he was by no means despondent of winning her yet.

His grosser, weaker nature could not comprehend the higher, loftier nature of Irene. Her gentle intimation of how he fell short of her ideal had not greatly impressed him except to fill him with a certain amount of sullen jealousy toward some unknown person or other whom it was evident existed in her mind, and possibly in flesh and blood upon the earth.

[Pg 57]

"Perhaps she has already given her heart away," he thought to himself. "But, no, she is too young. That cannot be."

As he walked slowly along the path toward the villa something bright and shining on the ground attracted his attention. He stooped and picked it up.

A cry of eager surprise broke from his lips.

It was the pretty, blue-enamelled locket that Irene usually wore around her white throat.

It had become detached from the slender gold chain and fallen on the ground without her knowledge.

Julius Revington had endured many pangs of baffled curiosity over this locket, of whose contents he had heard much from the ladies but which he had never had the good fortune to behold.

Pausing now in the quiet, secluded path, he deliberately touched the spring of the pretty bauble. The lid flew open, and there before him under the soft light of the Italian sky that sifted down through the glistening leaves of the orange trees, were revealed the handsome faces of old Ronald Brooke and his daughter.

A hoarse cry broke from Julius Revington's lips, his face whitened, a cold dew started out upon his brow.

"My God," he said, and sank down upon a bed of flowers as if totally overcome.

With starting eyes he looked at the kind, genial, manly face of the old man, and then at the fair, almost angelic face of Elaine. An uncontrollable shudder shook his form.

"Father and daughter!" he said, under his breath.

Sitting there in the balmy air with the soft murmur of the waves in his ears, he relapsed into thought. Minutes went silently by, bringing a subtle change into the man's face. His cheeks glowed, his downcast eyes sparkled.

"A master rather than a slave," he muttered at last with an evil triumph in his tone; "so be it."

Slowly rising, he retraced his steps to Irene.

He met her coming along the path toward him, her fair face anxious and troubled.

"Oh, Mr. Revington," she cried, "I have lost the locket off my chain! Have you seen it anywhere?"

He held it up to the light, and her sweet face glowed with joy.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Mr. Revington," she cried, "I am so glad! I feared I had lost it forever!"

"I am very glad to have the good fortune to restore it to you," he said; "it lay directly in my path as I was returning to the villa."

"I am so glad," she repeated, kissing it as if it had been some sentient thing. "You see, Mr. Revington, it was a gift to me from one who is now dead—one whom I loved—dearly," she concluded, with a falter in her voice and a mist of tears in her eyes.

"Miss Berlin, will you pardon me if I ask you what may seem an impertinent question?" he asked.

She brushed the soft dew from her eyes with her lace handkerchief, and looked up at him with her soft, wondering glance. [Pg 58]

"Well?" she said.

He did not look at her in return; his shifting eyes fell to the ground, as was their wonted habit.

"When I found the locket lying on the ground the lid was open. I saw the two faces it held," he said, in a strange, hesitating voice.

"Well?" she repeated, gravely, while a flush rose over her fair face.

"They—were not strange to me," he replied; "I was startled when I saw whose were the faces you wore always over your heart. Miss Berlin, will you tell me what that man and woman are to you?"

He saw her start and shiver—saw the warm crimson flash into her face, then recede again, leaving it deathly pale and cold. She clasped her hands over the locket, pressing it tightly to her beating heart, while she answered hoarsely and with downcast eyes:

"I cannot tell you, Mr. Revington; it is a secret, and that secret belongs to another. I have no right to reveal it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Julius Revington stood looking in silence at the beautiful, agitated girl as she repeated, sadly:

"The secret belongs to another. I have no right to reveal it."

"Is it a secret of shame?" Julius Revington asked, slowly.

Irene started, and flashed a look of anger upon him through her tear-wet lashes.

"You are impertinent," she said, sharply; "you have no right to seek to penetrate the secret of my past!"

"I have the same right as the physician who probes the wound to heal it," he replied, coolly.

"You!—you can heal no wound of mine!" she flashed, almost disdainfully.

"You think so, but you are wrong," said Julius Revington. "Sit down, Miss Berlin, I have much to say to you. It is for your own good that you should listen to it."

The earnestness of his tone impressed Irene against her will. She sat down slowly on the soft, green grass, still with a mutinous pout on her lips, and her eyes turned coldly away from him.

Mr. Revington seated himself also, and glanced carefully around, to make sure that no one was in hearing distance of himself and his fair companion.

"I see that you have no faith in my power of making an interesting communication to you," he said, addressing himself to Irene.

"No, I cannot imagine your telling me anything I should like to hear," she retorted, coldly.

An angry light flared into the man's dark eyes a moment, but he bit his lip to keep back a sharp rejoinder. Her willfulness, her pretty petulances, had an actual fascination for him. [Pg 59]

"Such an answer from any one but you, Miss Berlin, would be actual rudeness," he said, lightly. "But whether frowning or smiling you are ever charming to me. You remind me of nothing so

much as one of Tennyson's heroines, 'a rosebud set with little willful thorns.'"

She answered not a word. Her fair face was averted, and her blue eyes gazed at the silvery Arno softly gliding past.

"You have been a beautiful, enchanting mystery to me ever since I met you," he continued, slowly. "I have wondered whence you came and to whom you belonged, but with no hope of unsealing your beautiful lips or the secret they held so close. But chance—or shall I call it fate?—has solved the mystery for me."

She turned her head and looked at him suddenly, her blue eyes dark with fear and wonder.

"What can you mean?" she exclaimed.

"I mean that when I came upon your picture in your locket just now the mystery of your identity was solved for me," he replied, coolly, glad that he had roused her at last.

"I do not understand you," she said through her lips that had suddenly grown white and trembling.

A slight smile curved Julius Revington's mustached lips, as he saw how much he had startled her.

"Master rather than slave," he repeated to himself, vindictively, for that was the way he interpreted her eloquent description of her ideal.

"I told you the faces were not strange to me," he said. "Shall I tell you their names?"

"You cannot," she returned, miserably.

"Do not deceive yourself," he retorted. "The old man is Ronald Brooke, the beautiful woman is his daughter, Elaine."

A startled cry broke from her lips, she flashed her eyes upon him in a swift, horrified gaze, a terrible suspicion darting through her heart.

"You know her?" she cried out, hoarsely.

His answer dispelled the horrible dread that had clutched at her heart with icy fingers.

"No, I have never met her in my life, but I have seen her picture before," he said.

She gave a gasp of relief. It had been horrible to fancy for a moment that this man whom she despised in her heart could be her mother's betrayer.

"You have seen her picture before?" she repeated. "Where?"

"It depends on yourself whether I ever answer that question or not," he said.

"On me?" she asked, with some wonder.

"Yes," he replied; "for if I should answer that question it would involve a long story. Before I tell it to you I shall expect to receive a like confidence from you."

She shut her lips tightly over her little clenched teeth, and he saw the blue eyes flash mutinously.

"You refuse?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, dauntlessly. "You have startled and surprised me and I know not how much you know of me and my past. But at least you will never learn more from me."

He could not forbear a glance of annoyance.

"Miss Berlin, you are certainly the most willful child I ever saw," he exclaimed. "What good can it do you to refuse to tell me what relationship you bear to Ronald Brooke and his daughter?"

[Pg 60]

CHAPTER XXV.

Irene raised her large blue eyes to Mr. Revington's face. They were full of anguish and despair.

"I have told you already that the secret is not mine to reveal," she said.

"Then I must answer my own question," he replied, with a swift glance around him to make sure that he was not overheard; "you are Elaine Brooke's *illegitimate daughter!*"

A low cry of bitterness and despair shrilled from her lips. It confirmed his hazardous guess.

"You cannot deny it!" he uttered, triumphantly.

"My God, are you man or devil, Julius Revington?" she exclaimed. "How came you by this knowledge?"

"In a perfectly natural manner," he answered, coolly. "The story of your mother's past is better known to me than to yourself, Irene."

She could not speak for a moment. A hand of ice seemed to grip her throat, her brain reeled, the sound of the river came to her faintly as in a dream. The hot color rushed to her face and her lashes fell. She could not look at this man who held the story of her mother's past—that secret so full of shame and sorrow.

"I know it far better than you do; better than she does," he repeated. "Do not hang your head so

heart-brokenly, Irene. You have nothing to blush for."

"Nothing," she echoed, bitterly.

"No," he said, "I can tell you good news, little one. But first raise your head and look at me. I want to see the joy-light flash into your eyes when you hear what I have to tell you."

She obeyed him, lifting her sweet eyes in wonder, with half-parted crimson lips that seemed to ask mutely what joy life could yet hold for her.

"You have nothing to blush for," he repeated. "Your mother was a lawfully wedded wife. You are not the child of shame as you have been taught to believe."

"Can I believe you?" she exclaimed, and he was dazzled by the flash of joy in her eyes.

"You may, for it is true, and I can produce proofs of what I say," he answered. "Your mother has been fearfully wronged, but it lies in my power to restore her to her rights again."

"God forever bless you, Mr. Revington, if you can lift the cloud of sorrow from the hearts and lives of a wronged woman and her child," [Pg 61] exclaimed the lovely girl, fervently.

"It rests with you, Irene, whether I do so or not," he replied, flashing a look of admiration on her beautiful, agitated face.

"With me!" she echoed, blankly.

"You are the daughter of a wealthy, high-born, noble gentleman, who would be delighted to claim you if he knew that you lived, and who would rejoice to clasp your mother to his devoted heart," said Mr. Revington, watching her closely as he uttered the words. Her eyes beamed, her face glowed with joy; then suddenly a shadow fell on its brightness.

"You are deceiving me?" she said.

"No, I swear that I am not," he asseverated. "I can prove what I say, and I am ready to do so—on one condition!"

"And that?" she asked, innocently.

His shifting gaze fell before that eager, hopeful, unconscious look, but he answered, boldly:

"That you be my wife, Irene."

"I have told you that was impossible," she answered, growing suddenly pale to the lips.

"Why?" he inquired, chagrined at the prompt reply.

"I do not love you," she replied, evasively.

"Granted that you do not," he said, selfishly, "is your hand too great a price to pay to secure to your mother ease, honor, end happiness?"

She had no answer for him only an irrepressible moan of pain that broke uncontrollably over her white lips. Her thoughts went back to poor, patient, badgered Elaine, and her hard life at Bay View—harder now than ever, she guessed, since her father was dead, and she was left to the tender mercies of her mother and sister.

"Dear mother, how gladly I would purchase this man's knowledge, even at the bitter price he asks, for your dear sake, if only it were possible," she thought to herself with a pang like death at her heart, as she recalled her fatal marriage.

Julius Revington, watching the mute anguish on her speaking face, saw that it was no time to press the question.

"Do not answer me now, Irene," he said, with ready gentleness. "Take time to think it over. Revolve it in your mind to-night in soberness and calmness. Ask yourself if you do not owe this duty to your poor, wronged mother. How sweet it would be for her child to restore to her all she has lost."

"You are cruel and calculating," she said, indignantly. "Why should you ask such a costly price for doing this kindness to my poor, martyred mother?"

"Because I love you, and in no other way can I win you," he answered, boldly.

Her beautiful eyes flashed scornfully upon him.

"Would you take a reluctant and unloving bride?" she asked.

"I would take you on any terms, Irene," he replied.

She looked up at him and asked the strangest question that could possibly fall from a daughter's lips:

"Mr. Revington, will you tell me the name of my father?"

The piteous sadness of the tone, and the pathos of the question must have touched the heart of a better man. [Pg 62]

But Julius Revington was thoroughly hard and selfish.

"You have never heard his name, then?" he said.

"Never," she replied. "Will you tell it to me now?"

"Not yet," he replied, cruelly. "I will reserve that pleasant bit of information for our marriage day."

She flashed a sudden, piercing glance upon him.

"You are deceiving me," she said. "You are trying to win me by a pretended knowledge of facts that do not exist."

"On my honor, no," he replied. "I admit that I am selfish, and that I am using the knowledge I possess to gain my own ends, but on the morning that you give me your hand in marriage I swear that I will place in your hands the documents that will prove your mother a lawfully-wedded wife, and give you a legal right to your father's name and wealth. Moreover, I assure you that no one will be more surprised or rejoiced than your father himself on learning the truth."

"And what if I refuse to marry you? she asked, fearfully.

"If you refuse," he replied, cruelly, "the cloud of shame shall never be lifted from your mother's life and yours. Nay, more, I will go to the Stuarts and your good friend, Mrs. Leslie, and I will tell them why you choose to make a mystery of your past. Consent to marry me, and on our wedding-day I will prove you the legal inheritor of an honorable name and a great fortune. I will give you until to-morrow to decide the question."

He rose with the words and walked abruptly away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Irene remained sitting like one stunned on the banks of the beautiful river.

Her white hands clasped each other convulsively in her lap, her head drooped on her breast, she stared blankly and dreamily before her, seeming lost to the beauty of the fair Italian scene, and deaf to the soft sounds that filled the air with a pleasant murmur.

Heart and brain were in a terrible tumult.

Her head ached and throbbed almost to bursting, her heart beat fast and hard in her breast.

The joy and triumph she would have experienced in the knowledge of her poor mother's innocence and honor were all damped by the thought of the costly price she was required to pay before she could have the happiness of bearing the glad tidings to the wronged, unhappy woman.

With deepest self-reproach the girl recalled her own frenzied reproaches to that beautiful, sorrow-stricken parent on the fatal night when she had been so maddened by the revelation of the angry Bertha. She looked back as though years had intervened upon the Irene of that summer night as a rude, impertinent, willful child.

"Is it any wonder my mother left me to the death I courted in my wild despair?" she thought. "How could I, who should have soothed sorrow, turned upon her so cruelly? Poor, unhappy Ellie, as I used to call her, what sorrows may she not be enduring now? What insolence, what cruelty, at the hands of her overbearing mother and sister? Even I, her child, did not spare her my reproaches in her dark hour, and how should they who love her less than I did?"

[Pg 63]

In the flood-tide of remorseful affection that swept over her heart, she longed to go home to her mother, to take her in her arms, and say, lovingly: "Mother, darling, you and your husband were both cruelly wronged. Here are the papers that will prove your wifely honor. Take them and forgive me my wicked reproaches."

Alas, between her and that beautiful hour which fancy painted so glowingly, there yawned a dread, impassable gulf!

"Even if I could consent to pay Julius Revington's terrible price for those papers, I could not do so. I am already wedded," she said to herself; and her heart thrilled strangely at the thought.

The remembrance of his threat sent a shiver of dread thrilling through her frame. To-morrow he would tell Mrs. Leslie and the Stuarts that she was a child of shame; that her beautiful, pure-hearted mother was a sinful, erring woman. How should she bear it? she asked herself, with a moan.

The evening sun sunk lower and lower; the twittering birds flew home to their nests; the cool, soft dew began to fall on Irene's face and hands. She rose with a shiver, as though of mortal cold, and dragged herself back wearily to the villa.

Then she felt that she could not endure to meet the cold, curious faces of Mrs. Stuart and her friends just then. She stole quietly up to her own room, closed and locked the door, and threw herself wretchedly down upon the floor, with her face hidden on her arm.

She did not know how long she had lain there, wretched, forlorn, despairing, when she was roused by the tap of a servant outside, who desired her presence at dinner.

She replied, through the closed door, that she was ill, and did not wish any, and returned to her crouching posture on the floor, as if she found a grim pleasure in physical discomfort, as a set-off to her mental trouble.

She felt angry with herself for the fairness that had won Julius Revington's love.

"If I had been homely and ill-shapen, instead of fair and graceful, he would never have loved me, and he might then have given me those papers for pure pity's sake, with no such condition

attached," she told herself, sadly.

Two hours later Mrs. Leslie came tapping softly at the door.

"You must let me in, Irene, for I shall keep 'tapping, tapping,' like the raven, until you do," she called out gaily.

With a smothered sigh Irene admitted her friend.

"What, all in darkness? I beg your pardon, I did not know you had retired," exclaimed the lady.

Irene struck a light and then Mrs. Leslie gazed in wonder at the pale, haggard face.

"My dear child, what is the matter with you?" she cried out in wonder.

[Pg 64]

"It is nothing—only a headache, I—I have been lying down," she faltered, miserably.

The lady glanced at the white, unruffled bed, and then at Irene, curiously.

"Where—upon the floor?" she inquired, with a mixture of sarcasm and amazement.

"I—believe so; I felt so bad I did not think," answered Irene, trying to smile.

"Poor dear," said the lady, full of womanly compassion; "if I had known you were so ill I would have come up to you long ago. It was too bad your lying here all by yourself in the dark! In your tight dress, too; I am ashamed of myself! But now I am going to undress you and 'put you in your little bed.'"

Heedless of Irene's gentle expostulations, she proceeded to follow the kind promptings of her womanly heart, and directly she had the girl dressed in her snowy *robe de nuit* and nestled among the pillows of the snowy bed.

"Now you may shut your eyes, and I will bathe your head with *eau de cologne* until you fall asleep," she said.

"But indeed it does not ache now. Pray do not trouble yourself," Irene expostulated, now thoroughly ashamed of her innocent little fib.

The lady sat down and began passing her hand tenderly over the pillow.

"I am glad it does not ache any longer," she said, unsuspiciously. "You were sadly missed from among us this evening, my dear," she continued in a light, bantering tone. "Mr. Revington was exceedingly distract; Miss Smith teased him for a song, but he gave her such a doleful one that he received no encores whatever."

Irene looked so plainly disgusted at the mention of her lover's name that Mrs. Leslie forebore to tease her. She delicately changed the subject.

"Mr. Stuart came back from his trip to Florence this evening, and brought us some sad news," she said.

Irene tried hard to look interested in this communication, but failed dismally. Her own troubles absorbed all her care.

"There has been the most terrible ocean disaster," continued Mrs. Leslie. "Two American steamers, one homeward bound, the other en route for Italy, collided in mid-ocean at midnight, with a horrible loss of human life. Is it not awful?"

Irene tried to look properly shocked, but heart and brain were so numbed by her own grief that she could scarcely comprehend the extent of the calamity her friend was bewailing.

"It is very dreadful," she murmured, feebly.

"Is it not?" said Mrs. Leslie, in awe-struck tones; "and, only think, Irene, I was personally acquainted with one of the passengers who perished in the wreck. I met him once while visiting my sister in Baltimore. He was very handsome and agreeable, besides being very wealthy. His name was Guy Kenmore."

She paused, and uttered a cry of alarm in the next breath. Irene had gasped convulsively once or twice, then fainted dead away.

[Pg 65]

CHAPTER XXVII.

Mrs. Leslie was filled with dismay and terror at the result of her thoughtless communication to her *protege*.

"What a silly tattler I am to tell such shocking things to that poor sick child," she said to herself, with lively compunction.

Then she flew to the dressing-table, and securing a bottle of *eau de cologne*, proceeded to drench Irene's face vigorously.

The result of her treatment was that Irene speedily gasped, shivered and opened her eyes.

"Oh, you are alive yet, are you, my dear?" exclaimed her friend. "I was afraid I had killed you with my foolish tales."

"Then it wasn't true—you were jesting with me?" exclaimed the girl, unconsciously clasping her

small hands around her friend's arm, and lifting her dark, anxious eyes to her face.

"Eh? what, my dear?" Mrs. Leslie asked, rather vaguely.

"The wreck, you know—the people who were drowned," Irene answered, with a shudder. "Is it true?"

"Oh, yes, child, every word of it, I am sorry to say, but I oughtn't to have told you about it while you were feeling so badly. It shocked you very much, poor dear."

"Yes, it shocked me very much," Irene replied, in a strange voice. "You were saying—were you not?—that one of your friends was—was—drowned," she concluded, with a faint quiver in the last word.

"Yes—poor Guy Kenmore of Baltimore—one of the most splendid men I ever met," sighed Mrs. Leslie. "But do not let us talk about it any more to-night, dear. It makes you nervous, I think."

"Yes, and I am very tired. I should like to go to sleep. Good-night, dear Mrs. Leslie," said Irene, thus gently dismissing her friend.

"Very well, since you want to go to sleep, good-night, dear," said the lady, good-humoredly; "I hope you will let me know if you are worse in the night, though."

Irene promised, and received Mrs. Leslie's good-night kiss. Then the lady went away and left her alone.

Why did she weep so bitterly upon her lonely pillow that it was drenched with her bitter tears?

Now that her husband of an hour was dead, Irene knew that she loved him.

"Loved him with a bitter yearning
That could never pass away,
Loved him with an anguished passion
That could never know decay."

As she lay there weeping sorely on her pillow, she recalled that sweet June night, but a few short months ago, when her own willful folly had led her into that deplorable entanglement. She recalled the handsome face of Bertha's lover, as she then deemed him—handsomer then and now to her fancy than any other man she had met. He had given her no word of blame or reproach for her folly that had led him into that mad marriage. Nay, how kindly, how gently he had tried to make the best of it—he had offered to keep faithfully those marriage vows he had taken, even when he knew that she was a nameless child, and her mother a disgraced woman. How kindly he had spoken to poor Elaine, even when her own child madly reproached her. She seemed to feel again the warm, gentle clasp of his arm around her waist while poor Elaine told her sorrowful story.

"I love him. It is not wrong, for he belonged to me, and he is dead," she said to herself, plaintively and sadly, through her falling tears.

She forgot Julius Revington for a while in the shock of this new grief. One hour was given to her sorrow and her tears.

"He is dead, yet I cannot realize it," the girl-widow said to herself, trying to fancy those laughing brown eyes drowned in the salty waves of old ocean—those languid, musical tones hushed in its everlasting roar. It was in vain the effort. It was in life, rather than death that he dwelt in her thoughts.

"He is dead, but no more dead to me than he was in life," she repeated over and over to herself, "for I should never have seen him again."

And suddenly, like an Arctic wave coldly sweeping over her, came the remembrance of Julius Revington.

"I am free now," she repeated to herself, with a shiver of horror. "Nothing lies between my mother and happiness but my own unconquerable repugnance to the man who holds the secret of my mother's wrongs."

Remorseful memory pictured that beautiful mother sad, lonely, bereaved, wasting her heart in unavailing sighs and tears.

"Oh, mother, I was hard, cold, cruel to you that night in my madness," she cried. "I, who shadowed your life with an ever-present memory of shame for sixteen years, now owe you reparation and atonement even to the sacrifice of my poor life."

And in the solemn, mystical midnight hours the great battle was fought between self-pity and mother-love.

[Pg 66]

CHAPTER XXVIII.

It was late when Irene came down to breakfast the next morning.

The breakfast bell had clanged noisily twice, and all the other inmates of the villa were in their places at the table, when Miss Berlin glided in, pale, mute, grave, and took her wonted seat by

Mrs. Leslie's side.

Every eye turned curiously on the fair young face. The change was too marked to escape observation. The white cheeks, the dark shadows beneath the eyes, the pathetic droop of the red lips, all had a story of their own. The simple white morning-dress, with the black velvet ribbon at throat and waist was sad and suggestive too. All missed the bright bunch of flowers she was wont to wear on her breast, but none guessed that the simple black and white were mute tokens of bereavement.

"I was sorry to hear of your illness last night. I trust you are better this morning," said Mr. Stuart [Pg 67] from his place as host.

His voice was grave and kind, but his eyes were kinder. They often lingered on her as if fascinated, until, with a sharp sigh of pain he would turn away.

"Thank you, I am better," she replied, briefly, and dropped the long lashes over her eyes because Julius Revington was trying to meet them across the table.

He was vexed with her for looking so pale, so wan, so unhappy.

"Am I an ogre that she should look so pale, so ill, so wretched, at the bare idea of having me for a husband?" he said to himself, in a passionate ebullition of wounded vanity.

When breakfast was over he managed to intercept her as she was going out.

"It is a beautiful morning, Miss Berlin. Will you walk out with me?" he asked, pleadingly.

She brought her broad-brimmed sun-hat from the rack in the hall and silently accompanied him.

It was a beautiful morning, as he had said. The sun shone brilliantly, the blue sky mirrored itself in the blue river, birds sang, flowers bloomed, and the air was sweet with the breath of roses. But for once Irene was indifferent to the sweet influences of nature. She walked along silently by his side, her blue eyes downcast, her face pale, her steps slow and languid.

They paused at last to rest on a pretty garden seat beside the murmuring river. Irene flung herself down wearily.

She, who seldom knew what weakness meant, could barely drag her weary limbs along.

"I am sorry to see you looking so ill to-day," murmured the lover.

She glanced up quickly in his face for some sign of relenting.

Alas, his passionate look of admiration dispelled the sudden, springing hope. Her heart sank heavily again.

"I *am* ill," she cried. "God only knows what I suffered last night. Are you still relentless in your cruel purpose?"

"You use hard words," he said, flinching under her scorn. "Is it cruel to love you, and wish you for my own?"

"It is cruel to try to force me into compliance with your wishes," she answered, with a passing flash of indignation.

"You mistake. I have not tried to force you. I merely gave you a choice of terms," he replied.

"Scylla and Charybdis," murmured the girl, disdainfully.

"As you will," he replied; but in his heart he said, cruelly: "You find it hard, fair lady, to tolerate a master in practice, however fine it may appear in theory."

She sat still, looking dreamily into the rushing river, a look of despair frozen on her white face.

"You may have guessed why I brought you here," he said.

She made him no answer. The cold despair deepened in the lovely, downcast eyes.

"I am impatient for my answer," he went on. "Are you going to be kind to your mother, Irene; [Pg 68] kind to yourself, and merciful to me?"

She turned and looked at him, with the fire of scorn flashing all over her beautiful face.

"If you mean am I going to sacrifice myself for my mother's sake, I answer yes," she said. "Here is my hand. Take it. But it is empty—there is no heart in it. There never will be. I shall never love you, were I twenty times your wife. I shall always hate you for driving me to the wall, for making me untrue to myself."

Unheeding her wild words he took the hand and kissed it, but she tore it madly away. It rushed over her drearily how strange it was for Guy Kenmore's widowed bride to be thus plighting her hand to another almost in the first hour of her bereavement.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Mr. Revington duly announced his betrothal to the inhabitants of the villa. Congratulations followed of course, but he could not flatter himself that there was any heart in them.

Mr. Stuart was openly surprised and inwardly disgusted.

"To think that a girl of such beauty and soul as Irene should stoop to mate with that weak, guitar-playing dandy," he said to himself.

Brown and Jones were envious of Revington's good luck. The ladies, with the exception of Mrs. Leslie, thought it quite too good a match for the mysterious Miss Berlin.

"My dear," said Mrs. Leslie, the first time she could draw Irene aside, "I do not know how to congratulate you. You have surprised me too much. I never dreamed that you were in love with Julius Revington."

They were alone on the wide balcony, and the opaline hues of sunset sparkled on the blue horizon. Irene looked very pale and grave in the brilliant light. She gazed sadly at her friend.

"Does it follow that I am in love with him because I have promised to be his wife?" she asked, almost bitterly.

Mrs. Leslie started and gazed keenly at the fair young face.

"It *should* follow," she said. "No girl should marry a man with whom she is not in love. It is positively sinful to do so. And, my dear child, if you are marrying him for money you are sadly mis—" she paused, for a flood of crimson had drifted into Irene's face.

"Mrs. Leslie, I am quite aware that Mr. Revington's income is extremely small," she said, with girlish dignity.

"Oh, then, it is for love, after all," said the lady, relieved. "Well, that is the best, if you are going to marry him. But I must say it is a great surprise to me. You seemed to belong to me so utterly I never thought of a lover carrying you off."

Her sigh of genuine regret pierced Irene's tender heart.

She longed to throw her arms around the sweet lady's neck and tell her all her sad story—to disclaim all interest and love in the wretch who exacted so costly a price for her mother's happiness; but a feeling of pride held her back.

"Not now, while the shadow of the old disgrace hangs over me," she said to herself. "I could not bear for her to pity me. Only in the hour of my triumph will I tell her my strange story and ask her to rejoice with me."

[Pg 69]

Lilia came out on the balcony and Mrs. Leslie said no more. The child was exquisitely dressed, as usual, in a rich white robe, with a rose-colored sash. She looked quite pretty with her dark, shining hair falling over her shoulders, her large black eyes beaming with the fires of disease, and a deceptive glow of color on her cheeks.

She came and stood by Irene's side, and with one of her rare impulses of kindness laid her light, fragile hand on her shoulder.

"They tell me you are going to marry my cousin Julius," she said, abruptly.

"Yes," Irene answered, with a smothered sigh.

Mrs. Leslie looked at the two young girls, admiring their different types of beauty. Irene's blonde loveliness was matchless; the darker type of Lilia challenged admiration. Each set off the other, like night and morning.

But as Mrs. Leslie gazed she suddenly smothered a cry upon her lips—a cry of amazement!

Something had flashed over her suddenly and without warning as she watched the two beautiful faces side by side.

It was a subtle, startling, vivid resemblance between the two—the blue-eyed blonde, the dark-eyed brunette.

As she gazed, the wonderful, startling resemblance grew and grew upon her consciousness. Though one was fair and the other dark there was a subtle, haunting likeness in their features strong enough to have existed between sisters.

"What does it mean?" the lady asked herself, wonderingly. "Is it a mere chance likeness?"

While she gazed as if fascinated, Mr. Stuart stepped out upon the balcony. His dark face lighted with pleasure as he noted Lilia's affectionate attitude toward Irene. He stepped softly to his daughter's side and gazed at the two fair girls with a gratified smile upon his lips.

And again Mrs. Leslie suppressed a little cry of wonder.

The subtle likeness between Irene and Lilia was not stronger than that which existed between Irene and Mr. Stuart. They might have passed for father and daughter.

He looked up and arrested her gaze fixed upon his face in wonder and perplexity. He smiled.

"On what weighty subject are you musing so deeply, Mrs. Leslie?" he inquired.

"If you will come and walk with me, I will tell you," she replied, lightly.

"Nothing would give me more pleasure," he answered gallantly.

CHAPTER XXX.

They went down the wide balcony steps together, leaving the two girls alone. Mrs. Leslie chose a favorite walk along the river bank, and by chance they sat down on the same pretty garden seat where Irene had rested that morning while she gave her promise to be Julius Revington's wife.

[Pg 70]

Mr. Stuart looked at his friend with a smile on his dark, handsome face.

"Now will you give me the benefit of your thoughts?" he said.

"If you will promise not to laugh—not to call me fanciful," she answered.

"On my honor," he replied, placing his hand on his heart, and bowing with mock gravity.

She was silent a moment, feeling a momentary embarrassment over her promise. He would think her fanciful certainly, perhaps be displeased.

"I am growing very curious," he observed.

"You need not be—it is nothing of any consequence," she said. "It is only that before you came out on the balcony I was startled by observing the vivid likeness that exists between Lilia and Irene. They are like enough to be sisters. And when you came upon the scene my wonder only grew. Irene is enough like you to be your daughter."

She need not have been afraid that he would laugh at her—that he would think her fanciful. He started and gazed at her with wide, dark eyes and ashen, parted lips.

"Like Lilia! like me!" he repeated, strangely.

"Yes," she answered. "Enough like Lilia to be her sister, enough like you to be your child."

"Before God, I believe that she is!" he answered, startlingly.

She gazed at him in wonder.

"I do not understand you," she said, wondering if her old friend had gone mad.

But he reiterated in tones of suppressed passion:

"I believe that she is my own child. I have loved her since the first hour I looked on her beautiful face, so like that of the fair, cold woman who broke my heart! I have yearned to hold her in my arms, to kiss her fair face, and claim her for my own daughter, the pledge of a love that for a little while was as pure, as true, as beautiful as Heaven! It was the voice of nature speaking in my heart, claiming its own in tones that would not be stilled. Oh, Elaine, Elaine, fairest, dearest, cruelest of women!"

He bowed his head on his hands, and his strong form shook with great, smothered sobs.

Mrs. Leslie gazed at him in wonder and sympathy. What hidden mystery, what aching sorrow had her chance words evoked from the buried past? It was terrible to witness the shuddering emotion of this brave, strong man.

Looking up suddenly, with dark, anguished eyes, he caught her wondering, troubled look.

"Mrs. Leslie, you think me mad," he said, mournfully.

"No, no," she answered, reassuringly. "I must beg your pardon for my ill-advised words," she continued, regretfully. "I fear that I have touched the spring of some secret sorrow."

"You have," he answered, sadly. "But do not reproach yourself. You could not have known. You probed an aching wound by chance."

[Pg 71]

"I am so sorry. I did not dream," she said, incoherently, full of sorrow for her unconscious fault.

"And she looks like me, you think?" he said, thoughtfully.

"Marvellously," she exclaimed.

"Have you ever seen the woman's face in the locket she wears about her throat?" he asked.

"I am ashamed to confess that my womanly curiosity has made me guilty of peeping into it on one or two occasions," she replied. "It is the loveliest face I ever beheld."

"Fairest and falsest," he replied. "Mrs. Leslie, what will you think when I tell you that that woman was once bound to me by the dearest tie upon earth? She was my wife."

"I do not know what to think," she replied, and in truth she was half dazed by his words. She could not understand him.

"You look incredulous," he said, sadly. "But, Mrs. Leslie, you have known me for long years. Let your mind go back to the years before I married Miss Lessington. Did no faint rumor ever reach you of a boyish entanglement, hushed up by my father for fear it should reach the ears of the heiress selected for me?"

"Yes," she answered, with a start, "I recall it now—the merest whisper of a boyish fancy that your father would not tolerate. It was true, then?"

"It was true," he answered, sadly. "Mrs. Leslie, may I tell you my story? They say that a woman's wit is very keen. Perhaps you can help me to solve the problem of Irene's identity."

"You may tell me, and I will gladly help you if I can," she replied, with gentle, womanly sympathy.

In her heart she had always been sorry for Clarence Stuart. She believed him to be one of nature's noblemen, and she knew that he was mated with a cold, hard, jealous woman who was proud of her wealth, her birth, her station, and whose hard heart held neither pity nor sympathy

for those whom she proudly held as inferiors. She intuitively felt that he had never loved the haughty heiress his proud father had selected for him.

"I must go back more than seventeen years to the romance of my life," he said. "I was barely twenty-one, then, an eager, impetuous, romantic boy, chafing at the rein my father tried to hold over me, and disgusted with the idea of the *mariage de convenance* he had arranged for me."

He sighed, and resumed:

"Nellie Ford, my cousin, who was away at a fashionable boarding-school, sent me an invitation to a musical *soiree*. I went, carelessly enough, and at that entertainment I met my fate—a blue-eyed girl looking much as Irene does now.

"She was not only beautiful, she was gifted with the sweetest voice I ever heard," he continued. "She sang, and I was enraptured. I sought and obtained an introduction to my divinity. Before we parted that evening my heart was irrevocably lost to sweet Elaine Brooke."

Heavy sighs rippled over his lips as he paused and seemed to contemplate in fancy the fair, flower-face, so long ago lost out of his life. [Pg 72]

"That was not the last time we met," he continued. "Both loved, although it seemed indeed a mad, hopeless passion. I was destined to Lilia Lessington, and Elaine's ambitious mother intended to make a pedant of her daughter. She was destined to several years at Vassar College. Young blood flows hastily, you know, Mrs. Leslie," with a sad smile. "The hopelessness of my love maddened me. I persuaded my darling to elope with me to a distant city, where we were married."

"All for love, and the world well-lost," Mrs. Leslie quoted.

"Well-lost, indeed, if only *she* had been true," Clarence Stuart answered, with one of those long, labored sighs, that seem to cleave a strong man's heart in twain.

He was silent a few moments then, watching with gloomy eyes the softly lapsing river, on which the haze of twilight began to fall—

"So life runs away," he said, sadly. "Wave by wave, in sunshine or shadow. Ah! my old friend, the stream of my life has flowed for more than sixteen years in the shadow of a great sorrow. Only a few months of happiness were granted me with my beautiful bride."

"She was false, you said?" murmured Mrs. Leslie, sympathetically.

"False," he echoed.

"Falser than all fancy fathoms,
Falser than all songs have sung,
Puppet to a father's threat,
And servile to a shrewish tongue.'

"I have said that a few months only of happiness were granted me," he continued, after a moment's pause. "In a distant city, our whereabouts and our fate a mystery to all our relatives, we spent a few months of blind, delirious happiness, forgetting all save each other. Never was bride more wildly worshiped than I worshiped my beautiful Elaine; never was husband more adored than she seemed to adore me. We lived but for each other.

"To this sweet idyl, this beautiful romance, came a most prosaic ending.

"The considerable sum of money with which I had left home was quite exhausted by our idle, happy, luxurious life. I was forced to leave my wife for a short time, and go home, like the prodigal, to my father's house, confess my marriage, and entreat his forgiveness and assistance.

"There were hard words and a stormy scene at first. I had expected as much; for I was well aware of his ambitious plans for me. But at last, as I was about leaving his roof in anger, he relented. He gave me his paternal forgiveness, and promised to receive my wife as a daughter. It was arranged that I should leave early the next morning to bring Elaine home. Perhaps you can fancy my happiness, Mrs. Leslie."

"Yes," she replied, sympathetically, her kind blue eyes shining through a suspicious mist.

"I sat up quite late that night, talking to my father, expatiating with boyish enthusiasm on the beauty and sweetness of my young bride. My father heard me indulgently, and suffered me to run on unchecked. At length we drank some wine together, and I retired to rest in buoyant spirits, to dream of my darling, who was so soon to be welcomed as a beloved daughter to my father's splendid home. [Pg 73]

"Instead of awaking early the next morning to start on my return to Elaine, as I had proposed doing, I slumbered on deeply and dreamlessly until noon. I awoke, burning with fever, parched with thirst, and seriously ill almost to the verge of delirium. Physicians were summoned, who declared that a severe and probably long attack of illness lay before me. I entreated my father to write to my wife to come to me, and was assured that he had already done so. He received no reply. Elaine neither wrote nor came to my sick bed. At my wild and urgent solicitations he wrote again and again, receiving not a line in reply. To allay my terrible anxiety, as soon as my illness took a turn for the better, my father went himself to bring my wife to me."

He paused, and fixed his dark, sad eyes on Mrs. Leslie's face. Their intense, anguished gaze seemed to burn through her.

After a moment, he said, hollowly:

"My friend, he returned alone."

"She was not worthy your love," Mrs. Leslie began, indignantly.

"Listen, and you shall judge," he replied. "After I left Elaine, her parents by some means obtained a clew to her whereabouts. They went to her, and, by dint of threats and persuasions, induced her to renounce me forever—me, her husband, who lay languishing upon his sick bed, almost dying for a sight of her worshiped face."

His voice broke slightly here. After the lapse of sixteen years memory was still potent to shake the iron self-possession he had tried to build up against his sorrow. He collected himself with an effort and resumed:

"Cold, hard man as my father was, the tears of pity for his outraged son stood thickly in his eyes when he told me this story. Elaine had gone home with her father and mother, but she sent me a cold, hard letter, upbraiding me with having beguiled her from her duty to her parents, and declaring that she would never live with me again, and never even wished to see again the man who had persuaded her into an entanglement which now she bitterly regretted and deplored."

"She was young and her parents unduly influenced her," said Mrs. Leslie, instinctively excusing the beautiful child-wife.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Do you think so?" asked Mr. Stuart sadly. "Yes, she was very young, but that was a poor love that could thus lightly be turned away from its object."

And again he murmured hollowly from his favorite poet:

"Well—'tis well that I should bluster!
Hadst thou less unworthy proved:
Would to God—for I had loved thee
More than ever wife was loved.

[Pg 74]

"Am I mad that I should cherish
That which bears but bitter fruit?
I will pluck it from my bosom
Though my heart be at the root."

"You have had a sad experience," the lady said, gently.

"Have I not?" he said bitterly. "Ah, Mrs. Leslie, I cannot tell you what I suffered in learning my wife had cast me off. It seemed to me that I had gone mad in my grief and despair. I had a relapse of my illness and for long weeks struggled between life and death. I would sooner have died, but it was fated not to be. Slowly, wearily, I came back to life, and when I asked my father for tidings of her he told me that her parents had taken her abroad. Do I weary you, my friend, with the long recital of my sorrows?" he asked, pausing abruptly and gazing into her face with his beautiful, sad, black eyes.

"No, I am deeply interested," she replied. "I wish to hear all that there is to tell."

"There is little more to tell," he answered, sadly. "I was very proud, I loved my wife still, but I had no mind to force her obedience. I did not follow her to beg for her favor. I lent myself to my father's efforts to amuse and interest me, and tried to drown my sorrow in the mad whirl of dissipation and excess. In a few, a very few months, a formal letter came to my father from the Brookes abroad. Elaine, my willful child-wife, had died in giving birth to a little daughter. They wrote my father later on that the babe was dead, too."

He stifled the hollow groan that rose to his lips, and bowed his face on his arm. Mrs. Leslie regarded him in silent pity, but she could offer no acceptable words of sympathy to the sharp pathos of a grief like this.

"It grows late, I must hasten with my story," he exclaimed, glancing up at the sky from which all the sunset brightness was fading into "sober-suited grey." "You understand, Mrs. Leslie, that life was over and done for me then. I cared little what became of me, and my father urged me so persistently that a year later I married Lilia Lessington, the heiress he had chosen for me. I did not pretend to love her. I think she suspected something of my story, for she has always been bitterly jealous of me, and we have never been happy together."

"You should have told her your story. She could not have been jealous of the dead," Mrs. Leslie said, gently.

"The dead," he repeated in a strange voice. "Ah, my friend, is she dead? For sixteen years I never doubted it, but since that morning months ago, when I saved Irene's life, I have been haunted by terrible doubts and tears. The girl is the living, breathing image of my lost child-wife. She looks at me with Elaine's eyes, she speaks to me with Elaine's voice, she smiles at me with Elaine's face. And the face she wears around her neck is Elaine's face, only older, graver, sadder, with the brightness and archness faded from it, and the look of a martyred angel in its place."

[Pg 75]

"What do you suspect?" she asked, in a low and startled tone.

"I suspect that Elaine lives—that your mysterious *protege*, is her child and mine—I suspect that I have been deeply, darkly, terribly wronged—but, oh, my God, by whom?" he added, fiercely, striking his clenched hand against his high brow all beaded with drops of dew.

Mrs. Leslie stared, aghast and speechless. Had Clarence Stuart, indeed, been thus foully wronged? If so, whose soul was black with the stain of this sin?

"I have told you my story," he said. "I know you will keep it inviolate, but, Mrs. Leslie, if there is aught in the boasted keenness and wit of woman, I pray you find out this girl's secret for me. Let me know if my heart has spoken truly, when day and night it claims her for its very own, its first-born child, dearer than aught on earth beside, because she bears her mother's face."

"If woman's wit can avail, I will find out the truth for you," Mrs. Leslie answered, from the depths of her warm, womanly heart.

Then they rose and walked back to the villa in the hush of the beautiful twilight, outwardly silent, but with full hearts.

CHAPTER XXXII.

As the footsteps of Mr. Stuart and his companion died away, there was a sudden rustling in the thick shrubbery that shaded the garden-seat. The branches parted and the face of Mrs. Stuart appeared. It was white with commingled fear and anger, the eyes flashed luridly, her white, jeweled hands were tightly clenched, the breath came gaspingly between her parted lips.

She sat down on the garden-seat, and gazed gloomily before her into the deepening dusk.

"He suspects all," she uttered, huskily. "My God, what if he should learn the truth? That girl—I have always instinctively hated her. Can she be his child, indeed? If so, she must be removed as soon as possible. Does Julius Revington suspect whom she is, and is he laying a plan for my dethronement? I must see him privately and learn the truth. I cannot, I will not, be ousted from my place. I have dared and risked too much to lose all now!"

She made her way rapidly back to the house by a roundabout path, and going to her room, arranged her disordered hair and dress. Then she descended to the drawing-room in search of Mr. Revington.

The lamps were lighted and most of her guests were in the room amusing themselves in various fashions. She missed Mr. Revington, but the tinkle of his inevitable guitar came to her from the balcony. She went out and found him pouring out a plaintive love-song into the unappreciative ears of Irene. At the appearance of her hostess the girl effected a precipitate escape into the house, leaving her lover to finish his ditty to the desert air.

[Pg 76]

Mrs. Stuart went up to his side and laid her hand on his arm.

"Julius, I wish to speak to you," she said, in a low, strange voice.

The strings twanged discordantly under his hand. He looked up with something like a guilty start.

"Now?" he asked.

"Of course not," impatiently, "but as soon as possible. Can we manage a private meeting?"

"I can, of course," he answered, with an emphasis on the pronoun. "The risk is yours, not mine. What can you have to say to me?"

The impatient, almost insolent tone in which he addressed her, sent the hot blood to her face.

"You take a high tone," she breathed in suppressed anger.

"Pardon me," he replied, with a fine latent sarcasm in his tone that angered her yet more.

But she kept down her seething resentment with a powerful effort of will.

"Can you come out into the grounds to-night? I have something very important to speak about. I can slip out unnoticed about eleven o'clock," she whispered.

"I will come," he replied, laconically.

She named a place for meeting, then returned to her guests in the drawing-room. Her glance, full of envenomed hate and deadly malice, fell on Irene.

The girl was standing at an open window half-hidden by the falling drapery of the lace curtains, her beautiful, sad young face turned toward the sky. She was looking wondrously lovely in her simple, white mull dress with a great cluster of purple golden-hearted pansies nestled in the filmy lace at her throat, and the veil of her golden hair half hiding the slim, graceful form. Mrs. Stuart wondered at the air of deep sadness that marked the girlish face and caused that pathetic droop of the rosy lips.

How little she dreamed that the girl she hated so jealously was thinking of one dead in the cruel sea as she stood there watching the starry constellations of Heaven sparkling through the misty veil of night. She did not dream what mournful thoughts filled the young heart nor how sadly Irene murmured over to herself some plaintive words that seemed to fit her melancholy vein:

"Ships are tossing at sea,

And ships sail in to the windy cliffs of the shore;
But the ship that is dearest to me
Will never come in with the tide—
Will ripple the bay no more,
Riding in with the tide."

All unheeded and unnoticed by its object, Mrs. Stuart's angry glance dwelt on Irene. The girl was so absorbed in her own sad thoughts that the ripple of talk and laughter in the room seemed to flow past her like a dream so faint and far-away it sounded. A feeling of utter loneliness and pain, of vague longing and sharp regret possessed her. Only half conscious of outward things she leaned against the window mournfully musing.

[Pg 77]

Suddenly to her dulled senses penetrated the noise of a somewhat unusual bustle in the room, the rustle of a silken robe as its wearer hastily rose, and a sharp cry of wonder and surprise in the voice of Mrs. Leslie:

"Mr. ——" Irene lost the name in her apathy. "*Can* this be you, or am I dreaming?"

"I heard at Florence that you were here, Mrs. Leslie, and I could not resist the temptation of calling," said a deep, sweet, musical voice.

That voice! Every drop of blood in Irene's heart seemed to answer it! It shocked her out of her apathetic sorrow. She would have cried out in the suddenness of her surprise, but her lips were parched and dry, her tongue failed her.

Instinctively she shrank further into the shadow and turned her head toward the sound.

Her heart had not deceived her. The world had never held but one voice that could stir the secret depths of her heart.

And this was *he*! She had thought him dead—

"Down by the reefs and the shells
Far down by the channels that furrow the dolorous deep,
Where the torn sails rise with the swells,
And swing in the pulse of the sea.
Silently sleeping his sleep
Down in the sorrowful sea."

But there he stood—tall, large, handsome, with that easy, gracious, indolent air she recalled so well—a smile on his lips as he replied to Mrs. Leslie's eager questions and exclamations.

Then Irene, watching with startled eyes, saw and heard the hum of greetings and introductions. Even Mrs. Stuart unbent from her supercilious hauteur to do honor to the stranger. She had heard of him, and knew that he was well-born and wealthy.

"What shall I do? Will he know me?" Irene asked herself, with a great suffocating heart-beat.

She saw Mrs. Leslie coming to the window with her friend, and nerved herself for the ordeal. Her thoughts flew confusedly back over the past. How strangely they had parted, how strangely they were meeting.

Mrs. Leslie pushed back the rich lace curtain with her white, ringed hand, and showed the beautiful, silent, statue-like girl.

"Miss Berlin, allow me to present my friend, Mr. Kenmore, the dead-alive," she said, smilingly.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

There was one instant of breathless silence as Mrs. Leslie's kind introductory words thus fell on the ears of the husband and wife, who until that moment had believed the other dead. Then, with a great effort of will Irene raised her pale face and dark blue eyes to meet Guy Kenmore's gaze.

He was staring at her with parted lips, with dilated eyes, and a death-white face as if he had seen a ghost, and suddenly, without words or bow, or slightest greeting, he turned away and walked to another window, leaning from it as if stifled for want of air.

Mrs. Leslie gazed after him, stupefied. She had never beheld such unparalleled rudeness.

"Irene might have been a ghost," she said to herself. "What does it mean?"

In the next instant Mr. Kenmore walked quickly back to them. He bowed his head humbly before Irene.

"Miss Berlin, I crave your pardon," he said. "Pray do not think me rude. Your face startled me as if I had seen a ghost. You are the image of one—who is dead."

He looked at her strangely as if expecting her to refute his words, but she only bowed her graceful head and drooped her deep blue eyes before his earnest gaze. Her heart was throbbing wildly with the wonder if he would claim her before all these curious, gazing eyes. It would not have surprised her if he had said:

"You are Irene Brooke, whom I married and whom I thought dead. I know not how you came back

[Pg 78]

from your watery grave, but I cannot be deceived in your identity."

She stood speechless before him, expecting every moment to hear him utter those words. She wondered what she would say to him in reply. Should she own the truth—she, who had promised to give herself to Julius Revington to purchase honor and happiness for her wronged mother?

She could not answer her own question; a mist swam before her eyes, her heart beat in her ears, it seemed to her that her strength failed her, and in another moment she must fall upon the floor at his feet.

Through it all she heard his voice breaking clearly, musically upon her tumultuous thoughts.

"I am most happy to make your acquaintance, Miss Berlin," he said, in the courteous, kindly voice of a stranger, and extended his hand to her.

He had been startled out of himself, but only for a moment. Now he was the cool, polished man of the world again. He spoke to her and looked at her as a stranger.

Her heart gave a sudden throb of relief, then sank like ice in her breast. She gave him her hand, her small head crested with sudden pride, though a subtle thrill ran through her veins as his warm fingers clasped hers in a momentary pressure.

There is a subtle language in a hand-clasp. Guy Kenmore's pressure of Irene's hand said, as plain as words:

"I love you!"

Every drop of blood in Irene's heart acknowledged the confession, but her colder reason disdainfully rejected it.

"He will not acknowledge me. He is sorry to find that I am living," she said to herself, with a sudden, hot thrill of shame and anger. "Well, I shall not force myself upon him. I can be as cold and indifferent as he is."

Her strong will and her latent pride came to her aid. She knew that he regarded her as a spoiled child. A longing came over her to show him that she was a woman—a fascinating woman, too.

[Pg 79]

When Julius Revington came to her side again he was astonished at the bright, charming wiles she put forth for his benefit.

He knew that her moods were changeful as an April day. He had found a certain charm in the fact, although more clouds than sunshine had been meted out to him. But suddenly he found everything inexplicably changed.

From a lovely, willful, capricious child, Irene was transformed into a beautiful, dignified, brilliant woman. She talked with charming ease and grace. Her laugh rang out like a chime of silver bells. No one had ever seen her so gay and sparkling before, nor one-half so beautiful.

Her eyes sparkled beneath their drooping lashes with interest and animation. Her cheeks were flushed like the heart of a rose, the delicious dimples played hide and seek around her lovely lips. Her words, her looks, her gestures, were all full of grace and beauty.

Julius Revington was enthralled by the newly developed charms of his betrothed. He believed that she had softened to him at last, and that her graciousness indicated a dawning love for himself.

He was thrilled with joy at the thought, and gave free rein to the emotions of his heart. His eager adoration showed in his every glance.

Meanwhile Guy Kenmore, seated across the room by the side of Mrs. Leslie, could not keep his eyes and his thoughts from the lovely girl who had so startled him out of his self-possession. Not a movement or word escaped his notice, although he was outwardly courteous and attentive to the lady he had called to see.

But the pretty, graceful widow was gifted with keen perceptions. She did not fail to note her caller's wandering glance. She was not envious of her beautiful *protege*, but she could not repress a slight feeling of pique as she saw with what an effort he maintained his apparent interest in herself.

At length she tapped him lightly on his shoulder and brought his wandering glances back to meet her own.

"Forewarned is forearmed," she whispered, gaily. "Do not lose your heart to my beautiful *protege*, Mr. Kenmore. She is already betrothed."

He started, and a dark-red flush mounted to his temples.

"Your *protege*!" he exclaimed, catching eagerly at the word.

"Yes," she replied. "She belongs to me, and her story is a most romantic one. Some time I will tell it you, and you shall tell me about that dead friend of yours whom Irene resembles."

"Is her name Irene?" he inquired, and she did not fail to notice the uncontrollable start he gave.

"Yes, it is Irene—Irene Berlin. Do you not think it a pretty name?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, "I like it very much, and it gives me a new interest in the owner. The name of my lost friend was Irene."

"And if I am not mistaken my *protege* is the friend whom you believed lost. I have stumbled on a romance and a mystery," thought the lady, shrewdly, to herself; but aloud she only said, with

[Pg 80]

apparent unsuspiciousness: "That is quite a coincidence."

Then she said no more, for to her utter surprise she saw Julius Revington leading Irene to the piano.

Irene had always declined to play and sing before to-night, so her friend was quite excusable for the almost open-mouthed surprise with which she regarded her movements.

The white figure settled itself on the piano stool, the white hands fluttered over the keys, a melancholy chord was softly struck, then—

Mrs. Leslie held her breath.

Irene was singing in a voice no one had suspected her of possessing—pure, clear, rarely tender and sweet—those sad, pathetic verses, "Remember and Forget."

A sudden silence fell on every one in the room. No one was less surprised than Mrs. Leslie. No one had dreamed how obstinately Irene had concealed her gift of a sweet, bird-like voice until now. As the clear, well-trained tones rose and fell, every one was dumb with astonishment and delight.

"When I am dead, my dearest,
 Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
 Nor shady cypress tree.
Be the green grass above me
 With flowers and dewdrops wet:
And, if thou wilt, remember,
 And, if thou wilt, forget.

"I shall not see the shadows,
 I shall not feel the rain,
I shall not hear the nightingale
 Sing on as if in pain.
And, dreaming through the twilight,
 That doth not rise and set,
Haply I may remember,
 And haply may forget."

Mrs. Leslie felt a light touch on her shoulder. She looked up into the pale, agitated face of Mr. Stuart. He bent down and whispered:

"I can doubt no longer. She is too fatally like Elaine. She is, she must be, my own child. She has my lost wife's face and voice, and it is the same song she sang the night when her fatal beauty and sweetness wiled my heart from me. What must I do?"

She saw that he was deeply agitated, and fearing some impulsive action, whispered back, warningly:

"Do nothing—yet. Stranger coincidences have happened. Wait until you learn more."

With a sigh he acquiesced in her advice, and returned to his seat. But his agitation had not been unobserved by Mrs. Stuart. Her soul was on fire with anger and hatred toward the beautiful singer. She would have given anything she possessed to have heard what her husband had confided to Mrs. Leslie.

[Pg 81]

Guy Kenmore sat silent, lost in a maze of troubled thought. He had not meant to listen to Mr. Stuart's words, but in his proximity to Mrs. Leslie, the sharp, agonized whisper had penetrated to his hearing. An uncontrollable eagerness came over him to hear Mrs. Leslie's promised story of her beautiful *protege*.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Irene was playing a waltz now—something as gay and joyous as her song had been sweet and pensive. Guy Kenmore touched Mrs. Leslie's arm.

"Let us go on the balcony. The moonlight is so beautiful," he said.

They went, and though Irene did not turn her head she knew that they had left the room, and her heart sank unaccountably. But she went on playing with tireless fingers, and the gay, sweet music floated deliciously out on the balcony where the young man was saying in a low voice to his companion:

"I must confess to an almost feminine curiosity regarding your promised story of your beautiful *protege*."

"You wish to hear it now?" said the lady, smilingly.

"Yes," he admitted, frankly.

"After all there is little to tell," she replied. "I know actually nothing of her except that she is a beautiful, fascinating mystery."

"A mystery—how?" he asked.

"I will tell you," she said, "for I do not suppose it is any betrayal of confidence. If I do not tell it you will hear it from others who love her less than I do."

"No one could appreciate your confidence more than I will do," he said, eagerly.

Mrs. Leslie's heart beat quickly. She believed that Mr. Kenmore held the key to the mystery she had promised to unravel for Clarence Stuart. She determined to tell him Irene's story, in the hope of eliciting a like confidence.

"It is nearly four months now since we left Richmond for Italy," she began. "We sailed in Mr. Stuart's own yacht."

"Yes. I saw that fact duly announced in the Richmond papers," he observed.

"But, pardon me for having interrupted your story. Please go on."

"It was the tenth of June when we left Richmond—I like to be particular as to dates," said Mrs. Leslie. "Well, it was lovely weather, and we all planned to get up early the next morning and see the sun rise over the sea. We did so, and as you may be aware, it was a glorious sight; but we only got one glimpse of it, for its first beams showed us a more tragic and interesting sight."

Mr. Kenmore caught his breath, and gazed eagerly at the speaker.

"It was a loud scream for help that first attracted our attention," said Mrs. Leslie. "The sound was not very far away, and we all turned instinctively toward it. To our horror we saw on the level, sun-lighted waves a floating plank, with a human figure clinging to its frail support. Literally, there remained but one plank between her and eternity."

"Ah!" exclaimed Guy Kenmore, with a shudder.

"Mr. Stuart is one of the bravest men in the world, I think. He immediately sprang over the side of the yacht into the sea, and swam toward the floating figure. Before he reached her she lost her hold of the plank, and sank under the water. Mr. Stuart instantly dived, and brought her up in his arms."

"He saved her life. How strange," exclaimed Mr. Kenmore, as if speaking to himself.

"Do you think so?" she asked, looking at him keenly. "Why strange, Mr. Kenmore?"

"I beg your pardon. I did not express myself properly," he said, biting his lips nervously. "Well, Mrs. Leslie, do you mean to tell me that the heroine of that romantic episode was the beautiful Miss Berlin?"

"Yes, it was she," replied Mrs. Leslie.

There was a minute's dead pause. Irene was singing again. In the stillness her full, sweet voice floated out to them softly:

"Go! be sure of my love—by that treason forgiven,
Of my prayers, by the blessings they win thee from Heaven;
Of my griefs (guess the length of the sword by the sheath's)
By the silence of life more pathetic than death's!
Go, be clear of that day!"

Mrs. Leslie looked at the man's handsome face. It was grave and troubled in the moonlight.

"Is it not strange?" she said. "She would never sing for us until to-night. We did not suspect that she had such a soulful voice. But she was betrothed to Mr. Revington to-day. Perhaps the happiness of her soul finds natural vent in song."

She saw him wince as if she had touched a secret wound. He looked away from her at the lovely Italian landscape bathed in the pearly radiance of the moonlight. When he spoke again he did not look at her.

"Mrs. Leslie. I am curious to hear how your *protege* came to be in the water?"

"She threw herself in, Mr. Kenmore."

"No," he cried, with a shudder.

"It is true," she replied. "She says she had lost her only friend and did not wish to live."

"Who was that friend?" he asked.

"She declined to say. She declined to speak of her past. She had broken loose from all its ties, and never wished to unite them again. She shrouded herself in mystery, claiming nothing from the life she had left except the sweet, simple name of Irene."

"Yet you called her Berlin," he said.

"Yes, but it was my own maiden name which I gave her because she declared herself nameless," said Mrs. Leslie.

"You were very kind."

"Do you think so? I fell in love with the child, and adopted her as my *protege*. I am sure she has had a great sorrow in her life, but I am equally sure that she is pure and innocent as a little child."

He looked at her, gratefully.

"And the Stuarts?" he inquired, in a tone of veiled significance.

"Mr. Stuart was as much fascinated by Irene as I was. He wished to adopt her as Lilia's sister, but his jealous wife would not permit him to do so."

"And Revington is her lover?"

"Yes, she accepted him to-day."

"Is it a good match for her?" inquired Mr. Kenmore, dropping into a light, conventional, society tone.

"Not in a worldly way," she replied. "Mr. Revington's fortune is very small, barely sufficient for his own luxurious needs. He is of good family, however, being cousin to Clarence Stuart. I cannot say I have any admiration for the man, and I am disappointed at Irene's choice."

He made no comment on her words, but remained gazing thoughtfully at the beautiful starry arch of night. Mrs. Leslie thought that it was now her turn to receive confidence.

"Now, I have told you all I know of my interesting *protege*, you must tell me about your friend whom she resembled so much that she frightened you to-night," she said, blandly.

He started and looked at her, but before he could speak they were interrupted.

Mr. Revington and Irene came out upon the balcony and took seats near them. The girl looked at Mr. Kenmore with a bright, careless smile.

"We have been talking about you, Mr. Kenmore," she said. "We are exceedingly anxious to know how you escaped from the wreck in which you were reported as lost."

She spoke and looked as if he were an utter stranger. He answered with indifference equal to her own:

"I am gratified by your solicitude, Miss Berlin. I can very easily gratify your curiosity. I was rescued by one of the small boats that was lowered from the steamer that sunk us."

"Thank you for your concise explanation," she replied, gaily. "I see you are not disposed to weave any romance around it."

"It was too terribly real to be associated with the thought of romance," he replied, repressing a slight shudder.

"And yet our daily life is often more romantic than fiction," observed Mr. Revington, sentimentally.

No one dissented from the proposition. Mr. Kenmore rose and prepared to take leave.

But when he had bowed formally to Irene and her lover, and returned to the drawing-room, the hospitable host and hostess quite took him by storm.

"Return to Florence that night? They would not hear of such a thing! They could not think of losing such a pleasant addition to their party. Mr. Kenmore must promise to be their guest a week at least." The end of it all was that Mr. Kenmore gracefully accepted their cordial invitation, and promised to send to Florence for his luggage on the morrow.

[Pg 84]

Very soon afterwards the party separated for the night. Mr. Kenmore went to his room, but he was in no mood for retiring. He threw himself down into a chair at the window and lighted a cigar.

"Decidedly I have made a fine beginning," he said to himself. "I have found out more than I expected to do when I came to Mr. Stuart's villa. Perhaps I had been wise to have remained in America. I am come too late."

He was restless and ill at ease. The four walls of his room, spacious and elegant as it was, seemed to confine and stifle him. A fancy seized him to go out into the night air. It would cool his throbbing brow perhaps and he could think more clearly.

A narrow balcony ran across the front of his window, and a flight of steps led from it to the garden below. He stepped safely through his open window and went down the stairs just as all the clocks in the house simultaneously chimed eleven.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"You have kept me waiting, Julius."

Mrs. Stuart spoke impatiently. She had been waiting some time at the end of the myrtle avenue among its deepest shadows and her temper was not sweetened by the delay.

"I beg your pardon," Mr. Revington replied, "I was smoking a cigar with your husband and could not come any sooner."

He paused a moment, and then added in a rather complaining tone:

"I could not imagine what you wanted of me, anyhow."

"Could you not?" she inquired, with a smothered sneer. "Well, sit down here on this quiet seat and I will tell you."

They seated themselves and began talking softly, unconscious that in the long grass just beyond the thick belt of shrubbery that inclosed the myrtle avenue, a man had flung himself down full length, so absorbed in his own painful thoughts as to be for the moment unaware of their presence.

Suddenly he became aware of the murmuring sound of voices. His first impulse was to rise and leave the spot, but in the next he decided that it would startle the speakers and draw down their ill-will perhaps upon himself.

"Some of the servants out sparkling," he laughed to himself. "I will not disturb them. They will be none the worse for my presence."

So he laid his head down again upon his arm, and relapsed into his painful musing.

"I will tell you what I have to say to you, Julius," repeated Mrs. Stuart. "I wish to ask you who is this girl, Irene?"

Julius Revington gave a violent start in the darkness.

"My dear madame, how should I know?" he exclaimed.

"She has promised to be your wife, and it is very likely that she has confided the story of her past to you," replied Mrs. Stuart.

"You are mistaken in the supposition. She has steadily declined any such confidence. I have taken [Pg 85] her upon her own merits, mystery and all," he replied.

There was a moment's pause. Their faces were in shadow, and Mrs. Stuart devoutly wished that she could pierce the veil of the darkness, and read upon his weak face whether or not he was deliberately trying to deceive her.

"Perhaps you have formed some opinion of your own," she said.

"I have had no clew upon which to base an opinion," he replied.

"Have you ever seen the pictures in her locket?" she inquired.

Taken by surprise, he stammered faintly: "Ye-es, once, by the merest accident."

"You recognized them?" she asked, coldly.

"How should I?" he asked, startled.

"Why should you not?" she mimicked. "Julius, do not try to beat about the bush with me. I am in desperate earnest. I will not be put off by lies and evasions! You have seen Elaine Brooke's portrait; therefore you must have recognized the face in Irene's locket as hers."

"And if I did?" he asked, sullenly.

"You must have guessed at the girl's name. You could not have helped it. It is written on her face. You know whom she is, but you are trying to deceive me. You know that you are," she said, passionately.

He saw that he had to deal with a passionate, jealous woman, and that his game was all up, so far as concealment of his plans was concerned.

"I shall be forced to admit what I cannot deny," he told himself, grimly.

Aloud, he asked, in a tone of forced suavity: "Whom do you say that the girl is, Mrs. Stuart?"

She bent toward him and answered in a hissing whisper of anger and hate:

"She is the daughter of Clarence Stuart and his first wife, Elaine Brooke."

A cry of dismay and surprise came from his lips.

"You dare not deny it," she hissed.

"I do not intend to. It is quite true," he replied, doggedly.

"I knew it! How I hate her!" exclaimed Mrs. Stuart, vindictively. "Would to God she had perished in the sea that day! From the very first I hated her even before I dreamed of her identity!"

And for a few moments the air was filled with the sharp ravings of her anger and bitter hatred.

"How have you learned so much?" inquired Julius Revington, curiously, for he had fancied that the mystery surrounding Irene was impenetrable to all but himself.

"No matter. I am not blind to anything around me. I carry too terrible a secret in my breast to run the risk of its detection. I must guard it at every point," she replied. "Can you guess what question I am about to ask you, Julius Revington? You cannot? It is this, then, and mind that you answer me truly. Do you intend to turn traitor?"

[Pg 86]

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Traitor? What do you mean?" stammered Julius Revington.

"You know well enough what I mean," flashed Mrs. Stuart angrily. "You are going to marry that girl, and of course her welfare will be yours. It will be to your interest to betray me. Do you intend to reveal the secret and drive me and Lilia out into the world nameless and disgraced—through no fault of mine, remember, but through the sin of that old dotard who should have carried his miserable secret to the grave with him?"

A pause. It seemed to Guy Kenmore that they must hear his heart beating so near them in the stillness. He was thoroughly aroused now, but he could not believe that it was wrong to listen. On the contrary he blessed the fancy that had led him out into the cool night air.

Julius Revington made no reply to Mrs. Stuart's half-piteous appeal.

"Cannot you speak?" she cried out, sharply. "Are you too cowardly to own your vile intentions?"

"You use strong terms, Mrs. Stuart," he said, sullenly. "Is it a vile act to carry out the sacred commands of a dying man? To restore to Clarence Stuart the last love of his youth? To give honor and happiness to a wronged woman? To restore her unhappy child to her father's name and love?"

"Then you do intend to do so! Wretch!" cried the lady, bitterly; then she broke down, sobbing in an abandonment of despair: "Oh, Lilia, Lilia, my poor, fragile darling! This will kill you!"

Julius Revington sat sullenly silent, ashamed of being found out in his designs, yet by no means ready to forego them.

"And you promised to keep the secret for me. You took my bribes, and swore you would never tell the truth to Clarence! You are a perfidious villain!" upbraided the lady, violently.

"And you are a—". He bent and whispered the last word in her ear in a tone of threatening. "Beware how you call names, my lady! I am not to be abused and bullied, remember that!"

A wail of pain broke from her lips.

"It was for Lilia's sake," she moaned. "My proud, beautiful child, how could she bear shame and disgrace? Oh, Julius Revington, I would go down on my knees to you, I would bless you forever, I would deem you the noblest man on earth, if you would spare me and my Lilia this shame and ignominy!"

"Irene has lived under the shadow of shame and ignominy all her life. It is her turn now," he retorted, sullenly.

"Does she suspect the truth?" she asked, anxiously.

"No," he replied, ashamed of the bribe he had held out as the means of winning his lovely betrothed.

"She need not ever know. Oh, Julius, why cannot you marry her, and take her away, far away, and leave us in peace?" she cried, miserably. [Pg 87]

"You forget that she is the legal heir to her father's fortune," he retorted, with coarse significance.

"Ah! that is the object," she cried. "You are poor, and you cannot forego your grip on the Stuart fortune. Oh, Julius, I bought your silence once; let me do so again."

"It would be at a costly price," he said, in a hard, snappish voice.

"At any price!" she cried, desperately. "Listen, Julius. My own private fortune is as large as Mr. Stuart's. I have complete control of it. I will portion you off handsomely, if you will keep the secret and take Irene away from here—far away—where she can never trouble my peace again. Oh, for pity's sake, Julius, grant my prayer!" She threw herself desperately on the ground and clasped his knees despairingly. "It can matter little to you. You will have the woman you love; and I swear that you shall receive from me as much money as Mr. Stuart would leave her. Will you do this, Julius, for Lilia's sake? If you refuse, it will be the death-warrant of my child!"

"Since you put it like that, I suppose I must yield the point. I do not want to kill the child," he muttered. "But it is hard on Irene, and if a large slice of your fortune isn't handed out, you needn't count on my silence!"

"As much as you wish," she cried, eagerly; "and, oh, Julius, you will marry her as quick as possible—to-morrow—next week—the earliest moment she will consent! And let your wedding tour be to the other end of the world!" she added, feverishly.

"I do not care how far it be so that I have beautiful Irene for my companion, and a large bank account to draw on," Julius Revington answered, with a coarse laugh.

"And this contemptible creature is the man Irene loves, the man she would wed," Guy Kenmore said to himself in bitter disgust.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"What am I to do?" Irene asked herself that night when she was alone in the quiet and seclusion of her chamber.

She had laughed and sung and jested while Guy Kenmore's eyes were upon her, and feigned an

indifference she was very far from feeling. But now she had to tear off the mask so proudly worn, and face her fate.

"What am I to do?" she asked herself, miserably, as she walked up and down the floor in her pretty blue dressing-gown, with her white hands twisted together in a childish fashion she had. "I do not believe the heroine of the most impossible novel was ever placed in a more harrowing situation. Here am I betrothed to the villain of the story, when my husband, whom I believed to be dead, unexpectedly pops upon the scene. And instead of his appearance simplifying matters, it tangles them into a Gordian knot, and I can only ask myself what I shall do!"

She laughed—a mocking, mirthless little laugh that startled a dozen eerie little echoes in the corners of the room. [Pg 88]

"Heigh-ho! I know what I would do if *he* loved me," she said to herself, wistfully, "I would fly to my husband's arms, and defy Julius Revington to do his worst. I would say to him proudly, I have here an honest name, and a true love of which your machinations cannot deprive me!"

The quick tears started out beneath her golden-brown lashes.

"Alas, alas! he does not love me," she sighed. "Why should he do so? He never saw me but once before last night. It was my own willful folly that led him into that dreadful marriage. I doubt not he was glad when he thought that my reckless suicide had broken the fetters that had bound him. Last night he pretended not to know me, yet he could hardly have been ignorant of my identity. He could not have forgotten my face so soon. It is a fair one, they say—yet not fair enough to have won his heart."

That momentous question, "What am I to do?" echoed drearily in her heart. She could find no answer to it; she could think of no refuge from her sorrow. For the first time since that awful night in the cold, dark waves, she wished that the friendly plank had not drifted to her reach—that she had perished miserably then rather than have lived to find herself in this terrible strait.

"I cannot marry Mr. Revington now," she thought. "I must take back my promise of yesterday, with no reason save that of a woman's fickleness. He will be very angry; he will tell my miserable story to Mr. Stuart and Mrs. Leslie, to all of these people that sneer at the mystery that enshrouds my past. What shall I do?"

A passionate shame surged over her at the thought of the cold looks and sneering words that would be thrown at her when her discarded suitor should tell these strangers that her mother was a dishonored woman, and that she, her child, had no right to her father's name. She fancied that Mrs. Leslie and Mr. Stuart, the only two friends she had, would be turned against her, too. She would be utterly alone and wretched—friendless and forsaken.

"And yet I cannot be sorry that Guy Kenmore lives," she murmured. "Though he hate me and deny me; though he bring down shame and sorrow on my head, I must still be glad that he did not perish in the cold and dark waves. How strange it seems that only twenty-four hours ago I wept him dead, and now I weep him living. Alas! living or dead, he is lost to me the same. I must ever remain an unloved, unacknowledged bride."

Worn out by the weary vigils of the past two nights she threw herself down on the bed, dressed as she was, and fell into an exhausted slumber. She slept late and dreamlessly, and when she opened her bewildered blue eyes the next morning upon the beautiful sunny day no answer had come to the question that vexed her brain last night.

But in the golden light of the new day her woful strait did not look so grievous as it did last night. A feverish hope sprang up in her heart that God would befriend her in her sorrow and helplessness and show her some way out of her trouble. [Pg 89]

When she had made her simple, pretty toilet, and gone down-stairs, she found that everyone had breakfasted except Mr. Revington, who had sentimentally waited for her. She swallowed her breakfast with what appetite she could, and then he asked her to take a walk with him.

"All the ladies of the family are out in the garden," he said. "Mrs. Leslie and her admirer, Mr. Kenmore, have been out almost an hour. That will be a match, I think."

"I think you are mistaken," Irene answered, almost angrily.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Irene brought her shady sun-hat and went out into the beautiful garden with her lover. Mr. Revington carried his guitar, thinking that he would beguile the hours with music.

They went to Irene's favorite seat under the orange trees, where she could watch the river gliding past. She was very languid and quiescent this morning, the natural result of last night's emotion. She said to herself that she would make no struggle against her fate to-day; she would just drift quietly with the tide and see where it would bear her.

She little dreamed what subject was agitating Mr. Revington's mind.

He was full of the new idea Mrs. Stuart had suggested, and had brought his betrothed out expressly to ask her to name an early day for their marriage.

Some little remorse for the treachery he meditated toward her disturbed his mind, but it was not

deep enough to cause him to repent of the promise Mrs. Stuart had exacted from him. Once he was safely married to beautiful Irene he intended to invent some plausible story of losing the documents he had promised her as proving her mother's honorable marriage. Oh, he would manage cleverly enough. Once bound to him Irene could not help herself, doggedly reasoned the dastard.

But somehow he did not find it easy to broach the subject uppermost in his thoughts. Irene was grave and *distract* this morning, with a chilly reserve about her that did not court lover-like advances. All her bright spirits and coquettish wiles of last night had vanished. He was dismayed at her relapse into her old, *ennuyed* self. She would not encourage his advances. She was absolutely frigid.

So he was obliged to plunge into the subject with an inward shiver like one about taking a bath in ice-cold water.

"My darling, can you guess what I am going to ask you this morning?" he ventured.

She looked at him with a crimsoning face and flashing eyes.

"I wish you would not call me names, Mr. Revington," she said, with petulant dignity.

"Names!" he echoed, blankly.

"Yes," she replied, loftily. "Darling, and all such names as belong to the jargon of love, I heartily [Pg 90] despise, and I must beg you to spare me their infliction."

"But you have promised to marry me, Irene," he expostulated.

"I have not promised to love you, though," she retorted with spirit. "Please remember that, Mr. Revington, and spare me your love-sick phrases!"

He stared at her, angered and abashed. Her purple-blue eyes sparkled with scorn, her sweet, red lips were curled disdainfully. He kept down his bitter anger with an effort, remembering the boon he wished to crave.

"Do not forget that our compact was a mere matter of the bargain and sale of the secret you held," Irene continued, bitterly. "You drove me into it by your threats of disgracing me in the eyes of the world. Let us keep to the letter of our bargain. You will never have any terms of endearment from me, and I expect and desire none from you. On such terms they are simply revolting."

"As you will," he retorted, in sullen wrath. "But I cannot see what you expect to gain by your stand-off and let-alone policy. I shall be your husband all the same, and instead of having me for your devoted slave, you will make me a tyrannical master."

A queer little smile curled her lips. Her heart beat with a sudden exultant thought.

Fate had placed it out of her power to sacrifice herself for her mother's sake. She could not but be glad, although her heart bled for that mother's griefs and wrongs.

"Shall I tell him?" she asked herself, almost tempted to defy him then and there.

Her weak heart failed her at the thought of the story the wretch would pour into Mrs. Leslie's ears. How would she meet pity and contempt in those dear eyes that had looked at her so kindly.

"I will wait. I cannot tell him yet," she concluded, weakly.

But his next words fell like a thunder-clap on her startled hearing. "Irene, I wish you would name an early day for our marriage," he said.

"Early," she stammered, taken aback.

He smiled grimly.

"Yes, it's a mere bargain, you know, and, like all business compacts, should be ratified early."

She quivered all over with resentment at his tone, but she held her peace.

"Not yet," she answered to her beating heart that longed to defy him.

"It seems to me that in your peculiar situation, being a mere dependent on Mrs. Leslie's charity, that the sooner you have a home and a husband the better for you," he continued, coarsely. "I am most anxious to take you back to your mother with the good tidings we have to carry her. Do you remember, Irene, that the longer you delay our marriage the more you prolong your mother's pain?"

"I remember," she said, in a stifled voice.

"Then will you not consent to name this day week for our wedding-day?" [Pg 91]

"So soon? No, I will not," she flashed back, in indignant surprise.

"For your mother's sake," he pleaded artfully.

"Not for an angel's sake!" declared Irene angrily.

Her lover was dumfounded at this indignant denial.

"How soon, then, can I count upon your fulfilment of your promise?" he demanded, in a crestfallen tone.

The girl's red lips trembled with the defiant answer, "Never," but she bit them hard to keep back the passionate word. She knew his power, and though she felt that the threatening sword that

hung over her head must fall at last, she dreaded to utter the word that must precipitate its downfall.

"I have not thought about that matter yet," she said, determined to temporize with the wretch, and gain a few days' respite. "I supposed it lay far away in the future. I hoped so at least."

"I hope you will give it your earliest attention, then," he replied, sullenly. "I have no mind to wait long, I can assure you."

"How long will be the limit of your patience?" she inquired sarcastically.

"I shall wait two weeks on your pleasure. If you are not ready then to keep your promise I shall throw prudence to the winds and reveal all," he answered, stung by her scorn and goaded to retaliation.

Her beautiful blue eyes flashed scorn and contempt upon him.

"Wretch," she cried, "how I hate you! Leave my presence instantly, and do not intrude upon me again to-day. I am free yet, and I will not tolerate you until I am compelled to do so. Go this instant!"

The flash of her eye assured him that prudence was the better part of valor. He rose angrily.

"Very well, since you choose to play the shrew!" he said, "enjoy your liberty while you may! I assure you it will not last long once you are legally mine!"

And with a muttered curse on his lips he stalked angrily away, his heart full of blended love and hate for his beautiful, disdainful betrothed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"Mrs. Leslie, I want to ask you one question," said Guy Kenmore.

They two were walking in the wide, beautiful villa-garden among the roses and lilies and beautiful crimson flowers drooping from grand white marble vases. The sun shone on the beautiful terraced walks, on the sparkling fountains, and the glistening green leaves and golden fruit of the orange and lemon trees, the air perfumed with the fragrance of countless flowers.

Mrs. Leslie was walking by her friend's side looking thoughtfully down at the drifts of pink myrtle blossoms that blew across the path beneath her dainty feet. She looked up with a smile, and [Pg 92] answered:

"As many as you please, Mr. Kenmore."

"Thank you," he replied, but for a moment he was silent over the momentous question that hovered on his lips. Looking at him curiously she saw that he was very pale and grave, with a fathomless sadness in the dark brown eyes usually so bright and laughing.

"It must be a very important question, you look so grave over it," she said.

"It *is* important," he replied, and then he went on, meditatively. "You told me, I believe, Mrs. Leslie, that Mr. Stuart's yacht left Richmond on the tenth of June?"

"Yes," she replied.

"The question I have to ask you is this: Did the yacht go steadily on that day and night, or did she stop at any landing on the Bay?"

Mrs. Leslie pursed up her pretty lips, and reflected.

"Let me see," she said. "Ah, yes, I remember. We *did* stop that night, about nine o'clock, at a landing in the Bay. It was at a place called Brooke's Wharf, and was noted for the fine fruit to be obtained there. I think it was at Mr. Revington's instance we stopped, and Mr. Stuart obtained a supply of the most luscious fruit."

Outwardly calm and composed, Guy Kenmore inwardly trembled with excitement. Was he about to find a clew to Ronald Brooke's slayer?

"Did anyone leave the yacht and go on shore?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes, we all did," said Mrs. Leslie, readily enough. "I mean all except the captain and crew. It was the most beautiful night I ever saw, I think. These Italian nights are not lovelier. We went on shore, and rambled about in the moonlight. I remember the night perfectly."

Ah! did he not, too, he groaned, silently, to himself. How vividly it all rushed over him. His careless visit to Bertha Brooke, from which so much had arisen. Memory recalled the lovely, willful girl, who had carried him off to the hall perforce that night, and he thought, with a softened tenderness, of the childish spite and self-will that had so vexed him then. Poor little Irene! she had suffered enough from Bertha's rage to atone for her willfulness. A feeling of pity and remorse mingled with the love he bore his hapless child-wife.

"Poor child! I was vexed and annoyed when I first found out the truth that we were legally married that night. It came upon me so suddenly, and I showed my feelings too plainly, and she—she was equally averse to having me for a husband. But, better, far better for her, if she had taken me at my word when I offered to make the best of my sad mistake than to have given her

heart to that dandy jackanapes," he concluded, bitterly, for he had gauged the depth of Julius Revington at first sight, and the conspiracy he had overheard last night had filled him with horror and contempt for the traitor.

"To think that, she—my own beautiful and beloved wife—should turn coldly from me to lavish her precious love on a thing like that," he thought, jealously.

[Pg 93]

Mr. Kenmore, in his indolent way, though unconsciously to himself, had possessed some little complacent conceit of himself. His mirror had told him he was noble-looking and handsome, and women's eyes had repeated it. His progress through society had been a complete ovation to his pride and his vanity. Men had honored him for his manliness as much as for his great wealth, and women had angled for him as a most unexceptionable *parti*. But the complacent conceit that the world had fostered in him for years, had received a terrible blow from Irene's indifference and her palpable preference for the weakly-handsome, guitar-playing and tenor-singing Julius Revington.

"A compound of the dandy and the villain—a man who can plan behind her back to rob her of the knowledge of her honorable name, who cares nothing for the grief and shame of her wronged mother! To think that she should love *him*! And most probably she hates me for having reappeared when she believed me dead. I have a most disagreeable task before me, for I must prove to her the unworthiness of the villain on whom she has set her heart," he mused, gravely.

"Are you through with your questioning?" inquired Mrs. Leslie, noting his pre-occupied silence.

"Yes," he replied, adding, with a slight smile: "Perhaps you would like to ask me some questions now."

"Yes, I would," she smiled, with engaging frankness.

"I am ready to reply to you," he answered, cordially.

"Perhaps I shall startle you," she said; "I am going to ask you a leading question, as a lawyer would say. You must remember that I give you *carte blanche* not to answer it unless you wish."

"Thank you for the permission," he said. "Let me hear it."

She looked at him with an odd gleam in her bright, kindly eyes.

"It is this," she said. "I believe that you and Irene Berlin, my *protege*, have met before last night. Am I right?"

He looked at her with a curious, intent gaze.

"Mrs. Leslie," he said, "I can better answer that question if you will tell me whether I may count on your silence and friendship in the strange dilemma in which I find myself placed."

She put out her hand to him impulsively.

"No one can say that Laura Leslie ever failed them in the hour of trouble," she said, gravely. "You may count on my silence and my truest friendship if it can avail you."

He pressed her hand, gratefully. "It will be an incalculable benefit to me," he said. "Perhaps you can help me and advise me."

"I will do both if I can," replied the charming widow.

"Then I shall tell you my secret," he replied. "Mrs. Leslie, it was not mere chance as I pretended that brought me here last night. I have followed Clarence Stuart across the ocean on a self-appointed mission to right the wrongs of the innocent and bring the guilty to justice."

Looking at his grave, agitated face, she started and uttered a cry of comprehension.

[Pg 94]

"You come from Elaine Brooke——she lives!" she cried.

He started in his turn.

"What do you know?" he cried.

"No matter——I must hear your story first," she said. "And you have not answered my leading question yet."

"I will tell you my story, and then you may be able to answer it for yourself," he said.

They sought a beautiful, secluded spot where they were not likely to be interrupted or overheard, and Guy Kenmore confided to her sympathizing ears the story of that fatal tenth of June, when old Ronald Brooke had met his death and Irene Brooke had become his wife.

The lady listened with eager, breathless interest, with parted lips and shining eyes, and color that varied from white to red and red to white.

When he had finished he looked at her with something like a smile in his dark-brown eyes.

"Mrs. Leslie, I have given you my confidence now. Perhaps you can answer your own question."

She laughed, merrily.

"I can put two and two together as cleverly as any woman, I think," she replied. "And you have made this case quite clear. My pretty Irene is your wife."

"Yes," he replied. "And she is the daughter of Clarence Stuart."

"That is quite true," she answered. "I have suspected it before, now I am assured of the fact. No one will rejoice more over it than will Clarence Stuart, himself."

"I do not understand you," he replied, in a puzzled tone.

Mrs. Leslie found that she had a confidence to make too. She told him Mr. Stuart's sorrowful story, and he in turn related the conversation he had heard the night before. Many things were made clear to both by the confidence thus reposed in each other.

"It is as I supposed," Guy Kenmore said. "Clarence Stuart and his wife were foully deceived and separated by the machinations of old Mr. Stuart."

"And the whole secret of it lies in the possession of Julius Revington, and the proud usurper of Elaine Brooke's name and rights," added Mrs. Leslie.

"More than that," said he, with a shudder, "the death of old Ronald Brooke lies between those two."

She was silent a few moments, gravely reviewing the case. It was a baffling one, she confessed to herself, with a sigh.

"What shall we do?" she asked him, at last. "Shall we take Mr. Stuart and Irene into our confidence?"

"Not yet," he replied, thoughtfully. "Let us deal with Julius Revington first. We must study out a plan to bring that villain to confession."

CHAPTER XL.

[Pg 95]

Irene sat still where her angry lover had left her, lost in a trance-like maze of troubled thought. With her small, white hands folded in her lap, and her dreamy blue eyes fixed on vacancy, she remained there, statue-like and unheeding, and time, albeit its wings were clogged with sorrow, flew past unnoticed, until the noon-day sun rode high in the heavens.

A step, a voice, startled her from her dreamy reverie.

"Ah, Miss Berlin, you see I have discovered your charming retreat," said Guy Kenmore. "Will you permit me to share it?"

The swift color flew to her brow, as she looked up into the handsome face, with the slightly wistful smile about the firm lips.

"This spot is free to all Mr. Stuart's guests," she replied, coldly. "I have no right to forbid you to come here."

"Would you, if you had?" he asked, throwing himself down in the grass at her feet, and lifting to her face his slightly quizzical brown eyes.

"Why should I?" she retorted, gazing down into his face with an air of the most serene indifference.

"Why, indeed?" he asked himself, with sudden bitterness. "Serene, in her fancied incognito, she cares not whether I go or stay. I am no more to her than the earth beneath her feet," and aloud, he answered calmly as he could speak, and in a slight tone of banter:

"I fancied you might prefer to share this lovely solitude with some more favored friend—for instance, Mr. Revington."

The hot flush deepened on the beautiful face, and she answered with an impulse of passionate willfulness:

"That would be natural, would it not? I suppose you have heard that I am to marry, Mr. Kenmore?"

His brown eyes flashed beneath their shady lashes.

"She dares to twit me with her preference for that puppy," he said, angrily to himself. "Does she indeed believe that I am blinded by her borrowed name, and that I am unaware of her real identity? Will she attempt to carry the farce through to the end?"

An impulse came over him to claim her then and there as his own; to take the slight young figure in his arms and press it to his beating heart; to kiss the beautiful, proud face and the defiant eyes, and to say, jealously: "You are my own wife, Irene, and whether you love me or not, no one shall take you from me."

Ah, if only he had obeyed the prompting of his heart, how much sooner happiness would have come home to them to crown their lives with bliss; but their mutual pride stood like a wall between. He shook off the tempting impulse to claim his own, and believed that he was but obeying the command of chivalry and honor in keeping stern silence.

"What, claim an unwilling, reluctant bride?" he thought to himself, sadly. "No, no! never! I must wait until of her own free will she owns her fealty to me. I must woo and win her before I claim her."

[Pg 96]

Perhaps the struggle in his heart betrayed itself on his face, for the resentment died out of her blue eyes and they were filled with a mute, pathetic longing.

"Ah, if he would only love me, if he would only claim me," she thought. "I would tell him how I

hate and despise Julius Revington! He might help me to right my mother's wrongs!"

At that moment his downcast gaze fell on Julius Revington's guitar which that worthy had forgotten in his hurried and angry exit from Irene's presence. A jealous gleam lightened in his brown eyes.

"Ah, I see that Mr. Revington has already been with you this morning," he said frigidly.

"Yes," she replied, with coldness equal to his own.

"Are you fond of music?" he inquired, taking up the instrument, and striking a few chords, softly.

"Passionately," she replied.

Obeying a sudden impulse he played a soft, sweet symphony and began to sing in a mellow baritone. He had chosen the beautiful song, "My Queen," and the girl's heart vibrated painfully to the sweetness of the strain.

"Who will be his queen?" she asked herself, with a jealous pang at her heart. "He is so grand and handsome, he will only love some one gifted beyond her sex with beauty and genius. Ah, why did I come between him and his future?"

She looked at him wistfully when he had finished.

"I did not know you could sing like that," she said.

"Is it equal to Revington's performances?" he inquired, smiling at her implied compliment.

To his dismay she sprang up crimson with anger and resentment.

"Revington, Revington! It is always Revington with you," she cried, and flung away disdainfully from him.

CHAPTER XLI.

Irene preserved a dignified reserve toward Mr. Kenmore after that day when he had so angered her by his allusions to Julius Revington. She never spoke to him when she could avoid it, she never looked at him, she never seemed to know that he was in the room. She froze him by her coldness and indifference. He did not even dare speak to her unless courtesy strictly required it. Yet all the while her heart was aching with its doubt and pain, while as for him, his love for his beautiful, willful girl-bride grew stronger every hour, though in his pride and resentment at her coldness and scorn he would have died rather than avow it.

A few days after his arrival at the villa some of the gentlemen rode into Florence, and when they returned they brought tickets for a grand concert to be given that night. They reported that the music-loving Italians were in ecstasies over it.

It appeared that one of their countrymen, a musician, had gone to America twenty years before, where he had remained until two months ago, when he had returned to Florence, bringing with him a beautiful young lady whose voice he designed to cultivate for the operatic stage. The curiosity of the volatile Italians had run high over this pupil of the great musician, and unable to resist the importunities of his countrymen, Professor Bozzaotra had promised a public concert in which the American singer would make her *debut*. Her name was down on the programme as Miss Brooke. Strange to say, not one of the villa inhabitants to whom that name was so sadly familiar, were struck by its similarity to Clarence Stuart's first wife's. It failed to suggest any probabilities to their minds. One and all were eager to attend the promised feast of music.

But at the very last moment Irene declined to accompany the merry, expectant party to the concert.

A headache was the alleged feminine excuse for her refusal.

In vain Mr. Revington pleaded and Mrs. Leslie added her protests. They could not persuade Irene that the ride in the fresh air would benefit her head, or that the music would cause her to forget indisposition.

"I do not wish to go," she reiterated, firmly, and Mrs. Leslie wondered a little at the tears in the girl's blue eyes, as she kissed her good-night, and the more than usual fervency of her embrace.

When they were all gone, and the villa was left to the occupancy of herself and the servants, Irene retired to her room. She sat down and wrote a hasty letter to Mrs. Leslie, which, after sealing and addressing, she placed in a conspicuous place on the toilet table.

"She will think me unkind and ungrateful," she sighed to herself; "but what can I do?"

She removed her pretty blue dinner dress, and substituted a plain, black cashmere. Then, with trembling fingers and nervous haste, she packed a change of clothing into a small hand-bag. Lastly she took out her little shell purse, and counted its contents. There was something more than a hundred dollars, the gift of her munificent friend, Mrs. Leslie.

"She little thought for what purpose I would use it," sighed poor Irene. "But I have no other refuge left me!"

She put the purse into her pocket, drew on a dark gray travelling ulster, and a little cap with a thick veil. Then taking the hand-bag in her little trembling hands, she stole silently as a ghost

from the great house, and did not draw a free breath until she stood alone in the moonlighted garden.

Then she paused and lifted her white face and tear-wet eyes to the starry sky.

"If only *he* had loved me I need not have gone," she sighed. "Ah, my husband, my darling, farewell!"

Without another word she was gone, flitting away, a small, dark shadow, to mingle with the shadows of the night.

Meanwhile the party from the villa were seated in the great concert hall awaiting the appearance [Pg 98] of the lovely American *debutante*.

They occupied two boxes, and conspicuous in the foremost one was Mrs. Stuart, with her daughter and her husband.

Mrs. Stuart was elegantly dressed in rose-colored satin and point lace, with magnificent diamonds. With the aid of pearl powder and rouge she had been made up by her maid into quite a beauty for this occasion.

Lilia wore soft white mull and pearls. As she sat by the side of her handsome, dark-eyed father her likeness to him was marked and conspicuous. No one could have failed to see that they were father and child.

Impatience was at its hight. The orchestra had rendered its overture, and been vociferously applauded by the enthusiastic Italians. Professor Bozzaotra himself had executed a magnificent violin solo, and responded twice to encores that could not be suppressed. The curtain had fallen, to rise the next time on the lovely *debutante* whom Rumor credited with the beauty of an angel and the voice of a siren.

It rose at last, and the hundreds of curious eyes fell on her, standing there with modestly drooping head, yet quiet, calm, and self-possessed, and so lovely, withal, that before she opened her lips for a single note a thunder of applause shook the building. Silently and by the mere force of her peerless beauty she had carried all their hearts by storm.

For Clarence Stuart, sitting pale and silent by the side of his dying daughter and his faded wife, it seemed as if a ghost had sprung up before his eyes.

He knew her instantly—that fair, false wife who had forsaken him so long ago, and whom all these long, long years he had believed to be lying dead under foreign skies, with her baby on her breast. It was Elaine, the woman, lovelier in her splendid prime than she had been in her spring. As she stood there, "gowned in pure white that fitted to the shape," her only ornaments the clusters of pure white roses on her breast and in her golden hair, she looked queen-like, bride-like, and the man's heart swelled with a great despair as he gazed upon her, remembering how he had lost her forever. But he spoke not, he scarcely breathed, only sat and gazed with an eternity of despair shining out of his wide dark eyes.

There was one other, too, who gazed as if petrified upon that beautiful vision.

It was Guy Kenmore, who instantly recognized Elaine Brooke, but whose great wonder and surprise held him still and speechless, while her rich, clear voice rose and fell in waves of mellow sweetness on the tranced air. She sang a difficult, classic song, which the professor had chosen to display the great beauty and volume of her voice, and every note rung clear and true as liquid gold. When the first verse was ended, and she stood waiting for the tumultuous applause to die away, she suddenly lifted her eyes to the box above, as if drawn by some strange, magnetic power, and her glance met full those dark, burning, anguished eyes with which her husband gazed upon her.

A start, a shiver! Those who gazed closely at the beautiful singer saw her reel slightly; saw her white-gloved hand pressed convulsively upon her heart as if in pain. She stood thus, statue-like and immovable, for an instant, her eye held as if fascinated by that conspicuous group in the box; then suddenly, as the professor struck the opening notes of the next verse, she seemed to recall her wandering senses by a supreme effort of will. For weary years she had nerved herself for this chance meeting, which had come about so strangely at last. She would not let herself be conquered by it.

The beautiful voice rose clear, strong, delicious. There was just one falter in the first notes, just one tremor like a sob of agony. Then the woman's will conquered the woman's heart. She sang on to the end sweetly, bravely gathered up one or two of the fragrant floral tributes that rained at her feet, and with just the proper bow and smile retired.

Tumultuous applause, passionate encores followed her retreating footsteps. She did not respond to them. They thought her chary of her exquisite voice; they did not know that she had fallen down like one dead on the floor of the little dressing room, and that the lips that had sang to them so sweetly were now flecked with drops of blood forced out by the heart's great emotion. The flowers had fallen from her hands, and they were clenched so tightly that the white gloves were torn and spoiled.

"Oh, Clarence, Clarence, my traitor-love, we have met at last," she moaned. "Oh, God, how hard it is that I love him still! That perjured wretch who blighted my life and that of our innocent child!

[Pg 99]

He has not forgotten me! It was remorse that looked out from his eyes at me to-night. Yet that was his wife and child who sat beside him! Oh, heavens, what humiliation for me who stood there beneath their cold, critic eyes to remember that I was once his wife, that I rested in his bosom, that my arms cradled his child! Oh, Irene, my lost one, my darling, I must crush down this weak love that blazed afresh in my heart when I met the eyes of the man I once held as the truest and noblest of men! I must remember that the knowledge of his sin drove you to death, my darling, and I must hate him for your wrongs and mine!"

So she raved on in her impotent despair, while the thunders of the orchestra filled the house, and people chanted her praises, prophesying for her a career equal to Patti or Nilsson. She, whose voice was sweeter than nightingale's notes or the sound of falling waters, lay there like a broken flower, crushed by her terrible despair.

When she had retreated from the stage, Mrs. Leslie touched Guy Kenmore's arm. Turning to look at her face, he saw that her eyes were wide and startled.

"Well!" he said.

She answered in a voice that was hoarse with emotion:

"It was the face that Irene wears in her locket. What does it mean?"

He whispered back softly, "It was Irene's mother! It was Elaine Brooke."

"Merciful heavens," exclaimed the lady, and turned to look at Mr. Stuart.

[Pg 100]

Then she saw Mrs. Stuart and Lilia hanging over him in an agony of despair, and gentlemen crowding into their box. Mr. Stuart was a brave and a strong man, but when that ghost from the past had risen to confront him, then faded quietly again, heart and strength had failed him, and sitting in his chair, he had silently swooned away.

They said that the heat had overcome him, and bore him out into the fresh air, where he revived a little. Some advised him not to return to the concert hall, but he waved them quietly aside, ashamed of his womanly weakness, and returned to Lilia, who was sobbing with grief and fear.

"It is nothing, my dear. I am quite well again," he said, gravely. "But shall I take you home now?"

"No, no, papa, I wish to hear the beautiful lady sing again," she replied, turning eagerly back to the stage.

Mrs. Stuart said nothing to her husband. She was whispering with Julius Revington, who had come into her box a little while before. The gleam of hate in the lady's eyes flashed almost brighter than her diamonds, her cheek glowed through its rouge with a deep natural red, and her jeweled hands clenched each other nervously in her lap.

Miss Brooke came again after a little interval, which was filled up by other performers. She had fought down her terrible emotion, but her lovely face was very pale and sad, and she never lifted her dark blue eyes while she sang. This time it was an Italian *chanson*, and the words flowed easily from her lips in that liquid southern tongue that is so sweet and soft. The Florentines were charmed, as the professor had intended they should be, at hearing one of their native songs warbled by the sweet lips of the stranger. She retired again under a storm of bouquets and applause, but, as before, she did not respond to their encores. It was too keen an agony to go back and sing to them again before those burning dark eyes, whose gaze she intuitively felt upon her, though she would not lift her own to meet their flashing light. It was all that she could bear to go on when her turn came.

But when she had sung her last song and the liquid Italian recall followed her again, Professor Bozzaotra went to her. He was radiant with joy.

"Let me beg you to humor them, my child," he said, radiantly. "You have carried their warm hearts by storm. Be kind to them. Sing them something, anything to satisfy their craving."

She went back and stood before them, with bowed head and an almost divine sadness on her face. She sang some words that were "as sad as earth, as sweet as Heaven."

"I stand by the river where both of us stood,
And there is but one shadow to darken the flood;
And the path leading to it where both used to pass,
Has the step of but one to take dew from the grass;
One forlorn since that day!

[Pg 101]

"The flowers of the margins are many to see,
But none stoops at my bidding to pluck them for me;
The bird in the alder sings loudly and long,
For my low sound of weeping disturbs not his song,
As thy vow did that day.

"I stand by the river—I think of the vow—
calm as the place is, vow-breaker, be *thou*!
I leave the flower growing—the bird, unreproved—
Would I trouble *thee* rather than *them*, my beloved,
And my lover that day?

"Go! be sure of my love—by that treason forgiven;

Of my prayers—by the blessings they win thee from Heaven;
Of my grief—(guess the length of the sword by the sheath's)
By the silence of life more pathetic than death's!
Go! be clear of that day!"

Then the concert was over!

CHAPTER XLII.

The concert was over, and hastily excusing himself to his companion, Guy Kenmore made his way around to the private entrance; with some difficulty he elbowed his way through the eager throng that waited to see the lovely singer pass to her carriage, and was fortunate enough to meet her coming down the steps on the professor's arm. He touched her eagerly.

"Miss Brooke," he said, and she turned with a start and a cry. Her eyes dilated with wonder as she saw by whom she was addressed.

"Mr. Kenmore—you here!" she exclaimed, and put out her delicate hand graciously.

He pressed it warmly in both his own.

"I am delighted to meet you," he said, "I have news for you—good news. May I call on you at the earliest admissible hour to-morrow morning?"

She glanced at the carriage.

"You may come with us in the carriage now if you will," she replied. "The hour is not too late for good news from an old friend."

Then she introduced her friend to the professor. The gentlemen shook hands cordially, and Bozzaotra repeated Elaine's invitation to come with them in the carriage.

"Gratefully, if you can wait for one moment while I make my excuses to a friend," he said.

They promised to wait, and Mr. Kenmore hurried back to inform Mrs. Leslie that he would not return to the villa that night. He heard Julius Revington saying that he should remain at the hotel that night and walk out to the villa in the morning; but he paid small heed to the words, in the preoccupation of his mind. He was longing to tell Elaine that her daughter lived; and as soon as he had handed Mrs. Leslie to her carriage, he hurried back to her.

She received him with a pensive smile of pleasure, and made room for him by her side, the professor being seated opposite. The carriage door was closed, and they were whirled away.

[Pg 102]

"It is a great surprise to see you here, Mr. Kenmore," Elaine began, in her musical voice. "Is your news from mamma and Bertha? I have so longed to hear from them; but, though I have written them several times, I have had no news of them since I left Bay View."

"Bang! Whirr!"

His answer is not on record.

A pistol had been fired close to the horses' heads, and they plunged and reared, almost upsetting the carriage. The shriek of the driver was heard as he tumbled from his seat upon the stony pavement; then the maddened steeds, without check or hindrance, dashed blindly forward in a mad, terrified pace, dragging after them the rocking carriage, with its precious, living freight.

Meantime, the man who had fired that reckless, murderous shot had been overtaken by Nemesis.

In his eager excitement he had gone too near the horses' heads, and, making his retreat, he had stumbled and fallen. In an instant they had trampled his fallen body with their plunging hoofs. Compassionate hands lifted him up from the stony street, a crushed and bleeding mass, in which the spark of life yet feebly lingered.

The carriage driver was picked up senseless in the street, where the maddened horses had hurled him in their swift rush to destruction. Luckily, he had escaped the contact of their iron hoofs, and his injuries, though serious, were not mortal.

But that poor sinner who, in the commission of a dastardly crime, had been overtaken by a swift and just Nemesis, how fared he?

They placed him on a litter and bore him into the nearest house. Men looked at that crushed and bleeding semblance of poor humanity, and, turning away, shuddered with horror. The physician came, and shook his head.

"My poor fellow, you can live but a few hours more," he said. "Tell us who your friends are that we may summon them."

"Are you sure, quite sure, that I must die?" moaned the sufferer, while the dews of terror beaded the weakly, handsome face which had escaped the vicious hoofs that had beaten the life from his body.

"You cannot possibly live but a few hours longer," repeated the physician as kindly as he could speak, and with a deep pity on his face that would not have been there could he have guessed that the wretch had wrought his own destruction.

Moans of terror and despair welled over the man's blanched lips when he realized that death was so near him. He begged that a priest might be sent for to pray the pardon of Heaven on his sinful soul.

"And your friends," they asked him, "shall we not bring them, too?"

With a moan of pain he answered:

"Send some one with a swift horse to overtake Clarence Stuart, who is returning to his villa in the suburbs. Tell him Julius Revington is dying, and—the lady—who was in the carriage—with the runaway horses—if she is living, bring her to me with all haste."

[Pg 103]

CHAPTER XLIII.

The willing hearts were not wanting to do the bidding of the dying man. Messengers went in three different directions, while the physician remained to assuage by all means that lay in his power the agonies that racked that tortured form. Anon the priest came, and with prayers and holy words strove to comfort the poor departing soul.

The swiftest horse in Florence went clattering over the road in pursuit of the carriage that held Clarence Stuart and his wife and daughter. It was soon overtaken, and the ominous message flashed like a thunder-clap upon their startled senses.

Mrs. Stuart and Lilia uttered shrieks of the wildest dismay.

But Clarence Stuart, after the first shock of surprise, regained his self-possession.

"I must go to him at once," he said. "Mrs. Stuart, I must transfer you and Lilia to one of the other carriages while I return to poor Julius."

To his surprise the lady answered, in sharp, hysterical tones:

"Lilia may go in the carriage with Mrs. Leslie, but I shall return with you to the death-bed of poor Julius."

"I object to your doing so. It may be an unpleasant ordeal for a lady of your delicate nerves," Mr. Stuart said, almost sternly.

"I insist upon going. All the arguments against my doing so will be quite wasted," she exclaimed, doggedly.

"Oh, mamma, do not leave me," cried her daughter, in almost hysterical distress.

But Mrs. Stuart shook off the clinging hands of the weeping girl almost rudely.

Mr. Stuart regarded his wife in silent amaze and displeasure. Nothing angered him more than for anyone to speak unkindly to his child, but he well knew how useless it would be to remonstrate with his wife, so without more ado Lilia was transferred to Mrs. Leslie's care, and the husband and wife returned to the city.

No more unpleasant sight could have greeted Julius Revington's eyes than the face of Mrs. Stuart as she entered the room where he lay attended by the priest and the physician, the only helpers left to him on earth. The eyes already dim with the film of death gazed at her with weak repugnance and horror.

Unheeding his gaping wounds and his blood-stained garments, she knelt down by his side and whispered frantically in his ear.

With all the strength that was left in his mangled arms he pushed her from him.

"Do not tempt me to die with all this load of sin on my soul!" he cried. "I must confess, confess! The priest is waiting to shrive me of my sins! Clarence, Clarence," he cried out wildly, "take her away, take her away! She has been my evil genius. I was weak, but never guilty until she whispered her evil suggestions in my ear and bribed me with her gold!"

[Pg 104]

"It is false, false! Let no one listen to him. These are but the ravings of delirium!" cried the woman angrily.

Her looks and actions were those of a desperate, maddened woman. The physician came up firmly to her side and attempted to draw her away.

"Let me entreat you, madam, not to shorten the brief span of my patient's life by your unjust charges," he cried. "I assure you he is not delirious, but in the full possession of his senses. Come away from him."

They were about to drag her forcibly away when the door opened suddenly and Guy Kenmore entered the room with Miss Brooke clinging to his arm.

CHAPTER XLIV.

It was a strange sight on which the flickering gaslight fell in that little room. The dying man,

lying on the litter on which he had been borne into the room, and from which the physician declared it impossible to remove him, was a ghastly sight that sickened human sensibilities.

Mrs. Stuart, crouching on the floor beside him in her rose-tinted satin, her priceless lace and flashing diamonds, looked like a maniac. Her eyes flashed with hatred and desperation, her face was death-white, her breath fluttered over her lips in short gasps, and she defiantly resisted the efforts of Mr. Stuart and the physician to draw her away from the side of the dying man whose looks all too plainly expressed his abhorrence at her presence. At a little distance the old priest was devoutly crossing himself while he muttered an inaudible prayer. No wonder that Elaine Brooke reeled with horror as her gaze fell on that strange and dreadful scene.

"Be brave. Do not lose heart," Guy Kenmore whispered to her as he felt her weight grow heavier on his arm. "That dying man may have an important confession to make to you."

"I will be brave," she whispered back, but when she saw Clarence Stuart and the woman who had rivalled her in his heart—the woman who was his wife—it seemed to her that she could not breathe, that she must rush from the room, or surely she would fall down dead there at her traitor husband's feet.

They turned and saw them, the tall, gracious-looking man with his gentle, protecting air as he looked down upon Elaine—Elaine all in white, with her golden hair fallen down upon her shoulders in shining disorder, the snowy roses dying on her breast, and the pathos of a terrible despair written all over her lovely, pallid face—they saw her, and from Mrs. Stuart's lips shrilled a cry of rage and despair, from those of the dying man an exclamation of joy.

"You live!" he cried, "thank God, you live! Your death is not upon these dying hands!"

"Then it was you who fired that terrible shot!" cried Elaine, in horror.

[Pg 105]

"God forgive me, yes," he wailed. "Come nearer, Elaine Brooke. I have a story to tell you before I go hence. I have a legacy to leave you. Oh, horrors, will not some one take this mad woman away from me?"

Mrs. Stuart had sprung upon him in such insane fury that it seemed as though she meant to hurry his remorseful soul into the eternity to which it was hastening. Mr. Stuart hastened to draw her away, dreading the struggle that must ensue, when suddenly, with a choking gasp, she fell senseless into his arms. The tension on her nerves had given way, and she had instantly fainted.

"That is much better than having to remove the lady by violence," said the physician, relieved. "We will remove her to another room now where she cannot distress my patient."

"Clarence, you must return in a moment," moaned Julius Revington. "I have a confession to make to this lady—one that you must hear."

Mr. Stuart looked back a moment, and his glance met Elaine's large blue eyes, true as those of an angel, yet full of dumb agony. His glance fell and he turned away, with a strange thrill at his heart.

"She repents of her cruelty to me," he said in his heart. Meanwhile Guy Kenmore had spread a dark covering over Revington's mangled form, and Elaine knelt down beside him on a low cushion which Mr. Kenmore had arranged for her. She looked with compassionate gentleness at the sufferer who was passing away so fast from the reach of all earthly resentment.

"You are a stranger to me," she said, wonderingly. "Why did you try to harm me, and what can you have to confess to me?"

"You shall know presently," he answered. "Wait until Clarence Stuart comes back. You must hear my story together—you two who have been so foully wronged and parted."

CHAPTER XLV.

A startled look came over Elaine's face at those strange words from the lips of the dying man.

"Wronged and parted," she repeated, vaguely.

"Yes," he replied, and at that moment the door unclosed and Mr. Stuart came again into the room.

"Let all go out now except Mr. Stuart and this lady," said Julius Revington, feebly.

But Elaine interposed:

"I should like for my friend, Mr. Kenmore, to stay," she said. "He knows all the story of my life, and if I have been deceived beyond what I know I should like for him to hear it."

Julius Revington looked curiously at the man whom Elaine claimed as her friend.

The doctor and the priest had retired, and the four were alone in the room.

"What is he to you?" he asked, in his weak, painful tones.

[Pg 106]

Elaine looked up at Guy.

"Shall I tell him?" she asked.

He bowed his head in acquiescence, and she replied:

"He is my daughter's husband."

"Irene's husband!" exclaimed the dying man, feebly, and Clarence Stuart echoed the startled cry, "Irene's husband!"

"Yes, she is my wife, but she believed me dead when she promised to marry you," replied Guy Kenmore, looking at the dying man.

"My God," exclaimed Julius Revington, and for a few moments he lay silent contemplating this strange piece of news, then he looked curiously at the handsome, noble-looking man.

"You did not claim her when you came," he said.

"It was her secret. I was waiting until she gave me leave to divulge it," was the quiet reply.

Elaine had been listening with startled eyes. She sprang up and caught Mr. Kenmore's arm.

"I—do not—understand you," she panted. "You speak as if—as if my child were yet alive!"

He took her trembling hands and held them gently in his own.

"I meant to break it to you gently," he said. "But do not be shocked. That is the news I had for you. Irene is alive, and but a few miles away from you. You shall see her soon."

An ominous gasp from Julius Revington recalled them to his side.

"That news will wait," he said. "But I—I have but a little while to live. Listen to me first."

With a beating heart and a face radiant with sudden joy Elaine knelt down beside him. She could have touched Clarence Stuart as he sat by the litter, but she shrunk sensitively back, without looking at him. Guy Kenmore stood apart at a little distance, with his arms folded over his broad breast, his clear brown eyes fixed gravely on the little group.

"Clarence," said the dying man, turning his dim eyes on the face of his cousin, "you believed that this lady deserted you sixteen years ago of her own free will and desire. It was not true."

"Not true!" gasped Clarence Stuart.

"No, it was not true. She loved you and she was true to you. The wicked machinations of your father parted you from each other."

"My father! Oh, God, no!" exclaimed Mr. Stuart, in an agony of grief.

"It is horrible, but it is true," said Julius Revington. "He was bitterly enraged against you because of your marriage with Miss Brooke instead of the heiress he had selected for you. He laid his plans cleverly to circumvent you. Your severe illness that prevented you from returning to your wife was caused from drugs administered by him in the wine you drank that night."

"What authority have you for making these statements? Remember that you are dying, Julius, and do not try to falsify anything," exclaimed Mr. Stuart, almost sternly.

"I do not forget that I am dying," moaned the sufferer. "I speak the truth as God hears me—the truth as I received it from the lips of your father upon his death-bed." [Pg 107]

"He revealed the truth to you instead of to me—strange!" cried the tortured man, almost incredulously.

"Yes; can you guess why?"

"I cannot."

"He repented of his sin, but he was afraid to confess it to you. He dreaded your terrible anger and dreadful despair. He feared that you would curse him upon his dying bed."

"I am afraid I should have done so, indeed," muttered Clarence Stuart.

"So he selected me as the instrument to right the wrong," went on Revington. "He wrote out a full confession of his sin, detailing the means he had used to separate you, and he deputed me to carry it to Bay View, where your first wife had been living all the time while you believed her dead in a foreign land."

"And you failed in your promise to the dead," exclaimed Mr. Stuart, fixing a glance of deep reproach upon his cousin.

"No, I kept my promise. You remember the night we stopped at Brooke Wharf on our way to Italy, Clarence?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, that night while you lay in your stores of fruit, and the rest of our party rambled about, I fulfilled my mission. I went to Bay View Hall, and I persuaded old Mr. Brooke to come out on the shore with me. I told him of your father's death-bed repentance, and I confided to his care the written confession. He promised to deliver it to his daughter Elaine, and I came away and left him."

Elaine hid her face in her hands and low moans of pain came from her lips.

Julius Revington lay still a moment, breathing hard and painfully, then he resumed slowly:

"There was one who, by some means, had become cognizant of the secret confided me by the dying man. I will call no names. Your own heart may suggest who that person was, Clarence Stuart. She sought me and endeavored to buy my silence by costly bribes. I refused her importunities. I was bound by a solemn pledge to the dead, and I kept my vow. God knows how

she learned my mission that night, but she followed me at a distance. She concealed herself, and when I had gone she felled the old man with a sharp blow on the temple from a thick stone she carried, and then she wrested the precious confession from his clenched hand and fled back to the yacht."

A piercing cry broke from Elaine's lips.

"Oh, God, papa, my own papa, you were most foully murdered," and throwing up her arms, she fell like one dead upon the floor.

Guy Kenmore placed a cushion beneath her head with gentle care, but he made no effort to restore her to consciousness.

"It is better thus," he said. "I have long known or believed, that Ronald Brooke met his death by violence, but I would have been glad to spare this poor soul that harrowing knowledge if I could."

"You knew it!" both Clarence Stuart and the dying man reiterated in surprise.

[Pg 108]

"I suspected it," said Mr. Kenmore, "but the physician said that he died of heart disease, and I had no right to go beyond his verdict. I alone observed the purplish mark of a blow upon his temple. I alone knew that some important paper had been wrested from his hand in that last dreadful struggle. I kept silence, but I have been on the track of his slayer ever since. But go on with your story, Mr. Revington. Do not wait for this broken-hearted woman to recover. She has heard enough."

"There is little more to tell," he answered, weakly. "When I went back to the yacht, I missed the lady who was so interested in old Mr. Stuart's dying confession. Suspecting and dreading I scarcely knew what, I hurried back along the path I had come, and met her flying like a mad thing toward me, with the precious confession clasped tightly in her hand. Wrenching it rudely enough from her, I ran forward to restore it to Mr. Brooke, and found the old man's dead body lying on the sands, with its convulsed face upturned to the moonlight."

"A murderer—the mother of my loved Lilia a murderer!" groaned Clarence Stuart, hoarsely.

"I went back and charged her with her sin," continued Julius Revington. "She was horrified. She declared that she had not meant to kill him, only to stun him that she might obtain the coveted paper. It was then that she bribed me to keep the secret. But it was not alone her gold that bought me, I was sorry for her. She had been my friend for years, and I was not acquainted with Miss Brooke, although I had seen her portrait, and knew that she was the loveliest of women. But I thought it best to leave matters as they were. I reflected that if the secret were revealed, it would only shift the disgrace from one innocent wife and child to another, for Mrs. Stuart believed her husband free when she married him. So I kept silence, and now I realize my sin. I have here your father's death-bed confession, but I fear it will prove valueless to you, for the signature is gone."

He drew it from his breast, all dabbled with his life-blood, and Clarence shuddered as he took it in his hand. Guy Kenmore came slowly forward with a narrow slip of paper.

"Here is the signature and the remainder of the confession which I found clinched in Mr. Brooke's hand after death," he said; "I restore it to you, Mr. Stuart, and I also have a brief confession to make."

"You?"—and Mr. Stuart looked up in wonder.

"Yes, and it is this: I believed that you were old Ronald Brooke's murderer. I followed you to Italy to ferret out your secret, if I could, for the sake of poor Elaine Brooke, for I believed that Irene, my little bride, was dead then. I will tell you my own strange story by-and-by. Now, I wish to ask your pardon for the wrong I did you in my thoughts. Instead of the guilty sinner I believed you, I find that you are a wronged and miserable man."

He held out his hand, and Mr. Stuart pressed it firmly in his own, while his dark eyes wandered to the still white face of the woman whom he had never ceased to love, even while he thought her dead. Heavy sighs breathed over his lips.

"And Irene is your wife?" said Julius Revington's gasping voice.

"Irene is my wife," replied Guy Kenmore.

"And you love her?" said the dying man, wistfully.

"As my life," was the low, fervent reply.

"I loved her, too, but it was a selfish love," sighed the sufferer. "She despised me, but I bought her promise to be mine by a selfish barter. I had told her that her mother was legally married, and that I would give her her grandfather's confession on the day she became my wife. I was hard and cruel to her. Ask her to forgive me if she can, Mr. Kenmore."

"I will," answered Guy Kenmore, whose grave face had suddenly grown radiant.

A moment later Mr. Stuart asked, gravely:

"And did you really fire a pistol at Elaine's horses to-night, Julius?"

"Yes, and found my death in doing so," he groaned. "The same hand incited me to that desperate deed that did old Ronald Brooke to death. She was furious with rage and fear when she saw her rival on the stage, and she conceived that terrible plan for putting her out of the way. But I am thankful that my nefarious deed failed, although I can scarcely conceive how my victims escaped."

[Pg 109]

"I can tell you in a moment," answered Guy Kenmore. "In turning an abrupt corner of a street, the carriage parted from the horses, and left us safe, though sadly bruised and frightened in the battered vehicle."

"Thank God!" echoed Julius Revington, in his weak tones, and then he added, plaintively: "Call the priest in now, I wish to take my solemn oath to the confession I have made."

At that moment Elaine gasped and opened her eyes. They fell upon Clarence Stuart, who bent over her wistfully regarding her.

"Elaine, my poor, wronged darling, what can we say to each other?" he whispered, mournfully.

She regarded him with grave, reproachful eyes.

"Nothing," she answered, firmly. "You forged other ties when you thought me dead. Be true to them."

She could not repress that little outburst of jealous reproach, pure and angelic as she was, and with the words she took Guy Kenmore's arm and passed from the room.

With a heavy sigh, Clarence Stuart bent over the dying man. Death had blotted out all resentment.

"My poor fellow, what can I do for you?" he inquired.

"Nothing, only leave me with the priest," he answered, heavily. "I want him to pray for me. I have done with the things of this world."

And when he had sworn solemnly to the truth of his confession, he bade his cousin a long and last farewell, and sent him from the room.

On the threshold he met the physician coming in with a solemn face. Taking him by the arm, he said, gravely:

[Pg 110]

"My dear sir, prepare yourself for a great shock. The lady's swoon was more serious than we thought. She never revived from it. Her terrible excitement killed her."

Well, it was best so. How could he have ever looked in her face again, knowing that the death of old Ronald Brooke lay on her white, woman hands?

Just before daybreak they brought him word that Julius Revington was dead. He went and looked a moment at the still, white face, and the old priest told him that his cousin had died peacefully, trusting to the full in the mercy and pardon of Heaven.

Clarence Stuart shuddered and thought of that other one who had gone swiftly and unrepentantly before the bar of that God whose commands she had outraged.

All the morning he remained in Florence making arrangements for the double burial. Elaine had returned to her hotel, and Mr. Stuart sent her by Guy Kenmore the blood-stained confession to read at her leisure. Then he gave up his time to the burial of his dead. He sent a messenger out to the villa to break the tidings of death to all but Lilia, who was to be kept in ignorance of her mother's fate until he could tell her himself.

The messenger returned with tidings as sad as he had carried away. Lilia lay unconscious and dying, having suffered a relapse of her insidious disease that morning which had brought on fatal hemorrhage.

CHAPTER XLVI.

It was more than Elaine could bear to read the dying confession of the wicked old man who had blighted her life and branded her daughter's young life with shame.

It almost killed her to look at it and to feel that through it her kind, noble old father had lost his life.

"Better, far better, if old Clarence Stuart had died with the secret of his villainy untold!" she cried. "Better that I should have borne the brand of shame forever than you to have died by the assassin's hand, my father, oh, my father!"

Yet she knew, even while she bewailed him, that her father would have given his life twice over to purchase honor and happiness for her, his best-loved child.

"Irene must never know," she said to Mr. Kenmore. "She loved my father so dearly, and she is so passionate and impetuous that it would break her heart. We must spare mamma and Bertha, too. That wicked woman is dead now, and earthly vengeance cannot reach her, so for her husband's sake we will shield her memory."

He agreed with her that it was best so, and she gave him the confession to read for her, telling him frankly that she could not bear to hold it in her hand. Yet her heart burned and her cheek glowed as she heard the story of the deep-laid scheme by which she and her adoring young husband had been separated.

"Irene must read that—and mamma and Bertha," she said, wistfully, and Guy Kenmore understood then how bitterly the woman's pure heart had shrunk under the lash of scorn they had laid upon her shoulders.

[Pg 111]

"It is almost impossible to imagine anyone so heartless as that old man," he said. "With what devilish art he laid his plans. To you he told the story of the fraudulent marriage ceremony, and your husband's second marriage. To his son he presented your fraudulent letter of renunciation, and later on the false notice of your death abroad. No wonder the wings of his soul were clogged in dying by the weight of his terrible sins."

He told her the story of Irene's rescue from death, and how he had subsequently met her at Mr. Stuart's villa on the Arno.

"Does it not seem like some strange recompense of Providence that she should have been saved from death by her father?" he said, thoughtfully.

She agreed with him, and then he saw a wistful look stealing into her gentle eyes.

"You are longing for your child?" he asked.

"My heart aches to clasp her again," she answered.

"Be patient. In a few hours I will bring her to you," he answered.

"And you?" she asked, slowly. "Are you glad or sorry that the waves gave her back to us?"

"I love her," he answered, simply, and with that she was content.

He went away on his mission to restore the child to her mother's arms, and Elaine waited with eager impatience for his return.

"He has a brave, true heart," she said. "Irene will have a noble husband. After all, the mistake of that dreadful night may prove a providence to them both."

For it seemed to her that they could not help from loving each other. It seemed like a match made in Heaven. He was so handsome, so noble, so kind. Irene was so lovely, so tender, and her mother knew that beneath her pretty, wilful ways, that were but as the foam on the sea, she had a heart of gold.

So Elaine was well content with her son-in-law for her daughter's sake, though when she looked into her mirror it seemed almost ridiculous to reflect that she was a mother-in-law. Time had touched her very lightly in its flight, and she was as beautiful as her daughter. Indeed, Clarence Stuart pronounced her lovelier. Sorrow had brought such soul and expression into her face, even as "night brings out the stars."

When several hours had passed and she heard footsteps in the hall outside her door, the glad tears rose to her eyes and the rapturous beats of her heart were almost painful.

"Irene, my love, my darling," she murmured, longingly.

The door unclosed and Guy Kenmore entered—alone!

Elaine looked past him—her face paled, her eyes filled.

"Oh, do not tell me she would not come," she cried.

Then she saw the shadow of heavy trouble brooding over his face.

"Not dead!" she wailed.

He took her hands in his firm, strong clasp.

"Be brave," he said. "She is not dead. It is not so bad as that. But last night while we were away at the concert, Irene fled from the villa, and her absence was not discovered until late this morning. She left this note for Mrs. Leslie, and she has sent it to you."

He drew the dainty white envelope from his breast and laid it in her hand.

[Pg 112]

CHAPTER XLVII.

Elaine took the letter in her trembling hands, and, through a mist of bitter tears, saw the pretty girlish writing of the daughter she had mourned as dead. She wiped the dew from her eyes and read the sorrowful words that had flowed from the girl's burdened heart.

"Dear Mrs. Leslie, my true friend," Irene had written, "forgive me for going away in seeming ingratitude for all your kindness to me. Troubles encompass me, from which I have no refuge but in flight. I do not love Mr. Revington, and I am not free to marry him. But he has it in his power to work me ill, and I must fly far, far away, beyond the reach of his power. I have a sorrowful secret, but I cannot tell it to you; my heart is broken, but I cannot tell you by whose coldness and cruelty. Enough that I leave you reckless and despairing, not knowing if we may ever meet again. God forever bless you for your friendship and kindness to the mysterious stranger."

"IRENE."

"You have read this?" said Elaine, lifting her tearful eyes to Mr. Kenmore's grave, sad face.

"Yes; by Mrs. Leslie's kind permission," he replied.

"Is it your coldness and cruelty to which she so sadly refers?" asked Elaine.

"Mine? by no means," he answered, startled. "I cannot at all understand what she means by those phrases."

"You are willfully blind," she answered. "I am quite sure she referred to you. Ah, Mr. Kenmore, my poor child had learned to love you. You should have claimed her before them all as your wife, if you really loved her."

He looked very grave and perplexed. A deep flush colored his face.

"God knows I would have done so, gladly enough, but I feared to offend her. I believed she would be angry if I attempted to claim her for my own. And you must remember that she bore an assumed name. I was waiting, with what patience I could, hoping she would relent toward me and acknowledge her identity."

"Waiting for the child to throw herself into your arms," said Elaine, with one of her sweet, pensive smiles. "Ah, Mr. Kenmore, you are very noble and chivalrous, but you know little of the subtle workings of a woman's heart. My little Irene is very proud, and the circumstances of her marriage were not such as to make her feel confident of a welcome from you. I believe she would have died before she would have come to you and said: 'I am your wife, whom you believed to be dead!'"

"She was cold, proud, indifferent to the verge of rudeness," he answered, gravely. "She seemed bent on showing me that she loved Julius Revington."

"Yet you see now that she did not care for him. Ah, Mr. Kenmore, I can see plainly how pride and sensitiveness stood between you. While you waited for her to declare herself, she waited for you to claim her, and, despairing of your love at last, went away."

She extended her white arms to him, imploringly.

"Oh, Mr. Kenmore, you will find her for me, my little girl, my darling," she pleaded, piteously.

"Yes, I will find her for you, and for myself—I swear it," he said, passionately. "I will never give up the search until I find my proud and willful little wife."

He paused a moment, then went on, anxiously:

"But before I go I have somewhat to ask of you. Perhaps it may be too great a favor."

"Name it," she answered, gently, and he replied:

"Lilia Stuart—your husband's child, and who should have been yours, too—lies ill unto death at her father's villa with that fatal malady, consumption. Last night you carried the child's heart by storm. To-day, in her illness and pain, she sings over fragments of your songs—they think if—you would come—that it might make happier her dying hours."

"Let her father comfort her," she said, bitterly, jealous in her heart of that other woman's child.

He took her hand and gazed deep into her soft, pure eyes, tinctured with a certain womanly pride.

"Mrs. Stuart," he said, letting his voice linger firmly on the name, "this is not worthy of you. Your heart harbors resentment against your husband when he has never wronged you. He has not sinned, he has been sinned against. Just now he cannot come to the child. He must first bury his dead."

"How can I sing to her when my heart is so empty and full of pain?" she asked, drearily.

"Because God will bless your efforts to cheer the last hours of that motherless child," he said. "Clarence Stuart loves the child, and it might have been yours as well as his. You must love it for his sake. Think if it were your own loved Irene, dying in the spring of her life."

"I will go," she answered, tremulously.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

When Elaine went to the villa her strange, romantic history was known to all the inhabitants except Lilia. Mrs. Leslie, in her woman's wisdom, had judged it best to tell all the rest, but no one breathed it to the dying child. She alone never knew that the beautiful singer who had taken her young heart captive was her father's real wife. When he came and found her singing like an angel by Lilia's dying bed, he made no sign save by the silent gratitude in his dark eyes, and Elaine was best pleased thus.

There were several days of fluctuating hope and fear before the fair bud faded on its drooping stem. Sometimes she would have every appearance of rallying, but it was only the deceptive flattery of her insidious disease, and she would immediately fall back into the most alarming symptoms.

The day came when Mr. Stuart could bear it no longer to hear the weak voice asking for her mother, and wondering why she came not.

He told his child the truth with such infinite pity and gentleness that it softened the blow to her young heart——told her that her mother had gone before her to the unknown Land.

Lilia bore it more bravely than he had expected.

"She has only gone before me a little," she said, sadly.

And later on she asked Mrs. Leslie for Irene.

"I loved her at first until mamma bade me not to," she said, plaintively. "Then I was cruel and unkind. Is she angry still, that she does not come to me when I am so sick?"

They told her gently that Irene did not know of her illness, that she had gone away.

"Then I shall never see her again," said Lilia, sadly. "Tell her I was sorry for my cruelty, Mrs. Leslie, and ask her to forgive me. Tell her she should have been my sister only mamma was not willing. She was good and pretty and I loved her even when I tried to hate her."

Mrs. Leslie promised to deliver the message when she found Irene.

"I know she will forgive you, Lilia, for she loved you even when you were unkind to her," she said, marveling to herself how the tie of blood had asserted itself in the spontaneous love of the two girls whom the dead woman had so maliciously sundered.

"Poor little misguided Lilia. She will know in Heaven that they were really sisters, and it will be a comfort to her," she said to herself.

That evening in the glow of the golden Italian sunset Lilia closed her heavy-lidded eyes softly as flowers shut their petals at twilight, and forgot to open them again in the world in which she had tarried a little while. Elaine had held her hand and sung her to sleep in soft, sweet numbers that breathed of a Better Land.

"A land whose light is never dimmed by shade,
Whose fields are ever vernal;
Where nothing beautiful can ever fade,
But blooms for aye eternal." * * *

It was over the child's grave where they lingered together one twilight eve, strewing lovely, pure, white flowers, that Clarence Stuart made his first appeal to the wife he had so fondly worshiped, and from whom he had been so cruelly sundered.

"Elaine, my house is left unto me desolate," he said. "Will you ever consent to return to me?"

[Pg 115]

The fair flower-face drooped, crimson with the warm tide of her heart's emotion, but for a moment she could not speak, and he continued, sadly:

"I have never ceased to love you, Elaine, even when I believed you false, even when they told me you were dead, even after another bore my name, and shared my home. I never loved her. She was my father's choice, not mine, and she could not make me happy. Elaine, my early choice, my own worshiped wife, will you not come home to my heart?"

He held out his arms to her eagerly, but she drew back, though not unkindly.

"Not yet," she answered, gently. "It is too soon. Let us give a few months to the dead who filled your life so long, then—come for me."

"And this contemplated public career— I am very selfish, love," he said. "Will you sacrifice your ambition for my sake? Will you give up that sweet voice to me to be heard only in the walls of my home? It is sacred to me since it sang my child into her last, long sleep."

"It shall be as you wish, Clarence," she answered, gently; and though Professor Bozzaotra was disappointed at the loss of that grand voice to the world, he acquiesced in her decision. He was glad that Elaine's romance had ended so happily.

"Although it is a sad disappointment to me," he sighed. "When she was but a girl at school I told her that her voice belonged to the world, and when she came to me at last to teach her again I was charmed that the public should have its due. Ah, well, I must not spoil her happiness with my vain regrets!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

The moonlight lay on Bay View House—not the tender moonlight of June as when we saw it first—but the cold, wintry whiteness of November. The ground was covered with a thin, light carpeting of snow, and a wind from the bay swept coldly across the land, almost freezing those who were so unfortunate as to be exposed to its piercing rigor. In the sky the stars were glittering coldly bright.

But no hint of the outdoor cold and discomfort penetrated to the luxurious parlor where we first met our pretty, willful Irene. A bright coal fire burned in the wide, steel bars of the grate, and diffused a lazy, luxurious warmth through the large apartment. Basking in its comfortable rays sat Mrs. Brooke and Bertha, the lamplight falling softly on their black silk dresses and the delicate lisso at throat and wrists. A white rose fastened in Bertha's silky, dark hair diffused the pleasant fragrance of summer amid their wintry surroundings.

A dark frown disfigured the handsome face of the brunette, evoked by her mother's words, uttered a moment ago.

"To-morrow, Bertha, we must go up to New York and sell my diamonds," Mrs. Brooke had said.

[Pg 116]

"There is no help for it. They will have to be sacrificed."

"A pretty appearance we shall make in society when we lay off our mourning—no jewels to wear!" snapped Bertha, discontentedly.

"You will have your pearls and rubies; I have not asked you to part with them," said Mrs. Brooke, soothingly.

"You needn't do it—no, not if it came to starvation with us!" declared the brunette, passionately.

"You talk foolishly, Bertha," declared her mother. "Do you not suppose that it grieves me also to part with my jewels, the gift of your poor dead father? Yet I make no foolish lament over it. I consider the necessities of the case; but I also remember that if you had not forced me to make the tour of the summer resorts this season I should have been able to live through the winter without selling my beautiful diamonds!"

"Oh, yes, everything is my fault!" cried Bertha, angrily. "Could I help it if Guy Kenmore went gadding off to Europe instead of going to the summer resorts where I expected to find him? I am sure I should not have asked you to spend the money if I had not felt perfectly sure of finding him somewhere. And if I had found him I should have won him, I know, for I am very sure he was in love with me last year."

"I am afraid you were mistaken, my dear. I think it was Elaine he was smitten with. You had as well turn your attention to some one else with money, if you can find one, for it is very important that you should marry soon, and it is very evident that Guy Kenmore cares nothing for you," Mrs. Brooke said, tartly.

"Elaine—always Elaine!" cried Bertha, in a passion. "Do you suppose he could care about her after I betrayed her shameful story to him?"

Before Mrs. Brooke could reply there came a sharp peal at the door-bell that echoed weirdly through the great, silent house. Both ladies started violently.

"Who can this be?—at this hour?" exclaimed Bertha, glancing at the clock, whose hands pointed to nine.

"Some one who has come by the boat or the train," exclaimed Mrs. Brooke, nervously. "Perhaps Elaine!"

"You are always harping on Elaine—you forget that Professor Bozzaotra has taken her to Europe to make her a *prima donna*," Bertha exclaimed, sharply.

They heard old Faith, who was the only servant they retained now, waddling down the hall to the door, and waited a moment silently to learn whom their guest might be.

The heavy hall-door opened, light steps sounded on the threshold, then suddenly a shriek of terror resounded through the house, and staid old Faith rushed back to the parlor door, tore it wildly open, and fled to the side of her mistress as if for protection.

"Why, Faith, you old simpleton, what ails you? Have you seen a ghost?" exclaimed haughty Bertha.

"Yes, Miss Bertha, that's just what I saw! I opened the door and there stood the ghost of Miss Irene, just risen from the sea," panted old Faith, overcome with terror and exhaustion, for she was very fat, and her flight had been sudden and rapid.

"Ridiculous," sneered Bertha, and just then light feet came patterning along the hall, a slight figure flashed over the threshold—Irene, with the dark hood of her cloak fallen back on her shoulders, and all her wavy golden hair flying like an aureole around her beautiful, pale face!

She ran up to the old housekeeper and shook her laughingly by the shoulders.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, old Faith?" she said. "I'm not a ghost—I am Irene, living and breathing! Pinch me if you don't think I'm telling the truth. I've come to see my mother," her eager glance roving around the room. "Oh, where is she, where is she?"

[Pg 117]

CHAPTER L.

For a moment Mrs. Brooke and Bertha were almost as much unnerved and startled as the old housekeeper had been. They stared in speechless amaze at the fair, young face, like, yet unlike, Irene Brooke's—like it in the bright, captivating beauty that had been the girl's glorious dower, yet changed because a woman's soul with all its love and sorrow had subtly transformed it, adding the one only grace it needed to make it simply peerless.

At last—

"You are not Irene," gasped Bertha, "she is dead!"

"I was not drowned," the girl answered, simply. "God did not let me perish in my wickedness that night. I was saved by a passing yacht after floating several hours on a plank in the water. Look at me, Bertha. Do you not see that I am Irene, alive and in the flesh?"

Bertha regarded her a moment with steady, contemptuous eyes and curling lips.

"No, you are not Irene! You are a miserable impostor!" she flashed out, in scathing anger and bitterness.

Irene stood regarding her, disconcerted and amazed for an instant. It had never occurred to her that they would deny her.

Her lips quivered and the tears sparkled into her sweet, blue eyes.

"How dare you utter such a falsehood, Bertha?" she cried, with something of her old, imperious anger. "You know who I am perfectly well. You are wicked and cruel to call me an impostor."

Then she turned from the scornfully silent girl and crossed the room to Mrs. Brooke, who still sat in her easy chair with old Faith crouching in dumb terror at her feet.

"Grandmamma, you will not deny me," she pleaded, "I am Elaine's child—she whose shame and sorrow you shielded so long beneath the honest name of Brooke. Will you not speak to me, little Irene that grandpapa used to love so dearly?"

The handsome old lady returned her gaze with a hard, cruel stare. She was not ready to acknowledge her granddaughter yet. It flashed dimly over her bewildered mind that Irene had come back to claim her protection and support. [Pg 118]

In her straightened circumstances she was not ready to accord her either, and the faint pity that was struggling in her heart was smothered by the warning flash of Bertha's black eyes.

Irene saw herself disowned and rejected again. She looked at them in hapless bewilderment. Nothing equal to this cavalier scorn had ever occurred to her. She had been girlishly amused at the housekeeper's terror, but this was worse. Her young bosom heaved with stormy indignation.

"Where is my mother?" she asked, bitterly. "Will she deny me, too? Will she be sorry that the sea has given up its dead?"

No one answered her except old Faith, who gave a low, whimpering moan that might mean everything or nothing.

Irene went up to her and shook her by the arm with gentle violence.

"Come, old Faith, you are not quite daft, I think," she said, bitterly. "Tell me where to find your Miss Elaine!"

The fat old housekeeper seemed to be somewhat reassured by the very realistic touch of the warm, white hand. She shook herself like a big, shaggy dog, and rose to a standing posture. Some of the abject terror died out of her face.

"Is my mother up-stairs in her room?" inquired Irene, impatiently.

"Miss Irene, where have you been all these long months?" inquired Faith, irrelevantly.

"I have been in Italy, Faith. I was rescued that night when I tried to drown myself, by a yacht bound for Italy. The people were very kind to me, and I went there with them. But I have come back to find mamma. Where is she, Faith? Go and bring her to me," exclaimed the young girl, impatiently.

"Oh, miss, she isn't here. She went away after you did. She's gone away off to that place where you said you were," stammered Faith.

"To—to Italy?" exclaimed Irene, blankly.

"Yes, Miss Irene—she went away with her old music teacher to learn to be a great singer. Oh, Mrs. Brooke," sighed the old woman, turning anxiously to her mistress, "you can tell her better than I can about the letter that Miss Elaine wrote you before she went away."

"How dare you tell our private matters to this impostor, Faith?" demanded Bertha, fire flashing from her brilliant eyes. "Have you no sense, no judgment?"

"Oh, ma'am, 'tis certainly *our* Irene. I was an old fool at first and took her for a ghost, but now I could swear 'tis Miss Elaine's own little daughter," pleaded Faith, with a loving glance at the shrinking young girl who stood anxiously awaiting her reply.

"Hush, not another word!" raged Bertha. "How dare you set yourself up against me? I tell you this girl is nothing to us and she shall leave this house! Go to your room, Faith, and remain there. You have no business in the parlor."

"Go," echoed Mrs. Brooke, bestowing a glance of stern displeasure upon the old housekeeper. [Pg 119]

Faith slowly left the room, after bestowing a glance of love and pity upon the forlorn young creature who looked after her as if her last friend on earth were departing.

A rush of cold air met the old woman in the hall, and she went to close the heavy door which was banging loudly back and forth.

To her dismay she met a gentleman just crossing the threshold. Ashamed of her recent idiotic display of fear, the old woman held her ground bravely, and stopped to hold a parley with the intruder.

Irene remained standing in the center of the room looking blankly from one to the other of the two cruel women who so coldly denied her. A look of pain and grief shadowed her fair face.

"Is it true that your daughter has gone to Italy, madam?" she asked, timidly, looking at her grandmother whom she dreaded less than the wrathful Bertha.

"Yes, it is true," Mrs. Brooke replied, without raising her eyes from the contemplation of the shining rings on her plump fingers.

"When is she coming back?" inquired the girl.

"What is that to you?" demanded Bertha, pitilessly.

The beautiful girl flashed a look of deep reproach upon the cruel woman.

"It is everything to me," she said, mournfully. "She is my mother. I love her, and she is all I have to love me. I have crossed the sea to throw myself into her arms, and now that I am here she is gone—she is gone, oh, God, have pity on me," she wailed, despairingly, while the hot tears of disappointment and sorrow streamed down her cheeks.

"This is all very fine acting, but it does not impose upon mamma and me," sneered Bertha. "You are nothing to us, and you are nothing to my sister. You are a vile adventuress and impostor. You are trying to trade upon my sister's unfortunate secret which you have somehow discovered, but you will get nothing from us—nothing! Begone now, before I call the servants to put you out," she concluded, loftily.

Irene turned her pale, distressful face upon the merciless woman.

"Do you know that I have nowhere to go?" she asked, in a low, fearful voice. "I have spent the last penny in my purse coming here to find my mother. If you turn me out to-night I must perish in the cold."

"That is no concern of mine," Bertha answered, angrily. "Go, I tell you!"

"Do you sanction Bertha in her cruelty, madam?" said Irene, appealing to her grandmother. "Must I indeed go forth to my death?"

"Go where you please, so that you leave my room instantly," replied the hard-hearted woman, resolutely sustaining Bertha in her cruelty.

"You hear my mother's decision. Now go!" cried Bertha flinging wide the door, and pointing to it with her white, ringed hand. [Pg 120]

But even as she was about to thrust Irene out of the room, her hand fell, and she uttered a shrill scream of dismay.

Her malevolent black eyes had encountered the gaze of a pair of flashing brown ones, whose scathing contempt and bitter anger seemed to wither her where she stood.

"May God forgive you both!" said the poor forsaken girl, as she turned to obey their wicked mandates; "for I am surely going out to meet my death!"

Blinded by her bitter tears, she crossed the threshold, seeing nothing, and so ran into the manly arms that were outstretched to clasp her.

"You are going no further than your husband's arms, my darling," said the low music of the voice she had learned to love beneath the blue Italian skies. "To your husband's arms, never to leave him again!"

And holding his little wife tightly clasped to his beating heart, Guy Kenmore turned to Bertha.

"God may forgive you for this wanton cruelty," he said, "but I never will. None but fiends in human form could have showed themselves so pitiless to this helpless child. I hope I may never see either of your faces again."

And with no more words, he led his little bride from those inhospitable doors out into the cold, bleak night again. But they were no longer conscious of the cold, sharp wind and the driving snow. There was a warmth and summer in their hearts that made the night more fair to them than that June-tide with all its moonlight and roses when they had first met.

"I followed you from Italy here, my darling," he said, "and I shall never lose sight of you again. I love you, Irene. I have loved you ever since the night that made you my unwilling bride. Will you promise to stay with me always now, my little wife?"

And in her tender, timid "yes," and the pressure of the small hand on his arm he read the sweet, wifely love he was too generous and too chivalrous to ask his shy little bride to avow.

CHAPTER LI.

There was a very good hotel in the vicinity of Bay View House, and Guy Kenmore and his little bride went there to await the coming of the midnight train by which they proposed returning to Baltimore.

He secured a comfortable private parlor, and sitting by the cheerful fire never hours of waiting passed more rapidly than these.

With her lover-husband's arm drawn close and fondly round her graceful form, Irene listened to the story of that momentous night when she had so unwisely fled. She learned that the man she had both feared and despised was dead, that Mr. Stuart was her father, and that Lilia and her mother were both dead.

"And it was my own precious mamma whom I refused to go and hear that night," she said. "Oh, if I had only known! But I was driven wild by my fears. In my trouble it seemed to me that there was no refuge on earth for me but in my mother's arms, and so I came back to America as fast as wind and tide could bring me!"

[Pg 121]

"If you had known then that I loved you, Irene, would you have gone?" he asked her softly, while he gazed deep in the lovely sapphire blue eyes.

The warm color surged into her cheeks at his earnest gaze, and she hesitated.

"Tell me," he pleaded, and then she answered frankly:

"No, I should not have gone. If you had claimed me then I should have come straight to your arms and told you all my doubts and fears. I could not have left you."

"My proud little darling," he murmured, "we were both mistaken in holding aloof from each other; but, please God, we will make up the loss of those months of separation by long years of happiness spent together. Do you remember those sweet lines of Jean Ingelow, my darling?

"It's we two, it's we two, it's we two for aye,
All the world and we two, and Heaven be our stay.
Like a laverock in the lift, sing, oh, bonny bride!
All the world was Adam once, with Eve by his side.

"What's the world, my love! what can it do?
I am thine, and thou art mine, life is sweet and new;
If the world have missed the mark let it stand by,
For we two have gotten leave and once more we'll try."

In his deep, sweet tones and the fond glances of his eyes, Irene read that she was beloved even as she had longed to be in those days in Italy, when she had believed him cold, careless, indifferent, and determined not to acknowledge the tie between them. Tears of happiness sparkled in her eyes, and with a low sob she hid her face on his breast.

He held her close, and kissed her tears away, silently, thanking Heaven for the priceless gift of her innocent young heart.

He told her the gay yachting party had returned to Richmond, sobered and saddened by the loss of Mrs. Stuart and Lilia.

"The child—your half-sister, Irene—have you thought of that?—sent you some kind messages by Mrs. Leslie before she died," he said.

Irene was sorry to know that the spoiled, pretty Lilia was dead; but it pleased her to know that her mother had been kind to her—that she had soothed her dying hours with her soft, sweet songs.

"Dear, dear mamma—when shall I see her, Mr. Kenmore?" she asked, wistfully.

"I meant to surprise you," he said; "but I cannot keep you in suspense. You have already borne too much. You will see her to-morrow. She is the guest of my sister in Baltimore. When I found out in Florence that you had started to come back to America, I crossed in the next steamer, and your mother came with me. We landed in a few hours after you did, and I had no difficulty in tracing you. I learned that you had started for Bay View by the water route, and followed you on a fast train, by which means I was enabled to reach your old home in time to learn the wickedness and heartlessness of Bertha."

[Pg 122]

"In time to save me from perishing in the cold, for I had exhausted my last cent in the purchase of that ticket to Bay View," she said, with a shudder.

"I am most happy that I came, but in any case, you would not have suffered," he replied; "for old Faith assured me that, had they turned you out of the house, she would have gone with you and taken care of you."

"Dear old Faith, she was always kind to me," said Irene. "But Bertha always hated me, and I am sure that she will never forgive me for taking you away from her."

"Do not say that," he answered, "for I never belonged to Bertha. I admired her stately beauty, but the thought of taking a wife had never occurred to me until that night when," laughing, "you married me, willy-nilly."

Irene blushed very much, but ended by laughing, too. In a minute she grew very serious again, and, slipping her soft little hand into his, said, gently:

"Do you know, dear Guy, that since—since we love each other—that marriage in play seems very light and flippant to me? Shall we not—shall we not"—pausing, bashfully.

"Plight our marriage vows over again," he finished for her. "Yes, love, we will do so again, and this time our hearts shall go with our hands."

And the very next day they were married over again in the quiet little church in Baltimore, with their nearest relatives for witnesses, and although Irene wore the plainest pearl-gray silk, and the demurest little bonnet, Mr. Kenmore's handsome, fashionable sisters declared that she was the loveliest bride they had ever beheld.

They went away on a little southern tour to see Mrs. Leslie, who received her favorite with the

gladdest of embraces and some incoherent reproaches, calling her a "naughty little runaway."

"I can never quite forgive you for not confiding your secret to me," she said. "I could have helped you so much, dear, if only you had let me."

Mr. Stuart came to see her and they sent her in alone to meet him. All felt that their meeting as father and child would be too sacred a scene for other eyes to gaze upon. She came from his presence weeping, but they were the placid tears of joy that her father was proven good and noble, and that his heart was full of love for her and her long-suffering mother.

"He is waiting in sorrowful patience for mamma to relent," she confided to her husband, when they were alone. "I hope she will go back to him soon. Only think! They have been cruelly separated for almost seventeen years!"

And looking into the beautiful, loving young face, Guy Kenmore realized something of Mr. Stuart's pain in the sudden pang with which he wondered how he could bear to be separated from his beautiful Irene for such an eternity of years.

He kissed the sorrowful young face into brightened smiles again.

[Pg 123]

"When we go home we will talk to mamma," he said. "We will tell her that life is too short to spend away from those we love and who love us. We will persuade her to shorten the span of his probation."

"He deserves it I know, for he tells me that he has suffered deeply," said Clarence Stuart's daughter. "Oh, Guy, I love him dearly already. He saved my life, you know, and I believe I have loved him ever since, although I could not understand the subtle nearness of the bond that drew me to him."

CHAPTER LII.

Mrs. Brooke and Bertha did not go to New York the next day as they had intended doing.

Both of them were overcome by the scene of last night. Bertha's malevolence and angry bitterness made her almost ill. Mrs. Brooke was chagrined and regretful. She had permitted Bertha to rule her affairs with a high hand, believing in the wisdom of her ruling, and now she found that she had over-reached herself.

If she had dreamed that Guy Kenmore would claim Irene for his own, she would never have allowed her granddaughter to be driven from her doors. She had too keen a sense of the advantage to be gained from such a wealthy connection.

But it was too late now to recall the heartless deed by which she had closed Guy Kenmore's doors against her. His stern face remained in her memory, and his parting words rung like the clash of steel in her hearing:

"I hope I may never see either of your faces again."

It was just. She acknowledged it to herself, but it galled her none the less bitterly. She upbraided Bertha for her share in the transaction, and Bertha replied insolently. They spent their time in bitter recriminations, these two women who had so cleverly over-reached themselves.

In a few days a letter came from Elaine. The gentle reproach of its preface touched a painful chord in the mother's heart, for she had sadly missed her eldest daughter, though she would not have dared to say so before the overbearing Bertha.

"I have written to you many times since I left home, mamma," wrote gentle Elaine, "but as you never answered any of my letters, I conclude that they were unwelcome, and that I am forgotten and uncared for in my old home. I am writing you once again, probably for the last time."

Then in a few closely written pages Elaine told them the whole story of her new-found happiness.

"My plan for becoming an opera-singer is abandoned by the desire of my husband," she wrote, simply. "He is very wealthy, and there is no longer any need for me to work. I shall live in Baltimore. Irene's home will be here, and I cannot consent to live apart from my child. Mr. Kenmore has a superb residence here, and my husband has promised to secure a similar one for me on the same street, so that I may see my little Irene every day. Dear mamma, it seems to me that if you had loved your poor Elaine as warmly as I love my little girl, you could never have treated me so unkindly!"

[Pg 124]

It was the last drop of bitter in Bertha's cup of humiliation. Elaine, whom she had trampled upon for years, despising her for her sorrow, envying her for her beauty—Elaine to be loved, honored, crowned with wealth and happiness! It stung Bertha to the depths of her little soul. She would have sold her soul to the powers of evil for the power to drag Elaine and her daughter down from their high estate.

But there was no convenient demon about to gratify Bertha's malevolent desires, and her mother began to assert her own will, which she had long permitted Bertha to dominate. She forced her to accompany her to Baltimore to see Elaine, though she rebelled bitterly against this eating of "humble pie."

They found the long despised daughter and sister the guest of Mrs. Livingstone, one of the

leaders of fashion in the monumental city. She was a sister of Guy Kenmore, and it almost maddened Bertha to sit quietly and listen to the enthusiastic praises she bestowed on her brother's beautiful bride. "I have never seen anyone so artlessly lovely and charming," she said. "She will be the rage in society. While they are taking their little tour, the Kenmore diamonds and pearls are being reset for her, and her bridal reception dress is ordered from Paris. It will be a marvel of beauty."

"All might have been mine but for that fatal night's work," Bertha told herself, full of maddening envy, and no words could have told her hatred for innocent, willful Irene.

Elaine had become like a young girl again in the sunshine of her great, new happiness. Her blue eyes beamed with love and hope, her cheeks were tinted softly like the lining of the murmurous sea-shell, she had the sweetest smile in the world. There was only one shadow on her joy:

"If only my father could have lived to see my honor vindicated and my happiness restored," she would sigh, and when she remembered the cruel blow that had struck him down to death, she would steal away to her room to weep unavailing tears for his untimely fate. But she bore her pain alone, and none of those who had been bound to old Ronald Brooke by the tie of kinship ever knew the sorrowful secret hidden in Elaine's breast. Bertha did not let her mother stay long, though Elaine was very kind and gentle, and did not reproach them for their heartless denial of her daughter. The cruel, unkind sister could not bear the sight of Elaine's happiness, and so dragged her mother away, but not before the old lady had secretly whispered in the ear of her elder daughter that "everything had all been Bertha's fault."

Elaine did not doubt it, for she well knew her sister's malice and ill-nature, but seeing how their unkindness had recoiled upon their own heads, she tried to forgive and forget.

When beautiful, happy Irene came home, she pleaded her father's cause so well that Elaine, whose own heart was pleading for him, too, relented, and suffered her daughter to write for him. He came gladly, but the reunion of the long-parted husband and wife is too sacred a subject for us to dwell upon. It was the realization of the poet's dream:

"Look thro' mine eyes with thine. True wife,
Round my true heart thine arms entwine;
My other dearer life in life,
Look thro' my very soul with thine."

[Pg 125]

One bit of gossip, reader. Mrs. Brooke never sold her diamonds. Ten thousand dollars settled on her very quietly by her wronged and despised elder daughter, enables her and Bertha to keep their heads above water and to hold their place in society. They flash in and out from one gay resort to another, for Bertha is very restless and never contented long in one place. Mrs. Brooke is very fond of talking about "my daughter, Mrs. Stuart, and my granddaughter, Mrs. Kenmore," but it is noticeable that she is not very intimate with either. Indeed, she and Bertha have never yet crossed the threshold of the palace where Irene reigns a queen.

Bertha is an old maid now, faded, sour, and given to saying sharp things to everyone, so that no one enjoys her company, and no one dreams of seeking her for a wife. Proud, envious, spiteful, she seems to hate all the world, but no one with such concealed malice and galling bitterness as Guy Kenmore's wife.

[THE END.]



The Rose and the Lily OR LOVE WINS LOVE

BY
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"BONNIE DORA," "COUNTESS VERA," ETC.



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**THE ROSE AND THE LILY;
OR,
LOVE WINS LOVE.**

[Pg 1]

By MRS. ALEX. MCVEIGH MILLER.

CHAPTER I.

A dusky, *piquante* face, arch, sparkling, bright, as only brunette faces *can* be, dark, waving hair, and pansy-dark eyes with golden lights in their soft depth, delicious lips, tinted with the velvety crimson of the rose, a slight girlish figure, unformed as yet, but with a willowy grace all its own—Reine Langton.

She comes singing along the graveled path between the trim borders of bright verbenas, velvety pansies and fragrant pinks, swinging her large straw hat by its scarlet ribbons. The golden light of the summer day falls on the uncovered head, and on the fair, low forehead with its silky rings of clustering hair, and its slender, straight, black brows. She sings shrilly, but sweetly

"Love not—love not, ye hapless sons of clay;
Hope's gayest wreaths are made of earthly flowers;
Things that were made to fade and fall away
When they have blossomed but a few short hours;
Love not—love not."

The handsome, blonde face of a young man lifts itself from the reclining depths of a hammock-chair, swung under a wide-spreading tree; as she draws nearer, he breaks out with careless raillery:

"Pray forbear, Miss Langton! your shrill soprano has frightened me from a charming dream. I do not believe your match could be found for keeping one's nerves continually on edge."

[Pg 2]

"Men have no business with nerves," she retorts, coolly. "For shame, Mr. Vane Charteris. Get out of that hammock and stir yourself. I can't abide a lazy man."

He looks at her with sleepy, half-shut eyes that mirror the deep, beautiful blue of the sky overhead.

"Fortunately you do not have to abide me," he says, brusky. "After to-morrow I shall forever be out of reach of your shrill voice and scolding tongue!"

A strange look comes into her dark eyes a moment. Some of the golden light dies out of them, they grow darker and vaguely sad, but she laughs.

"A pity for you, too. My influence and example might rouse you otherwise from your stupid inertia. Tennyson must have had a lazy man in his mind's eye when he wrote the Lotos-Eaters."

He smiles, and quotes with careless good-nature:

"In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined

On the hills, like gods together, careless of mankind."

"Is not that an idyllic life, Reine?"

"No," she says, promptly. "I have no patience with the *dolce far niente* of some people. It is a pity you are to marry Maud Langton!"

He colors, and asks:

"Why?"

"Because she is as lazy as you are. When you marry her and come into Uncle Langton's money, you'll both be too lazy to breathe, just *that!* You will die for lack of energy to live."

She has stopped beside the hammock-chair, and leaning against the tree looks down into the handsome, debonair face with a gleam of audacious levity in the dusky eyes. He starts up to a sitting posture, thoroughly aggravated.

"Thank you," he remarks, with immense dignity. "I understand," with cutting irony, "the reason of your spite. You wanted Mr. Langton's money yourself."

"Not a bit of it," decidedly. "Thank goodness, I know how to earn my own living. Not but that Uncle Langton has treated me unfairly, though. I am as near kin to him as Maud. My father was his own brother. Why should he make her his heiress, and marry her to the son of his old sweetheart, cutting me off with a beggarly invitation to spend three weeks, and be her bride's-maid?"

[Pg 3]

"Why don't you tell him that?" he queries, watching the rich color deepen on the delicate cheek.

"I don't care to," with careless indifference. "I don't want his money."

"No—do you mean to say you do not care for all this?" He glances around him at the spacious white villa, set in the midst of a green, flower-gemmed lawn, shaded by stately trees. "Only think, my lady disdain: A summer home in these grand old mountains, a winter palace in Washington, a cottage by the sea, and a fabulous bank account; does it all count for nothing in your eyes?"

"Yes," pertly, "if, like poor Maud, I had to take *you* as an incumbrance with it all!"

He flushes with wounded vanity and anger.

"The feeling is mutual," he retorts, under the spur of pride. "If I had to take *you* with Mr. Langton's money, it might go to found an idiot asylum."

"Vane Charteris, I hate you!" she exclaims, with a flash of childish passion.

"I take it as a compliment," he replies, with a profound bow.

"Quarreling as usual," says a clear, sweetly modulated voice, and both turn with a start.

A tall, imperially stately woman has come sauntering down the path from the house. You think of Tennyson's description:

"A daughter of the gods, divinely tall.
And most divinely fair."

Vane Charteris' face lights with languid pleasure. It is Maud Langton, his betrothed. This very night she is to be his bride.

"Ah, Maud," he says, "I am glad you are come. Perhaps you will deliver me from this little vixen!"

There is a grave, far-away look in the light blue eyes of the bride-elect. She looks at Reine, not at her lover, as she answers lightly:

"It is very undignified to call names, Vane, and how often have I told you, Reine, that you must bridle that sharp tongue of yours?"

"He began it," mutters Reine, with a childish petulance.

[Pg 4]

"You should have known better than to tease the child, Vane," says Miss Langton. "If you are in fault, you must apologize, of course."

"I'll be shot if I do," he begins, stoutly, then stops at her look of dignified amaze, and says, with a gleam of tender relenting: "Very well, Maud. Of course I can refuse *you* nothing on this day of *all* days. See here, Reine, I beg your pardon for what I said. Will you forgive me?"

"No, I won't—so there!" she flashes, with some wrathful tears splashing down her cheeks.

"Reine!" Miss Langton cries, horrified.

"Reine!" mimics the girl, provokingly.

"Ah, me!" with a pretty sigh of resignation, "I see it is no use trying to train you," but Reine Langton is already out of hearing. They catch the distant gleam of her white dress among the trees.

Vane Charteris rises from his indolent pose in the hammock-chair and installs his blonde angel in his place. Tall, graceful, with the fair beauty of a Greek god, he might hold any woman's heart, but as he stands by her side, lightly swaying the chair, Miss Langton's large, blue eyes wander from him to the line of the distant hills that stand around about her beautiful home in a glorious green wooded circle.

"Ah, Maud, my beautiful, gentle darling," he says, "how hard it is to believe that Reine Langton is

your cousin. You are so utterly unlike. You are so calm and sweet and gracious, she is so rude, so pettish, so like a chestnut burr!"

"Poor Reine," she says, not disputing him, yet a little apologetically, "she has had no training. Her mother died in Reine's infancy, and her father brought her up after his own fashion, dying two years ago, and leaving her to get her own living. You cannot expect an underpaid teacher to have the manners of a lady."

"She is rather young to teach others, isn't she?" he says.

"Rather," she replies. "Sixteen or seventeen at the most, I should say. But now, Vane, I really must go in; I have fifty things to attend to. All my bride's-maids will be coming presently."

"My sweetest, how shy you are," he laughs; "you will barely look at me, yet in a few hours more you will be my own. Mine to love and caress as much as I please. Do you realize it, my dignified darling?"

[Pg 5]

A slight, a very slight shiver passes over the imperially-molded form. She looks at him, then, half-fearfully, half-questioningly—

"Vane, tell me the truth," she says. "Is it me you love or is it my uncle's money?"

A dark-red flush stains his handsome face.

"Maud, that question is unworthy of you. I have loved you from the first hour I saw you. I have told you how irritated I was at first when my mother's old friend wrote to me offering me a wife and a fortune. Poor as I am I was determined not to marry you unless I loved you. But your peerless beauty conquered me as soon as I saw you."

Something very like a sigh ripples over the delicate rose-leaf lips. She does not smile nor blush as if she felt flattered.

"I will tell you something else, now, my Maud, if you'll promise not to laugh," he goes on; "I was jealous at first of that handsome, black-eyed Clyde that came so frequently to call on you. I was very glad when you sent him away. You never cared for him, did you, dear?"

"Of course not, you foolish boy," she laughs, and with that she slips away from him.

He watches the flutter of her pale blue robe out of sight, then, dropping his eyes, sees a folded slip of paper lying on the ground at his feet. In a careless, mechanical way he picks it up and reads the few lines hastily scribbled in a man's strong hand.

"My darling," it says, "you have relented at the last and made me the happiest of men. God forever bless you. Do not fail to be at the appointed place. If you do not marry me I swear I'll shoot myself through the heart, but if you keep your promise I promise to make you the happiest woman on earth."

The note was signed with a blurred, undistinguishable initial. Vane Charteris tucked it into his vest-pocket in happy unconsciousness of the fatal truth.

"Reine Langton must have dropped this," he thinks to himself. "I'll restore it to her the first opportunity. I wonder who her suicidal correspondent may be?"

[Pg 6]

CHAPTER II.

Inside the elegant, ornate white villa all is confusion and excitement. The house is crowded with guests, and the preparations for the wedding are going blithely on.

In the dining-hall the long table glitters with plate of silver and gold, and all the luxuries of home and foreign countries are temptingly spread thereon. Flowers are lavishly arranged everywhere. Trained domestics hurry to and fro, bent on perfecting every arrangement, for the wedding of Mr. Langton's beautiful niece is a very grand occasion indeed, and every honor must be paid to the heiress, and the husband of her uncle's providing.

Mr. Langton himself was an old man, old and peculiar to the verge of whimsicality, as was proved by the fact of his adopting one orphan niece as the heiress to all his possessions, and leaving the other, a frail, weak girl, to fight her battle with the cold world alone.

Latterly Mr. Langton had become displeased with his favorite, Maud, because she had countenanced a suitor of whom he did not approve—a rascally fortune-hunter, he irascibly declared. The upshot of the whole matter was that he wrote to a clever young lawyer, the son of an old sweetheart long dead, and bade him come and marry Maud, to which the young man replied that he would marry her if she was pretty, and he fell in love with her, but not otherwise.

We have heard the result announced in the words of Vane Charteris to his betrothed. He was conquered at once by her peerless beauty. Mr. Langton privately confided to the young lady that she must marry the husband he had selected for her, or he would cut her off with a shilling. Maud acquiesced meekly, prudently banished her obnoxious lover, and Mr. Langton announced to his friends the near consummation of what he happily termed a love-match.

That it was a love-match on one side, the words of Vane Charteris have assured us. Whether it was the same on Maud's part remains to be seen.

[Pg 7]

"Can we assist you in any way?" asked the gay bevy of bride's-maids, coming into Maud's room *en masse* as the dressing hour drew near.

The beautiful bride-elect sat in the midst of the bridal finery, loosely wrapped in a dainty dressing-gown, her beautiful golden hair unbound, and flowing over her shoulders. She was very pale, and her blue eyes glittered with excitement.

"Thanks, no," she answered, in her languid, well-trained voice. "My maid can do everything, and you will need all your time to beautify yourselves."

They laughed and protested, but lingered in the room, admiring the elegant white satin dress, with its frosting of seed-pearls, the beautiful Brussels veil, and the costly set of pearls, Mr. Langton's bridal gift to his well-beloved niece. Maud did not talk to them much, and Reine Langton's quick eyes saw that she was growing nervous and impatient.

"Come, girls, let us go," she said. "It is time to dress, and Maud wants a little time to herself. Remember that this is her last hour of 'maiden meditation, fancy free.'"

The gay, pretty troop ran away, nothing loth, to don their bridal finery. Reine went to her own airy chamber thoughtfully.

"How calmly and coolly my cousin takes it all," she thought, "while I—I would give my two ears, I know, to be in her place. Oh, Vane, Vane! how cruel you are to me, and how much you despise me. What a fool I am to love you so!"

And full of indignant self-scorn, she threw herself into a chair, and wept until her eyes were red, a calamity which necessitated a copious mopping with cologne water.

"My looks are spoiled for the evening, that's clear," she says to herself, ruefully. "I shall look a fright; no one will give me a second glance. But who will care for poor Reine Langton, anyway?"

But when the pretty bride's-maid dress, Mr. Langton's gift, is on, and the dark, curling tresses are looped back with pale rose-buds and some long, trailing sprays of feathery white, she is well worth looking at.

The mellow *brune* tint of her skin is brightened by the vivid, yet changeful rose-flush on the round, dimpled cheeks; the dark eyes are none the less dazzling for the new touch of dreaminess that has come into their subtle depths beneath the drooping lashes, "like to rays of darkness."

[Pg 8]

Dressing has taken but a little time. It is a process over which Reine never lingers. She adjusts the last flower with one careless glance into the mirror, and goes to the window. The dim, mysterious twilight has fallen over everything. The silver sickle of a young moon hangs in the amethystine sky, the summer air is heavy with perfume and dew. Reine props her dimpled chin in the hollow of one small hand, and falls to musing.

To-morrow she goes back to the old dull life of care and labor, to the made-over dresses, the shabby boarding-house, the stupid, stubborn pupils of her village school.

These three weeks she has "fed on the roses, and lain in the lilies of life." Servants have waited on her, she has had her time at her own disposal, she has thoroughly enjoyed every hour of it in her eager, active fashion. This brief visit has been like a green oasis in a desert land. To-morrow she will step across its green borders, and journey on through the sandy reaches of a dreary, uncongenial life again.

"The same old, tiresome life," she says, yet even as she speaks she knows it will not be the same.

Something has come into her life these brief, bright summer days that she knew not of in the old days—even love.

"After to-morrow I shall never see him again," she says to herself with patient gravity, and there comes to her a shamed remembrance of his words that morning: "After to-morrow I shall be forever out of reach of your shrill voice and scolding tongue."

"Forever!" The word, never dwelt upon before, acquires a strange, terrible meaning in her thoughts. She realizes, with a gasp of terror, what Maud's lover really is to her. Though she has gibed him, teased him, pitilessly derided him, she has given him her whole, foolish, girlish heart. She flushes hotly with a passionate shame.

"I love him—when he will be Maud's husband in less than an hour!" she cries to herself. "For shame, Reine Langton. Shake off this disgraceful weakness, and be your own brave self again."

[Pg 9]

There is a tap at the door, unheeded and unheard in her preoccupation.

It opens, and the house-maid enters, flurried and excited.

Reine starts up in a panic and looks at the clock.

"Oh, dear, it is past the time," she cries. "How could I be so careless? Are they all waiting for me, Mary?"

"No, Miss Langton—leastways I don't think they need you."

"Not need me? What do you mean? Isn't the bride dressed yet?"

"No, miss—yes, miss—that is, I don't quite know. *She's* run away," the girl stammers, blankly.

"Who has run away?" Reine demands, sharply.

"The bride—Miss Maud," is the startling reply.

"Where has she gone? What for?" Reine demands, inelegantly, in the shock of her great surprise.

"To marry her old lover, Mr. Clyde, that she loved, and she couldn't love Mr. Charteris, miss," said the house-maid, succinctly.

There is a moment's silence. Reine drops back into a chair, dazed with the suddenness of the news.

"You see she left a little note to her uncle, miss, to let him know where she'd gone, and the old gentleman's that mad, miss, he up and swore bad enough to lift the roof off!"

There is a quick, startling rap at the door. Mary runs to open it in a hurry, and Reine glances up with dark, anxious eyes.

The next instant she starts to her feet with a smothered cry.

On the threshold stands Vane Charteris, pale as death itself, but superbly handsome in the customary suit of solemn black that makes gentlemen appear like mourners on all festive occasions.

CHAPTER III.

Fifteen minutes before, while Reine Langton dreamed at the window, there had been great excitement in the villa. The house-maid's tale was a true one. The bride-elect has eloped with another man.

[Pg 10]

They have the terrible story down in uncompromising "black and white"—in her own hand-writing. She has gone away to marry Mr. Clyde.

"Because I loved him all the while, uncle," she writes, pleadingly, "and at last I found it would break my heart to give him up. I could not love Mr. Charteris, though I tried hard, because you wished it. And indeed, Uncle Langton, you are deceived in Vane Charteris. It was your money he wanted, not me; but poor Clyde loves me for myself alone. I know you will forgive me when I come back to you, for you cannot long be angry with your own loving Maud."

All this to the uncle she had disobeyed, but not one word to the lover she had betrayed and deserted. He stands silent, biting his lips to keep back the words that rush to them, a lurid flame of angry scorn burning in his dark blue eyes.

"I could bear all else but that most cruel thrust," he says to his old friend, hoarsely, when the dismayed bride's-maids have left them together, amid the splendid paraphernalia of the bridal chamber. "When she knew how I loved her, to cast that wretched money into my face! Great God! the falsity of women! Henceforth I live only for revenge!"

The old man, so old and feeble that people said of him already that he had "one foot in the grave and the other on the brink," whirled around, and paused in his terrible revilings of Maud and her chosen lover, and looked strangely at his favorite.

"So you want revenge, my boy," he said, chuckling wickedly. "You are right to live for it. Very well, you shall have it ready made to your hand."

"How?" Vane Charteris asked, eagerly.

"That false, deceitful jade shall never receive a penny from my hoarded wealth!" declared Mr. Langton. "You shall have all."

But Vane Charteris shakes his head, decisively.

"No," he says, firmly, "I will not have my revenge that way. It would be defrauding another. You have another niece."

"I have not forgotten her claims," Mr. Langton says, grimly. "I was going on to speak of her when you interrupted me. What I was about to say was this: Reine Langton shall be my heiress, and you shall be her husband."

[Pg 11]

Vane Charteris starts and recoils.

"No, no!" he exclaims.

"What! you refuse my niece's hand when I offer it to you?" he storms.

"Yes; I cannot marry her, for I do not love her," Vane answers, firmly.

"You handsome idiot! Who said anything about love? I thought we were discussing revenge," cries the old man, testily.

"So we were, but I cannot take my revenge like that! I would sooner die than have an unloved wife tied around my neck like a mill-stone," Vane Charteris answers, gravely.

"An unloved wife," the old man repeats; "and pray, couldn't you love my niece, Reine? She's a bright little beauty to my thinking."

"Love that little hoiden, that incorrigible vixen!" the young man cries, regarding his mother's old friend as if he thought he had taken leave of his senses.

Mr. Langton frowns darkly.

"Take care," he says, "you are speaking of my heiress, remember. I see how it is. Maud disliked Reine—jealous of her bright prettiness, perhaps—she has set you against her."

"She has not," declares Vane. "Reine has done it, herself. You cannot deny her brisk manners, and her sharp, ungoverned tongue, Mr. Langton."

"Pooh! mere girlish fun," retorts Mr. Langton. "I have never disliked her sprightly ways, myself; I like the vim and spirit of Reine. She makes me think of Lelia, a 'rosebud set with little willful thorns,' much more charming than Maud's 'passionless, pale-cold calm.'"

"The king is dead, long live the king," Vane Charteris quotes with grim sarcasm.

"Yes, Maud is dethroned, and Reine shall reign in her stead," Mr. Langton replies; "and if you are wise, Vane Charteris, you will reign with her."

There is a moment's silence, and then Mr. Langton goes on:

"You talk of revenge. Marry Reine and you have it in full measure. Maud believes that she can marry Clyde, and come back and wheedle me into taking them both into my good graces. How glorious for Reine to take her place in my favor and in your heart!"

[Pg 12]

"She could not do that," Vane answers. "I was proud of Maud's beauty, and grace, and refinement. I loved her gentleness."

"The silky, purring deceitfulness of a treacherous cat," interpolates Maud's outraged uncle.

Vane flushes deeply.

"Still I should never love Reine," he said. "She continually jars upon me. She keeps my nerves upon edge. You are right to make her your heiress, but forgive me for saying that I can never make her my bride."

"She shall not be one without the other," declares the old man stubbornly.

"You mean—" Vane says, aghast.

"That if you refuse to marry Reine, she shall go back to her life of toil to-morrow, and I'll leave my money to found an asylum for idiots and fools," storms the old man, violently.

"You would never be so unjust, Mr. Langton," Vane exclaims, incredulously. "Let me reason with you. Though I do not admire Reine, I pity her. She has a hard life. Let me plead for the poor orphan girl. Take her in the place of Maud, and give her your love and your wealth."

"No, I have announced my ultimatum. To-morrow she leaves here, and to-morrow you leave here. She to her life of slavery, you as a mark for the finger of scorn to point at, a jilted man! How false-hearted Maud and her successful husband will laugh at the misery of the man they fooled so shamelessly; how the minister, waiting down-stairs, and the wedding guests will laugh in their sleeves at the deserted bridegroom. Go, now, sir, and remember that your cursed obstinacy has beggared you, and cheated Reine Langton of fortune."

He glares with bleared, furious eyes at the uncompromising young fellow. Vane looks troubled, reckless all at once.

"I do not want to cause Reine such a misfortune," he says, sadly. "Give me five minutes to decide in, Mr. Langton."

"Take them," the host says, shortly. Vane walks to the window and stares silently out at the dewy, odorous, tranquil summer night. Many thoughts crowd into his mind.

[Pg 13]

He has loved Maud Langton dearly, and he is cut to the heart by the bitter humiliation she has put upon him. He is a jilted man. How shall he face the sneering world again? that world that but a little while ago fawned upon him because he was going to marry Mr. Langton's heiress.

Mr. Langton waits impatiently, watch in hand, for the stipulated five minutes to pass. He is very anxious to have his way and spite Maud for her falsehood and disobedience. Inwardly he curses Vane's Quixotic foolishness in refusing a fortune, no matter how burdened.

"The time is up," he says, impatiently. "Yes or no. Marry Reine to-night and I will make my will to-morrow, and leave everything to you and your wife. For the present, until my death, which can't be far off," with sardonic humor, "I'll settle twenty-five thousand a year upon you; refuse, and you both go."

Vane Charteris turns upon him a white, desperate face.

"For myself I despise your threat," he says. "I am a man. I can carve my own way to fortune, yet I should hate for Reine to blame me with her loss of fortune. Mr. Langton, I will marry her if she will have me."

"Of course she will; no girl in her senses would refuse a handsome man like you, let alone the fortune," Mr. Langton cries, with returning good humor.

"On one condition," Vane continues, haughtily.

Mr. Langton lifts his eyebrows interrogatively.

"This: that I may go abroad to-morrow to be absent a year—you may offer any evasive excuse to the bride—and that while I am gone you will train Reine to be a graceful, dignified woman, whom I can respect and honor."

"Like Maud, for instance," Mr. Langton says.

"Maud's manners were perfect," Vane answers, flushing. "I could not wish more grace and refinement for my own wife so that her heart is kept truer."

"You are quite decided to go away?" Mr. Langton inquires, disappointed.

[Pg 14]

"Yes," decidedly. "I can marry Reine, but I cannot live with her just yet."

"Very well, you shall have your way. Now go and ask her if she will have you."

"Where shall I find her?"

"In her own room, I think. I have not seen her in all the bustle. I will wait here. If she says yes, bring her to me."

And Vane turns away with a white, set face, to obey him.

CHAPTER IV.

Vane Charteris enters the room and motions the maid to withdraw, closes the door, and stands face to face with Reine Langton. It strikes him suddenly on what a ridiculous errand he has come. This morning he offended her, and she refused to pardon him. Tonight he has come to ask her to be his wife.

But Reine—passionate, impulsive Reine—has quite forgotten all that now. After that one startled moment of indecision and surprise, she goes forward to him, she puts her small hand on his coat sleeve, she looks up into his white, haggard face with dark, pitying eyes.

"You are come to tell me," she says, forgetting in her eager excitement how strange it would be for him to seek *her* sympathy. "But I have heard. Believe me, I am very sorry for your disappointment. It was mean and cruel," indignantly, "in Maud. I would not have done it, *bad* as you think me."

How soft the dark, uplifted eyes; how gentle the pitying voice, how kind the words! Can this be Reine—sharp-tongued, restless, gibing Reine? He stares in great surprise.

"I should not care if I were you," she goes on. "I should be too proud to grieve for one so false and unkind. She never loved you; I saw *that* as soon as I came here, but I did not know she could be so mean. I will never speak to her again."

"You take my part," he says, unconsciously pleased.

"Yes, because you have been treated unfairly," she says, warmly. "You have been jilted at the very altar—you so handsome, so noble—" she stops, biting her lips, vexed at herself for these outspoken words.

[Pg 15]

But Vane Charteris smiles.

"Thank you for those words," he says. "They give me courage to ask what I came for—Reine, will you be my wife?"

The white hand falls from his arm, she steps backward a pace, and stares at him mutely, with great, wondering, dark eyes.

He repeats the words:

"Reine, will *you* be my wife? Will you go down-stairs and marry me, a jilted man? Will you take the man your beautiful cousin deemed worthless?"

A passionate sarcasm quivers in his tone. She looks at him, the deep, rich color flushing into her cheeks.

"You do not mean it; you are jesting!" she cries, in a vaguely troubled tone.

"I do," he answers. "The guests are here; the feast is provided; the minister waits. Nothing is lacking but the bride, who has fled to the arms of another. Will you throw yourself into the breach, Reine, and make everybody happy?"

"If I thought I could," she begins, with a questioning glance, and a delicious thrill at her heart. Something whispers to her that he would wed her to spite Maud, yet her instinct prompts her to take him at his word. In time her tender love must win a return from him.

"You must not stop to think," the strange wooer says, impatiently. "Everyone is waiting, and your uncle is most impatient. I have his permission to win you if I can."

"Uncle Langton wishes it?" she asks, wondering.

"Yes. What is your answer, Reine?"

"It is yes," she answers, simply, frankly, and happily.

"Thank you," he says; "come, then, Mr. Langton is waiting for us."

Then, softened by her gentle mood and the sparkling beauty he cannot help but acknowledge, he says, with a dash of mischief:

"You are changed from this morning Reine. So you do not hate me after all?"

A spark of the morning's *diablerie* flashes into the bright eyes again.

[Pg 16]

"Yes, I do," she retorts, "and I am only taking you that I may torment you to death."

He checks the impatient sigh, and leads her to Mr. Langton.

"Sensible girl," he chuckles, beaming upon her. "Knew better than to refuse uncle's fortune, didn't you, Reine?"

She stares at him, her rosy cheeks grow pale.

"I don't understand," she falters.

"Didn't you tell her?" Mr. Langton demands of Vane.

"No, I forgot. After all, it wasn't necessary," he answers.

"Cunning dog," the old man laughs. "So she took you for yourself alone? Well, I told you so. She has a true heart in spite of her wild ways."

But Reine stares from one to the other, vaguely troubled.

Mr. Langton bends and kisses the fair, low brow.

"Reine, you are my heiress now," he says. "I shall cut Maud off with a shilling. You and Vane will have all my money when I am dead."

"Oh, if you please, Uncle Langton, I'd rather not," she cries, breathlessly, then she looks at Vane. "Is he taking me for the money?" she says, with a flash of disdain in her great, black eyes.

Vane flushes an angry crimson, but his old friend interferes.

"No, you little goose," he replies, severely, "He's taking you because you're a deuced pretty girl, and worth a dozen disobedient Mauds. Now will you put on that wedding-veil there, and go down-stairs with him and show those gaping, gossiping simpletons that there's a bride after all, and the wedding-feast will not be spoiled by the groom's sorrow?"

He rings the bell with the words. A trim maid appears with a quickness that would argue that she had been listening outside the door.

"Put that wedding-veil on Miss Langton," commands her master. "She will be the bride, and also my heiress."

"Miss Reine, let me congratulate you," the girl exclaims, with a heartiness that shows how Reine has won her way since she came to Langton Villa.

[Pg 17]

In five minutes the veil is on, with the trailing sprays of orange flowers meant for Maud. The rich, white silk, with its lace flounces, makes no inappropriate bridal dress. But Reine stands still, a lovely bride, grown suddenly strangely pale and grave-looking.

"Now, Mary, hunt up the bride's-maids while I go down and notify the minister," adjures Mr. Langton.

They go, and the bride and groom remain alone together. She stands shyly in the center of the room, with drooping eyes, dark, slender, lovely, but strangely unlike the fair and stately Juno Vane Charteris has pictured these many days as his bride.

They speak no word to each other, and the laughing "men and maidens" come in and surround them.

"It is just like a novel," one says; and another: "It serves Maud right," and all agree that it is "just too romantic for anything," and are glad there will be a wedding after all.

But the two principals say nothing in all the babble of idle tongues. Arm in arm they go forward to the marriage altar, side by side they breathe those solemn vows that bind together their antagonistic lives. It is all like a dream to Reine: the wedding march, the wedding flowers, the curious faces, the solemn words, the circle of gold upon her finger. But as she turns to meet the congratulations of the guests, one precious thought is blooming like a full and perfect rose in her passionate heart:

"He is all my own now. I shall not be parted from him to-morrow."

After the hum of congratulations is over there ensues a momentary pause. The bride is led to a seat, and Vane Charteris drifts away from her side. The good wishes, the pretty sentiments of the guests fall meaningless on his ears.

"What happiness can I promise myself as the husband of that little vixen?" he says to himself, darkly.

So he stands apart in moody silence, and the curious glances of a hundred eyes note the handsome, troubled white face, and turn again pityingly on the girlish young bride.

"She will never be happy with him," they say, decidedly. "He has only married her to spite Maud."

[Pg 18]

Suddenly, in that momentary lull and stillness, the door is flung violently open, a tall, queenly figure, clad in a gray traveling-dress, wavers a moment on the threshold, then rushes across the room to Mr. Langton. She falls on her knees before him.

"Oh, for God's sake, tell me I am not too late," she cries. "Uncle Langton, I have repented my folly before it was too late. Forgive me, uncle. I have come back to marry Mr. Charteris."

CHAPTER V.

Dead silence falls. Every eye turns on that graceful, kneeling figure, and fair, uplifted face, with the gold braids crowning the graceful head so royally.

Mr. Langton stares stupidly a moment.

Maud puts her hand on his arm and shakes him.

"Uncle, don't you understand?" she says. "I have come back to marry Vane. I repented as soon as I saw Mr. Clyde. I knew in a moment that I did not care for him enough to sacrifice everything for him. I told him so, and he was very angry, but I came away in spite of his terrible threats. I—I like Mr. Charteris best."

Vane Charteris starts forward like one awakening from a nightmare.

"Hush; do not perjure your soul, Maud," he breaks out, sternly. "Say what you mean. You do not care for Vane Charteris, but you love Mr. Langton's money too well to give it up for love in a cottage with Mr. Clyde."

She starts to her feet, half extending her arms.

"This from you, Vane!" she cries, dramatically. "Surely you have not turned against me after all your professions of love. Do not be so hard, Vane. You see I have come back to you. Forgive me, I pray you. I *do* care for you, I want to be your wife!"

"You can never be my wife. By the folly of an hour you have barred yourself out of my life forever," he answers her with a strange, icy sternness.

She stares at him mutely a moment, then turns to Mr. Langton.

"You see," she says, triumphantly, "it is Mr. Charteris who refuses me—I do not refuse him. I am willing to keep to my contract—he declines my hand. Surely you will forgive me now, dear uncle, and take me back. I have not forfeited your love nor your fortune."

And Mr. Langton, finding voice at last, answers her, angrily:

"You have forfeited both by your cursed madness. Henceforth you have no part in my heart nor my home. Yonder sits my heiress, and Vane Charteris' *wife!*"

With a gasp like one dying, Maud follows the direction of his pointed finger.

She sees a slight, girlish figure that has suddenly come forward to the side of Vane Charteris as if mutely claiming him for hers. Her own costly wedding veil drapes the dainty, lissome figure.

"Reine Langton," she cries, furiously, "have you dared to rob me of my fortune and husband?"

Reine lifts her flashing, dark eyes.

"Remember, Maud, you flung them both away," she answers, indignantly.

"Fool that I was," Maud wails, despairingly. "I have lost all, all, by my brief madness! Oh! Uncle Langton, surely you will forgive me, and take me back now when I am so bitterly repentant. Let her have Mr. Charteris—I can do without him—but do not send me away!"

He looks coldly at the pleading blue eyes, and the eager, upraised hands. If possible he is more bitterly angry with her now than he was when he received her note an hour ago.

"It is useless to plead with me," he says, coldly. "You should have thought of all this before. It is too late now. I have flung you out of my heart forever. Reine will be my heiress—you can go."

"I have nowhere to go," she says, looking at him with wide, frightened eyes and parted lips.

"It matters not to me," he answers, cruelly. "Go back to the fine, gay lover that lured you from your duty and your plighted word. See if he will take you, now that you have lost all chances of the Langton fortune."

Reine comes bravely forward to the side of the discarded girl.

"Oh! uncle, let her stay," she says, imploringly; "I do not want your fortune, I have *Vane*. That is [Pg 20] enough for me. Let Maud come home and have the money—or at least *share* it."

"No," he thunders, stormily; "I have said my say—I will abide by it. She is nothing to me henceforth. Let her go."

Maud looks around at the bride.

"It is all your fault," she says, bitterly. "If you had not married Vane before I came, my uncle would have forgiven me. Vane does not love you, he has only taken you for my uncle's money. Beware that you do not rue this night in dust and ashes."

"If I had only known that you would come back, Maud, like this," Reine begins, wringing her hands in a passionate kind of self-pity.

Maud crosses to the door before them all, with that proud, imperial step that had become Mr. Langton's heiress so well, but is mockingly out of place now. The bride follows her.

"Maud," she whispers, anxiously, "send me your address to-morrow, and I will come to you. Indeed, indeed I am anxious to befriend you."

Maud puts her aside without a word, and steps over the threshold. She walks with her light, proud step down the hall, and disappears in the outer darkness, looking regretfully back, as Eve

might have looked when she was driven from paradise.

"My friends," Mr. Langton says, rising, "do not let this unpleasant episode damp the wedding festivities. You came to do honor to my heiress, and Vane Charteris' bride. *She* is here, and the banquet waits."

"The queen is dead, long live the queen!" that is what he means. They understand that Maud is dethroned, and Reine reigns in her stead. They obey his implied wish. No one speaks the name of Maud either in praise or blame. The festivities go on. The luxurious banquet duly discussed, the joyous music invites the young and gay to "trip the light fantastic toe." This is a country wedding where all is freedom and simple enjoyment. The guests "don't go home until morning."

In the pale dawn-light some of the young men, who left with gay words and light hearts, came hurrying back with blanched faces and startled eyes. In the woods near-by, they have found the blood-stained body of a dead man—Maud's lover, Mr. Clyde.

[Pg 21]

CHAPTER VI.

Wearied with the long festivities of the night, Reine goes to her room, in the pale light of the new day, and lays aside the bridal veil and dress, donning a cool white wrapper instead. She bathes her face in some fresh water, brushes out her silky, dark tresses, and loosely tying them back with a scarlet ribbon, slips quietly down the stairs again.

Ten minutes later, Mr. Langton and Vane Charteris coming into the deserted parlor, find her standing with one of the maids before the long table, on which the numerous and costly bridal presents have been displayed. Friends have vied with each other in the elegance and beauty of their gifts to Mr. Langton's heiress. Silver and gold, and precious stones flash back the expiring light of the flickering lamps. The house-maid has brought in a large box, and she and Reine are deftly restoring the wrappers to the various articles, and packing them carefully into its capacious recesses.

Mr. Langton stares.

"Child, what upon earth are you doing?" he exclaims.

Reine looks around, brightly.

"Only packing these things away for Maud," she explains.

"For Maud?" Mr. Langton gasps.

"Yes, sir. I shall forward them to her as soon as I find out where she is staying," she replies, pausing to admire a richly-chased bracelet, set with rubies, before she closes the satin-lined case.

"The deuce you will," Mr. Langton growls. "Upon my word I never saw such cool impertinence in my life. Who authorized you to do such a thing?"

"I took the liberty myself," Reine responds, flashing a laughing glance upon his indignant face.

"Very well. Let me inform you, Mrs. Charteris, that these things belong to you, not to Maud. They were given to my heiress, and Vane's bride, therefore they are your own."

The beautiful color flows into her face, but she shakes her small head resolutely.

[Pg 22]

"You must pardon me, uncle," she says, "but, indeed, I think your ideas of *meum et tuum* are rather confused. All these pretty things belong to my cousin by every right in the world, and I am determined she shall have them."

"I say she shall not," he cries, violently.

"And I say she *shall*," Reine reiterates, laughing, but in earnest, the golden lights fairly dancing in her eyes.

"Why, you audacious little spitfire," the old man begins to splutter, but Vane Charteris interrupts him gravely.

"I think Reine's idea is the true one," he says. "The gifts really belong to Maud, and she ought to have them."

The bride flashes him a dazzling look of gratitude from her brilliant eyes.

"There, now, Uncle Langton," she cries, with pretty triumph. "You see my husband sides with me."

"Sides with Maud, you mean," Mr. Langton mutters, between his teeth.

"He will always be on the side of justice, I hope," Reine says, with a smile at her husband, that he does not see, consequently does not return.

But Mr. Langton frowns at the pert little lady.

"See here, Reine," he says. "I won't be set at naught by a child like you, if you were fifty times my niece. Have your way this time, but don't begin your rule too soon. Remember, I haven't made my will yet."

"*That* does not frighten me one bit," she laughs; then she rises on tiptoe to put her rosy lips to his

ear. "You cannot take my husband from me," she whispers, archly. "I do not care for the rest."

He looks at her half-pityingly, and turns away without a word.

But something born of that pitying thought makes him say to Vane Charteris, as they pass from the room:

"There is no reason you should regret Maud. Reine is quite as charming and beautiful, though in a different way from her cousin."

And Vane answers, readily enough:

"She is beautiful, certainly no one can deny that. She has the brilliant beauty of the rose. But one must beware the thorns. She is a perfect contrast to Maud, who always reminded me of a tall, white, stately lily."

[Pg 23]

"The rose is the sweeter, to my thinking," Mr. Langton replies. "Besides, the rose is the true emblem of love."

They pass through the hall, and out into the soft light of the early day. The cool, dewy breath of the morning, freighted with the scent of countless flowers, blows in their faces, the matin songs of myriad birds make music in their ears. Roses, honeysuckles, jessamines and lilies, open their perfumed chalices to greet the rising sun that begins to color the eastern sky with tints of purple and rose and gold.

And up the graveled path came a trio of young men who had left the house but a little while ago, laughing and jesting in the light-heartedness of youth. They come silently now, with blanched and solemn faces, and heavily-beating hearts.

"Something dreadful has happened," they tell Mr. Langton. "We have found a dead man in the woods. It is Mr. Clyde. He is cold and stiff—has certainly been dead several hours. And, worst of all, he has most probably been murdered. There is a bullet-hole through his heart."

Found murdered! With what an icy chill the words strike upon the senses in that beautiful, peaceful summer dawn.

Having finished the packing of the box, Reine comes out, attracted by the hum of voices.

The rich color pales in her cheeks at the dreadful news.

"Oh, how terrible," she cries. "It was Maud's lover, and she loved him, poor girl!"

She sees Vane Charteris wince, and feels as if she could bite her tongue off for the thoughtless words. Her heart sinks heavily.

"He has given me his hand, but not his heart," she says to herself. "I must be very patient. Perhaps I may win his love yet. I must do so, for I cannot live without it."

As she thinks all this, he comes to her side. The heart of the unloved bride beats quick and fast as the blue eyes fall upon her.

[Pg 24]

But he has only come to say, coldly and carelessly:

"Reine, you had better go in. This is too terrible a thing for a young girl's ears."

CHAPTER VII.

Yesterday, Reine would have defied Vane, and taken her own way, recklessly. To-day, filled with the yearning wish to win her husband's heart, she obeys with gentle dignity, and retires into the house.

"I have read somewhere that love wins love," she says to herself. "If that be true, surely my patience, my gentleness, my devoted love will sometime win a return from him."

They hold an inquest over Mr. Clyde's body that day. No facts are elicited that throw any light on the manner of his death.

He was a stranger in the neighborhood, boarding at a quiet farm-house for his health, he said. He had few friends and fewer enemies. The people who lodged him deposed that they had not seen him since their early seven o'clock supper, the evening previous. He had been in very gay and brilliant spirits then; had dressed himself elegantly and gone out before dark. No one had seen him until he was found dead in the woods this morning, shot through the heart. The physicians examine the corpse, and decide that he has been dead since nine o'clock last night, and suddenly a baleful whisper runs from lip to lip.

There are a hundred people, guests of the grand wedding at Langton villa last night, who remember Maud Langton's abrupt entrance a little after nine o'clock, and her frank confession that she had gone away to marry Mr. Clyde, but had repented, and left him in spite of his threats.

These facts are communicated to the coroner. He looks exceedingly grave.

"It will be quite necessary to examine Miss Langton on the subject," he declares.

An officer is dispatched to bring her in to the inquest.

So they wait in the odorous sweetness of the green wood, the officers of justice, the silent corpse, the curious crowd; the wild birds sing on as gayly as if no dead man lay there on the sweet, green grass, with his handsome white face upturned to Heaven as if pleading for vengeance on his slayer.

He has not been murdered for purposes of robbery. His gold watch, his diamond ring, his purse, containing a hundred dollars in bills, are all secure upon his person. It is not known that he had an enemy in the world. A strange mystery centers around his death.

A few notice that old Mr. Langton goes away quietly before the officer's return with Maud. And Vane Charteris stays. Standing apart beneath the shade of a towering maple, he waits, with a strange, incensed look in his dark blue eyes, and on his handsome face that is almost as white as that of the dead. Many eyes regard him curiously; but the cold, white, inscrutable face tells nothing to their wondering gaze.

At last, after what seems a long and wearisome interval of waiting, the rumble of the carriage wheels is heard. They pause in the road near by, they catch the impatient neigh of horses, and the officer appears leading a lady through the trees and grass toward them.

She comes toward them, trembling so that, but for the support of the officer's arm, she must certainly fall to the ground. At the coroner's request she lifts her veil and looks at him with frightened, blue eyes, and a wild, white face—whiter than the lilies to which Vane Charteris likened her that morning.

She is duly sworn, and they re-cover the dead, white face, with its staring eyes they cannot close, and mute, cold lips.

"Do you recognize this man?" they ask her, and after one shuddering, quickly-withdrawn glance, she averts her face, and answers with white, pain-drawn lips:

"It is Mr. Clyde."

She is asked next:

"When and where did you see him last?"

A quiver passes over the pale, beautiful face.

"Last night, at or near nine o'clock, near this spot," she falters, yet standing suddenly erect, with [Pg 26] stately, lily-like grace, and a proudly-poised head.

"Was he living or dead?"

"Living, of course," haughtily.

"Mr. Clyde was your lover?" the coroner interrogated.

"I have not said so," she says, flashing him a haughty look.

"The fact is well known," he answers. "You went away to marry him last night?"

The deep color flows into her cheeks, then recedes again, leaving her pale as marble.

"I cannot deny it," she murmurs, in a crushed voice.

"Then you changed your mind, as it is a lady's privilege to do, and left him. He was very angry, and used threats toward you," the coroner pursues, politely.

"Yes," Miss Langton answers, in the same low, sad voice.

"Of what nature were those threats?" they ask her.

"He threatened to destroy himself if I did not become his wife, but, oh, I did not believe it, really—I thought he was only trying to frighten me into compliance with his wish," she cries, while a look of regret and sorrow transforms this fair, beautiful face. A hum of surprise goes through the eager throng of listeners.

"Do you believe that he really killed himself?"

"Yes; how else should he have met his death?" she inquired, fixing a look of grave wonder upon him.

A slight whisper goes through the crowd again—some shrug their shoulders.

The coroner pursues without answering her question:

"Was Mr. Clyde in the habit of making such suicidal threats?"

"He had done so on several occasions."

"In the presence of witnesses?" the question is asked with strange gravity.

Maud looks at him with a grave wonder on her fair, proud face.

"No, of course not," she answers, a little annoyance in her clear tone.

"Then you cannot prove that the deceased made those threats against his own life?" the coroner asked in a troubled tone. It is very plain to him that she cannot see the cloud of distress and suspicion gathering around her.

"Cannot prove it!" she says, indignantly. "You have *my* word under oath."

"Other evidence would make it all the stronger," he replies, evasively.

The officer who has brought her goes forward and whispers something in the coroner's ear. He starts and looks at the girl fixedly a moment from head to foot, then proceeds with the examination.

"When you left your uncle's house last night, did you return to your trysting-place with your discarded lover?"

She stares at him with strangely dilated eyes, and parted lips.

"Why should I?" she says. "I had dismissed him, and parted from him. I supposed he had gone away."

"Please answer, yes or no, to the question," he urges.

"What question?" a little shortly.

"The one I asked you just now. Did you return to your discarded lover at this place when you left Langton Villa the second time? Yes, or no."

"No, then," with a slight touch of defiance.

A minute of dead silence. The coroner resumes, almost irrelevantly, it would seem:

"Is the dress you wear now the same one you had on last night, Miss Langton?"

"Yes, the same. I have not slept all night, she replies, wearily.

"Please observe that on the front breadth of your dress there are some dark, reddish-looking splashes and stains that resemble blood. Can you account for them?"

A cry of mingled horror and fear comes from her lips. All eyes turn on the stylish, dark-gray silk that clings so gracefully to the tall, finely molded figure. True enough, there are some dark red stains on the middle breadth between the lower frills and the upper drapery.

"Can you account for them?" the coroner repeats.

But after one swift glance at the tell-tale marks, Maud crimples, and the tears start into her eyes.

"You must pardon me; I spoke falsely to you just now," she says, with desperate calmness. "I can tell you how those stains came there. They are Vernon Clyde's blood."

[Pg 28]

Again an ominous whisper runs through the circle of listeners. Maud glances around her fearfully. She meets strange, averted glances from faces that have been wont to smile upon her before. A strange light comes into her eyes.

"Oh, what do they mean?" she cries. "They do not think, do they, that I killed Mr. Clyde? I tell you he killed himself. He told me he would do so if I refused to marry him."

"Tell us how those blood-stains came upon your dress," the coroner answers, briefly and gravely.

She clasps her hands and shivers through all her imperially perfect form.

"I *did* come back here last night," she says, in a fearful whisper. "My uncle had discarded me. Mr. Charteris had married another, and I had no one to turn to but the lover I had discarded a little while before. So I hurried back, thinking I would be Clyde's wife after all, but when I came, he," with a gasp, "he lay dead before me. I had thought it but a mere idle threat to frighten me, but he had kept his word faithfully. He had shot himself through the heart. I knelt down beside him, and laid my hand on his breast, but it was cold and still. Oh, you must not think I killed him! I loved him, and I would have gone away with him, but I was afraid of losing my uncle's money," she ends, with a choking sob.

"Why did you not raise an alarm when you found him dead?"

"I was afraid they would charge me with his murder, so I hurried away, not knowing of those tell-tale stains on my dress where I had been down on my knees beside him. I did not kill him, no, no, but my fatal weakness drove him to take his own life."

There is a moment's perfect silence, then the voice of the coroner is heard, with a troubled cadence in its sternness:

"I regret my painful duty, Miss Langton, more than I can say. The high position you have always held in this county would forbid the thought of your criminality, but the evidence against you is of such a nature that we shall be compelled to commit you to prison until further developments."

[Pg 29]

Her cry of terror and indignation echoes to the blue sky above her golden head. The sweet songbirds fly affrighted from its shrill, eerie sound.

"You believe me guilty," she exclaimed. "Yet I have told you again and again that Vernon Clyde died by his own hand."

"If you could prove it to us," he says, "if you could even prove by a competent witness his threat of self murder, you should go free this hour."

She looks at him dumbly and strangely. Suddenly a light of dazzling joy breaks over her face. She slips her gloved hand into the folds of her dress, withdrawing it with a gasp of disappointment.

"Let me tell you," she says, hurriedly and eagerly. "Yesterday Mr. Clyde sent me a note relative to my promise to meet him last night. In it he says, distinctly and clearly: 'If you do not marry me, I

'swear I will shoot myself through the heart.' I remember that the note is in the pocket of the blue dress I wore yesterday. Tell me, for Heaven's sake, would that be proof sufficient?"

"If the writing could be proved as Mr. Clyde's, it would entirely clear you from suspicion."

"Then let them take me to Langton Villa," she cries, anxiously. "I can lay my hand upon the note in one moment."

All eyes are turned upon her glad, triumphant face. No one remembers Vane Charteris where he stands in the shade of the tall maples. Yet a strange look has come upon the fair, handsome face. The lips curl nervously beneath the golden-brown mustache, the blue eyes gleam with a strange, mocking triumph.

CHAPTER VIII.

Mr. Langton is nowhere to be seen when Maud re-enters the home, so late her own. Reine comes to meet her, pale, troubled, sympathetic. They have not been very fond of each other in the past—Maud has been too proud to encourage the friendship of her poor cousin—but now the heart of the younger girl goes out to the other in a gush of sympathy and sorrow.

"Maud, I am *so* sorry," she says, putting her hand gently on the girl's arm; "but never fear, dear. All will come right. Of course you would not have harmed a single hair of Mr. Clyde's head. Everybody must know *that*."
[Pg 30]

"Come with me to my room, Reine," Maud answers.

Inside that quiet room she had quitted only yesterday eve in such high hope Maud's proud self-possession breaks down. Throwing herself on a luxurious sofa, she gives way to hysterical weeping.

"I am *so* sorry, Maud," Reine can only repeat, in gentlest sympathy.

Maud gives her an angry glance through her tears.

"Sorry," she says. "Sorry! Why should you be? Your fortune is built on the wreck of mine."

"Oh, Maud, do not say so," the girl cries, deeply pained. "Indeed, indeed, I do not want the money. I will ask Uncle Langton to give it all to you. I have Vane, I care for nothing else."

"You love him?" Maud says, with lifted brows, slightly incredulous.

"Yes," with a deep, beautiful blush.

"You cannot suppose that he cares for you," Maud says, with subdued contempt.

"Not yet—not as he cared for you, of course, Maud. But I hope to win him after awhile. You know," hopefully, "he must have thought he could learn to care for me, else he would not have married me."

"What a little simpleton you are," Maud says, disdainfully. "Ring the bell for my maid, please."

The maid comes, her eyes red with weeping. She has been mourning over the troubles of her late mistress, and now, with dejected brow, stands waiting.

"Nellie, you remember the note you brought me from Mr. Clyde yesterday?"

"Yes, miss, an' if I'd known what trouble it would bring, I'd never have carried the first note back and forth," says Nellie, with vain lamentation.

"It's too late for regrets now," Maud answers her impatiently. "I want that note, Nellie. It is in the pocket of the blue dress I wore yesterday. Get it for me."

Barely a minute—and a cry of dismay from Nellie's lips.

[Pg 31]

"Oh, Miss Maud, 'tisn't there."

Maud's face grows suddenly white and scared.

"Look again," she says, with a gasp.

"'Tisn't there," the maid reiterates, after a second flurried search.

"Then it's somewhere else," confidently. "I know it is in this room. Look until you find it, Nellie."

Then she turns to Reine.

"Can you guess why I came back last night?"

"You told us the reason when you came, didn't you?" Reine says, blankly.

"Not exactly. I will tell you now while Nellie is searching for the note. Of course you knew when I went away I didn't expect to lose my uncle's fortune?"

"I thought you did. Hadn't he said—" begins simple Reine.

"That I should marry Charteris, or lose the money—yes, I know, but I give you my word I never believed it. I honestly thought I could marry Mr. Clyde and return here. I thought it would be an easy matter to wheedle my doting uncle into taking us both back. I never dreamed that you would throw yourself into the breach and help them to their revenge against me."

"I never thought of such a thing myself, until—until Vane *asked* me!" Reine murmurs, blushingly.

"Do you know why he asked you?" sneers the beautiful girl before her.

"To spite you for having jilted him so publicly, Maud, and, perhaps, because he liked me a little after all," she says, a little wistfully.

"I gave you credit for just a little more sense, Reine," Maud answers, bitterly. "Vane Charteris disliked you exceedingly. He thought you a vixen, neither more nor less. He made you his wife because Mr. Langton literally forced him to it."

"It is not true. Why do you say such things? You are cruel, Maud," the bride cries out, starting indignantly to her feet.

"It is the truth. Nellie, have you found the note yet?"

"No, miss, nor I don't think I can. Was it so very important?" returns the girl.

"Important! My very life hangs on its production," Maud says, wildly. "You have looked carelessly. [Pg 32] I could swear that it is in this room. It *must* be found."

"I'll look again. Perhaps I've overlooked it, being in a hurry," the maid returns, patiently, and Maud turns again to her cousin.

"Nellie has always been very faithful to me," she says. "She was in my confidence. She knew the trysting-place in the woods where I was to meet Mr. Clyde. As soon as she learned that it was likely you would marry Vane Charteris and cheat me out of Uncle Langton's fortune, she hastened after me, and urged me to return and prevent such a catastrophe. I decided at once to return. I had no notion of doing the love-in-a-cottage business with my poor, but handsome lover."

"You were heartless, Maud," Reine says, with a flash of her superb, dark eyes.

"So Mr. Clyde said," carelessly. "Anyway, I told him I should come back. He was very angry. He drove Nell back, and swore I should stay and go with him to the preacher that was even then waiting to marry us. I would not yield an inch, and as soon as I could I got away."

"Why do you tell me all this, Maud?" Reine says, with something like royal scorn. "You make me think very little of you."

"You will perhaps think very little of yourself presently," beautiful Maud answers, maliciously. "Come here, Nellie, and tell Mrs. Charteris all the hard things her husband said about her when Mr. Langton almost went down on his knees to him to marry her."

"How can she know?" Reine says, puzzled.

"I was hid in a closet, listening, if you'll please to excuse me, ma'am," the maid says, timorously, to the new mistress of Langton Villa. Then she looks at Maud. "Oh, I'd rather not," she exclaims. "It would only hurt Mrs. Charteris' feelings."

"Do as I bid you," Maud answers, with her imperious tone of command. "When Mr. Langton asked Vane Charteris to marry Reine, what words did he use in reply?"

Nellie looks at the bride with scared eyes.

"Mrs. Charteris, you mustn't get mad at me. I wouldn't tell it, no, not to save my life, only that Miss Maud will be angry if I don't," she says, deprecatingly. [Pg 33]

No words come from Reine's pale lips. She stares with great, troubled dark eyes alternately at the beautiful, cruel mistress and the shrinking little maid.

"Tell her," Maud repeats, imperiously.

"Well, then, he said," the maid begins, nervously, "he said, Mrs. Charteris, a flat no that he wouldn't marry you, that he couldn't love a vixen and a hoiden like you, an' he'd sooner die than have you hanged like a mill-stone around his neck."

"Why, then, did he consent to marry me?" the bride gasps, after a shiver and moan of unspeakable humiliation.

"For your own sake, ma'am, 'cause Mr. Langton said he'd make you his heiress if the gentleman would marry you, and if he wouldn't, why he would leave his money to some asylum for fools. An' so Mr. Vane he said he would marry you, 'cause he wouldn't want you to lose the fortune on his account."

"On one condition," Maud says, in her clear, high-pitched voice, gazing with pitiless eyes at the beautiful, scarlet face before her.

But Reine lifts her small hand with a sudden imperious gesture of command.

"I will not hear another word," she says, in a tone of mingled sorrow and pride. "You must obey me now, Nellie; I am your mistress, not Maud. And I command you never to open your lips on this subject again."

Nellie shrinks abashed. Her whilom mistress laughs low and mockingly.

"You have heard enough, eh? Well, I don't blame you. Well, Nellie, the note?"

"Oh, miss, I haven't found it yet, and indeed—indeed, I've looked in every spot in this room where it could possibly be. Sure, you've tucked it away somewhere and forgot, Miss Maud. Try to remember where you had it last," the girl says, soothingly.

Startled and half afraid, Maud springs to her feet putting her white hand to her brow.

"Let me think," she says, confusedly; "ah, now I remember; yesterday, when I went down the path to Mr. Charteris and Reine under the tree I had the note in my hand. I slipped it into my pocket."

"It must have fallen on the ground," Nellie says, quickly. "Shall I go and see?"

[Pg 34]

"Yes," Maud answers, anxiously.

Reine, grown suddenly, strangely pale, looks at the beautiful, harassed face of her cousin.

"That note, Maud," she says, in a voice of repressed excitement. "Is it so very important?"

"Important?" Maud says, peevishly. "Did I not tell you my very life hangs on it? They believe that I killed Mr. Clyde. I must go to prison unless I can find that note, which would establish my innocence."

"Then it must be found," Reine says with sudden nervousness. "I will go and help Nellie find it."

"No—no, Reine; where is my uncle?"

"Shut up in the library, I think, Maud."

"Is he so very—very angry with me," she asks, lifting her large blue eyes to Reine's troubled face.

"I—I'm afraid so," Reine stammers, with marked hesitation.

"Would he see me, do you think?" Maud inquires.

"I do not know," Reine answers, with an unconscious sigh.

"Go and ask him, Reine. Oh, I must make friends with him! What shall I do without a friend in this perilous time?"

"I will be your friend," Reine ventures, wistfully.

Maud measures the slight figure with scornful eyes.

"*You!* what good could you do me?" she asks, disdainfully.

"I do not know. I am small, but I am willing," Reine answers to that look. "Remember, Maud, a little mouse once saved a lion."

"Go and ask my uncle if he will let me come in and speak to him," Maud answers, ignoring her offer with proud indifference.

The slight, girlish figure turns away without a word. In the hall she meets Nellie returning.

"You have not found the note?" she says.

"No, ma'am, and whatever will my poor Miss Maud do? Oh, Mrs. Charteris, will they hang her for Mr. Clyde's murder? Oh, I daren't go in and tell her I cannot find it," whimpers poor Nellie.

"Nellie," abruptly, "tell me where to find Mr. Charteris."

"Oh, ma'am, at the inquest, most probably," returns Nellie, surprised; then, with an imploring look, "oh, Mrs. Charteris, please'm don't tell him what I told you. I know Mr. Langton would discharge me for listening. I shouldn't have told you, never, but for Miss Maud."

[Pg 35]

Reine looks at her sadly. A far-away look in her "dark—dark eyes."

"You needn't be afraid, Nell. I shall never tell him," she says, slowly, and passes on.

She opens the library door softly, and goes in. Mr. Langton is sitting dejectedly in his arm-chair.

"Uncle, dear," she says, in a strange, low voice, "tell me where to find Mr. Charteris."

He starts, guiltily, it seems to her. His fingers close over a slip of paper in his hand.

"You want Vane—oh, ah, yes, of course," he says, confusedly. "What can you want of Vane?"

She smiles sadly to herself. Her own husband, yet "what can she want of him."

"A matter of business, sir," she replies, with cold brevity.

"Business!" He glances up and sees how white and strange her face is. "Is it important? It will wait, won't it?"

"No; it's a matter of life and death," she says, with trembling lips.

"Life and death? You are jesting, child, surely. I am very sorry, dear, but Vane has just sent me a line. He has gone—I mean he has been called away suddenly. He may be compelled to remain some time. You will have to be satisfied with my poor society. Vane sent you his love, and regrets that he could not bid you farewell."

A slight, cold smile touches the scarlet lips that curl in faint scorn.

"Do not fib to me, Uncle Langton. You know very well he sent me no such message. Let me see that note."

She draws it deliberately out of his fingers, and reads the curt message:

"Mr. Langton, I am about going away as we agreed upon. I will write you from abroad. Invent some excuse to satisfy the curiosity of Reine."

"So that is the love he sent me," she says, looking at him with reproachful, dark eyes. "How charmingly affectionate he is! Aren't you afraid that you'll never get to Heaven, Uncle Langton,

[Pg 36]

after that tremendous fib?"

"Don't tease, child, I have vexation enough. I did not think it of Charteris, really. I wish now I hadn't—" he stops and gnaws his gray mustache, fiercely.

"I wish so, too," she says, with subdued bitterness. "It was a sad mistake all round. It cannot be helped now. But, uncle, I *must* see him. Tell me where to find him."

"You may find him in New York to-morrow. He left on the ten o'clock train to-day."

"This is dreadful—poor Maud," she says, incoherently. "Oh, uncle, Maud is up-stairs. She prays you to see her. Uncle, you *must*. She has no one to turn to but you. The shadow of a terrible crime is hanging over her head. She must go to prison unless something happens to help her."

"She has made her bed, so let her lie," he says, petulantly.

"Oh, uncle, you must forgive her and befriend her; say that you will."

"I won't," he says, with bitter brevity.

"Let her come to you for five minutes; she can plead her own cause better than I can."

"I decline to see her. Tell her so. Tell her I will never have anything more to do with her," he replies, sternly, leading her to the door, and shutting her out into the hall.

She goes back to her cousin, stumbling over Nellie, who is crouched outside the door, dreading to enter with the story of her non-success.

"He will see me?" Maud says, hopefully, as she enters.

"I am very sorry, dear, but he utterly declines," Reine says, sorrowfully.

"Of course! I doubt if you ever asked him," Maud cries, irritably. "But, Reine, what is the matter? You look white and scared? What has happened?"

"Vane—Mr. Charteris has gone away," Reine falters, miserably.

"Gone away—of course. That was the condition on which he married you. He said he could marry you, but he could not live with you."

"Maud, why do you tell me these horrible things?" falters the wretched young bride.

[Pg 37]

"To make you as wretched as I am," Maud breaks out, with vindictive passion in her voice and face. "But it is all true, every word. He said he would stay away a year, and Mr. Langton must train you to be such a woman as he could respect and honor; a woman," triumphantly, "like me."

"God forbid!" Reine says, with a stifled gasp, turning her white face away that Maud may not see the hopeless pain that shadows the brightness.

The door opens and Nellie creeps forlornly in.

"Oh, Miss Maud," she says, tearfully, "I can't find it, I can't find it! I've searched high and low but it's nowhere to be found!"

CHAPTER IX.

How strange are the turns of fortune. Yesterday the beautiful queen of the county, the heiress of a millionaire, the betrothed of a handsome, adoring lover; to-day the inmate of a prison, the shadow of a crime hanging over her head, looked upon with horror and suspicion by those who, twenty-four hours ago, were ready to fall down and worship her. So Maud Langton muses drearily.

Out of all the throng of defaulting friends only one remains to her—the girl she hates with cordial good-will, the rival who has spoiled all her hopes, who has married her lover, and who reigns at Langton Villa in her stead. What bitterness to acknowledge that slight, dark-eyed girl she has always despised, as the only human being who clings to her, and is kind to her in this, her dark hour.

But it is true. It is Reine who takes her by the hand when others fail her; it is Reine who stands up bravely by her side and declares her belief in the existence of the mislaid note; it is Reine who almost pledges herself to find it if only they will give her time—hours, or days, or weeks, as the case may be.

And when she has thus declared her purpose, she goes back to Langton Villa to "beard the lion in his den."

"Uncle Langton, I am going to New York after Mr. Charteris," she says to him, coolly.

[Pg 38]

"Eh? what—after Vane?" he growls, in his curt fashion. "What's up?"

"I have important business with him. I *must* see him, if only for five minutes."

The old millionaire looks keenly at the dusky, beautiful face. Some of the brightness has gone out of it since yesterday. The large, dark eyes have a strange, intent, far-off look, the lips droop like a grieved child's, the white rose instead of the red, blooms on her cheek.

"Child, you look tired and pale. All this excitement has been too much for you. What is this

business with Vane, eh? To scold him for running away?"

"Nothing of the sort," with impatient wrath; "a mere matter of business, as I said to you just now."

He does not believe her, and in his proud old heart there is a secret indignation at Vane for his cavalier flitting. Reine shall not run after him.

"You mustn't go," he says, bluntly. "I won't have you run after him. He'll come to of himself, only give him time and let him have his fling undisturbed. You will only disgust him, going after him. You shall hold your own, and be as stiff as he is."

She stares at him, her white hands locked before her, her sweet lips apart.

"But, uncle—" she begins.

"I know," he interrupts, "but believe me, child, I know men better than you do. You must not seem to care. Remember that you are a bride, unwooed, as yet, married for spite, not for love. In fact, Vane has gone away for a time just to accustom himself to the idea of his strange marriage, and to give you time to—to train yourself for your new position."

"To make myself over into a woman like Maud," she breathes, low and bitterly.

He starts, evidently disconcerted.

"Eh? what? Who told you that, Reine?"

"A little bird in the air whispered it," she retorts, with grim pleasantry.

"No such thing. I wish I knew who had been telling tales to you. I'd wring their necks!" testily. "But you understand, don't you," anxiously, "how premature it would be to follow him? Give him a little time. He'll come to his senses fast enough, and thank fortune for his pretty little wife!"

[Pg 39]

"Uncle Langton," indignantly, "do give me leave to speak. Do you think I'm a love-sick fool to go running after a man that despises me?"

"I thought you had more sense," he says, beaming upon her; "you give it up, then?"

"No, I am determined to go. Try to understand, sir, that it is on no personal business I wish to see him. It is for—for another. He will understand."

"Write to him, then, Reine."

"It would not do. He is very obstinate, I fancy. I may have to urge him very persistently."

Mr. Langton peers at her curiously beneath his shaggy brows.

"What is this mysterious mission on which you are going, Reine? Explain."

The dark lashes fall, veiling her troubled eyes from his keen scrutiny.

"I cannot tell you; it may turn out a mere chimera; say that I am going on a 'wild-goose chase,' and you will hit the truth."

"Of course you know there is not another train until to-morrow," he observes. "Vane will have had twenty-four hours the start of you."

"I know that. Still I must follow him," she says, persistently.

"Then I must tell you. I didn't mean you should know just yet; it is not likely you will find him in New York when you go. He's off for the other side of the 'herring-pond.'"

"Gone abroad!" She starts, and her tortured face whitens. Into her eyes comes a look of despair.

"You know he was booked for Europe—he and Maud were, I mean. Their passage was taken on the steamer which leaves New York to-morrow. Vane has obstinately chosen to go alone. Never mind, lovey. The young simpleton will be suing your pardon some day."

"Never mind me, uncle, I am not thinking of myself," she says, through white, quivering lips. "Oh, tell me what to do! I must see him for five minutes only—I must, I must, I *must!* if I have to follow him to Europe!"

"Is the case so desperate as that?" he asks; "I will help you, then. Shall I telegraph him to stay in New York until—"

[Pg 40]

"Not until I come," nervously. "*That* might make him very angry."

"Until I come, then. For I shall go with you, of course. What could you do all alone by yourself in big New York?"

"You will go—oh, you dear, kind uncle, how thankful I am!" she cries, kissing his withered old cheek in the fervor of her gratitude. "Now, I shall be brave as a lion. Oh, pray telegraph him this hour, if possible!"

CHAPTER X.

"Now, Reine, I know the hotel where Vane stays when he comes to New York. If he received my telegram he will be waiting there for me. I will go and bring him to you."

They are in a small, private parlor of a hotel in New York. Reine, very dusty and anxious-looking, is walking up and down the floor, never having even removed her hat.

"I will bring him to you," Mr. Langton repeats. "Now, dear, go to your room and bathe your face and hands, and brush your hair. Do not let your husband find you so dusty and travel-stained."

"As if he cared," she says, with infinite mournfulness, yet obeying his hint all the same.

She looks with dim, pathetic eyes at the pale, grave face in the mirror.

"How these few days have changed me," she sighs. "No wonder! Yet I did not know it was in my nature to suffer such pain. If Vane cared for me he must be startled at the change. But he does not love me, and never will, alas!"

She waits, perhaps the longest half an hour she ever knew in her gay, careless life. Mr. Langton comes at last—alone!

"Whew! how confoundedly hot and dusty is New York at this season," he splutters, mopping his face with his handkerchief. "The thermometer up in the nineties, and the dust in clouds that choke and blind one. An hour of life at Langton Villa is worth a year in this noisy, abominable place. Reine, let us go home."

[Pg 41]

She stares at him with wide, dismayed dark eyes.

"Uncle, he—he is gone?" she falters.

"Gone, yes, the impertinent young puppy," he growls. "Gone without a word, utterly ignored me and my telegram. I wish to Heaven—" he pauses with a dark frown.

"What, Uncle Langton?" with pathetic wistfulness.

"That—that I'd never married you to him, the scamp!" he blurts out in a fury. "He has treated us both with the most distinct contempt. We will go home, dearie, and Vane Charteris may go to the devil!"

This from the irate old man, but Reine looks at him bravely.

"Uncle Langton, I object to your calling names," she says, distinctly. "Mr. Charteris is my husband. I insist that you shall respect that fact."

"A pretty husband," he mutters.

"No one shall blame him in my hearing," she goes on with shy, pretty dignity. "After all, it was unfair to hang an unloved wife like a millstone around his neck."

"You know all," Mr. Langton mutters, darkly, "but where the deuce you found out is beyond my ken. If I knew, I'd shoot the fellow that told you. Well, are you ready to go back to the mountains to-morrow?

"No, oh, no," she clasps her small hands in anguish. "Oh, uncle, you promised to leave me your fortune. Give me only just enough money to follow Vane across the ocean, and I'll resign all the rest!"

"What, you obstinate little vixen! You are quite determined to follow him?"

"I *must*, uncle. Oh, you do not know how much depends on my seeing him!"

"And you would cross the great 'herring-pond' alone? I should think you would be frightened at the thought, you, a green little country girl. Who knows where Vane may cast his lines? Perhaps among the frog-eating Frenchmen, or the garlicky Italians. Can you speak French?"

"Like a native," she responds, with an arch little *moue*.

"Italian?"

"Perfectly, and Spanish, too. You know I get my living by my learning," she laughs, trying hard to be her own bright, careless self.

[Pg 42]

He is plainly delighted.

"Very well, you shall go," he replies. "A steamer sails to-morrow. We will go in her."

"*You*," she cries, with incredulous joy. "It will be too wearisome for you. You are so old."

"Not a bit," contemptuously. "Do you think I will let you go alone?"

CHAPTER XI.

The *Sea Gull* wings her flight blithely and rapidly across the "dark blue waves," as if she were not freighted with the heaviest heart that ever beat in breast of mortal man.

For Vane Charteris, although his passionately longed-for revenge has come to him in such strange and subtle fashion, is a most unhappy man.

Mingled with his almost fierce joy at the speedy retribution that has been dealt out to Maud, his false love, is a stinging, unconquerable remorse that pursues him like an evil spirit, although he cannot bring himself to repentance for what he has done. A shuddering horror takes possession of his soul when he thinks of the cloud of shame and disgrace, and impending peril lowering

darkly over that golden head he has loved so dearly, but his passionate anger and resentment are stronger than the languid, admiring affection he had cherished for his fair, queenly-looking betrothed.

In the madness of his insulted pride it seems to Vane impossible that he should lift a finger to save the treacherous one from her terrible fate.

Arriving in the great, smoky city of London, that is hot and smoky and altogether unbearable, Vane throws himself into whatever excitement is going with an *abandon* and recklessness altogether unlike himself.

He is bent on losing himself and his tormenting thoughts in the deepest oblivion he can find, but in less than a week he succumbs to fatigue and mental agony, and decides that he is "fagged out." Either he must recuperate or he must die.

Life is sweet to us all; even to Vane, with his dearest hope gone from him.

[Pg 43]

He decides to run down to the sea-shore a little way, and brace his constitution with the life-giving sea-breezes.

He hears of a quiet place, frequented by invalids, authors, and poets, and such quiet people, "packs his traps" and goes down by the first train. Behold, it is a coast such as Tennyson portrays:

"All sand and cliff and deep-inrunning cave."

"I shall die of memory and stagnation here in less than a week," he tells himself grimly, as he paces along the yellow sands up to his balconied hotel, where a few dispirited invalids and long-haired poets eye the handsome young American with a dreamy, listless curiosity. "I shall find health and quiet here with a vengeance. I shall go mad with this eternal sea!"

And after one night with the long, low moan of the "sad sea waves" in his ears, and the ghosts of the past stalking drearily in the haunted darkness, he stoutly prepares to "fold up his tent like the Arabs, and silently steal away" to "fresh fields and pastures new." The spirit of unrest is upon him; strange mood for one who all his life-long had been indolent, languid, not to say, in Reine's plain English, *lazy*.

But while he chews the end of his morning segar, and restlessly meditates on the where to go next, a boy comes to him with a pretty little three-cornered note. In stupid astonishment he takes it and holds it unopened in his hand.

"I was to take back an answer, sir," the lad ventures, as a gentle reminder.

Then Vane turns it over and looks at the superscription. It is addressed to himself in a pretty, graceful hand, with a good deal of character in it.

Unfolding it, he reads, with staring eyes:

"MR. CHARTERIS:—Arriving at the hotel an hour ago, I learned, on inquiry, that you were at the 'Haven of Rest.' Will you come to me for ten minutes? Hastily,

"REINE LANGTON."

The earth seems to yawn beneath Mr. Charteris' feet. He mutters, on the uncontrollable spur of the moment, a profane expletive:

"The devil!"

[Pg 44]

"Eh, what, sir?" the lad mutters, uncomprehendingly.

The words recall Mr. Charteris to his senses, he having been momentarily shocked out of them.

"Who gave you this note, boy!" he demands, sternly.

Really, it seems to him there must be some mistake. Reine, his unloved wife, here on Albion's wave-washed shore—impossible.

But the lad replies, distinctly:

"A young lady at the Sea View Hotel, a very pretty lady, with big black eyes."

This description is too suggestive of Reine to admit of further doubt.

With a suppressed groan, Vane tears a leaf from his memorandum book, and scribbles, hastily:

"Reine:—I will be with you in fifteen minutes.

"VANE."

Totally forgetting, in his flurry, to put her name upon it, he doubles the sheet and puts it into the lad's hand with a generous silver piece.

"Now, fly back to the lady, you young scamp," he apostrophizes.

As if the reward had lent wings to his feet, the urchin runs lightly along the sandy shore, and disappears in the distance.

Vane takes a turn up and down the balcony to steady his nerves. He has had what some people are wont to call a "turn."

The authors and invalids eye him with blended curiosity and admiration. It is not often that a handsome, comely young fellow like this anchors his bark in this "Haven of Rest."

"She has followed me here," Vane is saying to himself, through his compressed lips. "Now, I call *that* downright bold and unwomanly. It proves to me more and more how unwise a choice was forced upon me by Mr. Langton's perverse will. Why did he let her come? And how the deuce am I to get rid of her? For I swear I won't live with her, at least not yet."

So saying, he flings on his hat and starts off at a swinging pace along the sands toward the hotel.

"I must see what she wants," he says, under his breath, and gnawing the ends of his golden-brown mustache savagely, while the *habitués* of the place watch him carelessly, little thinking that the handsome American is going unwillingly to the bonniest bride all England holds.

[Pg 45]

He had called her "bold and unwomanly," yet in his heart he is forced to retract the words when he finds himself in her presence, and the spell of her dark, bright beauty throws its glamor over him, against his will.

For Reine, with the pardonable vanity of "lovely woman," has hastened to make herself fair for her husband's coming.

In London, while they rested and searched for Vane, Mr. Langton has bought her a box of what he calls "fine things." Among them is a sheer, white India muslin morning robe, trimmed with a profusion of fine, rich lace. Nothing could be lovelier than Reine in this dainty robe, with deep-hearted crimson roses in her hair and at her belt.

The slight, graceful figure advances to the center of the pretty morning parlor, then pauses suddenly, while the curling, black lashes flutter and fall till they waver against the burning crimson cheeks.

"You sent for me?" he says, abruptly, noting her sudden shame and confusion with ungenerous malice.

"Yes, I—I—" she pauses, and throws up her girlish white hands as if to ward off a blow. "Oh, do not look at me so," she says, imploringly. "I *know* what you are thinking and saying to yourself. It is that—that I am bold, forward, unlady-like, to have followed you here, when you," a choking sob, quickly suppressed, "when you despise me so!"

It is his turn to blush now under the dazzling light of the "dark, dark eyes" she opens wide upon his face, while she makes her frantic plaint.

"It is no such thing, pray do not say so," he retorts, fibbing unblushingly, in that he feels himself, to use his own graphic inward phrase, "cornered." "Of course you had a perfect right," dejectedly, "to come after me."

"Not at all," she says, decidedly. "No right that I would presume upon thus far. Oh, Mr. Charteris," with a sudden transition from shame and self-pity to irrepressible mirth, "pray, pray, do not look so dejected and forlorn. I have not come after you, indeed; that is, not as you think. I hope to leave here for America to-morrow."

[Pg 46]

"Leading me as a captive in your train?" he inquires, not feeling half so bad at the prospect as he could have imagined ten minutes ago.

"Certainly not," she replies, in her frank, decisive way; then, a little frigidly, "pray be seated, sir, and I will unfold to you the business upon which I have followed you to England."

He bows silently, turning a little pale beneath his healthy, florid tinge.

What an ominous sound that dull, prosaic word, "business," has from her lovely, heart-shaped, crimson lips. Besides, he feels, to use his own inward thought again, "*wilted*." She does *not* want him, as he has vainly imagined, and ridiculously resented in secret. She is come on a mere matter of business. She makes him understand that thoroughly by her pretty, dignified manner that has stiffened into ice.

"I should not have come—nothing could have induced me to," she goes on, with sensitive depreciation and lowered eyelids, "only for the sake of *Maud*."

"Of *Maud*!" he starts, and his pallor grows death-like. "What has she to do with you and me, Reine?"

She looks up silently, and their glances meet and hold each other a moment; the velvety black orbs, swimming in golden light, hold a mute and stern reproach before which the proud, defiant blue ones waver and shrink, pained and ashamed.

"I do not understand," he says, sullenly, answering her look against his will.

"Oh, yes, you do, you know," she returns with airy frankness. "You remember poor Mr. Clyde wrote *Maud* a note, swearing he would kill himself if she didn't marry him. And *Maud* lost the note that day she was in the hammock-chair under the tree. You, Mr. Charteris, found it, and tucked it into your vest pocket, thinking it of no consequence. But in that you were mistaken, as you learned the day of the inquest. Oh, Mr. Charteris, will you give up that note, and pray God to pardon your wicked revenge?"

[Pg 47]

CHAPTER XII.

There is a moment's perfect silence. From deathly white Vane Charteris has turned to a burning crimson, then marble-pale again. No sound is heard save the low, hoarse swell of the waves as they break on the rocky shore.

"Oh, you did not realize, surely," the girl goes on, with pained eyes, and clasped hands, "what a terrible thing you were doing when you went away silently with that note in your possession, that is worth the wealth of the world to poor Maud Langton. You were blinded by your wounded pride and insulted love, or you could not have stooped to take such an ignoble revenge for your wrongs."

He stares at her still, like one dreaming. Is the girl a witch? How does she know?

"Oh, speak!" she breaks out, impatiently. "Have you nothing to say?"

"You have taken my breath away," he answers. "Why do you bring this absurd charge against me? Who says," with a sneer, "I have that wonderful note?"

"I am your accuser," she answers, fixing upon him the full fire of her magnetic dark eyes. "I saw you, I was not very far away when Maud left you that day, I saw you pick up a note from the ground and read it, then you slipped it into your vest pocket. I am quite sure it was Maud's note. I do not believe you will deny it."

"Since you know so much, I will not," he answers, with blended amaze and defiance. "What then?"

The beautiful dusky face lights up with the lovely earnestness of hope.

"You will give it to me," she says. "I have followed you across the wide ocean to ask you for it."

"Why should I give it to you?" he asks, with distinct coldness.

She gives him a glance of blended pride and patience.

"Not for any grace you owe me, certainly," she says, with gentle calmness, "but for Maud's sake." [Pg 48]

"Do I owe her any kindness?" he asks, sardonically.

"You owe her forgiveness, which is divine," she answers, anxiously.

"I prefer *revenge*. Do you remember these lines?

"The sweetest thing upon this earth is love,
And next to love the sweetest thing is hate."

She rises and faces him, something of proud scorn in her free and girlish bearing.

"Yes, I remember them, but such sentiments are unworthy of you, Mr. Charteris. What! are you not the brave, noble gentleman I deemed you? Am I to blush for my—husband?"

A subtle thrill, he cannot tell whether it be of pain or pleasure, it is so intense, shoots through him as the low word falls from her lips. A passionate shame, evoked by her proud scorn, tingles through all his frame, yet he says, mockingly:

"So you own the tie that binds us? I thought not, as when I came just now and inquired for Mrs. Charteris I was told there was no such person staying in the hotel. I had to ask for Miss Langton."

"I am traveling as Miss Langton," she explains, simply, yet coloring crimson under his keen, cool gaze.

"May I ask why?" with an unconscious touch of pique in his tone.

"No, you may not ask," with a great deal of dignity in her tone; then, suddenly: "Yet I think you should know I am too sensitive to claim the name you will not accord me of your own free will."

She opens the scrawl he has sent her awhile ago, holding it open before his eyes. There is neither name nor address upon it.

"I, upon my word, I beg your pardon. It was entirely—I give you my word of honor—unintentional; a mere omission. I was so flurried, you see, and somehow I forgot. Can you forgive me?" he stammers.

"With pleasure," she returns, coolly, looking away from his shamed countenance. "But we have digressed from our subject. We were talking of Maud and the note you hold. How can you withhold it from her when you know that her very life hangs upon it?"

"Reine, do you know that I hate that woman?" he cries, with subdued fierceness. [Pg 49]

"Then you never loved her," she replied, decisively.

"I did; but her falsity turned my love to hate," he answers, moodily.

"No," she answers.

"That is not love
That alters where it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove."

An utter silence which she breaks again, anxiously: "You will not refuse my prayer? Give me the

note and let me go to Maud."

He turns from her sullenly and looks out of the window at the blue, sun-gilded waves breaking in snowy foam against the shell-strewn shore.

"You could not let her suffer for a crime of which she is innocent," the pleading voice goes on.

"I suffered innocently," he says, shortly enough, without turning around. "Why did she make me a mark for the finger of scorn?"

"You can live *that* down," she answers. "But she, her very life is at stake. Do not forget that if she suffers the full penalty of the law, for this crime of which she is not guilty, her blood will be on your hands. You will, in the sight of God, and to my knowledge, be Maud's Langton's murderer."

Though he will not turn around, she sees the strong shudder that shakes his frame.

"You will be a haunted man," she goes on, relentlessly. "By day and by night you will dream of the girl you have slain. You will remember always that the golden head you hoped to pillow on your breast is laid low in a dishonored grave."

"For God's sake, Reine, why do you torment me so?" he cries, turning fiercely round upon her.

"For Maud's sake, and your own sake, and for humanity's sake, and my own sake," she retorts, bravely. "That Maud's innocence may be vindicated, that you may be saved from the evil consequences of your wicked revenge, that the world may see how divine a thing is repentance and forgiveness, and that I," her brave voice falls to a low, pathetic cadence, "that I may not have to die of shame because I have given my heart to one so lost to honor, truth and mercy."

Vane Charteris stands like one stunned a moment.

[Pg 50]

"What a little vixen it is," he says to himself, darkly. "There is no end to her tongue."

"I know what you are saying to yourself," the girl breaks in, vivaciously; "you are wishing I would go away and leave you alone—"

"You are mistaken," he replies, thinking of a way to put her to confusion, and silence her tongue that is but a little louder than his own accusing conscience. "I was thinking of what you said just now. Is it really true that you have given me your heart?"

The warm, red color creeps up to her temples under the blue fire of his steady, curious eyes. She rallies herself with a brave little effort of will.

"Yes," she answers, with a little touch of pathos in her low voice. "It is quite true. Does it amuse you? It is only a girl's heart. You will break it and throw it from you of course. I have often heard that women's hearts were men's playthings."

He regards her in curious silence. Few women would be brave enough to make that frank admission to a cold, careless, unloving husband. Yet Reine is as proud as the most, she lacks none of the modesty of her sex.

There is a curious, restrained pride in her every look and movement now. And, strange to say, he does not feel disgusted at her pathetic admission of her love for him.

"She *loves* me," he repeats over and over to his heart, looking at the lissome, daintily rounded figure, and the brilliant face, bright and rich like a tropical flower, with the softness of emotion lying on it like dew. "She loves me," and there is a certain masculine vanity in the thought that he, Vane Charteris, is the lode-star of her girlish dreams.

But before he can think of anything to say, she goes back, pertinacious, to the old theme:

"But we have digressed from the original subject. Once more, Mr. Charteris, will you give me the note?"

And he answers, bluntly, almost angrily:

"No, I will not."

And for the first time since their interview, Reine shows a sign of weakness. She reels unsteadily, and throws up her white hands in the air.

"I have failed, I have failed," she cries, despairingly. "Oh, you are merciless; you are a veritable Shylock. Nothing will sate your thirst for vengeance but a pound of flesh!"

[Pg 51]

He catches the falling figure in his arms. For one moment the white, anguished face rests against his breast, then she opens her eyes and struggles from his clasp.

"Do not touch me," she says, with indignant scorn. "You are a monster!"

And his own conscience, knocking loudly at the door of his heart, echoes the words.

"Reine, Reine," he falters, hurriedly, "do not be hasty. Give me a little time. I will answer you to-morrow."

"You take back your refusal?" brightening so swiftly that you think of the sun coming out from under a cloud.

"Until to-morrow—yes," he says, feeling a sort of relief at his own words. "You can wait until then?"

"Yes, for I cannot go until to-morrow. Did I forget to tell you that Uncle Langton is with me?"

"Is he, really?"

"Yes, and I fear the trip has been too much for him, poor old dear," with loving compassion. "He feels worn and tired. He is lying down this morning. Will you go to him?"

"I shall be very glad. Does he—does he know why you came?"

"No," quietly; then, flushing: "You will not mind if he is a little cross, and—and fault finding? He is so old, you know, and then he is tired and half sick."

"I shall not mind," he answers, a little grimly, as he follows her through a small suite of rooms to Mr. Langton's own especial one.

"Mr. Charteris is here, uncle," she says, quietly ushering the visitor in, and sensitively withdrawing.

CHAPTER XIII.

Vane Charteris, entering the cool, breezy white room, with its wide windows opening upon the sea, encounters the half-indignant gaze of his old friend, who is lying on a low couch in a silken dressing-gown and tasseled cap, his wrinkled old hands grasping the knob of his gold-headed cane, which he proceeds to thump viciously on the floor at the young man's entrance, thereby expressing the war-like state of his mind.

[Pg 52]

"I hope I see you well, Mr. Langton," airily observes the handsome young "reprobate," as Mr. Langton mentally dubs him.

"Then you'll be disappointed," snaps the old millionaire, irefully. "Never was so mortally used up before in my life. Soul and body will scarcely hold together. And all on your account, you disobedient young rascal."

"Disobedient?" Mr. Charteris queries, in a mild tone, slightly arching his eyebrows.

"Disobedient, yes;" with an emphatic thump of the cane. "Didn't you receive my telegram ordering you to remain in New York until I came?"

"Ye-es, I did," admits the culprit, with no great show of repentance, "but being, according to the old law, free, white, and twenty-one, I didn't seem to see that I was under any man's orders."

"Nor any woman's either?" testily.

"Nor any woman's either," Vane repeats, undauntedly.

"At least I expected a show of courtesy from a young fellow whom I had tried hard to benefit," Mr. Langton retorts, with his stiffest air.

Whereat Mr. Charteris, after a little ambiguous cough, puts on a show of meekness.

"Ah, there I see my naughtiness," he says. "I acted like a churl. There can be no two opinions as to *that*. But, sir, if you could only know the madness of the passion that drove me on, I think you might find some excuse for me in your heart."

Mr. Langton, differing from him on this latter point, says nothing in reply, but discreetly changes the conversation.

"You talked with Reine?" he inquires.

"Oh, yes; or, I may say, she talked with me," this ruefully.

Mr. Langton at this chuckled heartlessly.

"She has a sharp tongue of her own, I warrant you," he says.

"Inherited honestly enough," replies Mr. Charteris, with a pointed bow at the old gentleman.

[Pg 53]

"Yes—yes; chip of the old block," Mr. Langton retorts, in nowise disconcerted at the hint of his niece's resemblance to himself. "Well, Vane, this mission on which she has followed you abroad—has she broached it?"

His yet keen eyes detect the flush that steals up to the young man's temples as he replies in the affirmative.

"I hope it was concluded to her satisfaction."

"It has not been decided yet," Vane replies, with no little embarrassment.

"I may not venture to inquire into its nature?" Mr. Langton asks, curiously.

"No, I think not—at least, not just yet. Later on you shall hear, perhaps," Vane responds, ambiguously, and with very palpable confusion.

They have some desultory conversation, then Mr. Langton asks, casually:

"Well, and have you enjoyed your '*outing*?'"

"Recklessly," responds he.

"I don't think I quite enter into your meaning," the old millionaire retorts; and Vane, laughing carelessly, replies:

"I mean I have enjoyed it down to the ground, as the fellows say here."

"Humph! looks as if you had been dissipating straight through," Mr. Langton comments, glaring keenly at him under his shaggy brows. "You don't ask me anything about that wretched girl," he says, startlingly.

"Reine has told me," Vane replies, pale to the lips.

"Serves her right. I can't, for my life, feel sorry for the treacherous little cat! To think that she should have treated me so!" said the vindictive old man.

"This affair is likely to go hard with her," says Vane, with admirably-acted indifference.

"Pooh! nothing of the sort," Mr. Langton returns, trying to salve his uneasy conscience. "No danger of such a pretty girl as Maud coming to grief. That cold, white beauty that reminds you," maliciously, "of a lily, would win over any jury in the world."

They discussed the subject a little while, carelessly, almost unfeelingly, it would seem, since Maud Langton has been so much to them both a little while ago; then the old millionaire turns carelessly, to all intent, to another subject.

[Pg 54]

"Do you know it seemed to me superlatively ridiculous to be dragging my old, sapless bones so far as this, dancing attendance on another man's wife?"

Vane colors, then turns aside the implied reproach.

"It must have weighed upon you, certainly," he responds. "I am rather surprised at such thoughtlessness, even on the part of Reine. Why did you let her persuade you?"

"Nothing of the kind. I simply came in spite of her. Did you think I would have suffered your wife to come alone, Vane?"

"Will you smoke?" Mr. Charteris inquires, proffering a choice Havana, and lighting one himself.

Mr. Langton, taking one gingerly between his fingers, resumes:

"There is a good deal more to Reine than we thought for. I am downright pleased over the exchange of heiresses I made. I wish now, seeing how all fell out, that I had taken her without encumbrance."

"Meaning me?" Vane asks, with an uncomfortable flush.

"Meaning *you*," Mr. Langton replies, beginning to puff away furiously at his Havana, as if he were a smoke-stack. "You see I am mistaken in you, Vane. After all you said I didn't believe it was in you to treat your bride in such a cavalier style. If I had thought you would really run away from Reine the next day, and set all the country talking and sneering, you might have gone to the devil before I'd have given you my pretty little niece!"

"The regret is mutual, sir," Vane replies, with some heat; and then, glancing up, warned by some strange instinct, he sees his unloved wife standing just within the door.

She has entered just in time to catch Mr. Langton's closing speech and the angry answer.

Vane sprang to his feet, very red and confused.

"I—I beg your pardon," he says, in the utmost confusion.

She bows, speechlessly. Her face has gone quite white; her eyes shun his in a kind of fearful [Pg 55] shame. She says at last, in a strange voice, but with desperate calmness:

"I feared Uncle Langton would be rude to you. You must pardon him, and pardon me."

"For what?" he gains courage to ask, a little blankly.

"For our share in making you unhappy," she answers, very low.

Something in the proud humility of her attitude strikes a remorseful pang through his heart.

She stands alone in the center of the room, slender and graceful as a young palm tree, her head drooped slightly forward, the dew of unfallen tears shining like pearls in her long, dark lashes. She is like, yet unlike, the giddy Reine of a month ago.

"There is nothing to pardon," he says, in a flurried tone, "Mr. Langton was right. I have acted very badly—like a brute, in fact. You must wish you had never seen me."

"Yes," she says, low, but steadily. "It would have been so much better for you."

"I did not mean that," says he, disconcerted.

"You are good enough to say so," she replies, with delicate disbelief, and then she goes up to her uncle.

"The physician you sent for is here," she says. "Shall I send him in?"

"Are you so bad as that?" Vane asks, with a slight start.

"Yes; I can scarce hold myself together," Mr. Langton replies, and his trembling old hands attest the truth of his words. "I must have something for my nerves or I shall not be able to stir from this to-morrow."

Vane rises, glad to get away under any terms.

"*Au revoir*," he says. "I will call again to-morrow."

He goes back to the Haven of Rest with the poets, aesthetes and such people, lounging on the balconies. That name is a misnomer. It appears to him a haven of unrest. He wanders away to the

shell-strewn beach, and smokes like a chimney while he reviews the situation.

Meanwhile, the physician attending Mr. Langton has thrown a bomb-shell into that camp.

"You are quite broken down and exhausted," is his dictum. "Rest and recuperation are what you need. I will leave you a tonic, and in about ten days you may be well enough to be taken for a short drive, and in two days more you may be strong enough to walk down to the sea-shore, and ——"

[Pg 56]

"Distraction, man!" thunders the irascible invalid. "Do you think I have come to this place to stay a year? No, sir. I am going to start back to America to-morrow."

"But, my friend, you know that is quite impossible," laughs the stout, good-natured physician. "At your time of life, recuperation goes on but slowly, and——"

"I tell you I'm as young as I ever was," this from Mr. Langton, in tones of mulish obstinacy.

"And I tell you you're breaking down of old age, and you'll not stir from this for two weeks; if you do you'll risk your life. You understand me, young lady?" turning to Reine.

"Yes, sir, and your directions shall be implicitly carried out."

"But, Reine," he objects when the doctor has gone, "you know you said it would be impossible we should stay beyond to-morrow."

"We must manage some way—you must not be hurt by our haste. We will go as soon as we can, that is all," she answers, patting his cheek, then turning gently from him to the window.

The dark, blue waves go splashing softly past under the gaze of her dark, sad eyes. A thought comes into her mind:

"But most of all would I flee from the cruel madness of love.
The honey of poison flowers, and all the measureless ill."

CHAPTER XIV.

"Another day. Never was mortal so glad to behold daylight," ejaculated Vane Charteris, yawning with all the weariness of one who has seen the long hours of a sleepless night glide past.

This is somewhat an unusual experience for our hero, but for once mind has so far triumphed over matter as to keep the drowsy god Somnus far away. A day and a night have been passed in vexing thought. Now when the first golden beams of sunshine gild the sea, he rises weary and unrefreshed, and goes for a stroll on the shore, this early outing being also a novel experience for him.

[Pg 57]

Early as it appears to him, others are astir before him. He meets several people returning from an early morning dip in the briny element.

Down on the sands he comes face to face with a vision fresh and fair as the summer morn itself—Reine, in a graceful boating dress, stepping lightly into a little boat that rides at anchor on the tide.

As she takes up the oars with consummate skill, his voice falls on her hearing, giving her a shock of surprise:

"Good morning; will you carry a passenger?"

She lifts to him her lovely face, flushed with a Hebe-like bloom, the light of the new day sunning itself goldenly in her pansy-dark eyes.

Somehow in this out-of-doors chance encounter there is none of the embarrassment that would attend a formal meeting in the house. There is even some of the old time *bardinage* and sauciness in her tones as she replies:

"Can I believe my ears or my eyes? Mr. Charteris out at this unheard-of hour? I thought you 'never, never——'"

"Well, hardly ever," he returns, with a spice of malice. "How came you to do it yourself?"

"Because I always *do*, you know," she returns, smilingly. "I have been out some time; I have had a glorious bath in the sea this morning, have you?"

He laughs no, and again renews his petition to be taken in, to which she assents, carelessly.

"I did not know you could manage a boat," he observes, as with a skillful sweep of the oars she turns the little craft forward, dancing lightly on the crest of the waves.

"Did you not? Well, that is not strange, seeing how little you know of me anyway. I am a good swimmer, too. You would not have guessed that?" she says, lightly.

"No, and yet it is a knowledge all women should possess," he returns. "Where have you learned these things?"

"My father taught me. He wanted me to be thorough in such things as well as in more lady-like accomplishments."

[Pg 58]

"He must have been a sensible man," Mr. Charteris comments to himself, and then there is a silence broken only by the soft, steady splash of the oars in the water. An embarrassing consciousness has fallen over both. Vane is thinking to himself that after all there may be some excuse for the *brusquerie* and wildness of the little savage, as he sometimes unkindly termed her in his thoughts. He remembers what Maud had told him of her tuition under her father. Masculine training would be apt to give her that touch of wildness.

She in her turn studies him shyly, but intently. She sees the haggard impress of the sleepless night on the pale, handsome face, and about the dark-blue eyes, with their slight heaviness and the faint blue circles around them. Impulsively she speaks:

"You have thought the matter well over. You will forego your revenge and save Maud?"

"Why should you think so? What sign have I given of yielding?" he asks, curiously.

"Your face, even your voice betrays you. If you had decided to refuse my prayer, you would look and speak differently. You would despise yourself, and your very looks would reveal it."

"I did not know you were such a close observer," he replies, "but it is true. You have saved me from myself, Reine."

As he speaks he leans forward, tossing a folded paper into her lap. The oars lie idle a moment, as they drift at the mercy of the wind and tide, while she reads the precious note.

Then she lifts her eyes, full of eloquent thankfulness, to his face.

"I expected no less of you," she says. "I knew you could not be so cruel to Maud."

The handsome blonde face darkens.

"It was not solely for Maud's sake," he replies. "Pray remember that I would not have yielded to you, Reine, only—only you showed me so plainly what a monster I was, and how truly I would be that false girl's murderer if I persevered. And then—then, I could not bear to have my wife ashamed of me."

He looks away consciously as he speaks. A thousand tingling little arrows of rapture shoot through her frame as the low words, "my wife," fall from his lips; spoken not harshly nor sneeringly, but kindly, almost tenderly. Is it possible, she asks herself, in thrilling silence, that he may one day forgive her, and be kind to her—nay, even give her love for love?

[Pg 59]

"I remembered," he goes on, even more kindly, "that this was the *first* request my wife had made of me, and I could not choose but grant it."

He can be dangerously winning when he pleases. It pleased him to be so then—perhaps to try his power over her. The result is quite satisfactory. The rich color leaps to her cheeks, the light of joy flashes into her deep, dark eyes, the low-breathed answer is freighted with emotion.

"I thank you more than I can express for your kindness," she answers, earnestly. "You make me very happy."

"Then, while you are in that pleasant mood, there is something I must ask you," he ventures.

"Yes?" She flashes him a bright, swift look of inquiry.

He is silent for a moment. He has an air of confusion that does not sit ill upon him.

"Reine," he says, "it was all a mistake, your traveling under your maiden name. It—it places you in a false position."

"No one knows aught of us here—it cannot matter," she replies, with a blush, and quickly-drawn breath.

He studies the beautiful face attentively. How fair, how young, how lovely it is. How sweet the heart-shaped, crimson lips, how long and dark the lashes that droop against her cheeks. How luxuriant and long the silken tresses that float like a banner on the fresh morning breeze. And she loves him; some strange, sweet thrill strikes through him whenever he recalls the truth she had owned with such pathetic frankness.

"I have acted badly—no one realizes that fact more than I do," he continues, gravely; "but, Reine that is past. I am your husband; you are my wife, shall we let bygones be bygones and begin again?"

"You mean—" she says, giving him a little wondering look.

"I mean," he replies, "that I will go back to America to-day with you, and I will try to do my duty by you in future if only you will forgive me for shirking it in the first instance, and running away in such a dastardly fashion."

[Pg 60]

Two crimson spots rise into her cheeks, her lashes fall lower.

"But—but we are not going back to-day," she explains, in an agitated voice, telling him what her uncle's physician had said.

"Not get away for two weeks?" he says. "Very well, Reine, then I shall leave the Haven of Rest and come to stay at Sea View Hotel, and it must be publicly made known that you are mine."

"Indeed you will not, then," she breaks out with sudden self-assertion. "I am not willing."

"Not willing?" he cries, and Reine's quick ear fancies it detects a tone of relief in his voice. "You refuse to be my wife, Reine—woman-like, taking revenge for a transient wrong."

"It is not that," she says, falteringly; "I am not angry with you, Vane, but it is best to—to wait."

"Until when?" he asks, bending his curious eyes on the bright, arch face.

And looking frankly at him, she replies, gently:

"Until love comes."

"Until love comes?" he repeats, blankly. "But I thought you owned—"

"Yes, I know," she says, checking him with uplifted finger, "but I mean mutual love."

With a light dip of the oars she whirls the boat around on its homeward way. The graceful head is poised in a free, half-haughty fashion. He cannot understand the strange look on the dusky, lovely face. It is neither pride nor humility, yet a strange blending of both.

After a moment she says in her clear, sweet voice, toned to a softer cadence than usual:

"Do not think me stubborn that I refuse to own your claim just now, Vane—I am proud in my own way. I cannot come to you until you wish it from your heart."

He is silent, gazing at her in sheer perplexity. She goes on gently:

"You see I was deceived at first, Vane—not willfully—I do not accuse you of *that*, but I fancied there must be in your heart some little spark of tenderness for love to grow upon. When I found out my mistake—how my uncle had forced the match upon you, and how but for my too eager consent Maud might have been yours, I—well, *it was hard to bear!* So I would rather wait, Vane—until the year you wished is over. Perhaps by then, the soreness of your regret for—another—will be past, and your heart may be open to me."

[Pg 61]

Has the moisture of the sea got into his eyes that they look so dim? He draws his handkerchief across them, and can find no words to answer. So she resumes, after a minute's weary waiting:

"I am not perverse, Vane. I am not fighting against my fate—only trying to make the best of it. You will give me a fair chance to win your heart before I wear your name? Will you not?"

"Yes," he answers, wondering at her strangeness.

"Thank you. Now we will return to my uncle. I will take the liberty to invite you to breakfast with him. Will you come?"

"Yes, thank you," he replies, and the little boat touching the shore, they spring out and go up the walk together, both very silent and thoughtful. He begins to think that Mr. Langton's quaint phrase of yesterday is true. "There is more in Reine than we suspected."

CHAPTER XV.

A sociable breakfast for three being laid in Mr. Langton's room, the small party proceed to enjoy it, Vane and Reine with appetites sharpened by the early morning air, and the sharp sea-breeze.

The old millionaire regards the young people curiously beneath his shaggy brows. Something in their expressions makes him say, confidently:

"You have come to an understanding regarding that secret mission, you two, I see."

"Yes," Reine answers, giving him a radiant glance from under her drooping, black-fringed lashes.

"And you are ready to return to America?"

"As soon as you are strong enough," Reine makes answer, trying not to let him see her inward anxiety to be gone.

"It is too bad that this old hulk of mine should be the means of detaining you," he grumbles.

[Pg 62]

"What shall you do now?"

She lifts her dark, inquiring eyes to the face of Mr. Charteris. He nods, affirmatively.

"I will tell you, uncle," she replies. "I shall write to Maud's counsel, and tell him I have found the missing note, and that I shall soon return, bringing it with me. He must obtain a stay of proceedings until my return."

"And this was your mission abroad?" Mr. Langton queries, surprised.

She smiles and nods, and Mr. Charteris comes in for his share of the old man's scrutiny.

"Then *you* had the note, Vane!" he says.

"Yes, sir," he responds, rather shame-facedly.

Mr. Langton looks from one to the other of the expressive faces, and comes to a very fair comprehension of the truth.

After a moment passed in silent thought, he breaks out with irrepressible enthusiasm:

"Reine, you are a trump!" whereat both the young people laugh with contagious merriment.

"Where are you staying, Vane?" Mr. Langton queries.

"At the Haven of Rest. I wished to change my quarters to the Sea View Hotel, but this imperious little lady here forbids me," he replies.

The keen little old eyes turn curiously on the crimsoning face of the girl.

"Why should you do that?" he asks, and stammering some incoherent excuse Reine flies from the room.

Then Vane rather ruefully explains the reason. To tell the truth he begins to feel ashamed of himself, the more so that Mr. Langton applauds Reine's determination.

"I am proud of her," he declared. "I was vexed at first. I thought she meant to follow you and plead her own case. Now I cannot help but glory in her nobility and her reasonable pride. She has the head of a Solomon on her young shoulders. If you were not blind, Vane, you could not fail to see what an adorable girl you have married."

"She is different from what I thought, certainly," Vane admits, gravely.

[Pg 63]

"She can hold her own—I am glad of that," Mr. Langton grunts, amicably. "You see you could not have her for the asking. Serves you right. There is hardly any excuse for the way you acted."

"It was outrageous, certainly," Vane answers, with admirable penitence, "but I wish she would have made it up and let me come here. The Haven of Rest is a dry place certainly—given up to invalids and poky people."

"I hear that Sea View is rather gay," Mr. Langton replies. "Some new people arrived this morning. There is talk of a ball to-night."

"A ball! Will Reine go down?" Mr. Charteris inquires.

"Scarcely, I think. You see I shall not be able to escort her."

"Perhaps she will allow me that honor," Mr. Charteris observes, promptly.

"Perhaps so," Mr. Langton responds, with a dry smile.

The ball comes off. Vane constitutes himself the attendant cavalier of Reine. In a white lace dress with Marechal Neil roses on her breast and in her hair, she has never looked more brilliant and beautiful. There is a softened grace about her, a new light in her eyes that is wondrously winning. She is withal a perfect dancer, embodying the very poetry of motion.

Some very pretty girls are present, some very nice men, but Reine is the belle of the ball. Mr. Charteris looks on in surprise. Reine had not been appreciated at Langton Villa.

"You have not given me a single dance," he says to her late in the evening.

"You have not asked me," she replies, in just the slightest tone of reproach, "and now I cannot; my card is full."

She floats away with a partner who has just claimed her. Vane, leaning carelessly against a chair in the corner, watches her languidly. She seems to enjoy herself. Smiles hover on the crimson lips, the dark eyes flash beneath their curling lashes.

Suddenly someone comes up to him—an acquaintance he has formed in London, and who has, somehow, found his way to this secluded spot.

[Pg 64]

"Ah, Charteris, how-de-do," the new-comer says, unceremoniously. "Who is the dark-eyed beauty? I've been watching her this half hour."

"Which one, Sir George?" with affected nonchalance.

"By Jove! there is but one, you know, the divinity in white lace and yellow roses. I saw you speaking to her just now," returns Sir George Wilde, with a look of interest in his handsome brown eyes.

"*That!*" says Mr. Charteris, "oh, that is—Miss Langton," with a curious hesitation over the name.

"Friend of yours?" inquires the dashing young baronet.

"Slight acquaintance," Charteris answers, warily.

"A compatriot, I take it," pursues Sir George.

Vane nods affirmatively.

"You'll introduce me, then?"

"With her permission," Vane responds, a trifle stiffly.

"*That*, of course," laughs Sir George.

A little later Vane goes to her to proffer his request. She stands for the moment alone in the embrasure of a window, her dark eyes turned from the giddy dancers out upon the mystic, lonely sea, with the moon and stars asleep upon its breast. He tells her, watching the bright face narrowly, that an English baronet has been so attracted by her beauty that he desires an introduction. Will she accord it?

The laughing, dark eyes, a spice of mischief in their starry depths, glance up into his own.

"A baronet!" she says, making a little round O of her rosy mouth. "Do you think, Mr. Charteris, I could really bear the burden of such an honor without being crushed by it?"

"You can but try," he retorts, lightly. "England expects every man and every woman to do their

duty."

"Then I am ready for the sacrifice," she laughs, as lightly.

He looks at her a moment in thoughtful silence.

"Well?" she asks, interpreting a question in his look.

"It is this, then, Reine: I am placed in an awkward position. How shall I introduce you—as Miss Langton, or as—as Mrs. Charteris?"

He flushes uncomfortably as the words leave his lips. His bride's face reflects the crimson glow. [Pg 65]
After a minute she replies, with outward indifference:

"Better, perhaps, as—Miss Langton, according to our agreement this morning."

Some slight feeling of pique rises in his heart. He will not own to himself that when he condescended to ask her the question he had thought to give her pleasure, and had felt, too, that he should not be ashamed to see this peerlessly-lovely girl wearing his name.

"Perhaps she does not really care for me as she pretended," he thinks to himself, and the first spark of jealousy is lighted in his heart when he sees her long lashes fall before Sir George's admiring gaze, and sees with what calm and graceful self-possession she acknowledges the introduction to the handsome, titled nobleman. "Who would have thought, when she first came to Langton Villa, that the wild little 'school ma'am' had so much dignity?" he thinks. "Is it, after all, a new phase of her character, or was I simply blinded then by my admiration for Maud? It seems that Sir George is irresistibly attracted by her graces. What can he see in the girl that I was blind to?"

And full of this wonder, he sets himself to watch the young baronet, who hovers around Reine with the palpable desire of the "moth for the star."

The whole room sees his admiration, and smiles at the fair American's conquest.

Vane is a good deal amused, and unknowingly piqued.

"What barefaced admiration," he says, within himself. "The young dandy is falling in love with my wife, confound him!"

CHAPTER XVI.

At a rather early hour the next morning, Mr. Charteris is astir, and out upon the sands.

Not so early as some others, though, he finds, for in a merry group of young people on the sands, he meets Sir George Wilde in close proximity to Reine. Vane, giving them a careless good-morning, passes on to some little distance, where he pauses with folded arms, and a slightly sulky aspect, to look out over the wide waste of heaving sea, his shapely back turned resolutely on the merry-makers.

[Pg 66]

"Confound the fellow's impudence," he remarks to himself, with needless savagery. "How he follows her around. Of course she would rather be with me. She loves me, or pretends to."

Why he should feel vexed at Sir George's monopoly of his, Vane's, unloved bride he could not explain to himself. Yet the feeling is there.

Glancing furtively over his shoulder, and seeing the undeniably handsome and well-matched pair strolling on side by side, creates a feeling of decided ill-humor within him.

"It is quite a flirtation," he tells himself. "Reine should know better, being a married woman. But perhaps she has taken a fancy to the fellow. Perhaps she was mistaken in the notion that she cared for me. She had seen no one else then. But now, meeting this handsome, spoony young baronet, she may regret this nasty marriage as much as I do."

While these thoughts flash through his mind, the gay hum of voices die away. The party have gone out of sight, and a sudden resolution comes into Vane's mind.

"I'll go and breakfast with the old gentleman again," he thinks. "After all it's only the proper thing to call and inquire for his health. Of course Reine will not have come in from her walk yet."

In this he deceives himself. Reine is there by the side of the old man's couch, with a lapful of rosy-tinted shells which she is displaying with a good deal of childish pleasure in their acquisition.

"Sir George found this one; isn't it a beauty?" she is saying, vivaciously, as the door opens, and Mr. Charteris is ushered in.

A start, a blush, a dimpling smile. She rises, gathering her treasures, child-like, in her apron overskirt.

Mr. Charteris, vouchsafing her a careless nod, passes on to Mr. Langton.

"I hope I find you better this morning, and rested?" he observes, taking the chair Reine places, without seeming to see her.

"A trifle easier, yes," Mr. Langton responds, with more than ordinary graciousness, and then Vane steals a furtive glance at Reine.

Some of the brightness that came into her face at his entrance has faded from it. She has quietly seated herself again, her long lashes droop to the shells in her lap, which she fingers rather at random.

[Pg 67]

"So the baronet helped you gather shells," he remarks, condescendingly.

She looks up, with returning smiles.

"Yes," she returns, spreading the pretty collection out to view. "Will you look at them? Some are quite pretty."

"Reine has been telling me about your friend," put in Mr. Langton. "He was very kind."

"Not my friend, a mere acquaintance," Vane replies with acerbity. "I saw him a few times in London; he is wild, rather."

"Indeed! and I thought him so nice," Reine says, with dismay.

"So he *is* nice; wildness, a little, you know, doesn't count," Vane hastens to say, ashamed of the spirit in which he has spoken a moment before. "Sir George is unexceptionable, rich, titled, and all that. He is what the ladies term a most desirable *parti*. A pity you are a-a-already married, Reine."

"Were I free he could be nothing to me," Reine retorts, a crimson flame coming to her cheeks.

Mr. Langton, struck by something in Vane's tone, looks from one to the other of the flushed faces, and says, laughingly:

"O-ho, my fine young lad, jealous, are you?"

Mr. Charteris is positively indignant.

"Don't tease, if you please, Mr. Langton," he retorts, with immense dignity. "Jealousy only exists with love, you know. And I haven't pretended to fall in love with my wife yet!"

With this most ungenerous stab, he flies out of the room in a passion.

The rosy-lipped shells fall unheeded from Reine's lap to the floor as she rises and stands before her uncle, the bitter tears of shame crowding into her eyes.

"Oh, Uncle Langton, how *could* you—how *could* you?" she cries, in bitter distress. "It—it is too—too absurd. He never could, you know—"

"There—there, don't cry, dear," he soothes, gently. "I am an old bungler, I know, and I shouldn't have said it so plain, but the fact remains. Vane Charteris, whether he knows it or not, is falling in love with you, my dear, and is correspondingly jealous of the baronet's attentions to you."

[Pg 68]

The beautiful dark eyes looked at him incredulously. She shakes her head.

"You are mistaken," she answers, decidedly. "Your hopes mislead you. Confess now," smiling pensively through her tears, "that 'the wish was father to the thought.'"

"Perhaps so," he answers, willing to drop the subject and sorry he had agitated it.

Vane goes home rather ruefully, without breakfasting with Mr. Langton, as he had promised himself.

"What possessed me to be so rude, I wonder?" he soliloquizes. "Though I did not love her, it was awkward and ill-considered to cast it in her teeth. I begin to believe that it is I who am brisk and unmannerly, not she."

The day goes, long and wearily it seems to Vane, who is conscious of some new feeling he cannot realize, perhaps does not try to.

He smokes and reads, turning an unsociable cold shoulder on the rather dry *habitués* of the hotel. In the evening, drawn by "a spirit in his feet," and thoroughly *ennuyed* with his own society, he saunters over to the Sea View Hotel.

On his way he meditates rather slowly.

"It is doubtful whether she will receive me," his musings run. "I was rude this morning. Of course the little spitfire will resent it. She has too much spirit to tamely brook such shameless impudence. I certainly forgot myself in my vexation at that stupid old man."

The wide balcony of the Sea View presents a pleasant sight. A dozen or two of "young men and maidens" are assembled on it, some sitting, some walking, but one and all flirting with the greatest interest and delight.

Vane's quick eye singles out one solitary figure sitting apart from the rest, a slight, girlish one in white, the dark head bent over a book.

To this figure Vane goes forward, not without a lurking dread of meeting a petulant repulse.

[Pg 69]

He stops behind her chair, and Reine, startled, looks around.

Vane is relieved to find that there is no resentment in her face, only a new, sweet gravity a little strange to see on the piquant, girlish face.

"Ah, it is you, Mr. Charteris!" she says, carelessly. "You left us so unceremoniously this morning, I

fear—thought you would not return."

Vane slips into the chair beside her, his heart unconsciously lightened of the burden that has weighed it down all day.

"To tell the truth I was half-afraid to come," he answers; "I was very rude to you this morning, and I knew you had reason to resent it, and expected you would. You remember you were wont to give me a piece of your mind very often in the days 'when we were first acquainted.'"

"Yes, but things are changed, you know," she returns, gently.

Reine is changed too. The thought flashes over him suddenly as he looks at her keenly, taking advantage of her momentary obliviousness of his presence.

She has folded her very small and slender white hands across the book in her lap, and is gazing a little dreamily out to sea.

The dark eyes are not so free and glad as they were of old.

They have grown larger and vaguely sad, the peachy cheek, rounded daintily like a child's, is pale to-day, the crimson lips have a slight, pathetic droop. Something in the softened loveliness of the brilliant face goes to his heart like a wordless reproach.

For a moment he regrets the arch, daring, sparkling face that used to flash defiance at him and his opinions.

"You are changed, too, Reine," he says, unconsciously putting his thought into words. "You used to scold me when I was naughty. I hope you are not afraid of me now because you are my wife?"

A great wave of color surges into her cheek at his words. She turns on him the half-shy gaze of the frank, dark eyes.

"Afraid of you—oh, no, it is not that," she says. "But you disliked my wild ways so much that I [Pg 70] have tried to be more what you wished me, more dignified, more gentle."

He looks at her with a half question in his blue eyes, a flush on his handsome face.

"Like Maud," she explains, further.

"Like Maud—why, really," he begins, with supreme anger and sarcasm, but she interrupts him, somewhat incoherently:

"I thought—I was told, I mean that—that I was to stay with Uncle Langton a year, and be formed over into a woman like Maud."

His blue eyes darken with shame and anger.

"So you have heard *that!*" he says, with self-contempt. "I was a fool, a dolt. Give over the attempt, Reine. You can never be like Maud any more than—than a rose is like a lily!"

"So I thought," she answers, visibly abashed. "Maud is so grand, and white, and queenly, and I am so little, and dark, and ugly."

"That is not true," he answers, hastily. "You are beautiful, Reine. I am sure you know *that*. You are like a beautiful 'queen-rose,' all sweetness, color and dew, 'set round with little willful thorns.' Maud is like a grand white calla lily, beautiful, but devoid of sweetness and perfume."

"The lily is the most beautiful of all flowers," the girl answers, sighing.

"But the rose is the emblem of love," he replies, smiling as the swift color floods her cheeks.

She has no answer ready, and he goes on with some embarrassment:

"Do not try to be like Maud, Reine. Though so beautiful and stately, she was mercenary and treacherous. Perhaps a less perfect manner is preferable with a heart free from guile. Do you not think so?"

Before she can reply, Sir George Wilde comes up to them. His eyes rest admiringly on the beautiful, graceful, dark-eyed girl by the side of Vane Charteris.

"Sentimentalizing and reading poetry?" says the intruder, looking at Reine's book. "Upon my word it is simply shocking, the number of flirtations going on this evening. Miss Langton, let me see your verses," coolly taking the open volume from her hand. [Pg 71]

Vane, looking off to sea, unreasonably vexed, and out of humor, hears him reading in a clear, full voice, the lines on which Reine's hands have been closely folded since he sat down by her.

"We stand at the window watching,
 Oh, God! through the glass of time,
 For the sails of our hopes to blossom
 Out on life's horizon line.

"And we see not across the islands
 The clouds that come up the sun,
 Until they have folded in silence
 The headlands one by one.

"And the winds to each other calling
 Over the waters pass,
 And we say: "They are wrecked at dawning,

The hopes of our lives, alas!"'"

"Lugubrious reading, certainly," comments the lively young baronet. "Does Charteris enjoy that style of poetry for a summer evening by the sea?"

"I—I was not reading to Mr. Charteris," the girl stammers, vaguely confused. "I was reading when he came, and then I laid the book down."

Both men regard her a little gravely.

The touch of sadness in face and voice is strange, yet sweet, in the young and lovely girl.

Sir George tells himself that there is some depth to this lovely American girl, and wonders why Charteris doesn't fall in love with her.

For himself, he is very far gone indeed, and Vane, irritated by his society, abruptly announces that he will go up and see Mr. Langton.

"He will be very pleased, I know," Reine answers, brightening suddenly, and Vane turns away with a sudden angry conviction that she is glad to have him gone.

Sir George is glad at least, there can be no two opinions as to that. He settles himself delightedly in Vane's vacated chair.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I have a proposition to make to you," Vane says, after he has conversed with Mr. Langton awhile on indifferent subjects.

Mr. Langton, lying on his couch, looking dull and weary, glances up with some interest.

[Pg 72]

"Well?" he says, abruptly.

"I saw your physician to-day," Vane observes, slightly embarrassed. "He thinks it would be at the risk of your health if you left this place under a month."

"The rascal! He's keeping me here to swell his fee for attendance, that's all," groans the millionaire; "well, and what has that to do with your proposition, eh?"

"A great deal. You know your delay in returning to America is attended with serious risk to Maud Langton, languishing in prison, and waiting for a release that cannot come until she regains possession of that note that is to prove her innocence."

"I have urged Reine to return alone, but she is unwilling to leave me," Mr. Langton answers, hastily.

"There would be no risk in doing so," Vane replies, "with a competent nurse left in charge of you. It is of that I wished to speak to you. Persuade Reine to go back without you. I will myself accompany her."

"*You!*" Mr. Langton exclaims, in such thorough surprise, that Vane flushes a deep red.

"Yes," he answers, a little testily, "I will go with her. Why not? She is my wife."

"Certainly, and it will be a very good plan," Mr. Langton replies, secretly delighted at Vane's repentance, but pretending to be very calm and non-committal.

"You see," Vane continues, with a sigh of relief, "after the business that took us home was concluded, I should bring Reine back. By that time you would be well and strong again, and we would travel some, the three of us, and remain abroad some time. Do you like my plan?"

"Very much. I am pleased with the idea. Have you spoken with Reine on the subject?"

"No, not yet. To tell the truth I have relied on you to persuade her. I might fail, you know. Will you undertake to plead my case for me?" inquires Vane, blushing like a girl.

"I thought you were lawyer enough to plead your own case," laughs the old millionaire.

"You see, this is different," answers Vane. "I—I do not quite understand Reine. I do not know how she would receive such a proposal. Perhaps she would laugh at me. I should have to plead as a lover, not as a lawyer. Only imagine the spirited little lady laughing in my face."

[Pg 73]

"I do not believe it is likely," Mr. Langton replies. "But since you are so afraid of your wife, I will speak to her about the matter. But, pray tell me, is your anxiety solely over Maud, or are you reconciled to your strange marriage?"

A step at the door, a hand at the latch, and Reine comes in, interrupting the answer hovering on his lips. Vane rises abruptly.

"I will go down and smoke my segar on the balcony," he says, then, looking at his wife: "Reine, will you walk on the sand with me afterward? It will be moonlight, and the nights are very pleasant."

A smile of surprise and pleasure lights the changeful face into splendor.

"Thank you, I shall like it very much," she answers, with some inward wonder at his kindness.

"I will wait for you, then, on the balcony," he replies, and when he's gone, Mr. Langton hastens to

tell her of Vane's proposal.

Her color comes and goes, her bosom heaves as she listens.

"But you know I could not leave you here alone with only a hired nurse," she remonstrates.

"You could, and you must," he replies, seriously.

"Listen, Reine, your husband has held out the olive-branch of peace, and you must not decline to accept it if you care for him. I shall do very well here with the doctor and the nurse. After all, I am not sick, only weak and fatigued. Remember Maud's peril before you refuse."

"I have written to Maud's lawyer. He will know that I have the note, and they will wait until I come," she replies.

"Delays are dangerous," he answers, "and the mails are not sure. Suppose your letter should not reach them. Letters have been lost before now," he says, artfully.

The girlish face grows white and troubled.

"If I thought that mine would be lost——" she begins.

"You would go," he finishes for her. "Very well, Reine, take my advice and go. I will remain here until you return. Go down now to your husband and tell him you will be ready to accompany him to-morrow."

[Pg 74]

"If anything should happen to you, I should never forgive myself," she says, with lingering hesitation.

"Nothing *will* happen," he answered. "You will find me here, when you come back, safe and well. Go, now, to Vane, and tell him you will go."

She lingers a moment, warned by some strange presentiment of evil; then, conquered by his renewed persuasions, and her own anxiety over Maud's fate, she goes from the room with a strangely beating heart to seek her husband.

He throws away his segar with a smile at sight of her, and comes out from a little knot of men who have clustered around him.

"You are ready?" he says, with a new tone of tenderness in his voice that makes the girlish heart beat all the faster, and drawing her hand through his arm they bend their steps to the shore.

It is twilight, that most seductive hour of all the twenty-four. The moon is rising softly, a few stars shine in the purple vault above, and mirror themselves in the laughing waves below.

The murmurous sound of the great deep is all that breaks the silence.

"Mr. Langton has told you, Reine," he says, looking down into the brilliant face that is "luminous, star-like, gem-like," in the soft, twilight haze.

"Yes," she answers, in a low voice, as if she scarcely cared to break the charmed silence brooding around them.

They walk slowly arm-in-arm along the sandy shore. Vane has drawn her hand very closely through his arm, and the tips of her velvet-soft fingers lie against his wrist, sending thrills of sweetness along every nerve. To him also "silence seemed best," so they stroll on quietly awhile. Reine lost to everything but the magic charm that lies in the presence of the man she loves, and Vane held in thrall also by some new feeling, whose power he is scarcely prepared to acknowledge.

He looks down at the young face that is strangely fair and tender in the mystic light, and wonders at his own blindness that he has never quite realized the charm of her beauty before. She has thrown some soft trifle of filmy lace over her waving dark hair, with soft ends knotted beneath the round, dimpled chin. Nothing could be more becoming. It frames the glowing face so delicately and so exquisitely, making her fairer than she knows. A strange, delicious thrill goes through Vane's heart as he remembers that this girl belongs to him—she is his wife.

[Pg 75]

"And she loves me," he says to himself, with the same wonder he had felt when that truth first flashed upon him. It flatters his manly vanity, cruelly hurt by Maud's treachery, to know that one true heart clings to him and loves him, though the woman he had loved had deceived him.

Suddenly her lips part with an anxious question:

"And you think it wise and prudent that I should go back to Maud leaving Uncle Langton here?"

"Yes," he answers, and there is a silence which she does not break.

"What do you think of the plan?" he asks.

"I hardly know," the girl answers, with some embarrassment.

"But you will do as I wish you—you will go back—in my care, Reine?"

"If you think it for the best," she answers very low.

"I do think so, otherwise I should not urge it. You need not be afraid to go with me, Reine. I will care for you with every tenderness—you are my wife, you know."

And, stooping over her, he lays his lips full and softly upon her own.

The shock of a great, new happiness tingles through the girl's sensitive frame. It is the first caress her unloving husband has ever offered her. With that impulsive kiss hope, which has

almost died in her wounded heart, is born anew.

"You are my wife," he repeats, gently. "I shall not lose sight of that fact again. I shall remember my duty better."

She sighs a little. That word "duty" sounds so cold.

"I will try to make you happier," he continues; "I fear you have not been so light-hearted as you used to be since *that* night. Do you know those verses you were reading this evening sounded like a reproach to me?"

[Pg 76]

She glances up, inquiringly.

"The verses you shut your hands over when I came up to you," he explains. "The sad words ring in my head:

"And we say: "They are wrecked at dawning.
The hopes of our lives, alas!""

"Did you think, my child, that they applied to your own case?"

"I was tempted to think so—can you blame me?" she says, with a gentle reproach in her voice.

"Do not fall into such despondent thoughts again," he answers, evasively. "You are too young for sorrow, Reine. Look on the bright side of the picture. I foresee that this play will end with my falling desperately in love with my own wife."

"I hope so," she answers, with sudden, piteous earnestness, and a quiver of passionate sorrow in her voice.

"So do I," he says, filled with sudden penitence. "I am sure it cannot be hard to learn to love so fair and noble a wife. You have saved me from my own sinful passions, Reine. I can never forget that."

"And now I must go back," she says, with a bitter sigh of regret. "Uncle Langton will be lonely, and if—if I go to-morrow I have a great deal of packing to do first."

They walk slowly back to the hotel through the murmurous silence of the summer night by the sea, with the strong, sweet smell of the brine in their faces. It is the first time they have been together without cold words from one or the other, the first time her husband has caressed her.

And when he leaves her at the balcony steps he presses his lips to her white hand, and whispers, kindly:

"After to-night, little wife, we are never to be parted any more, remember."

CHAPTER XVIII.

No one can recall without a shudder of horror the midnight burning of the steamer *Hesperus* in mid-ocean in 188-, and the terrible loss of life consequent upon that marine disaster.

She had been five days out, with fair skies and smooth seas, and every prospect of a prosperous and speedy voyage, when that disastrous fire stole upon her like a thief in the night, and wrapped her noble and majestic form in a winding sheet of flame.

[Pg 77]

Fifty souls perished miserably, including the captain and a part of crew.

In that terrible holocaust of fire and water, Reine Charteris was *lost*.

Her husband was saved—saved through such a tragedy of horror as sowed silvery threads in his fair, clustering locks, and almost broke his heart with remorse and pain.

We will hear him tell the story in his own words, as he told it that day when seated in the gloomy prison-cell, where Maud Langton was expiating her folly in bitterness of soul, he placed in her hands a small metallic case, locked with a tiny key, and said, solemnly and slowly:

"This means freedom and release to you, Maud. It is a legacy to you from the dead."

The beautiful, queenly-looking girl, wasted and worn from long confinement, and sickening dread and terror, looks up at the man's pale, haggard face, at the deep crape band on his hat, and shudders.

"You mean—" she says, then pauses, struck dumb by the white agony of his face.

"I mean I have lost my wife; Reine is dead."

"Dead!" the beautiful prisoner cries in wonder—not sorrow.

That is so plain to his senses, sharpened by grief, that he cries out bitterly:

"Yes, dead! But look at your legacy, Maud. That is all your selfish soul will care for!"

She gives him one look of cold surprise, and then turns eagerly to her treasure.

The small key grates in the lock, the lid of the box flies open.

Within lies a package wrapped in oil silk. Undoing this with eager fingers, Maud comes upon the precious note that means so much to her in this terrible plight, the note poor Reine had crossed

the seas to win from the vengeful grasp of Vane Charteris.

All of Maud's cold, superb dignity breaks down at sight of that little slip of paper. She weeps and laughs together. [Pg 78]

"This means hope, freedom, happiness to me," she cries, tearfully. "And you had it all the time, Vane. And Reine knew. It was for that she crossed the seas?"

"Yes," he answers, "and it was for that she died."

"No, no!" Maud says, and shakes her head; "how could that be? Oh, how I thank you for bringing me this! You did not know when you went away how much it was worth to me, did you? That my very life would depend upon it?"

He looks at her with steady, somber eyes.

"Yes, I *knew*," he answers. "I knew, but I did not care. My love for you was turned to hate by the crushing indignity you had put upon me. At that time I would have sold myself to the evil one for the chance of revenge upon you. Guess how I felt when, at the inquest over the dead body of the lover you had preferred to me, I found what terrible power fate had put into my eager hands. I rejoiced wickedly. I went away that the great ocean rolling between us might keep from me the tidings of your too probable fate, for I shuddered at the horror of my revenge, although I could not forego it. Yes, Maud, I, who had loved you dearly once, would not have lifted my finger to save you from the horror of a shameful death upon the scaffold; do you realize, now, the intensity of my hate?"

She puts her delicate hand to her grand, white throat and sobs hysterically. By day and by night she has dreamed of that horrible, impending death. She knows that all believed her guilty of her lover's death, and that no jury would have cleared her without that note in Clyde's own writing, swearing that he would shoot himself if she failed to marry him.

"You were cruel, cruel," she moans.

"Say rather that I was insane," he answers; "my heart and my brain were on fire, and my soul was numb within me until Reine came to me and showed me what a wretch I was, and how I should be your murderer if I persisted in my wicked silence. Then I yielded to that white-souled child who was far too pure to be my wife, and I prayed God to forgive my sin, as I now pray you, Maud." [Pg 79]

She looks at him with her large, clear blue eyes, with the glad tears of joy still pendant on the golden lashes and holds out her hands.

"I cannot refuse to forgive you since you have relented and brought me this invaluable paper," she answers, "and more especially since I know that I did you a cruel wrong. Can you forgive me, Vane?"

"Once I thought I could not, but it is easy enough now," he answers, gravely, just touching for a moment the soft, white, extended hands. "I have no longer any room in my heart for anger or resentment. I think only of my grief."

"For Reine!" she asks, with an almost imperceptible lifting of the golden eyebrows indicating surprise.

"For Reine," he answers, with a tortured sigh.

"Did she die abroad?" Maud asks in an awed and softened voice.

"She was drowned at midnight in the Atlantic Ocean, amid all the horrors of fire and flood," he groans.

"On the ill-fated *Hesperus*," she exclaims. "Oh, I read the news in the papers, but there were no particulars, and I did not dream of such a tragedy. You were with her, were you not? Why was it that you could not save her?"

His gloomy eyes fell with a look of loathing on the paper in her hand.

"She died, Maud, to save *you* from the consequences of your folly. She might have been saved but for that paper you hold in your hand," he answers, sternly.

"I do not understand you, Vane. Surely you know not what you say," Miss Langton utters in perplexity.

"Listen, and you shall be the judge," he answers, with a heavy sigh. "I sailed with my wife on the *Hesperus*—"

"And Uncle Langton?" she interrupts him to ask.

"We left Mr. Langton resting at a quiet summer resort. He was too much indisposed to return with us so soon. We were to have gone back for him as soon as your freedom had been secured," he explains.

She bows, silently, and he goes on, the pale, beautiful girl listening attentively.

"Reine came to me the day that we had been five days out, with that little metallic case in her hand. She had been very bright and happy since we started, but just then she was pale and grave. 'Vane,' she said to me, 'I have put Maud's precious paper in this little case for greater safety. But I have a strange dread of losing it. Put it in your breast pocket and keep it for me!' I—oh, Heaven! I obeyed her," he exclaims, struggling with a bitter remorse. [Pg 80]

The beautiful prisoner regards him with silent sympathy.

"I obeyed her," he repeats, with a passionate remorse, "and that night when we sprang into the water together, fleeing from the devouring flames, it was still on my person. All hope seemed gone, and we clung to each other in the desperation of despair, determined at least to die together. Suddenly a crowded life-boat came in sight. A man shouted there was room for one more and that they would take the woman in. At these words she cried out frantically that I had Maud's precious paper, and that I was the one to be saved, and with that she loosed her hold, and with an awful suddenness pushed me from her, and sank down, down in the terrible water. With the awful shock of her loss I became unconscious. They drew me into the boat in the place of my poor girl, and the boat swept on over her awful burial-place. It was for you, Maud. She gave her beautiful, innocent life freely for you rather than risk the loss of the legacy I have brought you!"

CHAPTER XIX.

Even Maud Langton's cold and shallow nature, utterly incapable of such an act of dauntless heroism as Reine's, is touched by the man's overmastering grief and the story of the woman's devotion.

"Poor little Reine! I did not deserve such a sacrifice from her," she exclaims, with a guilty consciousness of her cruel and contemptuous treatment of her generous rival.

Vane Charteris makes her no reply. He has dropped his pale, handsome face into his hands, his strong frame quivers with silent sobs. Maud watches him in amazement.

"You take it hard," she says; "yet I thought you did not love her, that you would not care."

[Pg 81]

"Not care!" lifting his somber blue eyes a moment to her pale, wondering face. "I care so much that by night or by day, sleeping or waking, her image is never absent from my thoughts. I would give the whole world to have her back, my poor lost darling!"

"Then you learned to love her?" Miss Langton exclaims, recalling his fastidious dislike of Reine's wild ways and sharp little speeches.

"Yes; now, when it is all too late," he answers, in a wild burst of remorse and sorrow.

Then there is a brief silence. How often those sad words, "too late," come home to stricken hearts with a pathos that words are all too powerless to express. Could Reine but have known—in that fair land to which her soul had flown—her husband's poignant repentance, she might well have answered with the poet:

"Too late, too late, thy beaming smile rests on me,
 Warm sighs and loving whispers come too late
Since thou hast lost that true and loving passion
 Which, while it lived, met but thy scorn or hate.

"It might have been—had but thy love awakened
 Before my ruined life no power could save;
But now, alas! thy warm and tender glances
 Fall on my heart like sunlight on a grave."

"Believe me, Vane, I am very, very sorry," Maud says to him in her gentlest tones. "Perhaps you think I was not worthy little Reine's generous self-sacrifice."

He has no answer ready for her. She begins to realize that he is strangely changed. The fair and handsome face that used to be so gay and debonair has grown wan and haggard. Some silver threads shine in the fair, clustering locks on his temples. His step is slow and heavy as he turns to go.

"How long will it be before I shall be free?" she asks him, wistfully, as he turns to go.

He starts, and turns back, remembering suddenly what the petted beauty must have endured in these weary weeks of confinement, with the shadow of an awful fate hanging over her.

Looking closer into the white face with its finely-chiseled features, sharpened and refined by the agony she has endured, his heart swells with momentary pity for the cold beauty who has wronged him so deeply.

[Pg 82]

"But a little while, I think," he answers, kindly. "I have seen your lawyer. He told me that the trial which he has been staving off from time to time, will take place to-morrow. He is quite sure that your innocence will be indisputably proven by the paper you hold, together with other facts in his possession. I congratulate you, Maud, upon your narrow escape from the terrible web that circumstantial evidence had woven around you."

She shudders, and grows deathly pale at the thought of it, and Vane hurries from the room and from the presence of her who had been, for a brief while, the sun of his existence.

Hurrying back to his hotel, he finds there a letter which has followed him across the sea from the quiet watering-place where he had left Mr. Langton. It is from the genial, kindly physician, and the news is startling.

The old millionaire, the sharp-tongued, irascible, yet kindly-hearted old gentleman, is dead—has died suddenly and strangely of disease of the heart in two days after Reine and Vane had left him in the confident hope of soon rejoining him. They have buried him there in the quiet churchyard by the sea, far away from his native land, and the friends he loved. All unknowing of Reine's fate, he has gone to rejoin her in the unknown land.

CHAPTER XX.

Mr. Langton's favorite axiom: "Delays are dangerous," which he had quoted so effectively to Reine, would seem to have made less impression on his own mind. The new will, which was to have disinherited Maud Langton and made Vane Charteris and his wife his sole heirs, had been carelessly and fatally postponed. Beautiful Maud, but yesterday penniless, imprisoned, suspected, goes back to-day, free, joyous, triumphant, to her old home, the undisputed mistress of Langton Hall and her uncle's great wealth. Vane Charteris, in nowise disconcerted, and scarcely disappointed, returns to the musty little law office in Washington, from whence his old friend's letter had summoned him a few months before to marry his heiress.

[Pg 83]

It is a dull, prosaic life enough. Vane is young yet, and has not made his mark. Very few clients come to seek his assistance out of their difficulties. Some dreary days go by, and life does not look quite the same through his office windows as it did in the golden spring before he went to Langton Hall. It is autumn now. The leaves are turning red, and brown, and yellow, the petals are falling from the flowers. Not that Vane takes note of this. One flower that faded in the summer gone, is worth all the world to him. For a time ambition, energy, hope, seem to forsake him. Always before his eyes floats a vision of a fair, dead face with waving tresses, tangled with seaweed; always against his breast he feels the pressure of small hands pressing against him, pushing him from her in the mad resolve to die in his stead. For in his heart Vane feels that it was not alone for Maud's sake she died. She had meant to save him, whom she loved far more than life.

So the autumn days go by. By-and-by the gay, brilliant, beautiful city of Washington begins to fill up with its usual winter throng. Congress assembles, and the brilliant crowds that follow in its train. And one day there comes a delicate, perfumed note to Vane from one of the most fashionable avenues of the fashionable city.

"Dear Vane," it says, "I have come to Washington for the winter, but shall be very quiet, of course, being in deep mourning for my dear uncle. I have invited the Widow Baird and her daughter—unexceptionable people, you know—to stay with me. But I am very lonely, very repentant, and very sad. Will you let by-gones be by-gones, and come and see me?"

"MAUD LANGTON."

A delicate, dainty, seductive note. With a start, Vane remembers the elegant house on — avenue, which had been Mr. Langton's property. Here it is that his heiress had pitched her tent, figuratively speaking, and opened the campaign, for she is determined not to lose the delights of the winter wholly, although in ostensible mourning.

Vane is roused to indignation at first. Why should she ask him to call? Does she take him for a simpleton? He has forgiven her for Reine's sake. That is enough.

[Pg 84]

He stays away, and in three days an elegant private carriage sets Maud down in front of his office. She rustles across the threshold in a costly costume, designed to represent slight second mourning—a black silk with jetted trimmings, white *crepe lisse* at throat and wrists, a jetted bonnet with white *lisse* strings, a dress that is marvelously becoming to the pearl-fair beauty, framed in soft waves of golden hair.

"Perhaps you think I have come to scold you," she says, with infinite tact, as he comes forward, visibly embarrassed; "but I have not. Of course you had a right to decline my invitation, if it did not please you to come. I shall not trouble you long now. I am here on a matter of business."

Mr. Charteris bows and hands her a chair. She seats herself, making *moonlight*, not "sunlight," "in a shady place," with her cold, white beauty.

Then her large, light-blue eyes turn scrutinizingly on his worn, handsome face.

"You are not looking well," she pronounces. "Business, perhaps, is driving you too hard?"

Vane smiles rather grimly.

"I cannot make any complaint of that nature," he responds.

The blue eyes light, unmistakably, with pleasure.

"Then you are not busy," she says; "I am rather glad to hear it. Perhaps you will have time to manage my property for me?"

He looks inquiringly at the beautiful, smiling face.

"I have quarreled with my lawyer," she explains. "I intended to take the management of my affairs out of his hands. Will you take his place, Vane?"

A dark, red flush creeps up to his temples at her air of condescending patronage.

"Excuse me, I must decline," he answers.

"You decline—surely not!" says the proud beauty, with incredulous surprise.

"Why should I not decline?" Vane Charteris asks, with a certain haughtiness, before which Maud lowers her proud tone of patronage visibly.

"I thought you could not afford to decline," she falters. "Are you not—not poor?"

[Pg 85]

"Granted," he answers, with a slight, cold smile. "I am not yet poor enough to barter my self-respect. For the rest, you know, Miss Langton—

"Man wants but little here below,
Nor wants that little long."

Maud, who has come bustling with pretty patronage and self-importance, is visibly disconcerted. She takes a new tone.

"You are harsh and cruel to me, Vane," she says, petulantly. "I came with the best intentions. I only meant kindness."

"Thank you," stiffly.

"I thought you had forgiven my—my folly," she goes on further, with a killing glance from the long-lashed, seraphic-blue eyes.

"I hope I have," he replies, still coldly.

"Then why—why will you refuse my request?" she asks.

Something like scorn flashes on her from the man's sapphire-blue eyes.

"Miss Langton, I have forgiven the indignity you put upon me last summer," he answers, shortly, "but do you think I could stoop to serve you—you?"

The heiress colors under his glance of haughty scorn.

"*You will never forget that,*" she sighs. "You will not believe how eager I am to make atonement for my sin against you. I see you are determined to be hard and cold with me. You will not make friends."

Vane turns round upon her a little fiercely.

"What are you driving at, Maud?" he asks, with positive rudeness. "Do you wish to make a fool of me again? To win my heart from me again and trample it under your feet?"

And then a sudden impulsive shame seizes upon him as she shrinks before his quick wrath with something very like fear in her face.

"I beg your pardon—I was talking foolishly to you," he says. "You do not at all understand me, I think, Miss Langton, or you would never have—"

"Never have come here, you mean," she says, as he pauses. "Aren't you just a little rude, Mr. Charteris? But I am determined not to be angry with you. Forgive me for trespassing on your time. I am going now."

[Pg 86]

Swish! goes the rich silk against her chair with a waft of delicious perfume.

The tips of her gloved fingers settle lightly against his coat-sleeve, the great, blue eyes look straight into his own, persuasively.

"Vane, think better of your refusal, pray do," she says. "I did not come here to insult you, neither to wheedle you back to your old allegiance. I thought you would help me about this great, troublesome property. I am so ignorant and helpless."

"Any lawyer in the city would be glad to manage your business for you," he returns, with cool courtesy.

"I shall not ask any of them till I hear from you again. Perhaps you may change your mind, and let me know that you will take this trouble off my hands," she answers, good humoredly, moving toward the door.

Vane attends her to her carriage, and with a formal bow returns to his lonely office. How lonely he never quite realized till now, looking at the empty chair where the brilliant heiress had sat just now, queenly and graceful like the tall, white lily to which he had once likened her.

CHAPTER XXI.

We will return to Reine Charteris on that terrible night of fire and flood, when, with all the deathless devotion of a true woman's heart she sacrificed herself to save her husband and her friend.

In the minute before the life-boat came into sight Reine's mind had been comparatively calm and contented.

Though she believed that certain death stared her in the face, it had no special terrors for her. Her life had been good and pure, and she had no dread of the hereafter.

The thought of dying with the husband she loved had a strange, romantic sweetness for her heart.

In the bright and awful glare of light thrown upon the waters by the burning ship, her pale and lovely face had upon it an expression of rapt and Heavenly sweetness and content, untouched by dread or fear.

[Pg 87]

Vane's arm was drawn around her, and they were slowly swimming about and looking for some drifting desperate hope of rescue.

A few minutes ago the black waves, weirdly illumined by the red glare of the flames, had been filled with a writhing, despairing, shrieking mass of anguished humanity, but now they had all disappeared. Some had floated off to a distance, some had sunk beneath the waves and found a watery grave—

"Unknelled, uncoffined, and unsung."

Vane and Reine were quite alone for a moment—alone, and drawn seemingly nearer together than they had ever been in life by the deadly peril that menaced them. They had made up their minds to death. Both were good swimmers, but they were too far from land for their strength and skill to avail. They clung together, each feeling instinctively that death would be less hard if shared together.

At that moment one of the life-boats that had been seized upon in the first moments of peril by a fortunate few, came in sight of them. It was crowded, already, but one manly heart saw and pitied the terrible case of the two victims. He shouted that they would make room for one more—they would take the woman in.

"Come, Reine, they will save you, my darling," Vane Charteris cried out, tenderly and joyfully, yet with the solemnity of a last farewell in his eyes, as he drew his young wife forward.

But with a sudden cry of anguish, the girl resisted him.

The bare thought of forsaking her husband and leaving him to die alone, was more bitter than death. With that thought came the remembrance of the precious paper she had crossed the sea to win from Vane's vengeful keeping.

"Let me save you—remember you have Maud's precious paper," she cried out, hoarsely, and pushing him frantically from her with both extended hands, she sank down—down into the depths of the sea. They waited a moment, but she did not rise again, and seeing that Vane had lost consciousness, they drew him into the life-boat, and in the efforts to revive him, they soon drifted out of sight of the spot where the devoted girl had disappeared beneath the fire-illumined waves.

[Pg 88]

In the meantime Reine, who was really a strong and expert swimmer, had only dived beneath the waves, and had come up again in a few seconds later at a different spot where, herself unseen, she could behold the life-boat with its living freight drifting swiftly out of her yearning sight. She had freely given her one chance of life to her husband, but with the thought that he would live there was born in her own young heart an agonizing desire for life. She loved Vane so dearly that she could not bear to leave him in the bright, gay world, and go down to death alone. Though not regretting that she had saved her husband by so great a sacrifice, she breathed a silent, fervent, yet seemingly hopeless prayer, that she might also be rescued and restored to him.

Yet who can tell how often God is near, listening to the wild appeals of those who, despairing of human help, cry out to Heaven. Alone in the wide waste of the ocean, with the midnight stars shining down upon her like the pitying eyes of angels, a friendly plank drifted to her reach. She clutched it eagerly with her hands, threw herself upon, and embraced it with her bruised and weary arms. Now she felt, with a thrill of hope, that there was at least one plank between her and eternity.

The night wore on. Wind and tide bore her far away from the terrible burning ship that towered aloft like a ghastly funeral pyre, throwing its awful glare far and wide upon the sea.

Tossed hither and yon, bruised and buffeted by the heavy waves, the slender form of the fair young girl still held in its breast the faint spark of life, though looking forward to death as inevitable, and drawing nearer and nearer.

The blushing rose of dawn opened its petals at last. The morning light glimmered palely in the east. It shone upon a deathly-white face with pale lips, half apart, and eye-lids closed in unconsciousness, with the long, thick lashes lying on the cheek like to "rays of darkness."

[Pg 89]

At that moment a small sailing-vessel hove in sight. The floating plank with its precious burden was sighted by the pilot, and in a few minutes more the unfortunate girl was safe on deck.

The crew gathered around her, filled with wonder and curiosity at the sight of the beautiful ocean-waif.

"She is dead," said the mate, with a sorrowful shake of the head.

"I do not think so," said the captain, decidedly. "Look at her right temple. You see it still bleeding

from a slight wound that must have been received from something that has struck her in the water. She has been stunned by it, perhaps, and will revive presently. Call Doctor Franks."

Doctor Franks came and agreed with the captain. The girl was not dead, but there was no telling how soon she would be, from the bad effects of her exposure in the water, and the jagged wound on her head.

"A bed must be prepared for her at once, and I will see what I can do towards resuscitating her," said the kind-hearted Doctor Franks.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Go and tell the stewardess to prepare a bed quickly for this young lady," said the captain, turning to the cabin-boy.

The boy disappeared in the lower regions of the vessel, returning presently with a plump, good-natured-looking woman, who had a "full blown comeliness, white and red."

"An' indade, Cap'en Dill, sorra a bit spare bed is there, saving the little cuddy-hole where Mrs. Odell's maid slept afore she died."

"Prepare that, then, Mrs. McQueen. Don't you see what a deuce of a hurry we are in?" returned Captain Dill.

"Faix, and it'll be by Mrs. Odell's leave, then," says Mrs. McQueen. "Shall I ask her? It's a bit cross and ailing she is the day."

"Ask her then, and be in a hurry," he answers. "If she refuses, the poor girl shall have my bed, and I'll bunk on deck with a blanket." [Pg 90]

He is saved the necessity of the sacrifice, however, for Mrs. Odell, whoever she may be, yields an ungracious consent to the appropriation of the defunct maid's bed, and the still unconscious girl is removed thereto.

Long days afterward she opens her eyes consciously for the first time upon this world, after a long battle has been fought with fever, and delirium, and greedy death; opens her eyes with a passionate heart-cry on her poor, fever-parched lips:

"Vane, dear Vane!"

There is a soft swish of silk as of a lady rising from her chair, and Reine's large, hollow, dark eyes follow the sound.

She lies on a small, white bed in a "cuddy-hole" indeed, herself, but a small door is propped open, showing just beyond a very tiny, but elegant saloon, furnished royally enough for a princess, with hangings of purple velvet and gold, and softest couches and chairs, a carpet of velvet pile, picturesque rugs strewn about the floor, small paintings, each perfect gems of art, adorning the walls. Moving slowly through this luxurious saloon comes a lady, on whom Reine's feeble gaze is instantly riveted.

A form of medium height, with narrow, stooping shoulders, and a middle-aged face with a strange beauty all its own—the beauty of brilliant eyes, waxen pallor, and hectic-flushed cheeks, that the deadly disease, consumption, bestows upon its victims. Clothed with almost barbaric splendor, with rustling silks and velvets, and sparkling jewels that seemed to flash fire in the dim saloon, she was yet one upon whom the heart ached to gaze, for by her terrible emaciation, and hollow, fever-flushed cheeks, and pain-drawn lips, she was one that cruel death had plainly marked for his own.

In wondering silence Reine's dark eyes lift to the strange woman's face as she comes to her side, diffusing a delicate odor of *attar du rose* as she moves. She speaks in a low, pleasantly-modulated voice, interrupted by a slight, hacking cough:

"You spoke, did you not? Is there anything you wish?"

"Yes, I want Vane," Reine answers, in a weak, childish voice, forgetful, or momentarily unconscious, of all that has passed since she was sundered from her husband's side. [Pg 91]

An expression of pity comes into the emaciated face regarding her.

"I hope you will see Vane after a while," she replies, evasively. "Do you feel better, my dear?"

"Better?" the girl echoes, startled. "Have I been ill?"

"Yes, with fever. But you are convalescing now. Do you remember nothing of your illness?"

"Nothing," Reine answers, dreamily. "And—and your face is strange to me. Have I ever seen you before?"

"Not to your knowledge, I think," Mrs. Odell replies, with a slight smile.

A puzzled look comes into the pale, thin face lying on the pillow, with its great, hollow, black eyes. Reine is slowly gathering up the links of memory.

"Are—are we not on the Atlantic Ocean?" she inquires, after a dreamy pause.

Mrs. Odell, drawing her handkerchief across her lips after a slight spell of coughing, answers:

"Yes."

Another dreamy pause. The dark eyes that have half-closed, open slowly again.

"Is this steamer the—the *Hesperus*?" she queries, half-doubtfully.

Mrs. Odell draws back with a slight expression of alarm on her face.

"I—I fear you are talking too much for an invalid," she says. "I will call the doctor."

Retiring into the saloon, and touching a silver call-bell, the fat stewardess appears.

"Send Doctor Franks in," Mrs. Odell commands. "His patient begins to recover consciousness."

Doctor Franks comes, eager, and on the alert, smiling a little as Reine's curious eyes seek his face.

"Another stranger," she complains, with almost childish petulance.

"Well, and what would you have?" he answers, cheerfully, as he touches her pulse. "Though strangers, we are all friends."

"I want Vane," the girl answers, with a hungry yearning in her weak voice.

[Pg 92]

"After awhile—after awhile," he answers, evasively, as the lady had done. "Are you feeling better to-day?"

"Yes, if I have been ill—have I?" Reine inquires, with some of her old sharpness of tone, for in her weak state she is easily irritated.

"Have you? Well, I should say so," he responds, smilingly. "At present you are nothing but a pair of big black eyes and a lot of hair that I should have cut off only that you were so pretty with it that I hadn't the heart."

"Do not believe him," Mrs. Odell puts in, good-naturedly. "If I had not scolded and begged, and almost gone down on my knees to him, he would have shaved your pretty head bare."

"I should not have liked that," Reine says, putting her small fingers to the thick, glossy plaits. "Vane liked my hair. He thought it pretty; he said so that very night when—" But, with the effort of recalling the long-past time, a great wave of memory suddenly breaks over Reine's heart. Her wan face grows paler, her eyes dilate wildly and fill with swift, passionate tears.

"I remember," she gasps, in a voice of pain, "oh, Heaven! I remember."

There is a moment of silence and they watch her closely. All along Dr. Franks had dreaded this moment of re-awakened memory in the girl's heart. But her agitation is not so great as he had anticipated, for though she is sobbing softly behind her hands, it is not with the bitterness of an utter despair.

"What is it you remember, Miss Langton?" he asks, touching her arm gently.

She starts and looks at him with her great, tear-filled eyes.

"Who told you my name?" she asks, curiously.

"It was marked upon your clothing," Mrs. Odell gently explains, and again Dr. Franks says, curiously:

"You were saying that you remembered—"

"The burning of the *Hesperus* and the loss of life, and our deadly peril, yes—yes," Reine answers, weakly. "But Vane was saved; oh, thank God for that. And now my life, too, is spared," she exclaims, with the glad tears of joy falling through her white fingers.

[Pg 93]

They regard her in sympathetic silence awhile, then Dr. Franks says, kindly:

"I am very glad your friend was saved, Miss Langton, and very happy to think that we had the pleasure of seeing you. Were you bound for America?"

"Yes—returning home from a trip to England," she answers.

"I knew you were American instantly," says Mrs. Odell. "We are also of that nationality."

"I am very glad," Reine answers, giving her a pensive smile. "Are you also bound for your native shore?"

"Not just now," the consumptive returns, with a smothered sigh. "I am in delicate health, and Doctor Franks here has recommended the climate of Italy for my health, with the additional advantage of a leisurely sea-trip in a sailing vessel. We are now making our way to Mentone, Italy."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"You are bound for Mentone, Italy!" Reine repeats, with a quiver of disappointment in her low voice. "Then I am going farther away from home every hour!"

"Yes," replies Doctor Franks. "Lucky thing for you, too, in your weak and debilitated condition. Mentone is a charming climate for invalids. Will set you up in less than no time. Then, when your roses are blooming again, we'll send you home to America."

"How long since you picked me up out of the water?" she asks.

"Three weeks," he replies.

Three weeks!—she shuts her eyes ever so tightly, but the traitor tears creep through beneath the black fringe of her lashes.

Three weeks since she parted from Vane amid the horrors of that awful night. Three weeks he has believed her dead. Has he mourned her much? she wonders. Perhaps time has already dulled the sharp edge of grief.

Then graver thoughts chase these self-regrets from her mind.

A terrible doubt chills the life-blood around her heart.

[Pg 94]

After all, was Vane really saved?

She remembers that crowded little life-boat, already so full that it seemed rash and perilous to take in even one more passenger.

Has the little bark survived the dangers of the sea, or gone down with its precious freight of souls to swell the treasures of the "vasty deep?"

Truly has the poet written that: "Love is sorrow with half-grown wings."

Reine lies silent, with quivering lips and closed eyelids, thinking with grief unutterable of the beloved one's unknown fate. From first to last this passionate love of hers has brought her nothing but bitter pain and sharp humiliation.

Doctor Frank's genial voice rouses her from her bitter absorption.

"Come, come, mademoiselle, this will never do. No fretting and grieving if you please. It will only retard your recovery and return to America. Hold up your head now, and swallow this bit of refreshment our good stewardess has brought you. Then you must go to sleep."

"Do, that's a dearie," admonishes Mrs. McQueen, rather vaguely, proceeding to feed the patient with a spoon from the bowl of gruel that she has brought in, but after a sip or two Reine declares that she cannot swallow, and begs to be let alone.

To this the physician blandly consents after administering an infinitesimal dose of a dark liquid. As a result Reine goes away on a journey to the land of Nod in precisely fifteen minutes. Talking and emotion have thoroughly wearied her exhausted frame.

She sleeps soundly and dreamlessly till the light of another day shines broadly over the world.

Waking silently, and in her senses this time, the girl lies still with wide dark eyes gazing around her. The door into the tiny saloon is open as before.

She sees Mrs. Odell lying on a satin couch, wrapped in a crimson dressing-gown, and covered with a costly India shawl. Her eyes are closed, her face is ghastly in its deep pallor and emaciation.

Suddenly she starts broad awake, seized by a terrible fit of coughing that convulses her slight frame. When she withdraws the snowy handkerchief she has been holding to her lips, Reine sees that it is streaked with blood.

[Pg 95]

"Oh, dear!" she exclaims, terrified, and Mrs. Odell looks around.

"So you are awake—what a sleep you have had. What made you cry out so?" she inquires in a weak, exhausted voice.

"It was the sight of the blood," Reine stammers. "I was frightened. You are very ill, are you not?"

Mrs. Odell, who has sunk wearily into a chair by her bedside, looks down at her with a ghastly smile on her blood-stained lips.

"Oh, no," she answers, with the hopeful confidence peculiar to that flattering disease, consumption, "my lungs are a little weak, that is all my trouble. The sea air and the Italian climate will quite restore my health, I think. The American climate is too harsh for me. I shall be better at Mentone."

"You will make your home there?" Reine asks, and Mrs. Odell answers readily:

"Yes, until my health is restored. Then I shall return to my native land. There is no place like America to me. Besides, all my property is there."

"Your friends and relatives, too?" Reine asks, and Mrs. Odell answers, sighing:

"Relatives I have none. My husband and children have all gone before to the better land. My friends are few. A woman as rich as I am does not know how to trust in friendship. Only think, child, my husband has left me two millions of dollars, and I have neither kith nor kin of my own to leave it to. I am utterly alone in the world."

"As I was until I met—Vane," Reine murmurs silently to herself, while a look of sympathy flashes from her beautiful eyes upon the lonely rich woman.

"The friend I cared most for on earth," Mrs. Odell continues, sadly, "was my maid, who died just a few days before you were rescued. She was a girl of culture and refinement, rather above her position, and a friend, rather than a servant. I have missed her sadly, as much for her company as her services."

"Did she die suddenly?" Reine asks, with a sigh for the poor girl who had found a watery grave

[Pg 96]

far from her native land.

"Yes, very suddenly, from an unsuspected heart disease."

After a minute's silence Mrs. Odell resumes, pensively:

"Do you know what I have been wishing, Miss Langton?"

"I cannot even guess," Reine replies, wonderingly.

"I have been wishing that you could take that poor girl's place with me. Not as my maid, of course, but as my friend and companion. I have grown to like you so much since you have been lying here ill and suffering. I have taken care of you as far as my own feeble state would allow. Do you think you could be my friend, child?"

"I am sure I could; that is, if you would not suspect me of designs on your property. I am an heiress, myself," Reine returns, with such naive, innocent pride that Mrs. Odell's pain-drawn lips part in an amused smile:

"You simple child. No one could suspect you of anything. There is no guile in that charming face," she answers kindly.

"Thank you. I shall be very glad of your friendship, and hope I may be of some account to you," Reine murmurs.

"It is settled then," Mrs. Odell says, with evident satisfaction. "You are to be my friend and my guest, the same as a daughter to me, until you leave me to return to America, which time, I hope, may be far off yet, for I shall not like to lose my little friend."

"Do not say that," Reine cries out quickly. "I should hate to grieve you, but I have two dear ones who would grieve to think that I was dead. I must let them know the truth as soon as I can."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Poverty is a great persuader. Numberless times it has forced people to put their pride in their pocket.

Vane Charteris, moping along in his law-office, finds such a dearth of clients that it would seem the world is for once at peace.

Nothing happens to break up the dull monotony of his life, or put a fee into his lank pockets. True, invitations pour in upon the "handsome rising young lawyer," but these he declines on the score of his mourning.

The city wakes up to the gayety of its winter season, but the ripple of joyous life flows past him unheeded. The lethargy of a hopeless grief is upon him. At last, with something of a shock, the vulgar and prosaic question of: "What shall we eat, and what shall we drink, and wherewithal shall we be clothed?" forces itself upon his consideration.

For Vane, handsome, careless, ease-loving Vane, has suddenly and thoughtlessly come to the end of his resources.

Bills, formidable, some of them, begin to pour in. Our hero, anxiously debating the question of "ways and means of raising the wind," begins to realize that business is strangely dull, and himself placed in a dilemma.

You understand that Vane Charteris is no perfect hero, my friends, you have seen that from the first. Self has in almost every instance ruled his thoughts; he has yielded to temptation, he has shown himself daily one of those petulant, faulty, yet daring types of men whom, after all, women cannot help loving.

So in this instance, instead of loftily adhering to his stubborn rejection of Maud Langton's offer, Vane Charteris suddenly remembers, with a sensation of relief, that all this while, a long month, indeed, the offer has lain in abeyance, waiting on his pleasure. Maud, like a skillful general, having made one artful move, is now waiting to see what the enemy will do.

Vane, like the thoughtless and innocent fly that he is, walks straight into the trap she has set. He decides to call. After all he may be forced to accept the management of her property. At this critical period of his fate, he cannot afford to be proud.

Yet it is with strange reluctance he climbs the marble steps and rings the bell. A memory of the dead seems to hold him back. The perfume of a white rose he has purchased and placed in his coat in passing a little flower shop, rises strong and sweet, thrilling him with the thought of her who has been like a rose herself.

"A rosebud set with little, willful thorns."

"I am foolish," he says to himself, disobeying the impulse to turn and descend the steps. "I must go through with it, I have to live." [Pg 98]

He rings the bell again, and when the door is opened, sends in cards for Miss Langton, and Mrs. and Miss Baird, with whom he has some slight acquaintance.

The two latter are out. Miss Langton receives him in the elegant library where she is alone among the books, basking in the ruddy glow of firelight and gaslight. As his eyes light upon her,

he recalls the English laureate's Maud:

"Maud with her exquisite face,
Maud in the light of her youth and her grace."

She is like a rare picture in her black velvet dress, with its picturesque trimmings of cream-white lace, and the pearls that clasp her throat and wrists. She rises with that slow and languid grace that Vane was wont to admire so much.

"At last," she says, in her well-trained, softly-toned voice. "Welcome, Vane!"

He touches the white, extended hand very lightly, and takes the chair she places.

"I was passing, and I thought I would look in upon you a few moments," he observes, with unblushing nonchalance.

"I am thankful for even that small grace," Maud answers, with her most winning smile. "I know I have been a very bad girl to you, Vane, but I think if you knew how sincere my repentance is you would not mind coming now and then to cheer my lonely hours."

Then she drops her eyes and sighs. Vane looks at the fair, calm, languid beauty in wondering silence. A little while ago this had been his idea of perfect beauty. Since then he has learned to love the slumberous fire that glows in dark eyes and the soul that dwells on scarlet lips and dusky, brunette complexions. The sweetness of the rose has won his heart, but the beauty of the lily unconsciously charms his eyes even now when he knows how false she is at heart, and only fair in outward seeming.

"I—I have no time for calling," he responds, with cool politeness. "I am always busy."

"Always?" she arches her golden brows slightly. "That is unfortunate. I suppose, then, that I may abandon the hope that I have been secretly cherishing, that you would relent and take the management of my property." [Pg 99]

Vane regards her in apparent surprise.

"Is it possible you have found no one else?" he inquires, carelessly.

"I told you I should not try until I heard from you," she answers.

"True, I had forgotten that," he answers. "And so you have been waiting all this time. I wish you would tell me why you wish me to do this for you when there are others equally capable, and far more willing."

Of this pointed reminder Maud wisely takes no heed save a gentle, quickly suppressed sigh.

"Perhaps you would be angry if I told you my reason," she says, gently, removing her eyes a moment from the contemplation of her folded, milk-white hands to glance into his fair, grave, handsome face.

"Oh, no, I am quite curious to hear," he replies.

"I think you know that Mr. Langton allowed his lawyer a very liberal salary," she begins. "You know there is a great deal of work, really, a number of tenements here, several farms in the country—"

"I know all that," he interrupts, with a slight air of brusqueness.

"I should like," she answers, with a very becoming blush, "that you should have that salary, Vane. It would only be fair, seeing that the whole property would have been yours but for my foolish, deeply repented error."

"Thank you, you are very kind," Vane replies, with grim brevity.

"Do you think so?" she asks, simply, then with an anxious look into his unmoved face, she continues: "Will you be kinder still, Vane, and permit me to offer this salve to my accusing conscience?"

"If only I were not so busy," Vane says, with artful reluctance.

"Cannot you make the time? I should feel so much better over this unfortunate thing," she says, lifting her blue, pleading eyes to his face.

Vane pretends to meditate within himself.

"Well, yes, since you make a point of it, I will try to take the trouble off your hands," he says, after that pause. "But as for losing Mr. Langton's money, pray don't think that I consider it hard lines, your inheriting it. I think you know that it wasn't for the sake of that I was—" he cuts his speech off short there, finding himself getting unwittingly on sentimental ground.

"I know," she says, quickly; "you mean you were going to marry me because you loved me. How foolish I was to doubt it then! Oh, Vane, if only we had it all to go over again, how different all would be!"

Vane turns on the beautiful, sighing coquette a look of steady contempt.

"If you had it all to do over again you would do precisely as you did then," he replies, with quiet scorn. "Don't play the coquette with me, Maud. I am in no mood for trifling."

"Nor I," she answers. "I am in earnest, Vane. It *would* be different; but I will not dwell on it since it annoys you. I fully understand that I am at liberty only to regard you as my man of business,

not my friend."

There is just the right touch of sad and patient humility in the musical voice, and a dewy moisture gathers on the golden lashes. Vane is inwardly mollified by her repentance, but is careful not to show it.

"My friendship can be of no value to you," he says, coldly. "You are rich, and can number your friends by the score. I will serve you faithfully in my legal capacity. That is all I can promise."

"That is all I can ask, then," she answers, resignedly, and with such sweet patience that Vane takes his leave with a vague feeling that he has been unnecessarily cruel to the fair woman who had jilted him.

"Has she really repented? Does she indeed care for me now, as her words would imply, or is she the most consummate actress upon earth?" he asks himself.

And this is the beginning of the end.

Maud, left alone in the silent, stately library, throws off the mask of meekness and patience that had set so becomingly on her beautiful face.

She walks up and down the floor impatiently, with blended triumph and vexation in her soft, blue eyes.

"I have gained one point at least," she murmured to herself. "And I will gain the rest, I swear it," clenching her jeweled hands tightly. "I love him. How strange that I should grow to care for him when once I fled from him in the hour that would have made me his own. I was mad and blind. I was deluded by my romantic fancy for Clyde. Ugh! how the remembrance of that man's face troubles and haunts me. I see it always as I did that night, upturned in the moonbeams, dead and white. If I had loved him really, the shock must have killed me. But I did not love him—at least not half so well as I love Vane Charteris now. How proud and independent he is. But I love him all the better for that. If he had not come back and brought me that paper I might have been hung, or at least imprisoned for life. I hate to think that I owe it to Reine Langton, whom I never liked. How fortunate for me that she and Uncle Langton died. I have the fortune now, and I am determined that I will yet be the adored wife of Vane Charteris."

[Pg 101]

CHAPTER XXV.

"Is the English mail in yet, Mrs. Odell? I do so want my English letter!"

Mrs. Odell turns a compassionate look on the pale, wistful face of the girl, into whose white cheeks all the life-giving breezes of Mentone have failed to restore the vanished rose.

Reine has been in Italy three weeks now. Thrice she has written to England to her Uncle Langton relating the story of her escape, and begging for news of himself and Vane.

No answer has come to these eager appeals, and she is half wild with anxiety.

"There is no letter yet, my dear," Mrs. Odell answers, sorrowfully, for she knows of Reine's strange story now. "I will tell you what to do now, Reine. Write to the postmaster there, and ask him for news of your uncle. Perhaps Mr. Langton has gone to another place."

"It is not probable," Reine answers, sighing, but she takes her friend's advice, and writes the letter of inquiry.

This time the answer comes all too soon. Her own three letters are returned unopened, with the information that Mr. Langton is long since dead! The physician encloses a certificate of death.

[Pg 102]

"He is dead, my dear, kind uncle is dead, Mrs. Odell!" Reine cries, lifting her dark eyes, heavy with grief, to the pale face of her friend.

"My poor darling, I feared as much," the lady answers, compassionately. "Now, darling, you belong wholly to me."

"You forget my husband," Reine answers, through her tears.

And Mrs. Odell, clasping tighter the paper she holds in her hand, speaks no word at first. How can she stab that tender heart yet deeper, already bleeding with the sad news of her uncle's death?

"You will be your uncle's heiress, dear," she says to her presently, thinking to check the flowing tide of grief.

The girl starts and looks up, bewildered.

"I said, you will be your uncle's heiress," Mrs. Odell repeats.

And Reine, growing a trifle paler, shakes her head

"Not if he has died so suddenly," she answers. "He intended to alter his will, but he had not done so when I left him. The old will left everything to my cousin, Maud Langton. It is more than probable that I am penniless."

"It does not seem to distress you, losing the fortune, I mean," the pale invalid remarks, with some surprise.

"It does not," the girl answers, calmly; "I never cared to have my uncle's money; I know that Vane will take care of me," she adds, with tender confidence.

And again Mrs. Odell's sad, white face grows sadder.

"Dear, you forget that you have no assurance that your husband is living," she exclaims abruptly.

Reine presses the small white hand that loosely wears the wedding-ring upon her poor aching heart, and lifts her dark, solemn eyes to the lady's face.

"My own heart tells me he is living," she says, with passionate energy. "He cannot be dead, my darling, just as I had almost won his heart. He lives to bless me yet with his love. Ah, if I only knew where to find him," she breathes, with despairing earnestness.

"My poor, poor child," Mrs. Odell says, with impulsive tenderness. "You must not be too sure. We can be sure of nothing in this world." [Pg 103]

"You have heard—something!" Reine says, with vague terror, looking fixedly at the lady.

"Yes, dear. I have here some papers that I have been trying for sometime to get, the English and American papers with the accounts of the burning of the *Hesperus* and the list of those lost."

"And—my husband?" Reine says, looking at the lady with burning eyes.

"Is reported among the lost," Mrs. Odell replies, the papers trembling in her trembling hands.

A moment's silence, then Reine, trembling all over with emotion, rallies bravely from the shock.

"Am not I, too, reported among the lost?" she inquires.

"Yes, here it is, dear," and Mrs. Odell reads, under the heading of "Lost:" "'Vane Charteris and wife.'"

"So you see that does not really signify anything," Reine says, momentarily radiant. "Here I am safe and sound on *terra firma*. And Vane had so much better a chance than I had that he cannot be dead. Did I not see him safe on board the life-boat myself?"

"But, listen, dear," Mrs. Odell answers, sorrowfully.

She folds down the paper and reads, in a weak voice, a short paragraph:

"The *Sea-Gull* rescued one life-boat after it had drifted two days at the mercy of the wind and waves. It was filled with thirsty, famishing women and children. They reported that the boat had been on the point of sinking from too great a load, when the four men who were in it had leaped into the water, heroically resigning their only chance of life in favor of the weaker sex. There is no ground for hoping that either of these noble, manly hearts survived their self-sacrificing act, as none have been heard from since."

"Well?" Reine says, in a hushed voice, with a strange, prescient dread on her white face.

"Oh, my poor, bereaved girl, how can I tell you?" exclaims the frail invalid, the dew of womanly sympathy starting into her eyes.

And Reine, with a horrible weight pressing on her heart, gasps faintly:

"My husband—"

"His name appears in the list of the four who leaped into the water," Mrs. Odell replies in an awe-struck voice. [Pg 104]

One cry, whose terrible despair pierces to the blue heavens, then blank silence. Reine has fallen forward, face downward, on the floor. For a brief space, time, love, sorrow, all the things of life, are blotted from her mind in a merciful semi-death.

The days go by—"time does not stop for tears"—and one day there comes out of the room where Reine, the girl, was carried in senseless, a beautiful, sad-eyed woman in sables. Sorrow has touched her with its transfiguring finger. The beautiful dark eyes droop always beneath the black-fringed lashes, the lips forget to smile, the white cheeks have lost their dimples and roses. For the passionate, loving heart, life is over and done—yet she lives on.

"Death does not always bring its balm
To every aching ill—
Life may outlast its dearest charm,
And heart-break does not kill."

After a time there comes to the crushed heart a thought crowded out at first by the intensity of woe—the remembrance of Maud. Maud, whose hopes, like her own, have hung trembling on the life of Vane Charteris.

"I must go home," she says, sadly, to her friend. "Maud will need me. God only knows what has happened to her in these long months."

And Mrs. Odell, who has daily grown weaker and frailer, looking up from the couch where she rests almost all day now, cries out, sorrowfully:

"Oh, Reine, you will not let this Maud come between us? She cannot love you as well as I do."

The girl answers her a little sadly.

"I do not think she loves me at all."

"Then, why go to her?" Mrs. Odell exclaims.

"Because it seems my duty," Reine answers calmly.

"Write to her," suggests the invalid eagerly.

"There is no surety in the mail. It is safer to go," Reine objects.

But that evening, faithful Dr. Franks, who has come across the ocean to watch over the invalid's [Pg 105] health, requests a private interview with Mrs. Charteris.

"I hear that you wish to return to America?" he says, fixing his kind, smiling gray eyes on her quiet face, with its grave, sweet lips and drooping eyes.

"Yes," she answers.

"Is it imperative?" asks Dr. Franks.

"I think so," Reine replies, with some little wonder at his curiosity.

"You are the best judge," he answers, gravely. "Were it otherwise I would beg you not to go."

"Why?" Reine asks, surprised.

"For that poor lady's sake in yonder. Do you know that your going will shorten her days upon earth?"

"Dr. Franks, how can you speak so? You know I would not harm one hair of her dear, kind head," Reine says, with subdued indignation.

"I know," he says, gently for him, usually so brusque and careless. "But she will grieve for you so. She has grown to love you as a daughter. She has no one else to cling to—she is sensitive and loving, who has buried all she loves, and is so ill and lonely."

"What would you have me do?" Reine asks, irresolute and pained.

"Stay with her till the last, if that were possible," he answers. "It cannot be for long. Do you know that her days are numbered?"

She starts, and trembles.

"No, I thought that this genial climate was to restore her health," she exclaims.

"We hoped it, but all has failed," he answers, sadly. "She fails daily and rapidly. There is no power in medicine, no magic in these balmy airs to lengthen her life. She is surely fading from us."

The dark eyes brim over with sorrow.

"How long?" she asks, faintly.

"I cannot tell," he answers, sadly. "Her disease is too insidious for one to say with any certainty. It may be hours, days, weeks, months, for who can prognosticate surely the coming of that dread enemy that flatters only to destroy."

"Then I must not leave her," she answers, warmly, "and yet, I know that I ought to go back to America."

"Can you not write?" he inquires.

"I must do so," she answers, "and trust to God that my letter may go safely across the ocean. Mrs. Odell has been too kind and tender to me for me to desert her now. Believe me, I did not know that the end was so near. I thought, I hoped, she would get well, but now I will not leave her while she lives."

"God bless you!" Doctor Franks exclaims, with strong but repressed emotion. "Will you go in and tell her that? I left her in the bitterest distress over the thought of your going."

"Yes," Reine answers, but when he has left her she lingers a little to regain her composure before returning to the presence of the hapless lady whom death had marked for his own.

The sun is shining on the soft, blue water, the flowers are blooming, the birds are singing.

Surely, this clime is fair and balmy enough to woo expiring life back to its tenement of clay. And yet, she, too, her last loved friend, thinks Reine, must go from her out into the darkness and dreariness of death.

Crushing back one hopeless sigh, Reine goes back to the shaded, quiet chamber, where the sick woman lies on her silken couch, with tearful eyes veiled by the thin, emaciated fingers on which the shining wealth of rings hang loosely.

She kneels down and presses her soft, loving lips on the thin, fever-flushed cheek.

"You are crying for me," she says, with an earnest penitence and regret. "I was cruel and ungrateful to talk of leaving you. Can you forgive me?"

"You are sorry; you will stay!" the sick woman murmurs, with piteous eagerness.

"Yes, as long as you live, I will never leave you nor forsake you," Reine murmurs, with all the solemnity of a vow, thinking sadly to herself that this is the only heart left on earth to which she

is near and dear.

"God bless you, you shall be like my own child, Reine. And it may not be for long," Mrs. Odell sighs. "I am afraid—afraid, dear, that I shall never see my native land again."

"We will hope for the best," the girl answers, gently, "and if—if it should be as you fear, you will not forget that Heaven is as near to Italy as to our native land."

Heaven! to these two who have lost the treasure of life, that word is sweet and potent.

[Pg 107]

Drawn nearer together by the waves of sorrow that have gone over their heads, they cling together in the falling twilight, and talk softly of

"A land whose light is never dimmed with shade,
Whose fields are ever vernal;
Where nothing beautiful can ever fade,
But blooms for aye eternal."

The soft Italian winter comes and goes. To Reine's young and inexperienced eyes, as she ministers lovingly to her dying friend, it seems as if a change for the better is taking place. But Doctor Franks shakes his head.

"Impossible," he tells her, sadly. "It is a marvel she has lasted so long. It almost seems as if your love and tenderness have held her fluttering spirit back from the other world. The end is not far now."

But the spring days pass with such gentle touches on the wasting frame that the spirit lingers still.

At last, in the golden sunset of a golden June, Mrs. Odell's summons comes, gently, as if angels had borne it down the golden stairway of the sky, closing her tired eyelids on the fair land of Italy, with her thin hand nestled in Reine's warm clasp, she opens them again on the "stiller, fairer world of the dead."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Standing alone and sadly by the marble cross that marks Mrs. Odell's quiet grave, Reine's thoughts turn homeward. The longing for native land inherent in humanity begins to stir in her heart.

'"Tis hame, hame, hame, hame I fain would be,
Hame, hame, hame, in my ain countree."

The slim, dark figure standing quietly with the pale face turned seaward, has a pathetic grace and beauty all its own.

So thinks one who approaches so quietly along the grass-grown paths of "the city of the dead," that she starts with a frightened little cry when he stands before her.

"Oh! Dr. Franks, how you startled me," she says, with one slim, white hand pressed against her heart to still its rapid beating.

[Pg 108]

"Did I? Pardon me," he answers, with an irrepressible glance of admiration. "I forgot you might be nervous in this quiet, lonely spot. Do I intrude upon you?"

"The place is free to all," she answers, somewhat confusedly.

"That would be no excuse for me if you did not desire my company," he answers, quickly and humbly, then in a lower tone: "Oh! Mrs. Charteris, you must pardon me that I have followed you here! I had something to say to you. Can you not guess?"

"Do not say it, please. I would rather not hear," she answers, with weary indifference in face and voice.

His handsome, eager face grows blank and dismayed.

"You will not listen?" he says. "Oh! Reine, think a minute. Is it best to refuse such love as mine—so ardent, strong, and devoted? You are so young and lovely, yet so lonely and unprotected. Let me throw the strong shield of my love around you—let me make you my wife!"

Reine waves him away with a quiver of pain on the beautiful face, that is even more lovely in its pallor and gravity than it used to be in its blushes and dimples.

"I shall never love—never marry—again," she answers, in a choking voice.

"Then you can give me no hope?" Doctor Franks asks sadly, and she shakes her head.

"You do not know how long I have loved you," he says, pleadingly. "Ever since I first saw you you have been the delight of my eyes and heart. But I have tried to be patient. I have respected your widowhood and your sorrow. But now, Reine, seeing you so utterly alone in the world, the time

seemed come for me to speak. Are you sure—quite sure, dear, that you can never love me?"

The sound of the sea comes to them soft and sad; the wind sighs through the long grass above the quiet sleepers, whom the things of this world trouble no more. Tears rise into the dark eyes of the girl as she looks into the man's troubled face. It is no slight thing to a true woman to hold the great, throbbing pulse of a man's heart in the hollow of the hand.

[Pg 109]

She lifts to his the great, dewy, pain-filled eyes.

"I am so sorry," she falters; "but you must have seen how little I cared for you, for anyone, and that my heart was broken."

Before that grave and pathetic confession the man's passion is mute.

"And I have wounded you," he says, in self-condemnation. "Forgive me, Mrs. Charteris, I have heard of women who were faithful unto death. I did not know there were those who carried love beyond it."

She sighs wearily and rests her cheek against the cold marble cross.

"My heart is broken," she repeats sadly. "I shall never have any more room in my life for love and lovers."

"Nor friends?" he asks, pleadingly, and Reine impulsively holds out her hand.

"Yes, if you care to claim me," she answers, gently.

"Rather your friendship than any other woman's love," says the rejected lover, loyally.

"You must not feel like that, it is so very hopeless," the girl answers. "I am going home soon. You may never see me again. I hope that you may love and marry some happier woman."

And when he has gone away and left her to the loneliness of her own thought, she sinks down in the long, sweet grass, weeping long and bitterly.

Until now she has never quite realized the truth of her widowhood. It comes to her with a great pang of agony that Vane Charteris has no longer any place among men.

His place in her poor life is vacant forever.

"And I loved him so dearly," she sighs, lifting her desolate, tear-wet eyes to the fair, blue heavens. "I loved him, and if he had lived he would have loved me. My patient love must have won him in the end."

And again her thoughts turn homeward as if drawn by some irresistible power.

"I will return to my native land," she resolves. "I will seek out Maud, if indeed she has escaped from the terrible web that encompassed her. I am so lonely and sad perhaps she will be kinder to me than of old."

[Pg 110]

CHAPTER XXVII.

A year has passed since the ill-fated *Hesperus* was burned in mid-ocean with such terrible loss of human life.

In the sultry heat of August, Vane Charteris has forsaken the breathless, dusty city for the coolness and verdure of that terrestrial paradise among the hills, Langton Villa.

He is the guest of Miss Langton, who queens it right royally here over the grand domain she had nearly lost by her folly of one year ago.

They walk up and down beneath the trees, Maud and her handsome lawyer, in the glow of the evening sunset, with the lovely sights and sounds of summer all around them.

The heiress, in a robe of palest blue, with creamy lace, looks her fairest. Mr. Charteris, always handsome, is none the less so for the shadow brooding darkly in the deep blue eyes, lending its touch of earnestness to the grave, pale face.

"How dull and *distract* you are," she says at length, impatiently. "Let us sit down here beneath this tree, and I will try to charm this dull mood away."

But for once she finds her fascinations fail. Vane, always inclined to be taciturn, is more than usually so to-night, even to the verge of embarrassment.

She wonders why his eyes evade her own, why he makes no reply to some tender epithets that falls cooingly from the beautiful lips.

"I thought you loved me, Vane," she breaks out at last, with some indignation.

"Yes, I thought so too, for a little while, under the glamour of your beauty and my own loneliness, but when you were gone, I found that I was mistaken. I am here to tell you this. Can you forgive me, Maud?" he blunders out, with all the shame of a man who feels himself placed in an uncomfortable position.

"Mistaken!" she cries, transfixing him with the angry gleam of her blue eyes. "Why, only the last time we met you said that you loved me."

[Pg 111]

Vane, rather red and ashamed, still holds his ground bravely.

"I was mistaken, as I told you just now," he says. "I do not, I cannot love you."

"Cannot!" she repeats, a little blankly.

"I cannot," he answers. "I find in the light of my later experiences that I never really loved you, not even when I was about to make you my wife. I was under the spell of your beauty. I know now that my heart was untouched."

"What do you mean by later experience?" the beautiful woman asks, sneeringly.

"I mean that the love I feel now, when too late, for my lost wife, Reine, is the only love my heart can ever know," he answers, speaking low and reverentially, as if in the presence of the dead.

The cold blue eyes of the beautiful heiress kindle with pride and resentment.

"You expect me to believe this?" she cries, hotly. "Do I not know how you despised Reine Langton! How you called her vixen, spit-fire, scold! How you longed to be out of her presence and rid of her?"

"For all of which I would beg her pardon on my knees if she were living," he answers, still low and reverentially; "I did not understand her then. I was a simpleton, an indolent, fastidious fool. I know now that those bright, wild ways were but the ripple and effervescence on the water that ran deep, and calm, and sweet beneath. She was like a lovely rose that hid its sweetness behind 'little wilful thorns.' At heart she was true, and sweet, and womanly. Too late I learned that I loved her, and in honor to her memory I will make no other woman my wife."

The angry color rises into Miss Langton's fair cheek.

"You forget that you are pledged to me," she says, in a low, fierce whisper. "You forget that our marriage day is already set."

"I forget nothing," he returns, sadly. "Nothing except that I was blinded for a moment by your subtle charm, and offered you what was not mine to give, what belongs irrevocably to the dead—my whole heart. I came to ask you for my freedom, Maud."

"What if I refuse?" she asks, with a subtle flash in the blue eyes.

[Pg 112]

"Then God help me and forgive you," he answers, solemnly, "for we can never be happy together. There are two ghosts between us, Maud. The man who murdered himself because of your falsity, and the fair, sweet girl who gave her life to save yours. They would haunt us and reproach us with their slighted and forgotten love. They would come between us ever."

Her cheeks and lips are paling, her eyes stare before her, wild and frightened; she shivers, and puts up her white hand as if to ward off some threatening danger.

"I—am haunted already," she says, in a low and trembling voice. "Do you think I do not see him in my dreams, with menace in his staring eyes and reproaches on his lips? He was my dreaded companion in the lonely prison-cell. He stalks before me grimly in the grand saloons of wealth and pride, always with a look of terrible reproach and despair on his dead, white face. I am a haunted woman. It is for this I have sought to win back your heart. I would fain put your warm, living love and tenderness between me and the pursuing ghost of the man whom I betrayed to his death. I am afraid of the dark, the loneliness, the terror of my own thoughts. Do not put me away from you, Vane. My only hope is in you."

They gaze at each other silently a moment. The soft wind, odorous with the breath of honeysuckles, pinks and roses, sighing through the garden, whispers to them of a slight form bowed behind the tree, a white face convulsed with passionate emotion. But they neither hear nor heed its admonition. Maud speaks again, pleadingly:

"I cannot release you, Vane. I love you. Surely you can give me some little tenderness and love when once I am your wife? I will make you happy—I swear it."

"The only woman who could make me happy rests in her ocean grave," Vane answers, with deep solemnity and truth.

Miss Langton regards him in wonder.

"Yet once you scorned her," she says slowly. "How did she win you at last, Vane?"

He is silent a moment, as if the question has struck home to his own heart, awakening thought and memory to life. His lips grow strangely tender in their saddened curve.

[Pg 113]

"How can I tell?" he says slowly. "Perhaps it was the softened sweetness that hung about her after that night when our lives became one. Perhaps it was her proud, sweet patience under my unkindness. Perhaps, yes, after all! I believe it was the charm of her love that won me. Can you realize such a thing as this, Maud, that love should win love?"

"Yes," she answers, hopefully. "Did I not tell you just now that my love would win you and make you happy?"

He shakes his head impatiently

"That could never be, Maud. You and I are better apart. I can never forget Reine, my slighted girl-bride. She is ever in my thoughts. I think of her as of one living, not dead. I recall her rose-leaf lips, her dark, laughing eyes, the nameless charm that clung about her, and my very heart aches with the intensity of its yearning to find my loved and lost one again."

"Thank God!" exclaimed a low, rapturous, thrilling voice almost at his very side.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

At that heart-thrilling cry of rapture, Vane Charteris and his companion turn around simultaneously.

Within a few feet of them they behold Reine, the long-lost bride, Reine, in the long, trailing sables of widowhood, yet with a face fairly transfigured by happiness, love and triumph.

The effect of her sudden appearance upon Maud is most startling.

The beautiful blonde, after one terrified glance at her strangely-restored cousin, shrieks out:

"A ghost, a ghost!" and flies in the wildest dismay toward the house.

Vane Charteris, half-bewildered, yet full of gladness, flies to clasp the beautiful phantom to his heart.

As his arms close around the palpitating figure, and he realizes that she is truly a creature of flesh and blood, a cry of thanksgiving escapes his lips, the tears of not unmanly emotion burst from the eyes and rain down on the dark head, nestled closely and lovingly against his breast. [Pg 114]

He holds her close and tight, raining passionate kisses on the sweet, scarlet mouth, the blushing cheeks, the dark eye, tearful with this sudden happiness.

"You love me, Vane," she murmurs, softly and half-incredulously, "and yet I thought, I feared—"

"You feared what?" he asks, breaking in upon her shy pause.

"That you loved Maud best," she answers. "When I came up the path and saw you two together, I crept behind the tree and listened. If I had learned then that she was the desire of your heart, I should have crept away quietly to die of my sorrow, I should not have come between you and your love. You never should have known."

"But since you found me faithful to your memory, Reine, you will forgive all the past, will you not, my darling?" he pleads.

"Freely," she answers, with a smile that is all the brighter because it breaks through tears.

"And now," he says, drawing her down to a seat beside him on the bench beneath the tree, "now, dear, you will tell me all your story. Where have you been through all the long months in which I mourned you as dead?"

Resting in his arms she tells him the story of those long months of sorrow while she believed him dead, sobbing even now in the deep, sweet gladness that has come to her so suddenly, over the remembrance of her despair.

"I knew no better until I reached the village yonder, seeking Maud," she concludes. "There I learned the whole truth, that you lived, and were again the betrothed of my cousin. I came here to have one secret, farewell look at you, my husband, to go away and leave you to your love and your happiness. But I heard all you said, and I could not give you up to Maud's selfish claim after that."

"I thank God that I have found you again, my precious wife. We shall never be parted any more," he answers, earnestly.

"You have not told me how you were saved that night after you sprang from the life-boat in which I last saw you," the young wife says after a little, lifting to his her shy, yet radiant eyes. [Pg 115]

"I floated on a plank a few hours, and was picked up by another life-boat, that is the whole story, simply told," he replies.

"And you did not forget me when you thought me dead—you loved me after I was gone from you?" she says, with a note of gladness in her deep, sweet voice.

"I loved you before I had lost you, darling. Did you not guess the truth, Reine?" he inquired, earnestly.

"No," she answers, with blended wonder and delight in her beautiful, glowing face.

"It is true, dear," he answers. "I loved you before I became aware of it myself. I was abominably jealous of the young lord who admired you in England. Yet at the time I was scarcely conscious of the meaning of my annoyance. My proposal to accompany you to America was an outgrowth of the longing to have you all to myself. And Reine, my darling wife, you remember that last night when the terrible trial of fire came to us, that night I had resolved that our strange alienation should exist no longer. I had determined to ask you, to pray you to come to your true resting-place upon my heart. But, my bride, my wife, there will be no more separation between us. You will share my home and my heart henceforth."

"You used not to like me," she says, filled with a glad surprise. "Why did you love me at last?"

The lover-husband looks down with a half-mischiefous smile into the dark, questioning eyes.

"Why did I love you," he says, lightly, yet tenderly. "Shall I tell you, little one? Well, then, I believe it was because you loved me."

The sweet face, covered with blushes, droops from his gaze. He bends to kiss it, then continues, less teasingly:

"You remember how you used to gibe and tease and ridicule me, Reine, and how I retaliated in likewise? Well, when it came to me suddenly that you really loved me, it filled me with a certain, indefinable triumph and pride which grew and grew upon me until when you came to England the feeling blossomed into passion. Every time I looked at you I said to myself: 'She loves me, that beautiful, spirited girl loves me,' and there was such strange, thrilling sweetness in the thought that it seemed to compel my love in return. Now, Reine, my own adored one, I feel and know that my love for you is the one great passion of my life. That which I felt for Maud was a mere empty fancy, born of her lily-like beauty, and fading when I saw that her soul was not fair and angelic like her face. Henceforth, my wife, you will embody all the beauty of earth to me. You are 'queen, lily and rose' in one."

[Pg 116]

She has no answer for him, her tears are falling so fast—the tender tears of happiness, soft and cooling, like the rain of summer that falls like a blessing. Vane kisses them away with tender solicitude. They are the last that dim her eyes for many years. The sunshine of her future happiness shines too bright on her life for clouds and tears to dim its glory.

After awhile, Miss Langton, who has been silently reconnoitering from an upper window, comes out to them.

"You see I was not a ghost after all," Reine exclaims, advancing to meet her. "Will you not bid me welcome, Cousin Maud?"

"You are an imposter!" Miss Langton answers, angrily, recoiling from the white, extended hand. "I will never acknowledge you as a cousin of mine!"

"For shame, Maud!" Vane Charteris cries out, warmly, drawing his young wife to his side. "This is my wife, and you know it!"

"I have your own assurance that your wife was drowned before your eyes on the night of the burning of the *Hesperus*," Maud answers, icily.

"That was a mistake, Maud. I only dived beneath the water and came up again out of his range of vision," Reine explains, eagerly.

But Vane checks her gently.

"Do not trouble yourself to explain to her, my darling," he says. "It matters very little to us whether she recognizes you or not. We can be happy without her favor."

"Happy! oh, I dare say," Maud laughs, hysterically. "No doubt you, Mr. Charteris, will be exceedingly happy in a squalid cottage, with a sharp-tongued little vixen for your companion. Permit me to remind you of the o'er-true adage that 'When poverty comes in the door, love flies out of the window.'"

[Pg 117]

Something in the blue fire of the eyes he bends upon her makes her quail momentarily. He answers with chill brevity:

"Fortunately I may take my wife to a palace, not a cottage, so we need run no such risks as you apprehend, Miss Langton. To convince you, will you look at this?"

He draws a folded paper from his breast and holds it open before her startled eyes.

"You see," he says, icily, "it is the will with which Mr. Langton threatened you the night you jilted me. I am a lawyer, you remember. I drew this up for him at his own request. It is signed by competent and available witnesses. It is perfectly legal, and I can prove it so in any court in the land. It bequeathes Mr. Langton's whole fortune equally between my wife and myself, cutting you off without a shilling."

Maud stares at the terrible legal-looking document with frightened eyes and a corpse-like pallor.

"You—you are deceiving me," she says, faintly. "If it is really true, why have you kept the will so long and allowed me to usurp the property?"

"Through pity and kindness for you," he answers, with cold contempt. "As long as Reine was supposed dead, no one suffered from the fraud but myself, and I was content to be poor that you might have the wealth your soul coveted. But now my wife's claims must be considered above all others."

"I would sooner die than be poor!" Maud weeps, wildly.

And Reine, taking the legal document between her white fingers, turns her shining eyes on her husband.

"Could you be happy with me, Vane, if we had really to live in a cottage and work hard for each other?" she asks, earnestly.

"Yes, Reine, I am quite sure I could," he answers, as earnestly.

"Then may I do as I like with this paper?" she inquires.

"You must not defraud yourself, dear," he says, startled.

[Pg 118]

She laughs—her old, ringing, joyous laugh, with a new tone of tenderness in its musical cadence.

"I do not intend to," she answers. "You are everything to me, Vane; Maud may have all the rest."

With the words, the white paper flutters in her whiter fingers, there is a sound of tearing paper, and the old millionaire's will flutters in a heap of snowy fragments on the soft, green grass.

Then Reine laughs in pretty, childish exultation.

"You are the heiress still, Maud," she says, gayly. "I have only Vane. From first to last, he is all I have cared for or wanted."

There is a moment's stunned silence, then the ice around Maud's selfish, worldly heart melts in the sunshine of this warm and loving nature. She is conquered by this heavenly forgiveness and love.

"Reine, Reine," she cries, in hoarse, half-choking accents, "forgive me for my cruel and wicked denial of you. I know you now. No other woman but Reine Charteris could be so forgiving, so generous, so self-sacrificing."

"You have beggared yourself," Vane says to his wife, a little vexed.

"I have you," she answers, with a glance so radiant and loving that he cannot but forgive her folly.

So there is peace between the three—a peace that is never more broken, for Maud's heart has gone out to her cousin in a love never to be recalled. She even offers to divide the fortune so generously bestowed on her, but Vane and Reine decline the compromise. They have each other, and as each laughingly declares, "that is the world and all." They try "love in a cottage" for a year, and declare it a perfect success.

One of the world's great bards has written: "The secret of genius is dogged persistence." Vane Charteris, toiling early and late in his dusty office for his little wife, finds it true. The laurels he would never have won in ease and indolence, begin to circle his brow with a chaplet that is the pride of his young wife's heart.

Yet he goes home one evening with a sigh instead of a smile for the dark-eyed wife who meets him in the homely little parlor, made beautiful only by her beautiful presence.

[Pg 119]

"Reine, how lovely you are," he murmurs, bending to kiss the upturned lips. "Ah!" with a discontented sigh, "if I only had jewels and laces, satins and velvets to adorn that glorious beauty."

"What is it, dear?" she asks, trying to smooth the frown from his brow with her dainty forefinger.

"It is only this, dear: Invitations are pouring in upon us which we cannot accept because we are too poor to enter into that circle where we rightfully belong by reason of my talent and your beauty. Darling, how I hate to seclude you from the gaze of men because I am too poor to adorn you like the rest. What shall we do?"

"Do? Why, we must go into the world and shine with the rest," she answers, promptly and gayly.

"We are too poor," he replies, gloomily.

"We are worth a million of dollars," Mrs. Charteris answers, calmly, with her dainty head perched sidewise like a bird's.

"Reine!"

"Vane!"

"Whatever do you mean?" he inquires.

"I mean," contritely, "that Mrs. Odell divided her fortune between Dr. Franks and me, and I have kept the secret, like a naughty girl, just for the pleasure of having you work for me. You see, Vane, you were careless, indolent, ease-loving. You never would have made a name if you had not an object to work for. Now, dear, will you forgive me for keeping the secret a whole year?"

"I forgive you and thank you, too," he answers, earnestly. "You have made a man of me, little wife."

"Yes, indeed," she says, with a pretty, happy triumph "And now, Vane, we will share the fortune and all the pleasures it can give together. My dear friend left me all her jewels, too. Only think," gayly, "how I shall shine in them."

In society they meet Maud, and—actually—Doctor Franks, who has also returned to America. Putting aside his own regret, he rejoices heartily in Reine's happiness. Maud's blue eyes heal the wound that Reine's dark eyes made, and a year later the pair are happily married, the selfish woman having developed into a nobler creature under Reine's lovely example.

[Pg 120]

The current of Reine's life glides on smoothly and brightly under the blue and sunny sky of love. At times the old, gay, teasing nature bubbles up to the surface; at times Mr. Charteris calls her "vixen and scold," but never in spite or vexation, only in the gay and careless *bardinage* in which it pleases them sometimes to indulge, as when under the green trees of Langton Villa, where the separate streams of their lives first met and mingled into one.

[THE END.]



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Transcriber's Notes:

Added table of contents.

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Some missing punctuation added in series lists.

Archaic spellings (e.g. hight, woful) retained from original.

Some inconsistent spacing retained (e.g. "a while" vs. "awhile").

Some inconsistent spelling retained (e.g. "glamor" vs. "glamour").

Some inconsistent hyphenation retained (e.g. "master-passion" vs. "master passion").

Guy Kenmore's Wife

This story was originally serialized in the *New York Family Story Paper* under the title *Irene Brooke; or Her Mother's Secret* in 1883.

Page 9, changed "gittering" to "glittering."

Page 12, changed "addressed" to "addresses" for tense consistency.
Page 28, changed "chagrim" to "chagrin."
Page 30, changed "verry" to "very."
Page 45, merged last paragraph of this page with first paragraph of following page.
Page 46, italicized "protege" for consistency.
Page 47, added missing close quote after "we are about the same size."
Page 53, removed unnecessary close quote at end of Chapter XXI.
Page 55, added missing period after "the gateway of the sky."
Page 58, changed "mutinous" to "mutinous."
Page 64, italicized "robe de nuit" and "eau de cologne" for consistency.
Page 68, added missing close quote after "extremely small."
Page 69, changed "fized" to "fixed" and "favarite" to "favorite."
Page 73, added missing close quote after "her worshiped face."
Page 79, changed "easy" to "ease" in "charming ease and grace."
Page 80, added missing period after "astonishment and delight."
Page 83, added missing quote before "I see you are not disposed" and changed ? to ! in "They would not hear of such a thing!"
Page 84, changed "Mr Rivington" to "Mr. Revington" and "Julius Rivington" to "Julius Revington."
Page 91, changed "surprise" to "surprise."
Page 92, changed "guaged" to "gauged."
Page 95, added missing comma in "...marry, Mr. Kenmore?"
Page 97, changed comma to period after "toilet table."
Page 99, changed "far" to "for" in "for your wrongs and mine."
Page 101, changed "repeat" to "repeated" in "Bozzaotra repeated Elaine's invitation."
Page 107, changed "seperate" to "separate."
Page 108, changed "Beooke's" to "Brooke's."
Page 110, added missing close quote after "shield her memory."

The Rose and the Lily

This story was originally serialized in the *New York Family Story Paper* in 1882.

Some apparently erroneous tense changes have been retained from the Eagle Library edition; it is possible that these errors did not exist in the original story paper appearance. Errors have been corrected (and noted below) where the original story paper issues were available for consultation.

Page 2, changed "smiled" to "smiles."
Page 11, changed "Langdon" to "Langton."
Page 12, added close quote after "cheated Reine Langton of fortune."
Page 24, added missing close quote after "return from him."
Page 40, removed unnecessary quote after "alone!"
Page 51, changed "swifty" to "swiftly."
Page 53, changed "thaat" to "that."
Page 54, removed unnecessary quote before "Mr. Langton, taking one."
Page 61, changed "handerchief" to "handkerchief."
Page 63, changed "were present" to "are present." (Inconsistent tense was not present in original story paper appearance).
Page 64, changed "prefer his request" to "proffer his request."
Page 67, added missing period in "Mr. Charteris."
Page 70, changed "Reinie" to "Reine."
Page 71, changed "Renie's" to "Reine's."
Page 74, added "to" to "If anything should happen to you."
Page 79, changed "atttentively" to "attentively."
Page 80, added missing quote after "keep it for me."
Page 86, changed "has been" to "had been" for proper tense (corrected to match original story paper appearance).

Page 89, changed "beatiful" to "beautiful" and "stuned" to "stunned."

Page 90, changed "medieum" to "medium."

Page 91, changed "unconcious" to "unconscious."

Page 93, changed "CHAPTER XXII" to "CHAPTER XXIII."

Page 94, changed "the the" to "the" before "tiny saloon."

Page 95, removed stray quote before "Mrs. Odell, who has sunk wearily into a chair."

Page 96, changed "a minutes' silence" to "a minute's silence."

Page 100, changed "begining" to "beginning."

Page 101, changed "Renie" to "Reine" and added missing close quote after "my dear."

Page 106, changed ? to . in "I was cruel and ungrateful to talk of leaving you."

Page 111, changed double quotes to single quotes around "little wilful thorns."

Page 116, changed ? to ! in "For shame, Maud!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GUY KENMORE'S WIFE, AND THE ROSE AND THE LILY ***

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