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by Foxcroft Davis**

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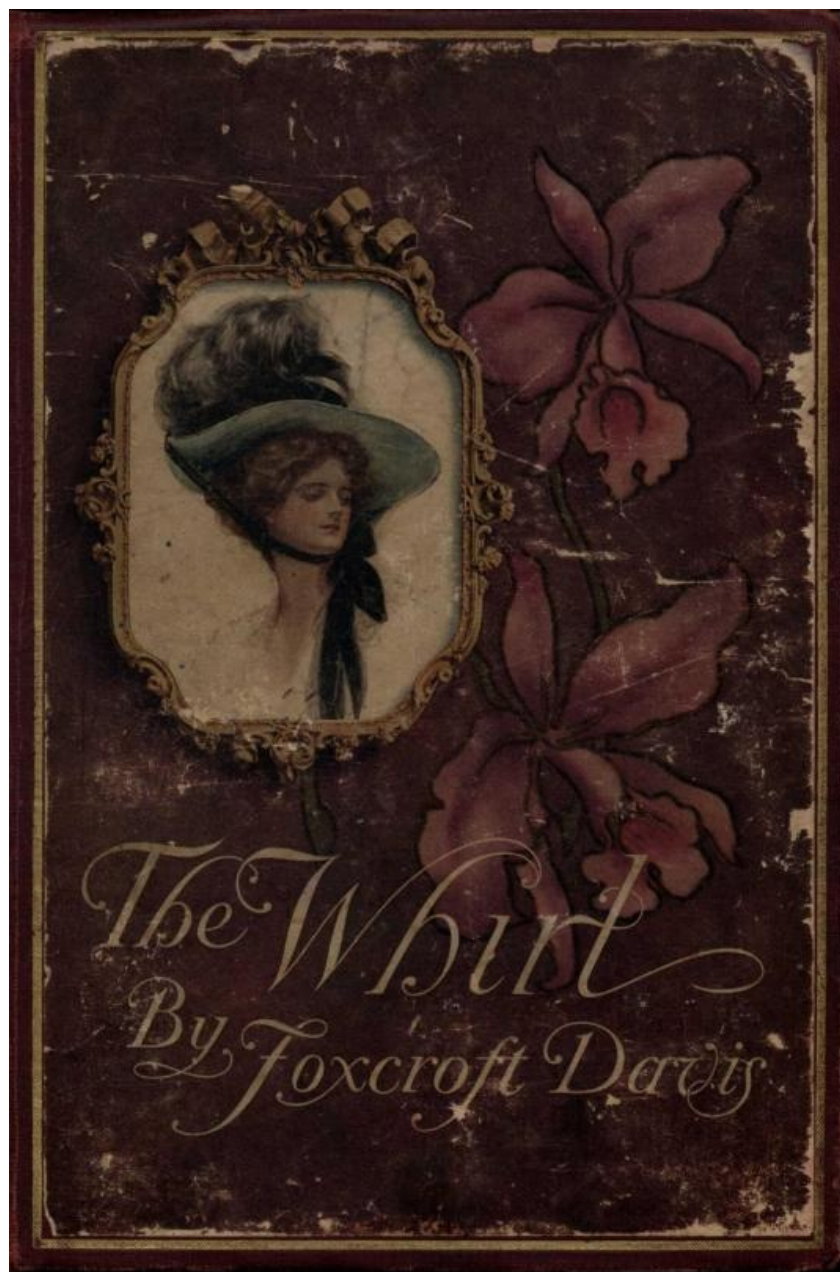
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WASHINGTON SOCIETY ***



Cover art

"Her glance, quick yet soft, was much the prettiest thing
of the sort Sir Percy had ever seen" (Page [33](#))
(missing from book) *Frontispiece*

THE WHIRL
A ROMANCE OF
WASHINGTON SOCIETY

BY
FOXCROFT DAVIS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
HARRISON FISHER AND
B. MARTIN JUSTICE

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ILLUSTRATIONS

["Her glance, quick yet soft, was much the prettiest thing of the sort Sir Percy had ever seen"](#)
(page 33) (missing from book) *Frontispiece*

["It is the old story. You are worthy to marry her, but I am not worthy to speak to her"](#)

["I shall leave this house to-morrow morning, never to re-enter it"](#)

I

Few men have the goal of their ambition in sight at thirty-eight years of age. But Sir Percy Carlyon had, when he was appointed First Secretary of the British Embassy at Washington, with a very well-arranged scheme worked out by which, at the end of four years, he was to succeed his uncle, Lord Baudesert, the present Ambassador. This realisation of his dreams came to Sir Percy on a December afternoon dark and sharp, as he tramped over the frozen ground through the stark and leafless woods, which may yet be found close to Washington.

He was a great walker, this thin, sinewy Englishman with a sun-browned skin, burnt by many summers in India and weather-beaten by many winters in the snowbound depths of the Balkans. He had the straight features and clear, scintillant eyes which are the marks of race among his kind, but no one would have been more surprised than Sir Percy if he had been called handsome. Within him, on this bleak December afternoon, was a sensation strange to him after many years: the feeling of hope and almost of joy. He stopped in the silent heart of the woods, and, leaning against the gnarled trunk of a live oak, thrust his hands into his pockets and glanced, with brightening eyes, towards the west. A faint, rosy line upon the horizon was visible through the naked woods; all else in sky and earth was dun-coloured.

To Sir Percy Carlyon this thread of radiance was a promise of the future. This was, to him, almost the first moment of retrospection since the day, two months before, when, in the Prime

Minister's rooms in Downing Street, a new life in a new country opened before him. Since then--amid the official and personal preparations necessary to take up his post, his seven days on the Atlantic, during which he worked hard on pressing business, the necessary first visits upon his arrival--Sir Percy had scarcely enjoyed an hour to himself. He had found the Embassy overwhelmed with affairs, about which his uncle, Lord Baudesert, coolly refused to bother himself, but which Sir Percy, as a practical man, felt obliged to take up and carry through. That day, only, had he, by hard and systematic work, caught up what was called by Lord Baudesert, with a grin, the "unfinished business" at the British Embassy, but which really meant the neglected business of a lazy, clever old diplomatist who never did to-day what he could put off until to-morrow.

Lord Baudesert had been many years at Washington, and had a thorough knowledge not only of the affairs of the American people, but of their temper, their prejudices and their passions. In an emergency his natural abilities, and a kind of superhuman adroitness which he possessed, together with the vast fund of knowledge that he had accumulated, but rarely used, made him a valuable person to the Foreign Office. However, as soon as the emergency passed Lord Baudesert returned to his usual occupation of studying the American newspapers and anything else which could add to the already vast stock of knowledge which he possessed, but rarely condescended to use.

The Embassy was presided over by Lord Baudesert's widowed sister, Mrs. Vereker, an amiable old sheep of the early Victorian type. Then there were three lamb-like Vereker girls, Jane, Sarah and Isabella, all likewise early Victorian, who regarded their uncle as a combination of Bluebeard and Solomon, and altogether the most important and the most terrifying person on this planet. Lord Baudesert's favourite instrument of torture to the ladies of his family was the threat to marry an American widow with billions of money. How this would have unfavourably affected her the excellent Mrs. Vereker could not have told to save her life--but the mere hint always gave her acute misery.

The secretaries of the Embassy were very well-meaning young men, who attended to their work as well as they knew how, but as Lord Baudesert seldom took the trouble to read a document, and would not sign his name to anything which he had not read, it was difficult to get business transacted. When Sir Percy Carlyon was getting his instructions from the Prime Minister concerning his post of First Secretary at Washington the Premier had remarked:

"Your uncle, you know, is the laziest man God ever made, but he is also one of the cleverest. No living Englishman knows as much about American affairs as Lord Baudesert, or has ever made himself so acceptable to the American people, but when he isn't doing us the greatest service in the world, he lets everything go hang. We are sending you to Washington to get some work done. I hear you can bully Lord Baudesert in every particular."

"Except one," Sir Percy had replied. "Neither I, nor anybody else, nor the devil himself, could make Lord Baudesert work when he doesn't want to."

Sir Percy, on this December afternoon in the woods, reviewed in his own mind his whole diplomatic career up to the point of that interview. His first beginnings had been as a minor civil servant on the Indian frontier twelve years before. It is not uncommon, however, for those clever youngsters who are sent out to India to govern, negotiate, threaten and subdue a vast and deceitful people to find themselves entrusted with responsibilities which might appal older representatives of the British Empire.

Far removed from Western civilisation, and out of the field of newspapers, young Sir Percy Carlyon was in effect ruler and lord of a million people, whose united word counted less with their English masters than one sentence from this sahib of twenty-six years of age. His post was on the Afghanistan frontier, where he had to circumvent Afghans and Russians and out-general all of them. The times were difficult, and in spite of young Carlyon's great and even splendid gifts of insight, temper and diplomacy, he would hardly have succeeded in his work but for one man. This was General Talbott, who was in military command of the district, and an admirable type of the soldier-diplomatist. He had stood by Sir Percy with a vigour and generosity, and a fatherly kindness, which no man not an utter ingrate could ever forget. They had gone together through stormy and tragic days, and when the reports had reached the Indian Office it was Sir Percy to whom General Talbott gave the largest share of the credit, and even the glory, which had resulted from their joint efforts.

Thanks to this extraordinary generosity on General Talbott's part, Sir Percy's efforts had received prompt recognition. His first two years in India were brilliantly successful, and marked him as a rising man among his fellows. From that time onwards he had been what is called lucky-

-that is to say, when two courses were opened to him he took the sensible one. After a brief but distinguished service in India he was transferred to the diplomatic corps, and good fortune followed him.

But the greatest stroke of his life had come two years before, in the Balkans, that line upon which, as Lord Beaconsfield said, "England fights." The Foreign Office happened not to be as judicious in a certain juncture as its young representative; in fact, the Premier committed the most astounding blunder, which, if it had become known, would have sent him out of office amid the inextinguishable laughter of mankind. This blunder, however, was known only to four persons--the Prime Minister himself, his private secretary, a telegraph operator and Sir Percy Carlyon. What Sir Percy did was to wire back to the head of the Government:

"Message received, but unintelligible owing to telegraph operator's ignorance of English."

Then he proceeded to act upon his own account. Three days later the Russian envoy was on his way to St. Petersburg on an indefinite leave of absence and Sir Percy was domiciled with the reigning sovereign at his country place, and was in the saddle to stay.

Six months after he had an interview with the Prime Minister. Not much was said, but Sir Percy was asked in diplomatic language to name what he wanted. He named it, and it was to be First Secretary at Washington when his promotion was due, then service at some smaller European court as Minister, and to succeed Lord Baudesert on his retirement.

The Prime Minister was not startled at the proposition. He knew Sir Percy to be a man of lofty ambition and not likely to underrate himself. The scheme, moreover, had in it elements of fitness and common-sense. The Prime Minister was heartily tired of gouty old gentlemen in great diplomatic positions, and thought it rather a good idea to make a man an Ambassador before he got too old. Besides, nothing that Sir Percy Carlyon could have asked in reason would have been too much, considering from what the Premier had been saved. So it was arranged that he should go to Washington as First Secretary, and the rest of the plan was likely to be carried out even if there should be a change in the party in power. Eighteen months afterwards the appointment was made and the first step in the programme taken.

In looking back upon his career, Sir Percy saw nothing but good fortune--great and exceptional good fortune; so much so, that he began to ask himself whether, like the old Greeks, a price would not be demanded from him for all that had been given him. The idea, however, was unpleasing, and he began, Alnaschar-like, to plan what he should do when he became Ambassador. Then a thought stole into his mind which made his somewhat grim face relax; there ought to be an Ambassadors. He could see her in his mind's eye, a beautiful, stately English girl, looking like the elder sister of the tall, white lilies. She must be grave and dignified, and very reticent--a talkative Ambassadors would be a horror. He would like her to be of some great English home. Himself one of the best born men in England, he had a fancy, even a weakness, for distinguished birth. He had a strong prejudice against members of the diplomatic corps marrying outside of their countries, and especially he disapproved of diplomats rushing pell-mell into marriage with American girls. He had known a few of these feminine American diplomatists in his time, and there was not one he considered well fitted for her position. Most of them talked too much; and all of them dressed too much. Then many of them had shoals of relatives, whom they insisted on dragging around with them to the various European capitals, and these relations generally involved them in social battles which were anything but dignified. On the whole, Sir Percy had fully made up his mind to marry none but an Englishwoman.

By the time he had reached this point in his reverie he was striding fast through the woods in the bitter winter dusk towards the town. Suddenly a woman's face, like a face in a dream, passed before his mind. The thought of her brought his rapid walk to a dead stop, like a dagger thrust into his heart. The image of Alicia Vernon rose before him--Alicia, who was tall and fair, and had a flute-like voice and the deepest and darkest blue eyes he had ever seen--Alicia, the only child of the man who had befriended him more than all the men in the world--General Talbott.

True, he had been but twenty-six years of age when he met Alicia, who was two years his senior. True, that older and stronger men than he had succumbed to her beauty, her charm, her courage, her fitness, and her wantonness. Not one of them, however, but had better excuse than himself, so thought Sir Percy, his eyes involuntarily cast down with shame.

When he first met her, Alicia was already married to Guy Vernon, weak, worthless and rich. Sir Percy remembered, with a flush of self-abasement, how ready, nay, how eager, he had been to listen to the plausible stories Alicia told him of Guy Vernon's ill-treatment and neglect of her. But she had omitted to mention that she had squandered half of Guy Vernon's fortune within the first three years of their married life, and had compromised herself with at least half-a-dozen men

since her marriage. True, also, that Alicia and Sir Percy were at a lonely post among the hills on the Afghan frontier, and that he and Guy Vernon's wife had been thrown together in an intimacy impossible anywhere else on the face of the globe. True, again, was it that Alicia Vernon's flattery had been insidious beyond words. Money was what she had heretofore required more than anything else on earth except the enslavement of men. Sir Percy's fortune, however, was only a modest patrimony, which would scarcely have sufficed for six months for what Alicia Vernon considered her actual needs.

As she had in reality seduced Sir Percy's honour, so, in a way, was she herself seduced by his powerful intelligence, by his brilliance and by his success, which, with a woman's prescience, she felt sure was only the presage of greater things. She inherited from her father a clear and trenchant mind, and she readily foresaw that the time would come when this young Indian civil servant would be heard of by all his world. She, however, was his first courtier.

It was impossible that a woman so gifted, so complex, so courageous as Alicia Vernon should not have at least one virtue in excess. That was her love for her father. False she was to him in many ways, but true she ever was in love of him. By the exercise of all her intelligence, and by eternal vigilance, she had succeeded in making General Talbott believe her the purest, the most injured woman alive. He always called her "my poor Alicia," and hated her husband with a mortal hatred, thinking him to have injured the gentlest and sweetest of women.

Sir Percy's infatuation for Alicia Vernon lasted but a few months, and, through Alicia's woman's wit, was unsuspected by the world, least of all by General Talbott, who adored his daughter. Then Sir Percy awoke once more to honour, and pitied the woman and hated himself for the brief downfall.

It is not every man who beats his breast and throws ashes on his head who is a true penitent. But no man felt bitterer remorse for his wrongdoing than did Sir Percy Carlyon. He applied the same judgment to himself that he did to other men, and while reckoning his fault at its full wickedness, also reckoned that sincere penitence was not entirely worthless. He had lived his life to that time of remorse in cheerful ignorance and a silent defiance of the Great First Cause; but upon the darkness of his soul stole a ray of light. He began to believe a little in a personal God, a father, a judge and a school-master who required justice and obedience of mankind. Sir Percy became secretly a religious man. He did not go to church any oftener than before, nor did he take refuge in Bible texts, but the prayer of the publican was often in his heart, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

After a pause of a minute or two he resumed his quick, swinging walk. The December night was upon him, although it was not yet six o'clock, and he had still five miles to tramp before reaching Washington. That night the initial ball of the season was to be given at the British Embassy, and Sir Percy was, for the first time, to see the kaleidoscopic Washington society. His rapid walk stimulated him and enabled him to put out of his mind that painful and humiliating recollection of his early lapse, which had lain in hiding for him by night and day, by land and sea, for ten years past. So long as he had been in Europe Alicia had not allowed him to forget her, but had tracked him from place to place. How well he remembered the anger and disgust he felt when she would suddenly appear--beautiful, charmingly dressed, smiling and composed--on the terrace at Homburg and challenge him with her eyes! How hateful became the Court balls at Buckingham Palace when Alicia Vernon, leaning upon her father's arm, would greet Sir Percy in her seductive, well-modulated voice, of which he knew and hated every note! How wearisome became the visits to great country houses when Alicia, as it so often happened, floated into the drawing-room on the evening of his arrival, and was generally the most beautiful and most gifted woman there, with more knowledge of what she should not know than any other woman present! At least, thought Sir Percy, his spirits rising, he would be free in Washington from Alicia Vernon's presence. There was not much here to attract a woman of her type.

By the time the lights of Washington studded the darkness and the tall apartment-houses, sparkling with electric lights, loomed against the black sky, Sir Percy was himself again, cheerful, courageous--ready to meet life with a smile, a sword or a shield, as might be demanded.

II

The British Embassy was blazing with light, and the musicians were tuning their instruments in the ball-room, when Sir Percy came in, a little before ten o'clock. Lord Baudesert, a handsome,

black-eyed and white-haired man, his breast covered with decorations, was critically inspecting Mrs. Vereker and the three Vereker girls, Jane, Sarah and Isabella. All were panic-stricken as Lord Baudesert's keen eyes travelled from the top of their sandy, abundant hair down to their large feet encased in white satin slippers.

"I swear, Susan," Lord Baudesert was saying to Mrs. Vereker, a large, patient, soft-voiced woman, "I believe that black velvet gown you wear figured at the old Queen's coronation."

"I have only had it ten years, brother," murmured Mrs. Vereker; "and it is the very best quality of black silk velvet, at thirty shillings the yard. A black velvet gown never goes out of fashion."

"Not if it belongs to you," answered Lord Baudesert, laughing. "And why don't you three girls dress like American girls? Your gowns look as if they had been hung out in the rain and dried before the kitchen fire and then thrown at you."

Jane, Sarah and Isabella, accustomed to these compliments, only smiled faintly but Sir Percy, looking Lord Baudesert squarely in the eye, remarked:

"They don't dress like American girls because they are English girls; and, for my part, I never could understand how any sane man could prefer an American to an English girl. As for Aunt Susan's gown, it is very handsome and appropriate, and she should not pay any attention to your views on the subject."

Mrs. Vereker looked apprehensively at Sir Percy, whom she regarded as a superserviceable champion, likely to get her into additional trouble.

"Oh, my dear Percy!" she hastened to say, "Lord Baudesert's taste in dress is perfect. I am sure I would be as smart as any one if I only knew how, but we are at the mercy of the dressmakers, and Lord Baudesert can't understand that."

"Lord Baudesert can understand anything he wants to," answered Sir Percy, laughing.

Then Lord Baudesert laughed too. Sir Percy's determination not to be bullied by him was an agreeable sensation to Lord Baudesert, accustomed as he was to be approached on all fours by the ladies of his family.

The occasion to worry his womankind, however, was too good for Lord Baudesert, and he began again to his nephew:

"I hope, my dear boy, you will meet a friend of mine to-night--Mrs. Chantrey--a widow, very handsome, fine old Boston family, with something like a billion of money."

Mrs. Vereker sighed. Mrs. Chantrey was her rod of scourging, which Lord Baudesert freely applied. Then, taking his nephew's arm, the Ambassador walked into the next room, and out of Mrs. Vereker's hearing expressed his true sentiments.

"You will see American women in full force to-night," he said. "They are strange creatures, full of *esprit*, and they have brought the art of dress to the level of a fine art. Be sure to look at their shoes and their handkerchiefs. I am told that their stockings are works of art. Don't mind their screeching at you, you will get used to it. There is great talk of their wonderful adaptability, nevertheless I never saw one of them whom I really thought was fitted to be the wife of a diplomat. You needn't pay any attention to the way I talk about Mrs. Chantrey; I wouldn't marry that woman if she were made of radium at two million dollars the pound, but it amuses me to worry Susan on the subject."

"That's nice for Aunt Susan," answered Sir Percy--"but on one point my mind is made up: I shall never marry an American."

"I can tell you one thing," continued Lord Baudesert: "marrying an American heiress is about the poorest investment any man can make, if he has an eye to business. In this singular country money is never mentioned by the bridegroom. That one word 'settlement' would be enough to make an American father kick any man out of the house. The father, however, is certain to mention money to his prospective son-in-law. He demands that everything his daughter's husband has should be settled on the wife, and generally requires that his future son-in-law's life be insured for the wife's benefit. Then, whatever the American father has to give his daughter he ties up as tight as a drum, so that the son-in-law can't touch it, and everything else the son-in-law may get depends on his good behaviour. The American girl, having been accustomed to regard herself as a pearl beyond price, expects her husband to be a sort of coolie at her command. If he isn't she flies back to her father, and the father proceeds to cut off supplies from the son-in-law. Oh, it is a great game, the American marriage, when it is for high stakes. I take it that it is impossible for any European, even an Englishman, to get at the point of view of an American father concerning his daughter."

Then the first violin among the musicians played a few bars of a waltz. Sarah and Isabella,

seeing Lord Baudesert's back turned, waltzed around together in a corner of the drawing-room. As soon, however, as they caught Lord Baudesert's eye they left off dancing and scuttled back under the wing of their mother.

"You seem to have terrorised those girls pretty successfully," remarked Sir Percy; "why don't you let the poor things have a little independence?"

"My dear fellow, they wouldn't know what to do with independence if they had it. They have behind them a thousand years of a civilisation based upon the submission of an Englishwoman to an Englishman. They would be like overfed pheasants trying to fly, if they had a will of their own, and they are happy as they are. They always sing when I am not by. I annoy Susan occasionally by talking about Mrs. Chantrey. When that lady is in full canonicals, with all her diamonds, she looks like the Queen of Sheba in Goldmark's opera. She looks worse than a new duchess at her first Court."

At that moment the great hall door was opened, and the first guest, a tall, slight, well-made man, with a trim grey moustache, entered, and was shown into the dressing-room. Lord Baudesert then took his stand, or rather his seat, near the door of the drawing-room, with Mrs. Vereker at his side.

"I always have the gout," he explained to Sir Percy, "at balls. It is tiresome to stand, and, besides, an Ambassador is entitled to have some kind of gentlemanly disease of which he can make use upon occasions."

"I am so sorry," said Mrs. Vereker sympathetically to Lord Baudesert, "that the gout is troubling you this evening. I have not heard you speak of it for months."

"Haven't had a touch since the last ball," calmly replied Lord Baudesert, and then he stood up to greet the early guest, who entered without showing any awkwardness at his somewhat premature arrival.

"Delighted to see you," said Lord Baudesert, with the greatest cordiality. "It is not often you honour a ball. Let me introduce my nephew and new Secretary of the Embassy to you--Sir Percy Carlyon, Senator March."

The two men shook hands, and instantly each received a good impression of the other.

"The Ambassador must have his joke," said Senator March. "It is true that I seldom go to balls, nor am I often asked. You see how little I know of them by my turning up ahead of time. The card said ten o'clock, and to my rude, untutored mind it seemed as if I were expected at ten o'clock, and here I am, the sole guest. I don't suppose the smart people will show up for an hour yet."

"So much the better, for it gives me the chance to talk to you," replied Lord Baudesert.

Then the three men sat down together and chatted. The conversation was chiefly between the Ambassador and the Senator. A question concerning international affairs had been up that day in the Senate, and Senator March, who was Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, had spoken upon it. He gave a brief *resumé* of what he had said, and Lord Baudesert, in a few incisive sentences, threw a flood of light upon the subject. Sir Percy listened with interest to what Senator March had to say. It was his first informal conversation with an American public man, and he admired the ease, the simplicity and the sublime common sense with which Senator March handled the complicated question, and so expressed himself.

"There is no excuse for our treating any question except in the most sensible, practical manner," answered Senator March. "In Europe you are shackled with the traditions and customs of a thousand years. You can't take down even a tottering wall without endangering the whole structure. With us it is all experimental. Nevertheless, our affairs are no better managed than yours in England."

Sir Percy at every moment felt more and more the charm of Roger March's manner and conversation. It was so simple, so manly and so breezy. Nor was Senator March without appreciation of this clean-limbed, clear-eyed Englishman. Half an hour passed quickly in animated conversation before there was another arrival; but then the stream became a torrent. In twenty minutes the rooms were full and the dancers were skimming around the ballroom to the thrilling strains of music. Mrs. Chantrey was easily identified by Sir Percy. She was a big, handsome woman, with an enormous gown of various fabrics and colours, who so blazed with diamonds that she looked like a lighthouse.

Sir Percy was not a dancing man, nor did he ever admire dancing as an art until he saw the soft, slow, rhythmical waltz as danced by Americans. His duties as assistant host kept him busy, but, like a born diplomat, he could see a number of things at once and pursue more than one train of thought at the same time. As he talked to men and women of many different nationalities,

ages and conditions, his eyes wandered toward the ball-room, where the waltzers floated around. Never in his life had he seen so many good dancers, particularly among the women. One girl in particular caught his eye. Her figure was of medium height, and her black evening gown showed off her exquisite slenderness, the beautiful moulding of her arms and the graceful poise of her head. Her face he scarcely noticed, except that she had milk-white skin contrasted with very dark hair and eyes. She danced slowly, with a motion as soft as the zephyr at evening time. Sir Percy's eyes dwelt with pleasure upon her half a dozen times while the waltz lasted. Then came the rapid two-step, which reminded Sir Percy of a graceful romp. But the black-haired, white-skinned girl was not then taking part.

The drawing-room grew crowded, and Sir Percy, moving from group to group, did not go into the ball-room. He was introduced to a great number of ladies, young, old and middle-aged, and the general impression made upon him was what he expected of the American woman *en masse*. Prettiness was almost universal, but beauty of a high order was rare. One girl alone he reckoned strictly beautiful--Eleanor Chantrey, the only child of the lady like the lighthouse, but totally unlike her. Eleanor was tall and fair, and Sir Percy thought he had never seen a more classic face and nobler bust and shoulders. Her voice, too, was well modulated, and delicious to hear after the peacock screams of most of the women around him. Miss Chantrey had both read and travelled much, and had the peculiar advantage of knowing the best people everywhere, quite irrespective of the smart set. It soon developed that she and Sir Percy had mutual friends in England, and had even stayed at the same great country house, although not at the same time. Her manner was full of grace and dignity, but with a touch of coldness like a New England August day. It was quite unlike the English. Eleanor was the highly prized American daughter, whose value is impressed upon her by that most insidious form of flattery--the being made much of from the hour of her birth. Nothing, however, could be farther from assumption than Eleanor's calm, grave sweetness, with a little touch of pride. Sir Percy, smiling inwardly, could not but be reminded by this gentle and graceful American beauty of some royal princess before whom the world has ever bowed. She was well worth seeking out, however, and Sir Percy, thinking he was doing the thoroughly American thing, asked Miss Chantrey if he might, in the name of their mutual friends, call upon her.

"My mother will be very glad to see you, I am sure. We receive on Tuesdays," she answered, and named a house in the most fashionable quarter.

A little later Sir Percy found himself standing among a fringe of men around the ballroom door. The lancers quadrille was being danced, and once more he noticed the black-haired girl dancing, and this time he was surprised to see that her partner was Senator March. The Senator went through the square dance with the gravity and exactness with which he had learned his steps at a dancing school forty years before. His partner was no less graceful in the square dance than in the waltz, and was more unrestrained, making pretty little steps and curtsies and movements of quick grace, which made her dancing the most exquisite thing of the kind Sir Percy had ever seen. When the quadrille was over he suddenly found her standing almost in front of him, laughing and clinging to Senator March's arm. Her profile, clear cut as a cameo, but not in the least classic, was directly in front of Sir Percy, and he was forced to admire her sparkling face. She had not much regular beauty, but her white skin, contrasted with her black hair, dark eyes and long, black lashes, was charming. Her mouth was made for laughter and on the left side was an elusive dimple. Sir Percy hated dimpled women, but he found himself looking at the girl's mobile face and watching the appearance and disappearance of this little hiding place of laughter upon her cheek. And, wonderful to say, she did not screech, but spoke in a voice that was singularly clear and musical. Some experience of the American methods of introducing right and left had been Sir Percy's, and he was not surprised when Senator March laid a hand upon his arm and whispered:

"May I introduce you to this young friend of mine, Miss Lucy Armytage of Bardstown, Kentucky? You have heard of Kentucky horses, haven't you?"

"Yes," answered Sir Percy, with the recollection of Iroquois and the Derby in his mind.

"Very well, the Kentucky horses are not a patch on the Kentucky women."

"In that case," replied Sir Percy, laughing, "may I beg you to introduce me to Miss Armytage at once?"

Senator March introduced him in due form, and Miss Armytage, holding out a slim hand, cast down her eyes demurely and murmured that she was glad to meet him.

"Sir Percy has only lately arrived in America," explained Senator March.

"And has probably never heard of Bardstown, Kentucky," responded Miss Armytage, suddenly

lifting her eyes and fixing them full upon Sir Percy. "I am afraid," she said meditatively, "that I follow the example of St. Paul. You know he was always bragging about being Paul of Tarsus, and I am always bragging that I am Miss Armytage of Bardstown, Kentucky."

"Pray tell me all about Bardstown," said Sir Percy gravely, and Miss Armytage, in her clear, sweet voice, and with equal gravity, proceeded to a statistical and historical account of Bardstown, the dimple in her cheek meanwhile coming and going.

Sir Percy listened, surprised and amused. The affected dryness of what Miss Armytage was telling was illuminated with little turns and sparkles of wit; and from Bardstown she proceeded to give, with the utmost seriousness, a brief synopsis of the history and resources of the State of Kentucky. Sir Percy grew more and more amused. He perceived that she was diverting herself with him, a thing no woman had ever done before. He had heard of American humour, but he did not know that the women possessed it. He felt sure that Miss Armytage was a real humourist, and also a sentimentalist when she said, presently:

"I was at a great dinner in New York last week, and as we were sitting at the table I heard an organ grinder in the street outside playing 'My Old Kentucky Home,' and while I was listening, and thinking about Bardstown, two tears dropped into my soup. I never was so ashamed in my life."

She looked into Sir Percy's eyes with an appealing air, like a child who knows not whether it is to be rebuked or praised. Her whole air and manner radiated interest in Sir Percy as she asked softly:

"What do you suppose the other people at the table thought of me?"

Sir Percy answered her as any other man would:

"That you had a very tender heart."

He was charmed with her simplicity, combined with her natural grace. A moment after a young naval officer came up and claimed Miss Armytage for a dance. She turned to go with him, but looked backward at Sir Percy with a glance such as Clytie might have given the departing lord of the unerring bow. Her glance, quick yet soft, was much the prettiest thing of the sort Sir Percy had ever seen. He perceived that Miss Armytage was the typical American girl. However, he was much disgusted, as his eyes followed Lucy, to see her glancing up into the eyes of Stanley, the young naval man, with precisely the same look of appealing confidence with which she had bewitched himself two minutes before. He hated a coquette with an Englishman's hatred of being trifled with by a woman, and immediately classified Miss Armytage, of Bardstown, Kentucky, as a very finished coquette, and concluded not to trouble himself further about her.

The ball went on merrily, and it was one o'clock in the morning before the carriages began to drive away from the *porte-cochère*. Among the last guests to go was Lucy Armytage. Sir Percy was standing in the hall when Lucy tripped down the stairs and joined an elderly, grey-bearded man standing near Sir Percy. A long white evening cloak enveloped her slender figure and a white gauze scarf was upon her soft black hair. She joined the grey-bearded man, who had on his overcoat and his hat under his arm, and then she, glancing toward Sir Percy, cried softly:

"I am so glad I met you. May I introduce my uncle? Colonel Armytage, of Kentucky, Sir Percy Carlyon. My uncle is a member of Congress; in Kentucky that makes him a colonel, though I can't explain why."

"My dear sir," responded Colonel Armytage, extending a cordial hand, "I am extremely pleased to meet you, extremely so! I am of unmixed English descent myself, and quite naturally I look upon our country as the mother of us all."

Sir Percy tried to imagine a member of Parliament meeting an American as Colonel Armytage met him, but his imagination was not equal to anything so extraordinary. He understood, however, and appreciated the frank, unconventional good-will which animated Colonel Armytage, and replied with sincere courtesy:

"I am always glad to hear that sentiment from an American, and be assured we feel the tie of blood as much as you do."

"Some of you do," answered Lucy oracularly, "but some of you don't. I can tell you a harrowing tale of a little upstart Englishman. Pray excuse me."

Colonel Armytage scowled at Lucy.

"You must forgive her, my dear sir," he said to Sir Percy; "this child has a charter to say and to do as she pleases, and Mrs. Armytage and myself are under bond to obey her. I shall have much pleasure in seeing you if you will honour me with a call. That, I believe, is the custom in Washington, but I assure you, sir, in the State of Kentucky, it would be the native who would call first, and such would be my desire if it were not for this infernal official etiquette which forbids it."

Mrs. Armytage and my niece receive on Tuesdays," and he named a large down-town hotel, which had ceased to be fashionable about forty years before, but still was frequented by Southern and Western representatives.

Then Lucy nodded and smiled and took Colonel Armytage's arm and was gone in a moment.

Sir Percy followed Lord Baudesert to the library and joined him in a cigar and a whisky and soda.

"What do you think of 'em?" asked Lord Baudesert knowingly, and Sir Percy, understanding that the American ladies were meant, answered:

"Very pretty and very well dressed and very much spoiled, I should judge. I can't quite make out how much real and how much apparent cleverness they have."

"No, neither can any one else," replied Lord Baudesert; "they are the most complex creatures alive. You must readjust all your ideas concerning the sex when it comes to studying this particular variety. They are not like Englishwomen, nor Frenchwomen, nor Spanish women, nor German women, nor Hindoo women, that ever I heard, yet they have some of the characteristics of all. Having been afraid of women all my life--except, of course, Susan and her brood--I am more afraid of American women than any others. Don't marry one, my boy. That's my advice--but don't tell Susan I say so."

"Trust me," replied Sir Percy confidently, lighting another cigar.

III

Sir Percy Carlyon had declined to be domiciled at the British Embassy, as Lord Baudesert urged, but took modest chambers close at hand. He found plenty to do, and although he was supposed to be capable of bullying Lord Baudesert, it was impossible to force the Ambassador to a regular course of work every day. Sir Percy, however, watched the chances, and succeeded in getting more out of Lord Baudesert than any one else had ever done. Moreover, Sir Percy was a *persona grata* to Mrs. Vereker and the three girls, not that this mattered to Lord Baudesert, who, as far as women were concerned, was a natural and incurable bully and buccaneer. Lord Baudesert was neither bad-tempered nor bad-hearted, but it cannot be denied that he was a trying person domestically. It was in vain that Sir Percy reminded his aunt and cousins that Lord Baudesert had no power of life or death over them and could not eat them. Mrs. Vereker was horrified at the suggestion that she should exercise a little personal liberty, and the three girls thought Sir Percy slightly cracked when he advised them to assert themselves boldly in the presence of their uncle. On the whole, however, Sir Percy liked his new outlook upon the world, and considered that he was now in the sunshine of good fortune.

Mrs. Vereker, Jane, Sarah and Isabella worked hard in the society grind, and Lord Baudesert was less lazy in social than in official life. Sir Percy, up to the evening of the ball, had not paid a single visit, except of an official nature, but on the Tuesday afternoon following he put on a frock-coat and started out armed with his card case. In front of his own door he hesitated a moment to think whether he should call on the Chantreys or the Armytages. Ridiculous to say, Sir Percy had been haunted by the remembrance of the airy grace, the seductive eyes of this provincial coquette--for so he classified Lucy Armytage; and, calling himself a great fool, he turned his steps first towards the down-town hotel where the Armytages lived. He began to reckon what Lucy's age might be. She had a peculiar guilelessness of look and voice and manner which seldom lasts beyond a girl's twenty-first birthday; yet he judged her to be not less than twenty-five. One thing about her, he admitted, was adorable--an obvious ignorance of evil, a lovely innocence, which revealed itself readily to the experienced eyes of a man of the world. Sir Percy hated knowing women, and that recalled Alicia Vernon. He doubted if she, even as a young girl, had ever been truly innocent in mind.

The afternoon was warm and bright, though it was December, and carriages full of elaborately dressed women were dashing about the streets and standing in long lines before houses which were open on that day. Sir Percy found, when he reached the down-town hotel, that visitors were plentiful there also, and thronged the halls and staircases. He was shown up to the great public drawing-room, in which lights were already blazing, and where a bevy of Congressmen's wives and daughters were holding a joint reception. The huge room was well filled, the ladies being in the majority. Sir Percy, standing in the doorway, was searching for Lucy Armytage when a hand was laid upon his arm.

"I am delighted to see you, Sir Percy," said Colonel Armytage. "Lucy will be delighted, too. She has talked about you incessantly since she met you."

If the uncle of an English girl had confided to Sir Percy that she had talked about him incessantly since their first meeting Sir Percy would have thought it time to ask for leave to hunt big game in the Rockies. But, being a man of brains, he recognised the mental attitude of Colonel Armytage, and found himself rather pleased at the thought that this dark-eyed girl had chatted about him. Probably he was the first Englishman of his kind she had ever met. The next moment he was being introduced to Mrs. Armytage, a motherly soul, in a black velvet gown, which was the twin of Mrs. Vereker's robe of state. A little way off, Lucy, in a white gown, was talking earnestly with a group of plain, elderly persons. She turned her head and caught sight of Sir Percy, but with a little nod and a glint of a smile she continued her conversation, and even escorted the little group to the door, where she said good-bye. Then she came up to Sir Percy.

"They were constituents," she said. "They are very nice people at home, but they are not much accustomed to society, and naturally they feel a little awkward in a room full of strangers like this. If one takes them in hand, and is a little pleasant, they are eternally grateful, and will stand by Uncle Armytage through thick and thin when the nominating convention is on."

"I see you are a politician," said Sir Percy, looking down at her and trying to determine whether white or black were more becoming to her piquant and irregular beauty.

"No; I am a diplomatist, like yourself," replied Lucy, looking up with laughing, unabashed dark eyes into his face. "My uncle, you see, is not a diplomatist at all, and neither his worst enemy nor his best friend could call him a politician. I call him a statesman. He is the dearest man on earth, but he always acts on his impulses, and that, you know, is very unwise."

The gravity with which she said this made Sir Percy smile, but Lucy kept on with the air of an instructress:

"Of course, it is unwise. Imagine Lord Baudesert bolting out the truth upon every occasion! And that is just what my uncle does. My aunt thinks him the wisest person in the world, so you see I am the only one in the family who is capable of any diplomacy at all. Now, as I am twenty-five years old----"

"So old as that?" said Sir Percy, pretending surprise.

"Twenty-six next birthday," gravely responded Lucy, "and I have learned a great deal. One thing is, that constituents never forgive one if they are not shown attention in Washington. I assure you my attentions to Bardstown people in Washington got my uncle his last nomination. I took a grocer's daughter round with me sight-seeing, and I gave nine teas in one month for Bardstown girls. I didn't commit the folly of asking for invitations for them. Nobody thanks you for introducing the superfluous girl, and I can't see why one should expect other people to pay one's social debts. But I paid all my own debts, and made Uncle Armytage do a lot of things for the Bardstown men who were here, which he said he hadn't time to do. But I made him find the time. Isn't that diplomacy?"

"Diplomacy and good sense combined," answered Sir Percy.

He thought he had never seen so expressive a face as Lucy Armytage's. Every word she uttered seemed to have a corresponding expression of the eye. Her cheeks were colourless, like the leaves of a white rose, but her lips were scarlet and showed beautiful and regular teeth. A charming English girl always reminded Sir Percy of a beautiful rose in bloom, but this girl was like the star-like jessamine, which grows not in every garden, its white, mysterious flowers hiding in the depths of its green leaves and casting its delicious perfume afar. Then Lucy said, suddenly changing the subject:

"I have been in a dream all day. This morning I went for a walk far into the country, as I often do, and I took Omar with me."

"Omar?" asked Sir Percy, not quite understanding her.

"'The Rubaiyat,' I mean. Everybody reads it here. It always takes me into another world. Our life is so vivid, so full of action, so concerned with to-day, and Omar's world is all peace and dreaming. I daresay you can read Omar in the original?"

"A little; but I didn't know that Americans liked peace and dreaming."

"Wait until you see more of us. There is Senator March; I must speak to him."

She turned and went up to Senator March, who had come in and was standing talking with Mrs. Armytage. Sir Percy remained some minutes looking at the sight before him. He was reminded of those meetings of the Primrose League which bring together all manner of men and women. Meanwhile he was acutely conscious of Lucy's presence, although half the room separated them. She was indeed like the jessamine flower whose languorous sweet odour forces

one to seek it.

Sir Percy found a few acquaintances, and while talking with them Senator March made his adieux and came up.

"Come," he said, "my brougham is below; let us take a turn together round the speedway."

Sir Percy liked the simple friendliness of Senator March's tone and manner, and readily accepted. As the two men passed along the corridor of the hotel another man was entering who came up and shook hands with Roger March. The new-comer carried a satin-lined overcoat on his arm and his hat in his hand. His appearance was so striking that to see him once was to remember him. He was of medium height, rather handsome, with dark hair slightly streaked with grey, a thin-lipped, well-cut mouth, and eyes of peculiar keenness--the eyes that see everything and tell nothing. A few pleasant words were exchanged and Senator March and Sir Percy passed on. Outside, a handsome brougham, with a pair of impatient horses, was waiting. The two men entered and in a little while were whirling along the level curve of the boulevard which skirts the river. The sun was sinking redly, and the water was wine-coloured, in the old Homeric phrase. The air was like champagne, with a sharpness in it brought by the breeze from the inland sea a hundred miles away.

"Did you observe," asked Senator March, "the man I spoke to coming out of the hotel? It was Nicholas Colegrove, one of those thoroughly American types that are worth observing. He is the son of a Congregationalist minister somewhere up in New England. He managed to pay his boy's way through a small college. Then Colegrove went into a railway office as clerk; by sheer force of intellect he has forced his way upward until he is the strongest man in railway circles in this country. Not that everybody knows it--oh, no! Colegrove is one of those men who avoids the shadow of power as much as he loves its substance. He keeps sedulously in the background; but there isn't a railway president in this country who would like to antagonise Nicholas Colegrove."

"One sees at a glance," replied Sir Percy, "that he is a strong man."

"A very strong man. He shows a sort of good will for me, but as I am Chairman of the Committee on Railroads I don't cultivate the intimacy of Nicholas Colegrove. I am a little afraid of the man."

"There are wonderful and diverse American types," said Sir Percy, "of men and women, who are so distinctively American that they seem to belong to this continent as much as Indian corn and the giant trees of California."

"Perhaps so, and our friends the Armytages, for example, are a very distinctive American type. Armytage himself is a sensible man, a good lawyer, and a hard worker in the House, but he is rashly outspoken and fiery tempered. His wife is a good creature, devoted and domestic, but of no particular value to Armytage in his public life, as she always approves of everything he does. The charming Miss Armytage is the real political manager of the family. She is a born diplomatist, if ever I saw one, and manages to conciliate the enemies whom Armytage makes by this hasty temper and unguarded tongue. I admire Lucy Armytage very much, and have often thought, if ever I had a daughter, I would wish her to be like her. I have known her ever since she was a schoolgirl, and often call her by her first name."

"I thought," said Sir Percy, "that American women took no share in public life?"

"Not openly, but every official position in this country, including that of the Presidency, has some time or other been determined by a woman. I know of a Presidential convention where, at midnight, a train was chartered and the party managers, making a run of one hundred and fifty miles in one hundred and sixty-seven minutes, knocked up a possible candidate at two o'clock in the morning and asked if he would consent to have his name presented to the convention. 'Wait until I talk with my wife,' was his answer. He went upstairs, remained fifteen minutes, and came down and said: 'No, gentleman; my wife has the doctor's opinion that my heart is weak, and she refuses to consent that I shall run.' It turned out afterward that the nomination would have been equivalent to an election. Oh, no! our American women, as a rule, carefully avoid any appearance of meddling with politics, but they have a great deal to do with it, nevertheless, just as the Roman ladies had in their time."

As they rolled along in the handsome, well-hung brougham, each man felt a growing regard for the other. Sir Percy, after the English manner, rarely brought a name into conversation, while Senator March, like an American, spoke names freely, and presently mentioned that he was due at Mrs. Chantrey's for a dinner call.

"Come with me," he said to Sir Percy; "the Chantreys will be glad to see you. I know that Mrs. Chantrey dearly loves a member of the diplomatic corps, and the daughter is charming--she is, in her way, as typically American as Lucy Armytage--I often call the child by her first name

involuntarily."

"Miss Chantrey was kind enough to ask me to call," said Sir Percy, and after a while the two men were entering together a fine house in one of the best avenues of the town.

Sir Percy might have imagined himself in an English house. The large pink and white footman at the door was unmistakably English, and the quietness of the atmosphere and repose, which became at once obvious, were as English as the footman. In the beautiful drawing-room Eleanor Chantrey sat beside a tea-table drawn close to the fire. Mrs. Chantrey almost embraced Senator March when he mentioned the liberty he had taken in asking Sir Percy to come with him, and Sir Percy was figuratively invited to rest on Mrs. Chantrey's bosom--like the poor stricken deer.

Mrs. Chantrey had a hidden romance, a heart's dream, a secret aspiration, to be one day an ambassadress, to share Lord Baudesert's title and position. To say that Lord Baudesert's sharp old eyes had seen this, from its first budding, is putting it mildly. In fact, the wily old gentleman had, himself, planted the notion in Mrs. Chantrey's innocent, susceptible, elderly mind, and carefully cultivated it. Every season, for ten years past, Mrs. Chantrey had confidently expected to be asked to preside over the British Embassy, and every season she had been disappointed, yet not without hope. It was one of Lord Baudesert's chief delights in Washington to play upon the hopes and fears of various enormously rich widows, of whom Mrs. Chantrey was the first. And Lord Baudesert, having something like fifty years' experience as an accomplished flirt, managed to keep these ambitious ladies dancing to a very lively tune. Hence the advent of Lord Baudesert's nephew was to Mrs. Chantrey a delightful and encouraging sign, and she was ready to be an aunt to him at a moment's notice.

Only three or four persons were sitting around the tea-table, all of whom Sir Percy had before met. There were no introductions, and when Eleanor Chantrey handed Sir Percy his tea he could scarcely persuade himself that he was not in Mayfair. Eleanor Chantrey, with ten times her mother's brains, had not an atom of coquetry in her being; she was perfectly graceful, and with a sort of cool kindness which suggested sincerity. Instead of being the same to all men, she was different in her manner to each person present, according to her degree of acquaintanceship. To one infirm old gentleman, who was plainly uninteresting at his best, Sir Percy noticed that Eleanor was extremely kind and even cordial in her manner, and pressed him to remain when he made a feeble motion to go.

After a pleasant visit, Senator March and Sir Percy left at the same time; it seemed as if the two could not see too much of each other. When they parted, at Sir Percy's door, it was with the understanding that they should dine together at the club the next evening.

The clear December twilight was at hand and a new moon trembled in the heavens as Sir Percy, instead of going indoors, started for his invariable walk before dinner. He made straight towards the west and soon found himself on a wide avenue recently laid out, with young trees in boxes on each side. A quarter of a mile away from the houses it soon ran into the open fields, with clumps of trees and little valleys on either hand. Nothing quieter, more remote or deserted could be imagined, and yet Sir Percy was but fifteen minutes from his own door. Not a person was in sight, until, after a time, he saw, at some distance ahead, and rapidly approaching, the slight figure of a woman muffled in furs and walking rapidly. Something in the grace of her movements attracted Sir Percy as she came nearer. She held up her muff to her face in an attitude which reminded Sir Percy of Vigée le Brun's picture in the Louvre, "The Lady with the Muff." As the girl flashed past him in the grey twilight he recognised Lucy Armytage. A strange and almost uncontrollable desire suddenly rose within him to join her, but, with the hereditary caution of an Englishman, he turned his head the other way. The next moment Lucy faced around, and, coming up to him, cried breathlessly:

"How glad I am to meet you here! Pray walk with me as far as the car."

There was no help for it, and Sir Percy, with the feeling of delight which follows when a man is forced to do what he wishes to do, replied:

"With the utmost pleasure. Is it not rather late for you to be in so lonely a place?"

"Decidedly so. Our reception closed at five o'clock, just when other people's are beginning, and a friend asked me to drive out in this direction for a little air. She left me on a lighted street, but I wanted to feel the earth under my feet so I walked around this way. I didn't realise how late it was until a few minutes ago, and I was scurrying home half frightened to death."

As she said this, Sir Percy would have liked to open his arms wide and hold her to his breast like a timid bird, but Lucy dispelled this idea by saying:

"Afraid of my uncle, I mean. He makes such a terrible row when I am out late. I am not in the least afraid of anything else."

Her timidity had seemed charming, but her girlish courage was more charming still. Sir Percy's head was in a whirl. No woman had ever impressed him so quickly and so deeply as this black-eyed girl, and he was staggered at the intensity of his own pleasure in being with her. Meanwhile Lucy thought him the most impassive of men, and felt a curious feminine desire to disturb that cool placidity which was so like a lake covered with a thin skin of ice.

"I saw you and Senator March going into the Chantreys'," she said, as they walked rapidly along in the deepening dusk. "I admire Miss Chantrey more than any girl in Washington. At first I thought her a little cold, but her very coldness is a sort of sincerity. I should like to have a house exactly like the Chantreys', except that I would make the atmosphere a little warmer."

She rippled out a laugh, and her eyes, under their long lashes, sought Sir Percy's in the half gloom.

"I am afraid that you would find our English houses a little chilly, and they are not always redeemed by such grace as Miss Chantrey's."

"Oh, one expects a little British chilliness in an English house! You admit, you know, that your reserve is nothing but shyness after all. Now I am not in the least shy, and so I have managed to get on beautifully with the few English people I have met. My uncle, you must know, is an Anglomaniac of the deepest dye, and claims relationship with all the peerage and half the baronetage. He is the most prejudiced man! If it were not for me I don't know what would become of him."

Sir Percy was extremely diverted at the notion of a slip of a girl taking care of a member of that great body which had its origin at Runnymede in the far-off days.

The stars were coming out in the wintry sky and it was yet some little distance to the streets where the gas lamps flared. It was an enchanting walk to Sir Percy, and without a word being spoken concerning a street car, or a cab, Sir Percy and Lucy Armytage walked together along the quieter streets to the very door of the big hotel.

Lucy Armytage went upstairs to her room, the typical hotel bedroom, but which she had transformed into something resembling herself. She had been proud of the bower-like air she had given the large square room, and had regarded with confident admiration the spotless muslin curtains and the thin white draperies over her little bed. Now she looked about her with dissatisfaction. How unlike it was to Eleanor Chantrey's beautiful and artistic room! And then Eleanor had an exquisite yellow boudoir, in which Lucy once had tea with her. How much beauty and ornament and luxury was in Eleanor's life! For the first time Lucy Armytage began to wish for something which could not be furnished in Bardstown, Kentucky.

"At least," she said, rising and speaking to herself, "I *know* I'm provincial. It is a great thing to know the limitations of one's horizon. What a narrow, uncultivated, inartistic, uninteresting person Sir Percy Carlyon must find me after Eleanor Chantrey!"

Then she went to her constant and usually faithful consoler--her mirror. But to-night even the mirror seemed not in a flattering mood, and Lucy only saw a disconsolate girl who, to her mind, could stand no comparison with that fine flower of civilisation--Eleanor Chantrey.

At the same moment Sir Percy was smoking fiercely as he made his way back to his chambers. From the first moment his eyes rested upon Lucy Armytage she had commanded his attention. He had tried to escape from the enchanting spell she had thrown over him, but all in vain. What was the meaning of that stirring of all his pulses, that sudden joy, when he met her in the twilight? He reminded himself that he was thirty-eight years old, quite old enough to know better; that he was the First Secretary of the British Embassy and that he had firmly resolved never to allow himself to become in the least interested in an American woman. He determined to avoid Lucy Armytage in the future as a disturbing element; in short, he resolved to take up arms against his destiny.

IV

Sir Percy Carlyon kept his word to himself, and did not go near Lucy Armytage. Nevertheless he could not avoid seeing her. One dull afternoon he was taking tea with Mrs. Vereker and the three girls, who were all so much alike that only their names differentiated them. In the midst of the deadly dullness with which Mrs. Vereker invested this function visitors were announced. Lucy Armytage with her aunt arrived to pay their call of ceremony after the ball. Mrs. Vereker and Mrs. Armytage were birds, or rather fowls, of a feather, as each of them was distinctly of the

barnyard variety. They sat and talked commonplaces comfortably together, like a couple of old sheep browsing side by side, the lady from Bardstown and the lady from the greatest metropolis in the world, and found each other thoroughly companionable. Not so Lucy Armytage and the three Vereker girls. Lucy's manner of saying the unexpected thing, her gravity, which was really her method of trifling, her quick, incisive humour, puzzled Jane, Sarah and Isabella. So also it puzzled Sir Percy Carlyon, who for that reason found Lucy Armytage the most interesting woman he had ever known. She had odd scraps, and even whole volumes, of knowledge upon the most unexpected subjects. She knew nothing about art or music, but she confessed her ignorance with a sweet humility which bewitched Sir Percy more than all the knowledge that Minerva carried under her helmet. Lucy had, however, read much and indiscriminately about the East, could discuss occultism intelligently, knew Omar, and had the Indian Mutiny at her finger tips.

"The truth is," she said to Sir Percy, holding her muff to shield her face from the fire and reminding him once again of the picture in the Louvre, "we are very old-fashioned in Bardstown. At home we have a great many old books, but not many new ones. My uncle hates modern books, as he does most modern things, and our library is a haphazard collection of antiques."

Then Lord Baudesert entered, and his appearance created the same flutter among the ladies of his family as if a vulture had descended upon a dovecote. Mrs. Vereker hastened to give him tea, while Jane, Sarah and Isabella fell over each other in their efforts to provide him with thin bread and butter. Mrs. Armytage, too, was somewhat awed by the appearance of a live Ambassador and, except Sir Percy, Lucy alone remained tranquil. Lord Baudesert talked with her a little, and was pleased to find that she could give a connected answer without fear or embarrassment. And then an untoward thing occurred--the door opened, and at almost the same moment two South American diplomats, between whom a frantic controversy and charges and counter-charges were raging, entered the room. Mrs. Vereker looked frightened to death, and the Vereker girls could think of nothing else to say but to invite the belligerents half-a-dozen times over each to have tea. Lord Baudesert's manner was perfect in its evenly matched courtesy, and Sir Percy Carlyon was not a whit behind. Lucy Armytage, however, who knew how the land lay, calmly engaged one of the sultry-eyed South Americans in conversation, and even got him off in a corner to look at a picture. Then Sir Percy, seeing a way out of the situation, went up to Lucy and her diplomat and asked them to come into the next room to see a portrait lately added to the Embassy. With perfect tact and grace Lucy managed to take the South American, with Sir Percy escorting them, into the adjoining room--a service for which Sir Percy thanked her with a meaning glance. They were absent only five minutes, but that gave time for the other belligerent to take his departure. Then Lucy's diplomat, after five minutes' talk with Lord Baudesert, went out, and Lucy and Mrs. Armytage began to make their adieux. As Lucy offered her hand to Lord Baudesert he said, smiling:

"I am glad I happened to be here when you called, and more glad that you were here when our South American friends called."

Lucy gave him a roguish glance, which brought a smile to his handsome, saturnine old face.

When she was gone Lord Baudesert, alone in the bosom of his family, remarked:

"That might have been a deuced awkward thing. Miss Armytage stood in the breach and helped to save the situation. She has a great deal of natural tact--looks simple, but is really very artful."

Sir Percy Carlyon sat soberly drinking his tea like a true-born Briton, but inwardly he was not at peace. Lucy Armytage always moved and interested and disturbed him. He glanced toward the low chair in which she had sat and saw her again as "The Lady with the Muff." He heard her voice, gentle yet ringing, and the perfume of the lilies of the valley she had worn pinned upon her breast still pervaded the room. He remained silent while Mrs. Vereker and the three girls discussed Lucy. Mrs. Vereker and Jane thought her very pretty, Sarah and Isabella thought her not pretty at all. Lord Baudesert decided that she was extremely pretty; then they all agreed with him. When the ladies of the family went away to dress for dinner Lord Baudesert asked Sir Percy:

"Did you ever know three such idiots as my nieces?"

"They are not idiots at all," responded his dutiful nephew; "they are afraid of you--that's all."

"Oh, yes, that's all! But that's enough. However, with all their dulness, they are better fitted to be the wives of diplomats than women like that sparkling little Armytage girl. She is clever enough at getting people out of a tight place, but, mark my words, the cleverer women are in getting out of trouble the readier they are to get into it. That's why they are not suited to the diplomatic corps."

"I quite agree with you," answered his nephew, with vigour.

Sir Percy found himself overwhelmed with dinner invitations, which he accepted partly as a duty and partly as a pleasure. He enjoyed the Washington dinners hugely, and after a while grew accustomed to the shrill, and often untrained, voices of the American women. He liked the naturalness and simplicity both of the men and women he met, and the absence of the young-lady-anxious-to-be-married was pleasing to him. He also liked the wives and daughters of his colleagues, and often thought, if dinners were the sum of man's existence on this planet, Washington was the ideal spot in which to live. Besides his work at the Embassy, which was not light, he was making a thorough study of American public affairs--no small undertaking. Then Lord Baudesert was continually clamouring for his nephew's company, so that Sir Percy's days and evenings were full. So full, indeed, was his time, that he ought, in the natural course of events, to have forgotten Lucy Armytage, of whom he only caught stray glimpses during the next month.

Colonel Armytage promptly returned Sir Percy's visit, and Sir Percy, by the exercise of all his will power, managed to call at the hotel one day just after having seen Lucy drive off in a hansom. He was rewarded--or punished, as the case might be--by meeting her face to face at the White House reception that night. She was again talking with Stanley, the handsome young naval officer, dazzling in his uniform. Lucy stood under the branching leaves of a huge palm, in the east room, which made a background for her delicate and *spirituelle* head. She wore the same black gown in which Sir Percy had first seen her, and carried a fan, which she used for the purpose for which it was designed--to accentuate and set off her own charms. Sir Percy passed her with a bow and a word, which she returned with one of those brilliant smiles that transformed her soft and elusive beauty into something vivid, palpitating and star-like. Unconsciously to himself, Sir Percy kept a furtive watch upon her. He saw other men come up to drive Stanley off, and they in their turn were driven off by other enterprising gentlemen. Some of them were ridiculously young, and others were obviously old; but Lucy contrived to make a beardless ensign feel as if he were a full admiral, and a dry-as-dust senator forget the burden of his years and drink once more of the draught of youth. Sir Percy fully determined not to seek Lucy Armytage out, and just as this decision was fixed in his mind he saw her pass upon the arm of Colonel Armytage. He went up to her, and, being a close observer, saw Lucy's mobile face suddenly light up, and the little dimple come and go in her cheek.

"Delighted to see you," said Colonel Armytage; "my niece is dragging me away just as I was beginning to enjoy myself. She has been sending me to bed every night at ten o'clock because I have had a touch of rheumatism, and half-past ten, she has just informed me, is too dissipated for me."

"I believe Miss Armytage claims entire authority over you, doesn't she?" asked Sir Percy, smiling.

"Absolute jurisdiction. She has taken charge of my person and estate, and also Mrs. Armytage, and she manages us both according to her own ideas."

Colonel Armytage said this with a note of pride in his voice, which an American uses when he proclaims he is ruled by his womankind.

They talked together a few minutes, and then Lucy and Colonel Armytage passed on to the cloak-room. When Lucy Armytage was gone the crowded rooms seemed empty to Sir Percy Carlyon. He walked home through the still and quiet streets at midnight and then smoked savagely for an hour before his study fire. No man was ever more surprised, annoyed and chagrined than was Sir Percy Carlyon to find himself bewitched by this captivating, provincial girl, and one amazing thing had happened--she had driven away the image--the hateful image--of Alicia Vernon. Alicia was the only woman who had ever deeply impressed herself upon Sir Percy Carlyon, until he met Lucy Armytage. There was warfare between these two ideals. It seemed to Sir Percy as if Alicia's wantonness had, in a way, cast a shade over all women. If a creature outwardly so modest, so refined, so high-bred, could be at heart a wanton, how could he ever believe in the purity of any woman's heart and mind? He dallied with the false suggestion that, if a woman were dull, she might be good, but if she were clever, her mind might range afar into the forbidden paths. Lucy Armytage, however, from the moment he met her, seemed to restore his shattered ideal of women. He had not reasoned, and could not reason, upon this, but he felt deeply the strong, unconscious and unacknowledged influence of this girl.

Sir Percy, sitting before his fire, repeated to himself that, in spite of Lucy's charm, there was every conceivable reason why he should not seek to marry her. She was an American to begin with, she had never seen a European capital, she was not a linguist, and her only accomplishment, as far as he had seen, was that of dancing, which was scarcely what an

Ambassadress, as his wife would become, would find the most useful accomplishment in the world. He was a poor man for his position, and there was no indication that Lucy had a fortune. Then it suddenly occurred to him that, even if he gave rein to his passion, Lucy might scorn him. She had not been trained to appreciate what he had to offer, and she might classify him with Stanley and the other youngsters whom he had seen dancing attendance upon her.

He called himself an ass, and then, his cigar being out, he lay back in his chair and fell into a delicious reverie. Supposing that Lucy might marry him, what charming, piquant beauty was hers; what insinuating grace; with what naïveté did she admit her imperfections! How unerringly did she divine the best way of making herself acceptable, and how singularly and completely did she possess that art of arts--the art of pleasing! Soon his reverie merged into a soft dream. He was with Lucy Armytage in the winter twilight and they were walking together through the cold, bare, winter woods, and Lucy's slim hand was in his and her eyes were downcast. He awoke suddenly and found his fire out and the clock striking one, and he marched off to bed swearing at himself for his folly and determining that the time had come when he must put Lucy absolutely out of his mind.

The next night Sir Percy Carlyon was to dine at the Chantreys'. Lord Baudesert and Mrs. Vereker were also of the party. Mrs. Chantrey thought a member of the British Embassy but a little lower than the angels, and to this was added the stimulus that she confidently expected to be Lady Baudesert before the year was out. Lord Baudesert encouraged this harmless delusion in every possible way, short of actually proposing, and if he had not been the ablest of diplomatists Mrs. Chantrey would certainly have married him when he was not looking. She had, in her own mind, already rearranged all the furniture in the British Embassy, decided whom she would invite to dinner and whom she would leave out, and intended to be very civil to Mrs. Vereker. However much Lord Baudesert might be outwardly diverted by Mrs. Chantrey's elderly coquetry, he was forced, cynic though he was, to admire Eleanor Chantrey. He even went so far as to concede that, if it were possible for an American woman to be fitted for an Ambassadress, Eleanor Chantrey was that woman. Beauty, distinction and many other accomplishments were hers, and she would have adorned the highest position.

The first person Sir Percy's eyes rested upon as he entered the drawing-room was Lucy Armytage, and to his rage and delight she was given to him to take in to dinner. Every moment thereafter he felt himself falling more and more in love with her.

Senator March was among the guests, and after the ladies had departed and the men were smoking he said to Sir Percy:

"Next month I'm having a little house-party at a country place I have in the Maryland mountains. I go there occasionally for a few days' rest. I hope you will be of the party."

Sir Percy accepted with pleasure. He had never met a man for whom he felt a stronger inclination towards friendship than Roger March.

When the men returned to the drawing-room Lucy Armytage and Eleanor Chantrey were standing together on the hearthrug and talking with animation. Eleanor was resplendent in her beauty, but to Sir Percy Carlyon the slim, black-haired Lucy Armytage seemed to outshine her as a scintillant star, set high in the heavens, outshines the great, round, common-place moon.

Later, driving back to the Embassy in the big, comfortable coach, Lord Baudesert said to Sir Percy:

"Magnificent girl, Miss Chantrey. She has everything: beauty, breeding and fortune. If she were not an American I should advise you to pay your court in that direction."

"But she is an American," replied Sir Percy, laughing, "and that is the unpardonable sin, according to my view of a diplomat's career."

That day two weeks Sir Percy Carlyon found himself at Senator March's country place for the week end. The party was small but brilliant. Eleanor Chantrey, her mother and Lucy Armytage were the only ladies. Their amusements were simple, and consisted chiefly in the enjoyment of the country, open in winter, after a siege in town. Young Stanley, a personable, pleasant fellow, was among the guests, and his frank adoration of Lucy Armytage made everybody smile, except one person, the other man who was in love with her--Sir Percy Carlyon. Sir Percy was too well trained and well balanced to show the chagrin he felt and the Fates, and the exigencies of a house party, threw him more with Eleanor Chantrey. He was forced to admire her, but his admiration was cool and discriminating. On Eleanor's part sprung up a strong admiration for Sir Percy Carlyon. She was not incapable of love, but her will and intellect were always dominant over her heart. And then the daughter repeated her mother's dream of ambition, marked, however, by the enormous difference between the dream of a woman and the sense of a

simpleton. Her beauty, her intelligence, her wealth, her prestige, had inspired her with what Sir Percy called "the princess attitude of mind," which looks around and chooses the man upon whom to bestow her hand. Sir Percy Carlyon was well fitted to please her, and she understood perfectly the really splendid position which would be his in time. She knew, also, he was a man of small estate, and it occurred to her, in her half-laughing, half-serious speculations, that her fortune would be well applied in maintaining the position of an Ambassadors. The idea that if she should indicate the slightest preference for Sir Percy she could not bring him to her feet did not occur to her. Her imagination, stimulated by her ambition, took hold of her, that Sir Percy would be eminently suitable for her, and she played with it, as women of the world do with such ideas quite as much as the veriest country lass.

On the afternoon before the party broke up a walk was proposed. As the case always is, the party paired off, and Eleanor Chantrey considered herself ridiculously mismated with Stanley, who was equally dissatisfied. Sir Percy Carlyon found himself walking with Lucy Armytage through the winter woods in the red February afternoon. The dead leaves were thick underfoot and drowned the sound of footfalls. Unconsciously the two voices grew low, and it was like the fulfilment of Sir Percy's dream. An impulse, stronger than himself, made him try all his powers on this girl, with her innocent guile, her unworldly coquetry. Suddenly he found she vibrated to him as a violin answers the bow. That was too much for the resolution of Sir Percy Carlyon, or for any other man with red blood in his veins.

They were the last to return, and at dinner that night Lucy Armytage's usually pale cheeks were flooded with a deep colour. She had promised to be Sir Percy Carlyon's wife.

V

Sir Percy Carlyon's mystification with his American *fiancée* began within twenty-four hours of the time she had given him her first kiss.

"Above all things," she said earnestly, as they were supposed to be exchanging commonplaces in the train, "nothing must be said of this, not one word to a soul. After a while I will break it to my uncle and aunt."

Sir Percy stared at her, and wondered whether he were dreaming or she raving. He expected, after the English custom, to announce the engagement immediately to Colonel and Mrs. Armytage, and what did Lucy mean by "breaking" it to them? His name, his position and his prospects were such that the greatest match in England might not have been reckoned unequal for him, and here was a girl from Bardstown, Kentucky, who proposed to wait for an auspicious moment when she could "break" this direful news to her aunt and uncle! Something of his involuntary surprise showed in his face, and Lucy studied it gravely and then suddenly laughed.

"I see," she whispered, "you don't understand. This is *our* secret: the world has nothing to do with it."

"I thought," answered Sir Percy, infatuated, but still retaining some of the vestiges of conventionality, "that marriages were quite public affairs. One has to get a license and be married in church."

"But this isn't being married," explained Lucy; "this is only being engaged."

Then the two looked at each other with adoring but uncomprehending eyes. Lucy's woman's wit, however, came to her rescue.

"I think," she said gravely, "that perhaps you know more about the ways of the world than I do, and, after all, there are other ways than those of Bardstown, Kentucky. So that it shall be as you wish."

She said this with such a pretty lowering of her long lashes, and so much deep feeling visible under her coquetry, that Sir Percy was more than ever charmed. Nor was the sound sense at the bottom of Lucy's remark lost upon him. A compromise was effected, by which Colonel and Mrs. Armytage were to be informed immediately, and the rest of the world was to remain in ignorance until within one month of the wedding day.

There was no suspicion among the others of the party concerning what had occurred, and least of all with Eleanor Chantrey and Stanley, both of whom might be said to have contingent interests in the matter.

The morning after Lucy's return she was awakened to receive a bouquet of roses and a letter from Sir Percy Carlyon. There was also a note for Colonel Armytage asking for a private

interview. This precipitated matters.

"I should like to know," said Colonel Armytage, standing with his back to the fire in his own room, with Sir Percy's letter in one hand and *The Congressional Record* of the day before in the other, "what this means--'a private interview.'"

"Perhaps," ventured Mrs. Armytage, "he wants to ask you for a copy of your speech of yesterday. There is an editorial in the newspaper about it this morning."

Lucy, dressed in a delicious pink *négligée*, was standing by the window, holding the roses in her hands.

"No," she said, coming forward with cheeks matching the pale beauty of the roses; "he wants to ask you, uncle--we were together, you know--and--and----"

A light dawned upon Colonel Armytage.

"The fellow wants to marry you," he roared.

"And I want to marry him," answered Lucy, with much spirit.

And then there were kisses and tears and embraces among all three of them.

"It is a far cry to England," said Colonel Armytage, "and I had always hoped you would marry some rising young lawyer in Bardstown."

Mrs. Armytage hinted that it might be a marriage of ambition for Sir Percy, who would naturally wish to be allied to a man of such eminent perfections as Colonel Armytage. At eleven o'clock Sir Percy walked into Colonel Armytage's room. His manner was so manly and so debonair, even in his imminent circumstances, that Colonel Armytage could not but compare him mentally with those Kentucky thoroughbreds who are models of decorum in the stable, on the race track and wherever they are seen. Sir Percy told his story and then waited for Colonel Armytage's decision.

"My dear sir," said Colonel Armytage, after a moment, "I appreciate the respectful attitude you take towards me, but, to tell you the truth, these matters are in the hands of our young people entirely. It is the part of parents--and Mrs. Armytage and I stand in that relation to our niece--to advise and take precautions, but not to coerce. However," he continued, smiling, and showing fine white teeth between his grey moustache and beard, "I don't think there is any coercion in this case."

"I believe not," said Sir Percy, with an answering smile, "these things are somewhat differently managed in the States than with us, but the result is the same. Miss Armytage is doing me the honour of marrying me without the consideration of certain matters which must be mentioned between you and me. As regards settlements, I shall be as liberal as I possibly can, but I must frankly tell you that my fortune is modest. All of it, however, shall be settled upon the future Lady Carlyon and her children."

"I beg to differ with you there," promptly replied Colonel Armytage. "I think children are not to be considered in these matters: I don't believe in putting a woman in the power of her children. Every penny I have is settled upon my wife, and she is my sole executrix, without bond. That is what I require of any man who marries my niece, and also that he insures his life for her benefit, and that her money--for my niece has some money of her own--shall be settled upon her irrevocably."

Sir Percy Carlyon longed both to laugh and to swear, but he controlled his inclinations and said calmly:

"I fully appreciate your point of view, but you must remember certain obligations which we, in England, acknowledge to our successors. My baronetcy will descend to my eldest son, if I be blessed with a son, and there are moral obligations in such a case to give a child something to maintain the rank to which he is born. With regard to the future Lady Carlyon--what is hers I desire to remain hers. If I were a richer man, I think I could convince you of my disinterestedness."

Colonel Armytage, like Lucy, had a mind open to conviction, and, after considering this speech for a moment or two, acknowledged that Sir Percy was right. Thus the dangerous question of settlements was got over without friction. After a few minutes more of conversation, Sir Percy asked to see Mrs. Armytage. That excellent woman, in bestowing her approval upon his suit, told him earnestly that to be related by marriage to such a man as Colonel Armytage was in itself a high privilege and carried a special blessing with it. Sir Percy inwardly agreed with this. He was glad that his future wife was brought up in the atmosphere of love and kindness, which surrounded the Armytages. He had a rapturous half-hour alone with Lucy, and then went away feeling that the gates of paradise had been opened before him.

In order to escape comment, it had been arranged that Sir Percy's visits should be on one or

two evenings in the week, when he would not be likely to meet any of his acquaintances as he passed in and out of the hotel, or might be supposed to be going to see a man. Evening visits, although long since abandoned by the smart set, still prevail among the old-fashioned people and the Congressional circle, in which were most of the Armytages' acquaintances. Never had Sir Percy imagined that such delicious hours in life awaited him as those he spent during the next fortnight in the Armytages' little sitting-room. Colonel and Mrs. Armytage, according to the Bardstown custom, felt it their duty to leave their modest sitting-room entirely to the lovers; but Lucy, who was making a close study of Sir Percy Carlyon's class prejudices, insisted that Mrs. Armytage should remain. Mrs. Armytage, feeling guilty, would establish herself with her knitting before the fire and dutifully fall asleep within ten minutes of Sir Percy's arrival. The lovers, sitting in an embrasure of a window and looking down upon a quiet side street, were almost as much alone as they had been in the winter woods, on that February afternoon, when they had first known each other's hearts. Sir Percy had a satisfaction which is often denied lovers--the satisfaction of seeing his *fiancée* adapting herself with grace and intelligence to his tastes and wishes. Lucy Armytage was far too clever to have that deadly obstinacy which is the bane of provincials, and which makes them carry their Bardstowns into every company and association in which they may find themselves.

It occurred to Sir Percy, a very short time after his engagement, that the sacrifices which he was prepared to make for the sake of marrying the woman he loved might not be so great after all. Whenever he saw Lucy he found that she had learned something. She had picked up a new phrase, or abandoned an old one which was not in perfect taste; she had learned to curb her wit and to be on her guard against those indiscreet words and actions which are harmless enough in a young girl, but highly dangerous in the wife of a diplomat. Sir Percy had begun to believe all he heard of the adaptability of the American woman after studying Lucy Armytage, and he saw, with profound pride, that Lucy was forming herself to be his wife. One thing only troubled him: should he confess to her then, or after their marriage, the story of Alicia Vernon? It was a difficult thing to tell to a girl so young as Lucy Armytage, and so guileless, and so little familiar with wickedness. If penitence could avail, then he had atoned for that early wrongdoing. He concluded it would be kinder for him to wait until after their marriage, when he could tell her the whole painful story.

One afternoon, three weeks after Lucy Armytage had promised to become Lady Carlyon, a letter was delivered at the British Embassy for Sir Percy Carlyon. One look at the clear, strong handwriting made him turn pale--it was Alicia Vernon's hand and the postmark was Washington. He thrust the letter into his pocket and, declining Lord Baudesert's suggestion to come in to tea, went back to his own chambers. With hatred and repugnance pulsating all through him, he opened the letter and read it. The date was of that day, and it was written from a fashionable uptown hotel.

"We arrived yesterday, my father and I. It was quite unexpected, for Washington has always seemed as far away to me and as unreal as Bagdad, but here we are. We shall call at the Embassy in a day or two, and meanwhile my father asks me to say that we shall be at home at five o'clock every day, and he hopes to see you soon.

"A.V."

How like the letter was to Alicia Vernon! Apparently so conventional, so frankly friendly, and yet how different was she to all of this! Sir Percy Carlyon had reached that age and stage of life when he was sceptical of reformations. One thing was certain, General Talbott's presence ensured Alicia Vernon's *entrée* to the British Embassy, and that she and Sir Percy would be much thrown together. At this, rage and shame possessed him. He saw at a glance the grim possibilities of the case, and they were enough to stagger a strong man. He examined the letter before him as it lay upon his study table, and it seemed to bring contamination with it. His sin and the shame had tracked him over the world, and were now seated, hideous spectres that they were, on each side of him. He had repented and had atoned as far as he could, for the sin of his youth.

He rose and, throwing his arms wide, despaired in his heart, and then asked pardon of that Higher Power to which his soul aspired. The thought of Lucy came to him like a lash upon an open wound. Then his mood grew dogged and a kind of fatalism possessed his mind. If it were written that Alicia Vernon should be avenged upon him, then it *was* written, and struggle were useless. If only he had not told Lucy Armytage of his love! She, poor child, might be dragged into

the degradation which awaited him! He remembered that he was to go to see Lucy that evening after dinner. The joy he felt at the thought of being with her was poisoned by the black shadow of Alicia Vernon's presence in Washington. He had to pass the hotel where she and General Talbott were lodged on his way to his club for dinner, and the place which held Alicia seemed odious to him. And General Talbott, too; of all living men he was the man whom Sir Percy should most wish to meet and to serve; but among the keenest pangs of his punishment were the shame and unworthiness he felt in General Talbott's presence.

Sir Percy had some thought of excusing himself from his semi-weekly visit to Lucy on that evening, but, doggedness still possessing him, he went, thinking to himself, at any moment the explosion might come, any meeting might be their last, therefore would he have as many as possible. He had not reached his present position without acquiring perfect mastery over his manner, his voice and his countenance, and Lucy had no suspicion that he was not entirely at his ease when he entered the Armytages' sitting-room.

Never had he seen Lucy more charming than when she came forward to meet him. She was full of the lessons in languages she was taking, especially in rubbing up her superficial knowledge of French. She had got a French newspaper, and read with admirable accent some editorials in which Sir Percy was interested. Mrs. Armytage went sound asleep as usual, and the lovers could talk with a sweet unrestraint. Heretofore it was Sir Percy who had risen promptly on the stroke of ten, but to-night it was a quarter past before he stirred, and Lucy then forced him away. He returned to his chambers accompanied by the ghost of his wrong-doing, and the black dog who kept watch over him prevented him from sleeping all night long.

The next afternoon at five o'clock Sir Percy Carlyon was ushered into General Talbott's and Alicia Vernon's charming little drawing-room at the hotel. As he came in, General Talbott met him with both hands outstretched. Sir Percy realised, as he always did in General Talbott's presence, that here was a man of no common mould. He was small, bald and low-voiced, but in distinction of bearing and manner there were few men superior to General Talbott. This distinction also belonged to Alicia Vernon, and Sir Percy could not but recognise it as she rose and advanced towards him and gave him her hand. She was quite forty, and showed it. Like most women of her exquisite blonde type, each year left a visible mark. Her chestnut hair had lost much of its lustre, and her fine white skin had little marks and lines in it, like a crumpled roseleaf. She had not the freshness and naturalness which Sir Percy Carlyon reckoned the chief charm of the American women. Alicia Vernon was the product of an old civilisation, and showed it; but her tall and stately figure retained all its symmetry, and her eyes and her voice and her smile--ah, they were matchless still! Her voice, low, soft and clear, had a melancholy sweetness and power of expression that Sir Percy Carlyon had never known in any woman's voice but hers, and her eyes, the colour of the violets, had in them a depth of fire, and flickering shadows like the heart of an opal. Everything about her was individual and distinctive. Sir Percy was not much versed in the details of a woman's dress, but he felt, rather than knew, the beauty of the sweeping, pale blue draperies which undulated about Alicia Vernon, and the seductive perfume which exhaled from everything which she wore and used. Hers was the charm of the Shulamite.

In meeting Sir Percy her manner and tone were perfectly calm, friendly and composed. Towards her father she was always perfect; and his air of tender, chivalrous protection was touching and beautiful.

The three sat around the fire and talked intimately, as friends do after a long absence. Mrs. Vernon offered Sir Percy a cup of tea, and even handed it to him with her own hands sparkling with gems, but he declined it. If it had been in Italy during the time of the Borgias he would have hesitated to drink any cup offered him by Alicia Vernon. She said little, leaving the conversation chiefly to her father and Sir Percy. As they talked she sat in a large chair, her head half turned towards Sir Percy and holding between the fire and her face an antique fan painted by Greuze. She had been a slip of a girl when her lips had sought Sir Percy's, and had shown him, in triumph, her long, bright hair; but in some things she was unchanged, and Sir Percy felt that a stripling of to-day, such as he had been in the old days, would not be safe with Mrs. Vernon. While they were talking Lord Baudesert's card was brought to General Talbott. On it was scrawled:

"My first chance to take the air. Gout has me by the leg, so come down and drive with me for an hour."

General Talbott rose at once. Sir Percy had no excuse to leave at the same time and remained perforce.

When the door was shut on General Talbott Sir Percy Carlyon's face changed into the

hardness of a flint, and he sat silent waiting to see what position Mrs. Vernon would take with him. She too remained silent for a while, fixing upon him two wells of violet light. The setting sun streamed through a western window upon Sir Percy's face, and she studied it carefully. No; he was not handsome even as a young man, and at thirty-eight his moustache was growing grey and his hair scanty, and there were crow's feet in the corners of his eyes. But what did that matter to her? He was the most considerable man upon whom she had ever tried her power.

"After all," she said presently, her low voice filling the room as a trained singer's softest note is heard at the Paris Opera, "I was right even in my youth, and knew that before you was a great destiny. You are to be the next Ambassador here."

"How did you know that?" asked Sir Percy.

"Partly by observation and partly by a clever guess. I have been staying in the same house with the Prime Minister, and quite naturally we spoke of you. I told him that we were old friends."

As she said the last two words Sir Percy Carlyon turned away his head and a dull flush dyed his sunburnt face.

"However, those are matters really of prescience. I was very young when we loved, but even then I knew that some day you would be a great, if not a famous, man."

"I am neither," responded Sir Percy, taking refuge in commonplace.

Then there was silence again for a time. The firelight played over Mrs. Vernon's face and figure and the masses of pale blue draperies, and over the tip of her pale blue slippers, upon which stones sparkled. Her eyes were fixed upon Sir Percy, and, raising herself in her chair, she leaned over towards him and said calmly:

"Guy Vernon, you know, has been dead more than a year."

Sir Percy knew what she meant--that she was now free.

"I had not heard it," he replied with equal calmness. "I hope that your latter days with him were happier than the earlier ones."

"I had not seen or spoken with him for several years. We had much unhappiness together. If I had been happily married---"

She broke off suddenly and then continued after a while:

"It would be hypocritical for me to express any grief at Guy Vernon's death, and, whatever I am, I am not a hypocrite--except to my father. I love him, for I can love, and he is the one person I really fear--except you."

As she spoke she leaned forward again, and, closing her fan, almost laid the tip of it upon Sir Percy's hand, outstretched on the arm of his chair. In another instant it would have been a caress, but Sir Percy coolly moved his hand and Mrs. Vernon quickly withdrew the fan.

"General Talbott is a man very much to be feared as well as loved," was his answer. "Whenever the memory comes to me of what I owe him and how I repaid him I feel like shooting myself."

"But we were very happy in that time," murmured Alicia, leaning back and letting her hands fall in her lap as she watched the fire.

Sir Percy rose and Alicia Vernon rose too.

"You know very well," she said, showing some agitation, "why I came here. I wanted to see you. I am a fool, of course--every woman is about some man. I have tried to forget you, I have been trying to do that for twelve years, but I have not yet succeeded. Do you remember those tragic stories of the Middle Ages, when a woman who loved a man would dress herself as a page and follow him to the Crusades? Such are the women who knew how to love; not those conventional creatures who sit by the fire and to whom one man is the same as another."

As she spoke her eyes filled and two large bright tears dropped upon her cheeks, and she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes with a trembling hand. Sir Percy had meant to be stern with her, but no man, if he be a man, can be stern to a woman in tears. He remained silent for a minute or two, moved, in spite of himself, at Alicia Vernon's emotion.

"Alicia," he said, and then paused. It was the first time he had called her by her name for years, and as he spoke her eyes lighted up and a sad smile played about her mouth. "I, least of all human beings, can reproach you. I am willing to take upon myself all the guilt, all the shame, of that bygone time, but it was guilt and shame, and let us not deceive ourselves."

"Was it guilt and shame?" she asked in her thrilling voice. "Was it rather not fate? I was married at twenty to a worthless wretch. I was formed to love and be loved, and I found myself tied to a creature like Guy Vernon. Then I met in you the man for whom I was meant and I came into my own. At least I was disinterested, for then you were both poor and obscure. I never had

one regret for anything that happened. Do you suppose that Marguerite Gautier regretted, even when she was dying, that she had loved Armand? I always go, when I can, to hear that opera, *La Vie de Bohème*. Mimi's death is really a triumph of love. Let me tell you this: no woman who ever loved ever regretted it. If she regretted it she did not love. Men feel and act differently about these things. You know you loved me once and you have seemed to hate me ever since, but love will prevail--it will yet prevail."

It was a piteous sight to see her with clasped hands and the glory of an undying hope in her eyes and voice. To make her believe that the end had come long since between Sir Percy Carlyon and herself was like fighting a shadow. The resolve took possession of Sir Percy to tell her of Lucy Armytage, and then she might realise the inevitable.

"We will speak no more of the past," he said, "and I will tell you what has happened in the present. I have met a woman whom I truly love, and she has promised to marry me."

Alicia Vernon turned deathly pale, and stood looking at him with eyes like those of Dido when she saw Æneas sail away from her. She walked steadily to the window and looked with unseeing eyes at the glory of red and gold in which the sun was sinking. Sir Percy Carlyon, standing where she had left him, had to battle with his common-sense. Reason told him that he had done this woman no injury--rather she had injured him--and although Alicia Vernon's protestation of love for him carried with it conviction of truth, it had not kept her in the straight path. Nevertheless he felt as if he had struck her a physical blow. Presently she came from the window towards the fire, and said to Sir Percy what any woman of forty would say:

"The girl you love is young?"

"Yes."

"That is the way of the world," cried Alicia--"youth is everything. What is it François Coppée says? 'There is nothing for women but a little love when they are young.' I ask, however, one thing of you. You can scarcely refuse it." Sir Percy remained silent. He did not refuse it, but he was too much on his guard to promise it. "Only this, let me see this woman whom you prefer to me. You think it childish? Very well; all women have something of the child in them."

Sir Percy went towards the door, and his face, already dark and flushed, grew still darker. Alicia came up to him and said with pleading in her voice:

"You can't suppose that I would let her suspect anything? I think I have shown that I know how to keep the secrets of my life. I would hardly be so foolish as to betray myself to this girl who has succeeded where I have failed."

Then came one of the most exquisitely painful moments of Sir Percy Carlyon's life. The thought of bringing Lucy Armytage into the same room with Alicia Vernon filled him with rage and shame. Rather than see Lucy Armytage become what Alicia Vernon was he would have killed her with his own hand. Something of this dawned upon Alicia's mind as she looked at him. It flashed from her eyes and burst into words.

"It is the old story. You are worthy to marry her, but I am not worthy to speak to her. Oh, what a world it is!"



“It is the old story. You are worthy to marry her, but I am not worthy to speak to her”

"It is the old story. You are worthy to marry her, but I am not worthy to speak to her"

"It is the world which has made that law, not I," responded Sir Percy. "Don't think that I reckon myself worthy to marry this woman whom I love--I only hope to make myself a little less unworthy. Ever since the world was made it has demanded more of women than of men."

"That law sounds well when it is enforced by you against me. Good-bye," was Alicia's response.

VI

Sir Percy Carlyon went out into the cool March air, which steadied his much-shaken nerves. He had refused to bring about a meeting between Alicia Vernon and Lucy Armytage, and with masculine directness made not the slightest secret to himself why he did it. Yet he was not without shame at the part he had played in the matter.

It was early for his walk, as the spring afternoons were growing longer. He struck out toward the northwest and walked for an hour. As he was returning he reached the top of the hill, where the paved streets began, when Lord Baudesert's carriage with its high-stepping bays overtook him. Lord Baudesert called out of the window, and in another minute Sir Percy was sitting in the carriage opposite Lord Baudesert and General Talbott.

"It is rather pleasant," said Lord Baudesert, "to come across a countryman once in a while, and not to be always considering American susceptibilities. Talbott, here, is delighted with the country as far as he has got. I told him it is the most interesting, as it certainly is the most complex, of all nations and societies." Lord Baudesert leaned back in the carriage and settled himself comfortably to talk upon that agreeable subject, his own affairs. "The Ambassadors at Paris and Berlin and other European capitals have an easy berth compared with mine. I can walk in and talk with the President and arrange affairs to our mutual satisfaction. It might be supposed that I had accomplished something, as it would be in any Chancellery of Europe, but not here, if you please. At the next Cabinet meeting the Secretary of State may say that it is all a stupid blunder on the part of the President, or the Attorney-General may put in his oar, and all goes to smash. Then, if it gets as far as the approval of the Secretary of State, and the permission of the Attorney-General, as soon as it is done up in official form, it goes to the Senate. The Senate likes to lay the Secretary of State by the heels and the British Ambassador on top of him; and that is where our carefully studied arrangements generally land. The House of Representatives, too, can generally find a peg on which to hang some objection, and, if there is any money involved, we can't turn a wheel without the help of the House. That is diplomacy in America."

"How do you get anything done, then?" said General Talbott.

"There are ways, my dear Talbott. The Speaker of the House is a useful man to have as a friend, and there are, besides, a few men in the Senate who can deny themselves the joy of tripping up an Ambassador. One of them I particularly desire you to meet--Senator March. He stands high with the administration, and with everybody, in fact. He is an uncommonly able man, and has a candour and fairness which disarms opposition. I should not venture to call him absolutely the most gifted man in the Senate, or the most profound lawyer, or the most brilliant speaker, but, take him altogether, I consider him the strongest man in public life in Washington to-day. You will meet him when you dine at the Embassy next week. I will send a card in due form to yourself and Mrs. Vernon. I think I had the pleasure of meeting your daughter once before her marriage?"

"That marriage turned out most unfortunately for my poor child," replied General Talbott, with the peculiar tenderness in his voice with which he always spoke of Alicia. "Guy Vernon had a large fortune, but he was a scapegrace inborn. My daughter was young, innocent, and had never had the command of money, so you may imagine she made some mistakes, but she was most cruelly treated; that I found out after her patience could no longer stand her husband's unkindness. Vernon died more than a year ago, after having lived long enough to ruin the life of my only child."

Sir Percy Carlyon, sitting with his back to the horses, listened with an impassive face to General Talbott's words.

"Mrs. Vernon had her settlements, had she not?" asked Lord Baudesert.

"Yes. But she and Vernon between them managed to get some of the provisions of that arrangement set aside, and spent a great part of the money which was supposed would be a provision for my daughter in the event of Vernon's death. Luckily, there were no children. I shouldn't care to have a grandchild with Guy Vernon's blood in him. My daughter is an angel. Pardon a father's pride."

"She looked an angel," replied Lord Baudesert, "when I saw her in the first bloom of her beauty."

Sir Percy Carlyon, listening to this, reflected that his shrift would be short if General Talbott knew what had happened twelve years before.

Lord Baudesert dropped General Talbott at his hotel, then drove back with Sir Percy to the Embassy, where Sir Percy joined the family circle at dinner. When the ladies left the table and the uncle and nephew were alone was Lord Baudesert's favourite time for exchanging confidences with Sir Percy. To-night he chose the subject of General Talbott and his daughter.

"While I have not seen Talbott's daughter for many years, I remember well what a beautiful and captivating young girl she was, but it seems to me that I have heard rumours--eh? Bad marriage, worthless husband, and gay wife. Do you know anything about it?"

Sir Percy then calmly and deliberately proceeded to lie like a gentleman.

"Nothing except what the world knows. I saw a great deal of Mrs. Vernon twelve years ago when I was in India. As you see, General Talbott is a most devoted father and Mrs. Vernon a most affectionate daughter. She was virtually separated from Vernon when I first knew her."

"And had squandered a lot of money?"

"Both of them were spendthrifts, as far as that goes. Mrs. Vernon was a beautiful young

woman and much admired."

"And a little gay, perhaps?"

"Not that I ever heard," responded Sir Percy coolly, looking Lord Baudesert in the eye. "It would be hard to believe that General Talbott's daughter were not everything she should be. He is, I think, altogether the finest man I ever knew."

Lord Baudesert, with a catholic interest in beauty, asked:

"You saw Mrs. Vernon this afternoon. Is she still beautiful?"

Sir Percy paused before answering this question.

"Yes, she is still beautiful, but she is no longer a girl, of course. If you will excuse me now, I will join my aunt in the drawing-room."

Sir Percy went from bad to worse--because as soon as he appeared in the drawing-room Mrs. Vereker and the three girls fell upon him like playful sheep and began to ask him all manner of questions about Alicia Vernon. Was she a great beauty, as Mrs. Vereker had heard, and was she going to marry somebody else, now that Guy Vernon was dead? Jane wished to know how Mrs. Vernon dressed her hair. Sarah inquired if her sleeves were large or small, according to the latest London fashion, and complained that, for her part, Americans changed the mode of their sleeves so often that she could not keep up with them! Isabella yearned to know whether Mrs. Vernon smoked cigarettes or not. Sir Percy almost laughed at the latter suggestion. He had never seen any woman in his life so careful to pay the tithe of mint, anise and cummin to the world as Alicia Vernon, or more ready to avoid the weightier matters of the law. The slightest aroma of fastness was rigidly forsworn by her, and no Cromwellian ever kept out of the way of the fast set more absolutely than did the lady of the violet eyes.

In the midst of this patter of questions Lord Baudesert entered the drawing-room, and the three girls suddenly grew mute, while Mrs. Vereker asked Lord Baudesert, for the fourth time that evening, if the east wind hadn't given him a touch of gout. Having answered this question three times with much savagery, Lord Baudesert let it pass, and demanded pen and paper, directing Isabella, who was the family scribe, to make out the list for the dinner which was to be given next week in honour of General Talbott and Mrs. Vernon. The first name put down was Senator March, and then followed a list of eight or ten other representative men whom Lord Baudesert thought General Talbott would like to meet. The selection of the women was more difficult. By way of disciplining Mrs. Vereker, who did not need it in the least, Lord Baudesert commanded Isabella to begin the list of ladies as follows:

"Mrs. Chantrey."

Mrs. Vereker ventured to say feebly:

"Mrs. Chantrey has already dined here twice this season."

"She may be dining here oftener than you think," was Lord Baudesert's menacing reply, and Mrs. Vereker, in her mind's eye, saw Mrs. Chantrey as the future Lady Baudesert, presiding with much majesty over the British Embassy.

Some girls were required for the unmarried men who were asked. It was the unwritten law that at dinners only one of Mrs. Vereker's covey should appear at the table--an honour which was always received with nervous apprehension by the successful candidate. This time it was Isabella who was the Jephtha's daughter of the occasion. Mrs. Vereker suggested several girls, but each one was remorselessly thrown out by Lord Baudesert on various grounds. Presently he asked:

"What is the name of that girl who was here on the afternoon the two South Americans called, and helped to pull us out of the hole?"

"Miss Armytage," replied Mrs. Vereker.

"She struck me as rather an unusual sort of a girl."

Mrs. Vereker, with her usual capacity for misunderstanding Lord Baudesert's meaning, replied faintly:

"Oh, yes, very unusual! She is from a little town called Bardville in Tennessee, or is it Indiana? I forget which. Of course she would not do at all, and we never thought of suggesting her."

"Put down Miss Armytage," snapped Lord Baudesert.

The comedy suddenly became a tragedy to Sir Percy Carlyon. So, then, Alicia Vernon and Lucy Armytage were to be brought face to face after all--and it filled him with a dumb rage. Isabella, meaning to conciliate her uncle, murmured:

"A lovely girl, Miss Armytage, so intelligent, so interesting!"

"A provincial, if ever I saw one," was Lord Baudesert's response to this. "Nevertheless she has some beauty and a pretty voice, and we will have her."

When Lord Baudesert had retired to his library Mrs. Vereker and the three girls talked in subdued tones for fear the ogre might hear them. They mournfully agreed there must be something between Lord Baudesert and Mrs. Chantrey, and Sir Percy was appealed to for his opinion.

"Lord Baudesert wouldn't marry Helen of Troy if she had all the virtues of St. Monica and John D. Rockefeller's wealth into the bargain," was Sir Percy's consoling answer. "He simply talks about Mrs. Chantrey to worry you. I wish them both joy if they get each other, but there isn't the shadow of danger."

Mrs. Vereker, however, refused to be comforted.

"And what a surprise that he should have gone out of his way to ask Miss Armytage, whom he frankly called a provincial! Surely, in the language of the hymn, it might be said of Lord Baudesert, 'He moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.'"

Sir Percy had promised to stay all the evening, but he broke his promise and left early. He began to believe that Fate, and not he, would settle when and how Lucy Armytage would hear the painful story of his youth.

During the next week Sir Percy Carlyon saw General Talbott every day, and for hours, and it was inevitable that he should see much of Alicia Vernon. He did the regular sight-seeing with them, drove with them through the park, went with them to Mount Vernon, and, in short, acted as their cicerone. Nothing could exceed the grace and composure of Alicia Vernon's manner, and in her defeat she was not unlike General Talbott in the few rebuffs that he had experienced during his life. If Sir Percy Carlyon had been a younger or more sanguine man he would have felt quite at ease, but he knew Alicia Vernon too well ever to feel at ease in her neighbourhood. She was not the woman to lay obvious snares and traps to find out things, much less to fall into the open vulgarity of asking questions, yet Sir Percy felt that her sharp intelligence was at work on every word and phrase he uttered, to find out what he had refused to tell her--the name and habitat of the woman he loved.

Cards and invitations began to pour in upon General Talbott and his daughter, but the dinner at the Embassy was the first formal entertainment which they attended.

Sir Percy's first meeting with Lucy Armytage after Alicia Vernon's arrival was purely accidental. He had taken his late afternoon walk eastward, and as he crossed, after sunset, the deserted plaza of the Capitol he noticed Lucy's slim figure standing in the purple dusk upon the Capitol terrace. She did not know he was near until he spoke, and then she turned, her face and eyes flooded with the joy of the unexpected meeting. She had come from the National Library with a book, and announced her intention to walk back to the hotel.

"Since I am to be an Englishwoman, I shall probably be more English than the English themselves. I walk everywhere, and I have bought a pair of large thick boots, which my uncle declares he can't tell from his own."

Lucy's feet were slender enough to take this liberty with them. Lucy was full of her invitation to dinner at the British Embassy, where she had never dined before.

"It will be different," she said, "from any dinner I was ever at, because when Lord Baudesert and Mrs. Vereker know--you understand"--Sir Percy understood well enough, and Lucy continued--"they will, of course, look back and begin to canvass me and I want them to have a good opinion of me."

To which Sir Percy, like a true lover, replied:

"How could they have any other?" Yet the thought of Lucy coming face to face with Alicia Vernon made him sick at heart.

It was still light enough for them to remain out of doors twenty minutes, and the region of the Capitol, which swarmed with people during the day, was absolutely deserted. A sudden impulse prompted Sir Percy to say to her, as they strolled slowly along the quiet streets in the twilight:

"I have something to ask of you, something I hope you will grant."

Lucy turned upon him two laughing, adoring dark eyes; but the look upon Sir Percy's face sobered her.

"It is this--to have enough faith in me to accept my word. There is something in my past life, something which the world might think of no great consequence, something I will tell you all about when we are married. It will be a confession, but I repented of it long before I ever met you, and I have repented of it a thousand times more since."

"I could not marry any man whose word I could disbelieve," replied Lucy with calm confidence.

They walked together until within a square of the hotel, when Lucy demanded that Sir Percy

should leave her.

The evening of the Embassy dinner came, and Sir Percy Carlyon, who always acted as assistant host, was the first guest to arrive. Almost immediately General Talbott and Alicia Vernon followed. Alicia, like most Englishwomen, was at her best in the evening. She was one of those rare women who could wear jewels in her hair and look well, and to-night she sparkled with gems. No woman could cross a drawing-room floor with more grace than Alicia Vernon, or could sit and rise and bow with greater dignity. She was more like an enthroned queen than a pretty princess such as Lucy Armytage's air and manner suggested when she entered the drawing-room. Nevertheless their charms were so different that they enhanced, rather than outshone, each other. Lucy carried in her hands a huge bouquet of violets. They had been Sir Percy's gift, and a whispered word of thanks, unnoticed by any one, repaid him. Alicia Vernon, apparently absorbed in conversation with various persons who were introduced to her, after the American fashion, watched closely every woman as she entered the room. She was the last woman in the world to underrate her rival, and with discernment saw that this black-haired girl with the milk-white skin was easily the most attractive woman present. Mrs. Chantrey and Eleanor were the last to arrive. The former wore at least a quart of large diamonds strewn over her person, and, recalling with triumph that this was her third dinner at the Embassy during the season, considered herself as good as married to Lord Baudesert, and adopted condescending airs towards weak Mrs. Vereker. Alicia had claimed a woman's prescience in matters of the heart. She felt instinctively that the beautiful Eleanor Chantrey was not the woman whom Sir Percy loved.

Not a soul except herself at the long, brilliant dinner-table suspected anything between Sir Percy Carlyon and Lucy Armytage, who sat opposite each other. But Alicia Vernon's violet eyes saw everything without watching. She knew the English habit of not conversing across the table, but she observed that Sir Percy Carlyon spoke to Lucy Armytage once or twice. Lucy, herself, instead of answering him with the gaiety and spirit she showed in her conversation with her neighbours, replied to Sir Percy with only a brilliant smile and a word or two. The indications were so slight that not even the hawk-eyed Lord Baudesert noticed them, but nothing escapes a jealous woman.

Meanwhile, never had Alicia Vernon exerted herself more to please. She sat on Lord Baudesert's right hand and on her left was Senator March. Mrs. Vernon was a better listener than talker. She had not the naïve effervescence of the American women, but she had a softness, a charming air of listening with profound attention, which few American women ever acquire. Senator March, struck from the beginning by her manner of the highest breeding, admiring her mature beauty and charmed by her subtle and even silent flattery, thought it the pleasantest dinner he had ever attended. Eleanor Chantrey sat on the other side of him and he experienced a glow of pleasure which a man feels when he basks in beauty's light. But Eleanor Chantrey was not much older than Lucy Armytage and her range of conversation was strictly limited to what had happened since she came out in society. Senator March had passed his fiftieth birthday and liked to talk about things which happened twenty-five years before. He had an agreeable feeling with Mrs. Vernon of being contemporaries, which he could not feel with a younger woman. Alicia Vernon, on her part, recognised Senator March's virtues as a dinner man and was tactful enough to keep to herself the surprise she felt at finding an American so accomplished.

When the ladies left the table and the gentlemen's ranks were closed up for that comfortable after-dinner conversation, which is still the heritage of the Englishman, Lord Baudesert took pains to bring General Talbott and Senator March into conversation together. Between the two men a good understanding was instantly established. General Talbott did not lose interest in Senator March's eyes for being the father of the charming woman who had sat next him. With the frank friendliness of the American, he made greater headway in General Talbott's acquaintanceship during their half-hour's talk than many Englishmen make in a month's companionship. Simultaneously Senator March asked permission to call, and General Talbott gave a cordial invitation to him to do so. Lord Baudesert was in high feather. The dinner had been pleasant and agreeable and he was pleased that General Talbott should see what admirable dinner guests Americans of the best sort made. Sir Percy Carlyon appeared to be in his usual form, but, as he sat smoking and talking pleasantly, the thought that Lucy Armytage and Alicia Vernon were at that moment in the same room, on the same terms, and reckoned to be of the same sort, gnawed him like some ravenous beast.

Mrs. Vernon at that very time was sitting on a sofa with Lucy Armytage, and with perfect art and tact was finding out from her many things which the girl was quite unconscious of betraying. Alicia Vernon was puzzled by the fact of a secret engagement, because Sir Percy had told her

that the girl he loved had promised to marry him, and this was evidently unknown to the rest of the world. Without the least trouble, by asking a few half-laughing questions about the custom of engagements in America, Alicia Vernon discovered that such things as unannounced engagements existed and were not considered discreditable. Lucy answered readily, but in speaking her pale cheeks took on a colour like the faint pink of the azalea. Alicia led her on without questions, but with clever suggestions, to tell of her employments, of the books she read and many other things, which Lucy told frankly and without the slightest suspicion that she was being cross-examined, and was adding link by link to the chain of evidence which had begun with the mere probabilities of a guess.

Alicia Vernon's heart burned within her. She would like to have forgotten Sir Percy Carlyon long ago, as she had forgotten many others. She knew that her feeling for him was an infatuation, but in some strange manner he had dominated her imagination from the beginning. It was the most dangerous, on account of General Talbott, of all the affairs in which she had ever been engaged; but all women like Alicia Vernon have one tragic love. The old Greek superstition that those who defy love are punished works out in a different civilisation with those who dishonour love, paying for it in blood and tears.

Alicia Vernon had said to Lucy:

"Sir Percy Carlyon and I are old friends. We met first in India twelve years ago."

Lucy had enough mother wit not to express surprise or to betray how much she knew of the incidents of Sir Percy's life. But she was no match in *finesse* for Alicia Vernon, who found out, without the least trouble, that the girl knew certain dates, places and events which she could not have known except from Sir Percy Carlyon.

The sight which greeted Sir Percy when he entered the drawing-room was Alicia Vernon and Lucy Armytage still sitting upon the small sofa together, apparently conversing with intimacy. A tall, red-shaded lamp cast a rosy glow over the woman and the girl, and fell upon Alicia Vernon's rich hair, in which a few grey threads showed. Her beautiful eyes were fixed upon Lucy with an expression which Sir Percy Carlyon knew perfectly well. He surmised in a moment what had happened. Lucy was clever as girls are clever, but with Alicia Vernon she was as a bird in the snare of the fowler. His poor little Lucy!

The irruption of the gentlemen into the drawing-room was greeted with enthusiasm, as it always is. Mrs. Chantrey made a dive for the Ambassador, and, wedging him into a corner with a chair, leaned over it girlishly and ogled him, much to Lord Baudesert's delight. Nothing he had ever known in his life had diverted him quite so much as Mrs. Chantrey's determination to become Lady Baudesert if she could possibly contrive it. Lord Baudesert, as usual, made plaint of his poverty outside of his official income, and omitted to mention that his private income was something like £10,000 a year. Mrs. Chantrey then held forth eloquently upon the worthlessness of money except to help those one loves. Lord Baudesert, with *malice prepense*, led her to the verge of an offer of marriage before making his escape.

Sir Percy Carlyon drew up a chair close to the sofa on which sat the woman he hated and the woman he loved, and smiling and outwardly at ease, talked with both of them. Senator March, too, soon gravitated that way. He wished to see more of his late neighbour with her low, delicious voice and her beautiful, melancholy eyes. Then quite naturally came out the story of the late house party at his country house, and what the guests did to amuse themselves.

"It is very quiet up there," said Senator March; "we are in the Maryland mountains, you see, and there are no ruined abbeys to visit, no hunt balls, or anything of the sort. We simply walk and read and rest and talk; but my friends who give me the privilege of their company are so kind that I feel that they enjoy their visits almost as much as I do."

Lucy hastened to corroborate this, and Sir Percy added pleasantly:

"The pleasure you offer us is just what we like best. I remember those country walks in which the ladies sometimes did us the honour to join us. Don't you remember them, Miss Armytage?"

Alicia Vernon understood this as a cool defiance of her.

"You must pay me another visit as soon as possible," cried Senator March. "The country is looking beautiful, now that spring is approaching. Perhaps Mrs. Vernon and General Talbott will do me the honour to join us? Of course, I count upon you, Miss Armytage and Sir Percy?"

Lucy accepted promptly. So did Sir Percy, with the mental reservation that Lucy should stay away from any house-party of which Alicia Vernon was to be a member.

As the guests were leaving, Alicia passed Sir Percy and said to him, unheard by any one else:

"It is she."

Driving back in the carriage, General Talbott expressed to Alicia his enjoyment of the

evening.

"I have not been to a pleasanter party for a long time. What a fine fellow Senator March is! He has an enormous fortune, Lord Baudesert tells me, but lives very simply. He has no capacity for money-making, and the beginning of his fortune was an inheritance, and he became rich rather by accident than effort. It is years since I met a man who pleased me so well."

Then Alicia told the thought which had occurred to her many times during the evening:

"I didn't think that Americans could have such good manners as some of those people had."

But even while she was speaking her mind was upon that strange problem, why could she not cast off the memory, the passion for Sir Percy Carlyon? He hated her and she knew it, but that only made her love him the more, as she reckoned love--so curious a thing is the heart of a woman.

VII

The very next day Senator March called upon General Talbott and Mrs. Vernon and found them both at home. Alicia seemed to him even more charming than on the evening before. There are few occasions that a woman appears better than when dispensing the simple hospitality of her own tea-table, and it is a charm which many Englishwomen possess. Alicia Vernon had it in great perfection, and her tea-table gave an air of home to the hotel sitting-room. Senator March remained a full hour and enjoyed every minute of it. Alicia Vernon's voice was the soul of music, and her soft and gracious manners completed the charm of her voice. Then, too, she was not so ridiculously young. Before Senator March left, he had arranged for a dinner at his own house, and also for a week-end at his country place. Just as he was leaving, Mrs. Chantrey came fluttering in, and that meant still another dinner for the English visitors, and Senator March, being a court card, was at once grabbed by Mrs. Chantrey for her dinner. The next week was to be one of Grand Opera, and Senator March, who loved music, determined to take the best box at the theatre, chiefly for the pleasure of having Alicia Vernon in it. Quite naturally, in all these plans for pleasure, Sir Percy Carlyon was included. Senator March and himself had become almost chums from the beginning of their acquaintance, and what could be more suitable than that Sir Percy should be one of the party when his old friends were entertained? Then Senator March's fondness for Lucy Armytage, and his somewhat limited acquaintance among the younger set, brought her into the circle.

At the dinner which Senator March gave in his big, old-fashioned house Alicia saw, with her own eyes, evidence of inherited as well as acquired wealth. There was a ton, more or less, of family silver on the sideboards and cabinets, while the portraits of three generations hung upon the walls.

Among the twenty-five guests were Lord Baudesert, Mrs. Vereker, Lucy Armytage and Sir Percy Carlyon. The second meeting with Lucy Armytage made Alicia Vernon's confirmation doubly sure; but there was a new personality present which divided her interests with Sir Percy Carlyon and Senator March: this was Colegrove, the man whom Senator March and Sir Percy Carlyon had passed in the hotel lobby on the day of their second meeting. He sat directly across the table from Alicia Vernon, who was on Senator March's left, Mrs. Vereker being on his right. The mellow glow from the shaded candelabra fell full upon Colegrove's head and shoulders. He was instantly struck with the beauty of Alicia Vernon's eyes, as most men were, but Alicia was no less struck with his. They were clear, so compelling--they were the eyes of the commanding officer on the field of battle. His well-shaped, iron-grey head, his clear-cut features, spoke power in the lines of their contour. Alicia Vernon found herself involuntarily glancing across at her neighbour, and whenever she looked at him she found his glance fixed upon her.

When the ladies retired to the drawing-room the conversation turned upon Colegrove, and Alicia found out that he was one of the great railway magnates of America, one of those men of whom she had heard and read about, who, beginning at the lowest rung of the ladder, make their way up by sheer indomitable force to the top, and then kick the ladder down after them. He had a wife, whom no one had ever seen, stowed away somewhere in the West, but was never known to speak of her, much less to present her. Fabulous tales were told of his wealth and of the simplicity of his mode of living. His winters were generally spent at Washington, in a comfortable but not expensive hotel, where he had a modest suite of rooms. While the ladies were talking about him, the gentlemen appeared from the dining-room. Colegrove walked straight up to Alicia,

and, seating himself, plunged into conversation with her. Alicia, with infinite tact, led him to speak of himself, his affairs, his wishes, his aspirations, and listened so intelligently that she bewitched him even more than she had Roger March.

"I think," she said presently, in her slow, sweet voice, "that I am getting new ideas all the time in this country about money. You Americans are credited with thinking much about it. I never saw people who value money so little."

"Why should we?" answered Colegrove, smiling. "We have no hereditary nobility, no entailed property to keep up. Every generation here looks out for itself. Then American ladies don't give their husbands the best chance of saving money."

"How can any woman save money?" asked Alicia helplessly. "I am always in want of money, have been all my life, and yet it doesn't seem to me as if I have many costly things or expensive habits."

"Oh, the want of money with a woman is chronic," replied Colegrove easily. "The right way to do would be to pay your bills and ask a smile in return."

He looked at her with such frank admiration that it brought the colour to Alicia Vernon's face; but she was not displeased with him; on the contrary, she rather liked the sense of power, of innate force, which was so plainly his. How trifling to him would seem the mountain of debt under which Alicia had always laboured, and which she had only managed to keep partially from her father's knowledge.

"I shouldn't mind a woman spending money on toilettes, jewelry, carriages and such things. That would be just like buying toys," he said, still smiling. "I am a man of simple tastes--you would be disgusted at the plainness of my rooms at the hotel, but I can understand that white birds should have downy nests."

Colegrove would have monopolised Mrs. Vernon, but Senator March would by no means have it so. He came up and began to talk about the coming house-party, taking Alicia into the library to show her pictures of the place. Then her eyes fell upon pictures of Senator March's family home, which was in a near-by Eastern State, and the photographs he showed of it proved that it was a fine old Colonial house added to with taste and judgment until it was a beautiful and spacious mansion. Also he had a ranch far off in the Northwest, and his near-by country place in Maryland.

"You have as many homes as a great English noble."

"But they are not castles; they are only houses; and a man alone, as I am, has no home. This was my father's town house; he was in the Senate before me, but you see that it is an old barn compared with the splendid modern houses in Washington. Then the home, in my native State, is where I was born, but I have lived there very little. After I left the university I travelled for some years, and then went into public life, and that has kept me pretty close to Washington. My own home is too far away to go to for the week-end, so I have this little place a hundred miles away in the mountains. I don't know exactly how I happened to acquire the ranch. I went into a land purchase with some friends of mine, and the first thing I knew was that I had a ranch, and I don't yet quite understand how I came by it. I didn't know what to do with it, but I went out there, and found it a gloriously lonely place, with an adobe house and a courtyard, stuck up on the side of the mountain. The people out there told me to stock the place--I have the title to a good part of the big valley--I got a manager, and, strange to say, I haven't been swindled. Every year or two I try to go out there for six weeks. It's a superb climate and I live on horseback, as I did when I was a boy. I should like so much to show you the ranch which I found in my pocket one day."

Alicia smiled and shook her head.

"There is so much to see, and one can't stay in America for ever: it is so expensive."

Senator March looked at her with secret pity. He thought what a nasty freak of Fate it was that this exquisite creature should want what he would so easily have given her, but could not.

Alicia Vernon, with a woman's subtlety, noticed and liked this attitude of the American toward women--the eternal readiness to give. It was distinctly different from that of the Englishman, who is strictly just to his womankind, but is not expected to be generous, and the normal woman hates justice as much as she loves generosity. Alicia, with a sigh, recalled the storms concerning money in which her married life with Guy Vernon had been passed, and the laborious subterfuges which she was forced to employ to keep her father from knowing the exact state of her finances. And here were two Americans, strangers to her, and with oceans of money, who were as ready to give it to a wife as they would give sugar-plums to children!

Colegrove determined to see more of his charming *vis-à-vis*, and went up boldly to General Talbott and asked permission to call on him. General Talbott, the kindest of men under his English reserve, cordially invited him.

It was a remarkably pleasant dinner to everybody, with one exception--Sir Percy Carlyon. His pride, his self-respect, his self-love, suffered cruelly every moment that Lucy Armytage was in the company of Alicia Vernon. He had taken Lucy in to dinner, and he could not but see the advance she had made, even in the short time, in tact and self-possession. Not a self-conscious word or look escaped her as she sat talking charming nothings to the man whose lips had been upon hers only the night before, and no one would have dreamed that Sir Percy Carlyon was upon any different footing with her than any other woman at the dinner.

The next week was the week of Grand Opera. Senator March took a box for the whole week, and three nights during that week Alicia Vernon and her father were his guests. As Mrs. Vernon sat in the shadow of the box, listening to the enchanting voice of one of the greatest tenors in the world, it dawned upon her mind how privileged was the position of an American woman where men were concerned. The social customs, which permitted men to lie almost at the feet of a woman, were entirely new to her, and when this was done with the tact and high breeding of Senator March, he appealed to the craving for luxury in her which had been her undoing. He had asked her to name which operas in the week's repertoire she would like to hear, and when she had made her selection he called in his carriage for her and her father, and she found a beautiful bouquet waiting for her in the opera box and a supper after the performance.

Whither Senator March was drifting was plain to everybody except himself. He had grown accustomed to consider himself as a bachelor for life. He did not, himself, know the cause of his bachelorhood. Few women pleased him thoroughly, and he had put off from year to year the search for the other half of his being, and suddenly he found himself a middle-aged man. He disliked the idea of an inequality in age and felt no desire to make any of the sparkling young girls he knew Mrs. Roger March, and the women who were suitable in age did not often retain the power to please his æsthetic sense. He had no fancy for widows and did not care to be the object of a woman's second love. When he heard Alicia Vernon's history, however, it occurred to him that a woman's second husband might possibly be her first love.

These things all came to him before the soft spring days which Alicia Vernon, her father and Sir Percy Carlyon spent at his country place. Senator March had particularly desired Lucy Armytage's company. He had been fond of her from childhood, and she was one of the few young girls who did not worry him with the insidencies of youth, but Lucy, after having accepted the first suggestion of the visit with enthusiasm, was not now able to come. Senator March explained why at dinner the first evening of his house-party, which was as large as his modest house could accommodate, and numbered two ladies besides Alicia Vernon.

"I regret very much that my young friend, Miss Armytage, is not one of us, but she found herself obliged to go out to Kentucky for a fortnight's visit to some relatives," he said. "I believe that in Kentucky people are in bondage to their relations. However, I shall hope to have Miss Armytage at our next reunion, for we must come here often. Congress promises to sit into the summer and we must take refuge in the country as often as we can."

Alicia Vernon, sitting on Senator March's right hand, with Sir Percy Carlyon on her left, turned towards him with a look which held a meaning. It was Sir Percy who would not let Lucy stay under the same roof with her, Alicia Vernon. No repulse he had ever given her stung like this. For the first time she felt an impulse of fury towards him and a desire to make him suffer. She lay awake in her bed that night, hot and cold with rage.

The next day was Sunday, and in the afternoon the usual Sunday walk along the mountains was proposed. Senator March was too accomplished a host to devote himself to any lady of the party, and as there were not enough to pair off all the gentlemen, he attached himself to General Talbott for the afternoon. A little clever management on Alicia's part, in the presence of her father, secured Sir Percy Carlyon as her escort. Sir Percy made no effort to escape. He knew that strange liking which women have for opening the grave of a dead passion and dragging the bones of it into life, weeping and wringing their hands over it and crying aloud to it, commanding it to live again.

They walked together in the April afternoon through the budding woods, looking down upon the wide, peaceful valley before them, with the blue peaks cutting the edge of the clear horizon. It was the same walk which Sir Percy had taken Lucy Armytage two months before on the Sunday afternoon, and the recollection of it, and the strangeness of Alicia Vernon being his companion now, almost bewildered him. When they came to a sunny spot on the hillside, where a grey, flat rock afforded a resting-place under the pine-trees, Alicia would have stopped, but Sir Percy said to her almost roughly:

"Not here; we must go on farther."

"Why not?" asked Alicia. "Was it because you and Lucy Armytage once rested here and therefore I am not worthy to stop for a moment in this place?"

It was a chance shot, but it went home. Sir Percy turned his back, and Alicia, with a feeling of triumph, seated herself upon the flat stone where Lucy had first heard the words of love from Sir Percy Carlyon. When he turned round she saw in his face, dark and displeased, that she had scored against him.

"I wish I could forget you," she said, "and not care whether I can hurt you or not, but I can't. You see, there are some parts of a woman's life which she can live only once, and the memory is always tormenting her. This is the first walk we have taken together since--since that time in India. It was a hilly country somewhat like this."

Sir Percy made no answer; the rage in his heart against Alicia Vernon had received an accession in the last fortnight.

"Of course," she continued in a voice of suppressed anger, "you forbade Miss Armytage to come here. You didn't wish her to be under the same roof with me. One would think that I were the only sinner in the world."

"I sinned as much and more than you," replied Sir Percy, "but I have repented."

"That is to say, you grew weary of your passion for me. I think that is what men call penitence."

Sir Percy looked at her, amazed for the thousandth time. Outwardly she could observe every canon of dignity and refinement, but secretly, like every woman who had ever gone wrong, as far as Sir Percy Carlyon's experience went, she had lost all sense of justice, of proportion, of reticence, of discipline, and even of sound sense. He had heard stories of women who trod the downward path and then retrieved themselves, but he had never met one. These women and Alicia Vernon, with her heritage of the best birth and breeding, "were sisters under their skins." The thing which really surprised him was that Alicia maintained so outwardly and unbrokenly the high standard of her birth and breeding, and was still capable of disinterested affection--her love for her father.

As Sir Percy would not reply, Mrs. Vernon said no more for a while. She leaned against the mass of rock at her back and looked around at the still woods, in which only a few trilling bird notes broke the golden silence, across the sunlit valley and then at Sir Percy Carlyon. What strange fate had brought them from one end of the world to the other that they might meet alone in such a place? She was so still that Sir Percy presently looked around to see if she were there. She was sitting quite motionless, looking with deep, inscrutable eyes straight before her. She turned her gaze to him and said:

"I know no more than you do why I could speak to you in this way, or why I could ever think of you again. I am like a child who has got hold of some pretty, shiny thing, which turns out to be a jewel, and the child weeps and struggles when the jewel is taken away."

Sir Percy could not but be sorry for her; he often had moments and hours of silent rage with her, but it would not hold against her in the presence of her despair. Presently she arose and came toward him, smiling.

"Look around you," she said; "this spot, I know, I feel, is associated with the image of that girl. Now you will be unable to think of it without thinking of me also. I will not have it that I only shall think of you; I mean that you shall not be able to escape the thought of me. Come, it is late; let us be going."

They turned and walked back towards the house. Farther along the mountain path they met Senator March and General Talbott; quite naturally the party divided, and Sir Percy joined General Talbott, while Senator March ranged himself with Mrs. Vernon. They fell behind, as Senator March was pointing out the features and general historic points of the landscape, while Sir Percy and General Talbott went ahead. When they were quite far in advance and walking down the country lane bordered with the mountain ash, now with little brown buds upon the bare white branches, and the whole air scented with the coming spring, General Talbott said:

"I think this journey, my dear fellow, to be one of the pleasantest, and even one of the most fortunate, that I ever made. It has been a long time since I have seen my poor child so like her earlier self. She is interested and amused. The social customs over here permit a woman to enjoy a great many pleasures and to receive a great many attentions from men without exciting remark. My daughter is, as you know, extremely careful in her conduct, often prudish. Not that I would wish her otherwise, but still I am glad when she finds herself in an environment that permits her a little innocent enjoyment. Those parties at the opera were extremely pleasant, but no such attention could be offered or accepted in Europe."

"You are quite right; socially American customs are extremely pleasant. They embody liberty without license."

"I agree with you from what I have seen."

As General Talbott spoke, Sir Percy observed in him a cheerfulness and note of pleasure in his voice which always followed when Alicia seemed to be at ease and a little happy.

Sir Percy Carlyon left early on the Monday morning and returned to Washington in advance of the rest of the party. It was still some days before Lucy Armytage arrived from Kentucky. At their first meeting afterwards Lucy asked no questions whatever about Senator March's house-party, and the delicate reticence which she showed on this point was not unnoticed by Sir Percy, who volunteered to tell her all of which he could speak. He did not avoid Alicia Vernon's name, but whenever he spoke of her Lucy saw that peculiar expression of his eye which indicated dislike. She asked, however, a great many questions about Senator March and then said:

"I wonder if Mrs. Vernon will marry him when he asks her."

Sir Percy was thunderstruck; no such idea had entered his thoroughly masculine mind, and after a moment he said so.

"How stupid!" remarked Lucy, eyeing him with profound contempt. "It was perfectly obvious the first night they met. Everybody in town is talking about it."

"They are?" replied Sir Percy after a moment, and then quickly turned the conversation into another channel.

Meanwhile his mind was in a tumult. Alicia Vernon married to Senator March, or to any man of honour, for that matter, and Senator March, chivalrous, high-minded, taking everything for granted in the case of the woman he loved! It was staggering to Sir Percy Carlyon; the whole thing was anomalous, inexplicable. But for him Senator March and Alicia Vernon would never have met. His mind went back to those early days in India: how the web then formed not only entangled him, but caught others, innocent and helpless, in its meshes. He would be forced to stand silently by and see a man who loved his honour better than his life take to his heart a woman unworthy of him. This thought possessed Sir Percy, and brought with it the fiercest stings of remorse. He went about that day with a strange sense of unreality concerning everything. Alicia Vernon might indeed have married even an honourable man, but to see a man as proud and sensitive as Senator March lay his honest, tender heart at the feet of Alicia Vernon was an incredible thing to Sir Percy Carlyon. That evening at the club the first person he saw in the smoking-room was General Talbott.

"I am very glad to have come across you this evening," said General Talbott. "I wish to speak with you confidentially. How are marriages arranged over here?"

"With the least possible trouble," answered Sir Percy with a glimmer of a smile, "and totally unlike marriages anywhere else. They are supposed to be on a basis of pure sentiment, and the question of money is handled in the most gingerly manner."

General Talbott smiled and then continued:

"To be quite confidential with you, my dear fellow, I have seen lately that Senator March takes an uncommon interest in my daughter. Whether Alicia would marry him or not I can't say. This afternoon Senator March called to see me, to tell me, what I had suspected for some little time past, that he is deeply attached to my daughter. I needn't tell you that the idea was quite acceptable to me. I am an old man, and at my death my child would be unprotected in the world; she is one of those delicate creatures unfitted to stand alone, and what I most desired for her was the protection of a good man's arm."

Sir Percy listened with quiet attention, but all the while a sense of unreality deepened upon him; nevertheless he said quite coolly:

"As far as the man himself goes, it would be hard to find Senator March's superior, and, as you probably know, he has a great fortune, honestly come by."

"I am not in love with money myself," said General Talbott, and then stopped and looked meditatively at Sir Percy.

The idea had occurred to him many times since Alicia's widowhood that the friendship, which was all that General Talbott knew had existed between Alicia and Sir Percy, might bring them into a closer relationship. It would have been an ideal marriage for Alicia, her father thought, except that Sir Percy Carlyon was a poor man and Alicia, as her father always said deprecatingly, had little idea of the value of money. He would rather, he thought, that Alicia should marry in her own country, but, recalling Sir Percy's modest income and expectations, General Talbott dismissed the half-formed wish from his mind. No; Alicia was not the wife for a poor man in public life.

"To be still more confidential with you, my dear Carlyon," he said, laying his hand on Sir Percy's knee, "nothing could have been more generous in every way than March's proposition to me. The law makes a liberal provision in America for the wife, I find, but Senator March, knowing our customs, volunteered to make settlements, splendid in their generosity, upon my daughter. She will have an independent income of her own, every year, far exceeding the entire income of Guy Vernon's estates, and for a woman of my daughter's luxurious tastes that is a great consideration. She is so high-minded, however, that I scarcely think she took this in, although after Senator March left I talked with her quite frankly on the subject. Of course, she isn't a young girl any longer, and has realised painfully all her life the restrictions of a modest income."

"But she will marry Senator March?"

"I think so; she has asked a little time for consideration, but you know what that means with ladies. March had the good feeling to say to me that, if she would consent to marry him, he would promise in advance that she should visit England once a year to see me, and he hopes that I will agree to spend a part of each year with them--most considerate of a father's feelings."

As General Talbott talked, Sir Percy saw in him a deep feeling of gratification and even of relief. The only fault her father could find with Alicia was her reckless expenditure, but if she married Senator March she would be far beyond all need of doing without anything--so General Talbott in his simplicity thought. Sir Percy's manner struck General Talbott as being a little peculiar, but he thought he could account for it: Sir Percy had his own private disappointment to bear; such was General Talbott's explanation.

VIII

In Washington there is always an outbreak of gaiety after Easter to atone for a slight suppression during Holy Week. It is then that the results of the season are tabulated and the coming June weddings announced. Two such announcements were made which surprised society: that of Sir Percy Carlyon, First Secretary of the British Embassy, to Miss Lucy Armytage, whose name most of the smart set heard for the first time; and that of Senator March to Mrs. Vernon, the charming Englishwoman, who had been received with open arms by the smartest of the smart. The first was paralysing in the effect it produced. The British Embassy, and all that belongs to it, is reckoned the peculiar property of the smart set, and for any one attached to that Embassy to go outside of the smart set for a bride seemed almost a violation of international law, to say nothing of diplomatic usage. Every particular about Miss Armytage, as the facts came to light, was more appalling; she was from a provincial Kentucky town, of which nobody, outside of Kentucky, had ever heard; she was the niece of a representative in Congress who lived in a down-town hotel; she had never been to Europe, and Newport and Lennox were unknown ground to her. Almost the only fashionable house at which she had ever been seen was that of the Chantreys, and society had from the beginning bestowed Eleanor Chantrey's hand upon Sir Percy Carlyon.

Deep in Eleanor's heart was a disappointed dream of ambition. She had herself too well in hand to fall in love with Sir Percy Carlyon, or any other man, until her love had been asked, but his eligibility had been suggested to her a great many times, chiefly by Mrs. Chantrey, who had visions of possessing the British Embassy, body and bones: herself the Ambassadors, her daughter the wife of the First Secretary. Some hint of this Mrs. Chantrey let drop to Eleanor when they sat together at tea in Eleanor's yellow boudoir on the day that Sir Percy Carlyon's engagement was announced. There are ways by which a daughter, as perfectly well-bred as Eleanor Chantrey, can silence a garrulous mother, and this is what Eleanor did.

"We must go this afternoon," she said calmly, "and call on Miss Armytage. I think her a charming girl, quite clever enough to fill any position whatever."

Mrs. Chantrey, being civilly bullied by her daughter, the two drove down later to the Armytages' hotel and, instead of merely leaving cards, waited to know whether they could see Mrs. and Miss Armytage. They were ushered up into the modest sitting-room, which had been the scene of some halcyon hours to Lucy and Sir Percy.

Eleanor Chantrey, the most sincere of women, honestly admired Lucy Armytage, and the quiet dignity and grace with which Lucy received her congratulations confirmed Eleanor in her previous opinion, that Lucy Armytage would be equal to any position. She thanked Eleanor warmly for her good wishes and kind interest, and the two girls were drawn closer together by the innate nobility which both of them possessed.

Meanwhile, Sir Percy was having what might be called "a roaring time" at the Embassy with Lord Baudesert, his Aunt Susan and Jane, Sarah and Isabella. Sometimes even sheep will make a feint of butting, and, following Lord Baudesert's tigerish assault, the Verekers butted and prodded as viciously as they knew how. Sir Percy had chosen tea-time as the hour to break the news to his family. He first had a private interview with Lord Baudesert in his library. The Ambassador happened to have a real and not a diplomatic touch of gout, and was correspondingly savage. When Sir Percy coolly, and without any preamble, announced that he was engaged to Miss Armytage, and that the wedding would take place at Bardstown, Kentucky, in the middle of June, Lord Baudesert almost jumped from his chair with wrath and surprise, and then fell back again overwhelmed with disgust.

"You swore to me," he bellowed, "that you would never marry an American."

Sir Percy smiled and stroked his moustache.

"Well," he said, "I am of that opinion still. This is the only American I would ever marry under any possible circumstances and I don't propose to do it but once."

"You know the disadvantages of it," cried Lord Baudesert, thumping the table; "her money will be tied up as tight as wax; you will have a tail of relations following you all over Europe, and the whole thing is the most damnable mess I have ever heard of in my life."

"Call it anything you please," replied Sir Percy, still smiling, "only be careful how you mention Miss Armytage. As for her money being tied up, she has very little, so it really doesn't matter."

This was like throwing a bushel of dynamite into a burning house. Lord Baudesert forgot his gout and, getting up from his chair, strode up and down the room, dragging his gouty leg after him, and muttering savagely to himself, with an occasional blast against American marriages. Presently Sir Percy rose and went into the drawing-room, followed by Lord Baudesert. There sat Mrs. Vereker and the three girls, and while Mrs. Vereker was handing Sir Percy his tea, he remarked casually to her:

"Aunt Susan, I hope very much that you and the girls will, as soon as you conveniently can, call upon Miss Armytage, who has done me the honour of promising to become my wife."

If the big chandelier in the middle of the room had tumbled on the tea-table, and had been followed by a patch of the blue sky, Mrs. Vereker could not have been more astounded; her jaw dropped, and the three girls, horror-stricken, gazed at Sir Percy, who went on drinking his tea with the most exasperating calmness.

"Engaged to Miss Armytage," murmured Mrs. Vereker despairingly, when she found her voice. "A most incredible thing! I think you must be joking, and that you are really engaged to Miss Chantrey."

"I assure you that I am not," replied Sir Percy. "Give me another cup of tea, please, Isabella."

"Mamma," said Isabella, without paying the slightest attention to Sir Percy's request, "he is simply teasing us. He certainly is engaged to Miss Chantrey. I have heard it suggested a dozen times in the last month."

"But I am not," said Sir Percy, helping himself to tea, which no one else was sufficiently composed to give him.

Mrs. Vereker shook her head hopelessly. "I am sure it is Miss Chantrey."

This view of the matter acted upon Lord Baudesert's smouldering rage like a stone in front of a rushing railway train, which is at once derailed and helpless. Lord Baudesert exploded into a short laugh.

"No such luck," he said; "Miss Chantrey has a fortune; Miss Armytage has not."

Sir Percy, having finished his tea, put down his cup and rose.

"I shall be very much obliged to you, Aunt Susan, if you will do as I ask. Lord Baudesert, of course, will call to-morrow."

Lord Baudesert growled something between his clenched teeth, which nobody could make out, and Sarah cried:

"Oh, Cousin Percy, how many times have I heard you say that you would never marry an American;" and Jane chimed in, "No one would have minded in the least if it had been Eleanor Chantrey."

"Perhaps," remarked Sir Percy to Jane, meanwhile looking Lord Baudesert full in the eye, "you may yet have the pleasure of being allied with the Chantreys. Common report has it that Lord Baudesert and Mrs. Chantrey are to be married shortly. Good-afternoon." And leaving this bomb behind him, he escaped into the street.

Only to one other did he feel the necessity of imparting the news himself. This was to General Talbott, and through him to Alicia Vernon. He walked to their hotel and was shown to their

sitting-room to await their return from a drive. He went to the window and looked down on the street embowered with trees, and with sidewalks full of gaily dressed people, and smart carriages dashing to and fro in the sunny spring afternoon. He had heard that day, as had everybody else, the announcement of Alicia Vernon's engagement, and it brought him no surprise, but only that strange feeling as if such a thing could not be: that Alicia Vernon should become the wife of an honourable man. While he was watching, the carriage with General Talbott and Alicia drove up, and the General, with his own portly grace, assisted his daughter to alight. In a moment or two they entered the room together, and General Talbott grasped Sir Percy's hand and congratulated him from the bottom of an honest and generous heart.

"We, too, have news for you," he said, smiling; "I will leave it to Alicia to tell you, as it is her affair."

Alicia fixed her violet eyes on Sir Percy Carlyon, and in them was the light of triumph. "I think, papa," she said, in the sweet, affectionate voice which she always addressed her father, "if you will leave me with Sir Percy for ten minutes it would be kind. I want to tell so old a friend all about it. So here is your newspaper, and go into your own room for ten minutes and then we shall be delighted to see you."

She took the afternoon newspaper off the table and, thrusting it into General Talbott's hand with an air of tender familiarity, led him to the door and closed it after him, and then she came back to where Sir Percy stood near the window and began to pull off her long gloves.

"Have you told Miss Armytage about that summer at the hill station?" she asked calmly, with a sidelong glance. Sir Percy remained silent, but it won for him no mercy. "I see that you haven't," she said. "Yet you think it right to marry that innocent girl without telling her all? Very well, I shall marry Senator March, but neither shall I tell him all."

It occurred to Sir Percy to ask her if she meant, like himself, to be so true, so devoted in her marriage that she might have some little ground upon which to ask forgiveness. But although he by no means adopted the specious view that the law has no variation for men and women, yet he felt that no one who had violated the law in any part could rebuke his fellow-sinner, and, therefore, remained obstinately silent. Mrs. Vernon had encountered this mood before, but it made the situation rather easier for her, as Sir Percy never contradicted anything she said. After a moment or two she spoke again.

"It is a curious thing that people like Senator March, who have never been tempted, put all poor sinners in the wrong. I feel it every moment that I am with him. I never had this feeling with Guy Vernon, because from the day I married him his wickedness and his weakness were plain to me. But there is a compelling honesty about a man like Senator March from which one can't get away; it is like my father's. Senator March thinks I am marrying him for love; you think I am marrying him for money. This last is true, and I can't deny it, but I also have a disinterested motive--it will make my father happy and put him at ease concerning me. I have a good many debts of which my father knows nothing, and which he would pay, if he knew of them, with his last shilling. I couldn't keep them from him much longer and I dreaded to tell him. Now he is spared all that. I had the satisfaction of dealing honestly with Senator March when I told him that I must still give a part of my life to my father. He kissed my hand and told me he loved me the better because I loved my father so well."

Yes, it was the only redeeming love which Alicia Vernon had ever known, and it had in it a strange element of nobility and perfidy.

"I hope sincerely you may be happy," was all that Sir Percy Carlyon said.

"I don't know whether I wish you to be happy or not," Alicia replied in the same low voice.

"At least the past is now a closed book between us."

"Is the past ever a closed book? Certainly not to a woman. There are some things which are bloodstains upon the page of life and sink through and through its pages until at the very last there is still a red stain. Anyway, I don't hate Senator March and I don't wish to make him unhappy. That is as much as I can feel for any man now, but I could chop him to pieces for my father's sake or for--" The sentence remained unfinished.

Alicia's wild, unreasoning passion, mingled with revenge, regret and chagrin, died hard. There had never been a moment in which she would not have considered a marriage with Sir Percy Carlyon as imprudent and even disastrous. But there had never been a moment, not even the present, when she would not have rushed into this joyous madness. She turned and walked up and down the room once or twice, saddened, as all sentient beings are, when looking down an abyss in which they long to throw themselves, struggling fiercely against the restraining hand. Sir Percy, quite immovable, stood in the same place until Alicia turned towards him and spoke in

her usual, quiet tones.

"But I have this to say to you: if, after you are married, you assume that your wife is too good to breathe the same air with me, you may expect me to resent it. We may be in Washington together, remember, for some time, and if I am unjustly treated there will be a catastrophe, and this you may count upon."

Just then General Talbott's bedroom door opened and he walked in.

"The ten minutes are up," he said; "now sit down, Carlyon, and let us talk about coming events. Alicia and I will call to see Miss Armytage to-morrow, taking the privilege of old friends."

"Thank you," said Sir Percy, and could not force himself to say more.

"How strangely things fall out," continued the General pleasantly. "I had no thought when I came to Washington that I should leave Alicia behind me."

"You won't leave me for long, papa," replied Alicia, "because I know in two or three months' time I shall ask Senator March to take me to England and then we will bring you back."

"Oh, yes!" replied General Talbott, smiling, "there will be an eternal fetching and carrying, and some day I shall be a rickety old fellow; then you and March will probably throw me over."

Alicia only answered him with a look which was eloquent.

General Talbott did not think Sir Percy's silence strange; Englishmen are not likely to be talkative under such circumstances; so General Talbott, full of sympathy and kindness, kept on:

"After having seen Miss Armytage, my dear fellow, one can safely congratulate you. The newspapers say the wedding comes off in the middle of June."

"The newspapers are right for once," answered Sir Percy. "The wedding is to take place in Kentucky, so I am afraid I sha'n't have the pleasure of Mrs. Vernon's presence and yours."

"No; we shall have our own affairs to attend to at that time. We are to be married ourselves, you know," answered General Talbott, laughing, and then Sir Percy said good-bye and went out.

When he was gone General Talbott said to his daughter:

"Miss Armytage is indeed a charming girl, but it is a pity she has not fortune and prestige such as Miss Chantrey has, and fortune and prestige are what Carlyon needs in a wife."

Alicia Vernon made no reply and General Talbott, taking up a batch of newly arrived English newspapers, retired to his own room to read them.

Alicia Vernon, lying back in the depths of a deep arm-chair, sat quite still, looking straight before her. From the street below came the sound of voices, of traffic; outside her window black and white sparrows were wheeling and chattering, and a linden tree in full leaf close by the broad window waved softly in the breeze, making delicate green shadows pass over the room and Alicia's pale face. The phase of existence on which she had entered was as strange to her as if it were that of another planet. Senator March's offer of marriage had not taken her by surprise; she had seen it coming for weeks and had made up her mind from the first to accept it. Nevertheless, when it came she was overwhelmed with the strangeness of her new position. Of all of those who had ever made love to her, he was the first man who believed her to be the soul of truth and purity. It produced in her a faint stirring of a wish to be a little like what Roger March thought her to be. If only she could put Sir Percy Carlyon out of her mind! But his presence, when he came to tell her of his engagement to another woman, had agitated her more than Senator March had been able to do, even in the moment of asking her love.

Suddenly the door opened, and a boy ushered in the person farthest from Alicia Vernon's mind at that moment--Nicholas Colegrove. His personality was so strong that he could not come and go anywhere unnoticed. The sight of his handsome, iron-grey head, the grasp of his firm hand, brought Alicia Vernon to her feet and dispelled instantly the strange, benumbing dream into which she had fallen. Colegrove was saying in his rich voice:

"I took the liberty of a friend, albeit a new one, in coming to offer you my felicitations on what I heard this morning."

Alicia Vernon, now quite herself, smiled and thanked him prettily and asked him to be seated.

"Marriage is a very different thing between men and women and between boys and girls," he said in a tone of good-humoured cynicism. "When a full-grown man and woman marry, I have often noticed they assume a defensive attitude, one to the other; it is best in the long run. Of course, they don't admit it--everything in this blessed country is on the basis of the slightest sentiment--but it is a fact just the same."

Alicia smiled and answered:

"I don't think that American men have ever been on the defensive with women."

"Quite true in a way," answered Colegrove. "My interest in the subject is purely academic. I was married at nineteen to a pink-cheeked girl three years older than myself. We found out our

mistake at the end of a few years. I am not a brute and I am willing to give her everything she wants, but she doesn't know what she wants. Sometimes she thinks it's a divorce, but as soon as I agree to it she finds out that she doesn't want it at all. Of course," continued Colegrove, rising and walking about the room, "the time may come when I shall meet a woman who will mean a good deal to me. So far, however, not one of them has been able to make any impression on me as deep as the action of the Board of Directors of the A.F. & O. Railroad. If you don't mind my saying it, however, now that it is too late, I was very much impressed by you. Your type, you know, is very unusual."

Yes; Alicia Vernon knew that her type was very unusual and never in her life had her pride and self-love been more flattered than by Colegrove's frank and debonair admission.

"However," he said, coming and standing before her, "it won't keep me from being friends with Senator March; he is a very strong man in every way, and I hope you will let me be a friend of yours, too. Recollect, if you ever get into a financial tangle, I can give you some good advice."

"I have been in a financial tangle all my life," murmured Alicia, "but now that is past."

"Not if you have been in it all your life, my dear lady; those things are matters of temperament and bear a very indirect relation to the rise and fall of one's income. That's one thing in which I have been always very indulgent towards women. Very few of them have any real idea of the value of money, and the charming and beautiful among them should have it just as they should have plenty of air and sunlight."

This sentiment was peculiarly acceptable to Alicia Vernon.

Colegrove remained twenty minutes longer, and when he left Alicia reflected that in him was embodied that American type of which she had heard so much--men who can deny nothing to women.

The next day Lord Baudesert, cursing and swearing, and Mrs. Vereker, sighing and lamenting, while Jane, Sarah and Isabella sighed and lamented at home, went to call upon Lucy Armytage as the *fiancée* of Sir Percy Carlyon. Luckily Lucy was not at home, for which mercy Mrs. Vereker was humbly thankful. The visit, however, had to be returned, and within the week Mrs. Armytage and Lucy drove in a hired carriage to the British Embassy and were shown into the drawing-room. Never was there a meeting with greater elements of danger. Besides Mrs. Vereker and the three girls, they had General Talbott, Alicia Vernon and Senator March. It was enough to disconcert a trained woman of the world, but Lucy Armytage, with the natural tact and self-control which was her heritage, bore herself beautifully. She had long since divined that the three Vereker girls followed their mother as if she were a bell cow, while Lord Baudesert was the supreme arbiter of their destinies. Lucy took up the best possible strategic position--a chair next to Lord Baudesert. The Ambassador, in spite of his tendency to harass his womenkind, was a gentleman, and while cursing Lucy from the bottom of his heart, treated her with courtly attention. Something in the softness of her manner and the fearlessness of her eyes struck Lord Baudesert with a sneaking admiration. Lucy Armytage had neither great beauty, great talents, nor great fortune, but she was a conqueror of hearts and her empire was over men. No man had ever withstood her charm when she deliberately chose to exercise it. On this occasion she proceeded with infinite tact to captivate Lord Baudesert. Sir Percy, secretly diverted in spite of himself, watched Lucy serenely walking into the good graces of the Ambassador, and that by a path which few had the courage to tread--the path of polite disagreement with him. Mrs. Vereker turned pale when she heard Lucy say, smilingly, to Lord Baudesert concerning a certain public question then under discussion:

"I speak with much ignorance and more prejudice, but just the same I can't agree with you."

And Lord Baudesert, instead of eating her up in two mouthfuls on the spot, answered amiably:

"My dear young lady, you are no more ignorant and prejudiced than nine men out of ten who have discussed it."

Then Lucy told him, with quiet drollery, of her own views and opinions on the subject and the various others which she had heard expressed by the public men who discussed it, and Lord Baudesert laughed with appreciation. And then they found a book or two in common, and Lord Baudesert made the amazing discovery that a girl might browse about in a library and get hold of interesting odds and ends of knowledge, which she knew how to use without pedantry or affectation. Lucy's information about the Indian Mutiny was a mine of gold to her. Lord Baudesert had been a cornet in the days when there were still cornets, and had been both at Delhi and Lucknow, and sewn upon the breast of his court costume was the medal of the Alighur, which he would not have exchanged for the blue ribbon of the Garter. Lucy was the first woman

he had met in America who even knew the date of the Mutiny, and Lord Baudesert therefore soon reckoned her above and beyond the rest of the nation.

The visit was to Lucy a little triumph of her own, which was not lost upon any one present, least of all Alicia Vernon. The manner between these two women was perfect. Lucy had not forgotten Sir Percy Carlyon's word of warning. She knew not why he had no desire for her to be intimate with Mrs. Vernon, but his wishes were respected. Each was carefully polite to the other, and the little shade of reserve was too delicate to be noticed by any one present except Sir Percy Carlyon; Senator March did not notice it in the least, but came up to Lucy as she was leaving, and said in a low voice:

"I hope that you and Mrs. Vernon will become great friends. I owe Sir Percy a debt of gratitude: it was through him, you know, I met Mrs. Vernon."

"Thank you," replied Lucy. "Sir Percy is always laying people under obligations to him," and she turned away smiling.

When, after a short visit, Mrs. Armytage rose to go, Lord Baudesert tried to pin Lucy down. Lucy stayed a little longer, but not even Lord Baudesert's blandishments made her commit the blunder of staying too long.

Lord Baudesert's first remark on finding himself alone in the bosom of his family was to Mrs. Vereker:

"Have her to dinner as soon as you can. Delightful girl, she is. After all, perhaps Percy didn't make any blunder."

Mrs. Vereker shook her head like a Chinese mandarin, and sighed; she had been shaking her head and sighing ever since the engagement was announced.

The dinner two weeks later was another and greater triumph for Lucy Armytage. Sir Percy had expected her to be frightened out of her wits at the thought of sitting next Lord Baudesert during the whole of the dinner, and he could not quite bring himself to believe that Lucy's calm courage was not foolhardiness. But where men were concerned, Lucy Armytage knew what to say and do as well as any woman that ever lived. As she sat next to Lord Baudesert at the long and glittering dinner-table, she talked with him so prettily, controlling her natural effervescence, but occasionally sparkling into brilliance, that Lord Baudesert found himself captivated as he had never been before in his life. Senator March and Alicia Vernon were present also; it seemed to Sir Percy as if the Fates were still at their terrible work between Alicia Vernon and him.

Mrs. Vereker was sadly polite to Lucy, wondering all the time what Lord Baudesert saw in her to delight him so obviously. When the last guest had departed, Lord Baudesert, standing in front of the fire in the hereditary attitude of the Englishman, with his feet wide apart and his hands behind his back, remarked coolly:

"I think, Susan, when you go home this summer, you may as well arrange to remain during the winter. I intend to take the future Lady Carlyon in hand and show her a few things, and I can't do it as well with you here. I shall ask her to preside here."

Mrs. Vereker gasped. The intimation was not wholly displeasing to her after three years of trial with Lord Baudesert, but the idea of an American woman doing the honours of Lord Baudesert's Embassy was enough to stagger anybody, certainly a person so easily staggered as Mrs. Vereker.

On a June morning in a small church in Bardstown, Kentucky, Lucy Armytage became Lady Carlyon. It was the simplest little wedding imaginable, without any token that Lucy was making a splendid marriage. She was a charming and unaffected bride, and looked all happiness. Sir Percy, however, after the manner of an Englishman who has attained his heart's desire, was silent, and looked somewhat bored.

On the same day, at a fashionable church in Washington, Alicia Vernon became Alicia March. The first news she heard of Sir Percy Carlyon was that he was promoted, and appointed Minister at a small Continental court. Thus Lady Carlyon and Mrs. March had separate orbits many thousand miles apart.

IX

Four years and a half afterwards, on a mild, sunny December afternoon, Senator March, whilst walking through the still fashionable, fine old street in which his house was, saw a beautiful victoria, superbly horsed, drawn up to the sidewalk. In it sat a lady and gentleman, whom he

instantly recognised as Sir Percy Carlyon, recently appointed Ambassador to Washington, and Lady Carlyon. They had stopped for a moment to speak to two beautiful little boys, three and two years of age, in the care of a stately nursemaid and her assistant. Senator March's eyes rested with longing upon the charming little children. He was passionately fond of children, and they were the only gift of Heaven which seemed denied to him. When the nurse moved away with her charges Senator March stepped up and grasped Sir Percy's hand, and then Lady Carlyon laid her little white-gloved hand in his.

"I didn't know you had arrived," said Senator March. "I watched the newspapers, and so has Mrs. March, thinking that we would not let twenty-four hours go by without seeing you."

"We reached town only last night," said Sir Percy; "and we were speaking of you five minutes ago when we drove past your house."

While Sir Percy was speaking, Senator March, man-like, kept his eyes fixed upon Lady Carlyon. One glance showed to him that she had found herself; she was far prettier than she had ever been before, and there was a new meaning and intelligence in her black eyes and added charm in her agreeable and well-cultivated voice. She seemed to have grown taller, and she had a sweet, unaffected dignity of wifeness and motherhood. The dainty, high-bred girl had become a woman, had developed into an Ambassadors worthy of the name. It was she who said to Senator March:

"I hope Mrs. March is well, and of course she is happy?"

"She appears to be both," replied Senator March, smiling; "perhaps it is only her British pluck which enables her to stand the American husband."

"I shall hope to see her very soon," said Lady Carlyon, and then Sir Percy inquired about General Talbott.

"We are expecting him in the spring. As you may imagine, Mrs. March does not let any long interval pass between her visits to General Talbott in England and his visits to us. By the way, what an odd fatality has always interfered with our seeing you and Lady Carlyon when we have been in Europe. We seemed to be playing a game of hide-and-seek, but now there will be no escaping each other, and we must see as much as we can of you and Lady Carlyon."

"Thank you," answered Sir Percy, with the utmost cordiality, but it was Lady Carlyon who added: "Yes, pray remember us to Mrs. March, and we shall look forward to seeing General Talbott as soon as he arrives. We shall expect to see you very shortly."

Then after a few moments more of conversation the carriage drove away.

A victoria, with a coachman and footman in hearing, is no place for a private conversation, and nothing was said about Senator March and his wife until Sir Percy and Lady Carlyon had reached home and were alone in Sir Percy's library.

"Dearest," said Lady Carlyon, laying her little hand upon his sleeve, "there is but one attitude to take: we must be friendly with her. Remember Senator March's position and how you stand with General Talbott."

"I know it all," answered Sir Percy doggedly.

They were standing together, and Sir Percy took his wife's hand and kissed it.

"You are the better diplomatist of the two," he said; "I could not bring myself to mention Alicia March's name. If it hadn't been for your readiness Senator March must have suspected something. It must be hard for you?"

"Very! But I have been preparing myself for this complication ever since you told me that story. After all, it is quite natural that Mrs. March should make a fight for her position in the world. It isn't every woman who has it in her to be a Louise la Vallière."

"It is certainly not in Alicia March; however, there is nothing so cowardly as for a man to complain of a woman. I should be glad to take all the pain of my own wrongdoing, but you, poor, innocent child, must suffer too."

"Let us not think of it," said Lady Carlyon, drawing her husband's lips to hers.

Sir Percy said nothing, but his kiss and his eyes were eloquent of love and gratitude. Then Lady Carlyon went into the drawing-room and Sir Percy followed her. Deep in his heart he was a sentimentalist, and he loved his wife with single-hearted devotion. He could not but compare her, as she moved about the room, her white cloth gown trailing upon the floor, with the slim, pretty and inconsequent young girl whose waltzing had first charmed him. She was still slim and pretty, but she had grown wise with soft, sweet wisdom. It was she, now, who thought for him, smoothed over the rough places, practised an easy and graceful self-control, and was all that the wife of an Ambassador should be.

The tea-tray was brought in, and Lady Carlyon gave Sir Percy his tea, a thing comforting in

itself, with the same gracious air that she would have handed it to the Ambassador of France.

"It was in the ball-room that I first saw you, waltzing with young Stanley, the naval officer," said Sir Percy, drinking his tea with calm deliberation, "and it was in the library that Lord Baudesert warned me that a diplomat should never marry an American, and I swore to him I never would."

"It is all wrong in principle," replied Lady Carlyon, making a pretty little grimace--she retained for Sir Percy's benefit alone all the little roguish tricks and airs which made Lucy Armytage so charming, but would scarcely have been becoming in Lady Carlyon--"I never thought that anything would induce me to marry any man outside of Kentucky. I have often been shocked by your want of knowledge of horses."

Sir Percy tweaked her ear. The form and ceremony with which horses were treated in England had been a revelation to Lady Carlyon, and Sir Percy himself was no mean judge of a horse. Nevertheless, Lady Carlyon, when she chose to be once more Lucy Armytage, would give herself supercilious airs to Sir Percy upon all equine subjects.

"You hardly know a horse from a cow, my Lady Lucy," he said.

This was the name by which he called his wife when they were alone. He had explained to her at the beginning of their married life, when instructing her in titles, that she could not really be Lady Lucy Carlyon unless she were an earl's daughter, to which Lucy replied demurely that she had always supposed every gentleman in Kentucky to be the equal of the biggest earl in England. The small joke amused Sir Percy, and from that on she became to him "Lady Lucy." In some way Lord Baudesert had also caught the name, which so pleased his fancy that "Lady Lucy" became applied in tenderness to Lady Carlyon. It recalled Lord Baudesert, and Lady Carlyon said, as she gave Sir Percy his second cup of tea:

"I don't think your uncle will be able to keep away long from Washington. He will be sure to come back here as a visitor. He declares that he finds London, Paris, Vienna and Berlin dull after Washington."

"Perhaps it is because he is no longer an Ambassador, or else that the English, French, German and Austrian sense of humour is not so acute as he found the American, and my uncle can't have the ambassadorial joke as he did here."

"And Mrs. Chantrey is still unmarried," said Lady Carlyon, and then they both laughed.

Lady Carlyon kept away from the hateful subject of Mrs. March, but Sir Percy understood well that his wife would shoulder the burden and carry it bravely and quietly. The idea of Alicia March being under his roof was odious and humiliating to Sir Percy Carlyon, but he saw no way out of it. His immediate departure for England after his marriage, and thence to his Continental post, had kept Lady Carlyon and Alicia March apart. The Carlyons had not been to America but once since, and then only for a few weeks, within a year of their marriage. Colonel Armytage had been stricken with paralysis, and Lady Carlyon, with Sir Percy, had hastened to him, arriving in time to find him conscious, but dying. Mrs. Armytage had followed her husband within a fortnight, her last days tended by Lady Carlyon, to whom she had been a mother. Within a month all was over and Lady Carlyon returned to Europe without going near Washington. The chapter of accidents which Senator March mentioned as having kept him and his wife from meeting the Carlyons in Europe had been really a series of clever stratagems on the part of the latter. When the Marches were on the Continent, especially at the Capitol, where Sir Percy Carlyon took his preliminary canter as Minister before winning the blue ribbon of an Embassy, he and Lady Carlyon had found it convenient to be absent at those times. Then when the Marches went to London the Carlyons managed to be on the Continent. Sir Percy could not possibly put himself in the position of avoiding General Talbott, who had visited him at his Continental post, and had been made an honoured guest. Only one person suspected why the Marches and the Carlyons had never met, and that was Alicia March. Nor were the Carlyons the only persons who avoided her, but of this her husband remained entirely ignorant.

The stories of Senator March's wealth made a sensation in the sphere of General Talbott's and Mrs. March's acquaintances. Mrs. March herself gave evidence of it in the splendour of her jewels and the cost and exquisiteness of her costumes. She spent with a lavish hand, and the world knew it. Sir Percy Carlyon, hearing rumours of this, thought to himself: "It is the same Alicia, whose passion for spending has grown by what it feeds on." Sir Percy Carlyon turned these things over in his mind while drinking tea on this December afternoon, but he said nothing of them.

Then when tea was over, following the custom established after the birth of their first boy, the Carlyons went upstairs to pay a visit to the nursery. In saying good-night to the two beautiful

little children, Lady Carlyon knelt down by their cribs and made a silent prayer, and Sir Percy, standing near her, did likewise, and thought himself the happiest of men, but for one thing--that which had happened in the far-away hill-country of India long years ago.

Meanwhile, on parting from the Ambassador and Lady Carlyon, Senator March soon reached his own door. The outward aspect of the house had been changed and wonderfully improved. The adjoining house on each side had been demolished, and wings built out in the same simple but dignified style of architecture of the original house. One wing was a ball-room and the other was a picture gallery. As Senator March entered the hall a footman handed him a box which contained a bouquet; this was Roger March's daily tribute to his wife ever since his marriage. Within the house the note of luxury was struck, and it increased in an ascending scale until it came to Alicia March's boudoir, which was part of the new building. Senator March's quarters alone had escaped the tide of splendour, and his own rooms remained as simple as in his bachelor days.

He knocked at the door of 'his wife's boudoir and Alicia bade him enter. The four years and a half, which had developed Lucy Armytage into an Ambassadors worthy of the name, had also made a subtle change in Alicia March. She was apparently no older than on the day when she had first seen Roger March. She was an admirable subject for the great London and Paris dressmakers, and she had reached that stage of a woman's existence where dress ceases to be a passion and becomes a fine art. Time had left no mark on her, but her eyes--her beautiful violet eyes--had an expression of apprehension, even of fear, in them, and she, heretofore the most placid and self-controlled of women, had become strangely nervous. She started as her husband entered, but smiled as she received his gift of flowers with the graceful thanks which she never omitted. Then Senator March asked her how the day had passed.

"Very well," she replied. "I didn't wish to go out until you had come in. What have you been doing to-day?"

"I worked like a cart horse until three o'clock, then walked uptown for exercise, and whom do you think I saw half-a-square away?"

"The Carlyons," answered Mrs. March calmly. "I saw them drive past. Did you speak to them?"

"Oh, yes! I was delighted to see them again. You know I have a special reason for gratitude to Carlyon, as it was through him I met you."

Mrs. March turned her beautiful eyes on her husband with a look which every woman's eyes have when she receives a sincere compliment.

Senator March continued:

"Sir Percy is looking very well; that man has had unbroken good fortune of the most brilliant sort. I believe him to be the youngest Ambassador in the diplomatic service, and Lady Carlyon!-- bless me--she is Lucy Armytage and yet she is not Lucy Armytage--that is to say, she has grown up. She has a charming dignity without the slightest pretension, and one can see at a glance that she will do well anywhere. They had stopped the carriage for a moment to speak to their children, two fine boys."

"I saw them, too," said Mrs. March; "they looked quite adorable. Did Sir Percy ask for me or send me any message?"

Senator March tried to recall.

"I really can't remember anything special. Both of them were most cordial, and Lady Carlyon particularly said she hoped to see us very soon."

Mrs. March smiled.

"Sir Percy has forgotten, perhaps," she said softly after a moment, "his first six months in India."

"Oh, I think not! He told me during our first acquaintance all about that and the enormous obligations he was under to your father. We must call and see the Carlyons very soon, and have them here to dinner."

Then Alicia suddenly changed the subject, and began to ask him about his day's work.

"There is a tremendous amount of work on hand for the committee, as there is a great mass of information to be mastered before one can treat intelligently this whole railway subject, for instance."

Then Senator March went on to describe the pitfalls and obstacles in the way of certain intended legislation concerning railways. His wife listened with the deepest attention, occasionally putting in an intelligent question. Presently the Senator said:

"I believe you know as much about the matter as I do. You should be an interstate commerce

commissioner."

Alicia smiled, she rarely laughed.

"That is the way with Englishwomen: we accommodate ourselves to our husbands instead of requiring them to mould themselves to us."

"It is a very pleasant way," replied Senator March gallantly, and then, being full of his subject, he went on talking about it until, suddenly recalling himself, he said: "You have not been for your drive and it is already growing dark. I can't go with you to-day; I have a lot more of this business on hand in my study."

"I don't think I shall drive this afternoon," replied Mrs. March. "I think I shall walk for half-an-hour. You wish to be undisturbed until dinner?"

"Yes," said Senator March, going into his own quarters.

Ten minutes later Mrs. March, in a plain walking dress, with a thin black veil over her face, went out of her own door, and when she was well around the corner called a cab and gave the address of a plain hotel in the lower part of the city. As she leaned back in the ramshackle cab she drew her veil still more closely over her face and tried to collect her thoughts for the interview which she sought, but her mind wandered to all manner of subjects. How strange it was that she, the wife of one of the richest men in the Senate, with an allowance which was a fortune in itself, should be at that moment harassed for money! She never remembered the time in her life that such had not been the case. When she married Senator March it was with the expectation that never again as long as she lived would she ever want for money, but within the year the old emptiness of purse returned. Money slipped through her fingers she knew not how. She loved pearls and diamonds and beautiful things with an insatiable love. Senator March had loaded her with jewels, but she wanted more. It seemed to her that wealth was not wealth if one had to consider how it was spent. That principle had caused her to spend not only a splendid income, but had piled up debts to which her old burdens were a mere nothing. The same principle of shame and even fear that she had felt toward her father prevented her from opening her heart to her husband, the soul of indulgence. There was a kind of rigid morality about Roger March, and the idea that she had made debts which she concealed from him she knew would appear as a crime in his eyes. He would, of course, pay them--of that she felt quite certain--but in spite of her husband's love and gentleness, he had always inspired her with a certain fear, just as her father did, and General Talbott would know the whole story which she so shrank from telling. She found a curious lack of power in herself to stop spending money. Then came Nicholas Colegrove's opportunity.

He had seen Alicia March several times during the first winter of her marriage, when she immediately became one of the great hostesses of Washington. Colegrove was by nature social, and liked, as well as any one, a good dinner, a good glass of wine and a pretty woman on each side of him. His position as the moving spirit of an association of great railways, which some people called a conspiracy, placed him somewhat at a disadvantage with public men in Washington. Senator March, however, liked Colegrove well enough, and was by no means afraid of him, and if Alicia March wanted to have him at her brilliant dinners her husband made no objection. Senator March was chairman of the committee which was dealing with Colegrove and his associates, but so far nothing had been discovered of a nature damaging to Colegrove or his friends. As he good-humouredly told Senator March, the railways asked only to be let alone; and Senator March, with equal good humour, replied that was the very thing that the committee did not mean to do.

As the committee would not agree to let Colegrove alone, but persisted in asking prying questions, the next best thing for him was to find out exactly what the committee knew, and how it proposed to act. Alicia March was the instrument ready to his hand. Colegrove, who had a vast quantity of that semi-divine gift known as common-sense, was under no illusion respecting Alicia March's influence over her husband. Senator March was deeply devoted to his wife, but neither she nor any other human being who ever lived could swerve Roger March from his duty, or cause him to betray the smallest trust. He was not, however, on guard against his wife, and Colegrove knew it.

When he passed the March house late at night and saw the lights burning in Senator March's study, and knew that he was at work there with his clerk and a stenographer, Colegrove longed to know what they were writing. How easy it would be for Mrs. March to make a few copies of the letters and memoranda, which would be immensely useful to the A.F.&O.! Reflecting on this, Colegrove cultivated Mrs. March's society. Being a man of acute observation, he found out some things about Alicia March which not even her husband knew. He discovered that she had a

strange sense of dislocation in her new place. She had been forced, as she thought, in her previous life to have many concealments, and she still had them, but they gave her a vague sense of discomfort which she had never known before. Still the habit was upon her, and she had the conviction that concealment, however wrong, was absolutely necessary.

Colegrove alone of all the men she had ever known seemed to penetrate at once into everything which she wished to keep secret. He had got out of her the fact that she was pressed for money within a year of her marriage. This he proposed to remedy in a manner at once easy, simple and honourable: to get hold of stocks which would cost next to nothing to buy, and would sell for a fortune, and this he would do for Alicia March in his own name. He made the condition, however, that she should not mention it to her husband, and to this Alicia March agreed readily enough, knowing the transaction could not take place unless it were kept a secret from Senator March. Then money flowed into her hands, not enough to make her independent of Colegrove, but enough to ease the perpetual strain. At this point Colegrove had asked her to get copies of certain letters which he knew were in Senator March's desk in his study. At this Alicia recoiled and then refused, but when payment was demanded for a couple of black pearls which she had bought, and her dividends from her stocks were not forthcoming, Colegrove told her plainly that he must have copies of those letters before any more money was paid. Alicia had realised some time before that she was playing a dangerous game, but who fears the danger of a game as long as one is winning? It was ridiculously easy to get what Colegrove wanted, and love for the black pearls was stronger in Alicia March than honour or fear. Colegrove got his copies and Alicia's stock suddenly, according to Colegrove, declared a tremendous dividend.

Colegrove congratulated himself on what he had accomplished with Mrs. March and incidentally was scorched. All men are dreamers of dreams, and at last the dream took shape with Colegrove that he should force a wedge between Roger March and his wife. As for Colegrove's own wife, the fretful lady in a far-away western city, that was easily managed--he could drive her into a divorce any day he liked. He was the last man on earth who would betray himself, and what seemed an unguarded outbreak of passion for Alicia March was really a carefully calculated procedure. Alicia received it with a calmness and capacity to deal with the situation which showed him that she was no apprentice in such matters. She held him off, but she did not break with him. Each was too useful to the other to come to an open rupture, and so matters had gone on for more than three years.

In that time no human being, not even Roger March, suspected that Alicia March and Colegrove ever met except in the presence of others, and generally at dinners. Nevertheless, they had brief interviews, chiefly relating to bills and their payment, and papers were handed over to Colegrove, and crisp new bills for considerable amounts were received by Alicia. These meetings generally took place in unfrequented streets and parks at twilight, and might easily be explained as accidental. Those were not occasions of sentiment, but when Alicia and Colegrove met in drawing-rooms Colegrove then said things which conveyed to Alicia that her husband was puritanical in his ideas, which Colegrove was not, and when she should find Roger March intolerable there was a refuge waiting her. It seemed quite natural to Alicia March to hear these veiled declarations from Colegrove. She admired the ingenuity with which he made them and listened to them with a smiling composure, the meaning of which not all Colegrove's acuteness could discover. Alicia herself did not know her own feeling towards her husband, nor had the brilliant life upon which she had entered acquired any true sense of reality and proportion. She felt as if she were living in a dream, silent, changeful, exciting, but still a dream.

As the cab jogged along over the streets Alicia turned all these things over in her mind. It was the first time she had ever had a meeting with Colegrove which was open to the slightest suspicion, but Colegrove had written to her that he did not desire it to be known that he was in Washington while the great railroad legislation was pending until he should be called as a witness, and for that reason he would come to Washington for a few hours, stopping at a plain hotel where he was not known, when he was supposed to be on a hunting trip in Pennsylvania.

It was almost dark when she stepped out of the cab in front of the hotel where Colegrove was staying. He was watching for her and came down the steps to meet her. Time had dealt lightly with him, and he was the same strong, supple, keen-eyed man of four years before, with the same captivating frankness of manner, which did not reveal himself, but revealed others to him.

"Now," he said, when Alicia and he were in the lobby of the little hotel, "you won't mind coming to my sitting-room, where we can talk privately?"

"I mind very much," replied Alicia coolly. "There must be a public drawing-room somewhere about, and we can talk there."

"Here it is," replied Colegrove, opening a door near by and entering a large, showily furnished room glaring with gas. "But this is a very public drawing-room," said Colegrove, smiling, "and it is not to be supposed that Mrs. March is not known by sight to a great many people who are not on her visiting list. You had better come to my sitting-room."

Without a word Alicia followed him to the lift and they ascended one flight. Colegrove's sitting-room was a small replica of the drawing-room below.

"It is a good many years since I entertained a lady in a place like this, but I hope you will excuse it. I don't want your husband's committee to know that I am within a hundred miles of this town. Before we begin talking business, tell me how you have been. You are looking blooming, as well as I can see under that veil."

"I remembered that you told me," was Alicia's reply, "that you must have copies of the correspondence. I never have any trouble in getting copies, but it always makes me ashamed."

Colegrove paid no attention to the latter sentence, but stored up the first, and thought it a lucky admission on Alicia's part. She opened the costly little bag which she carried in her hand, and took out half-a-dozen letters, which Colegrove read rapidly, and with an air of satisfaction. Then, putting them in his breast pocket, he said pleasantly:

"By the way, that A.F.&O. stock has gone sky-high, and will soon go down in a hole in the ground. I sold a thousand shares of that investment of yours which stands in my name, and here is the money for it. You understand why I am obliged to give it to you in money instead of a cheque?"

He handed out a roll of bills, naming a considerable sum, and Alicia, without counting it, put it into her bag. Colegrove, having transacted the business part of the interview, would have liked to have had half-an-hour's conversation with Mrs. March, whose charming voice and speaking eyes had a steady and increasing fascination for him, but Alicia would not stay.

"We can talk," she said, "when you come to Washington openly. My husband, I think, likes you very much, and he says he is warring on the corporation, not on individuals."

"Will you ask me to dinner, Mrs. March?"

"With pleasure," replied Alicia, smiling faintly.

"I am glad it gives you a little pleasure; it gives me a great deal," replied Colegrove. "When a man has led the life that I have led, and has to do with large affairs, most women appear to him like children whose range of ideas is soon exhausted. Not so with you, however."

"I never was reckoned a clever woman," responded Alicia.

"Oh, Lord! I hate cleverness in both men and women. It assumes to be everything and takes the place of nothing. But you have lived from the very hour you made that unlucky first marriage. No one admires Senator March more than I do, but he ought to have married a purely conventional person, like Miss Chantrey, for example, whom I have met at your house. There must be a good many things you can't talk about to your husband."

Colegrove's words were guarded, but something in his tone expressed a subtle contempt for Senator March. Suddenly, and without the slightest premonition, Alicia March felt herself colouring with anger at Colegrove's words. He dared to say one word against her husband in her presence! It was the first strong feeling she had ever experienced where Roger March was concerned, and it lighted up her eyes, and brought the blood to her face, and she answered him sharply:

"I am not worthy of my husband, you and I both know it," and walked out of the room.

Colegrove followed her, hat in hand, and full of apologies, professing ignorance as to how he had offended her. She allowed him to assist her into the cab, but merely bade him a chilly good-bye. Colegrove watched the cab as it fumbled off in the dusk and then said to himself:

"I shall let her get into a tighter place than ever for money before I give her another lift. But, by Jove! if I were in March's place I would have had that woman's confidence long ago."

Then it occurred to him that there was in reality a great gulf between Senator March and the woman who was his wife, and a man like himself. This did not disconcert Colegrove in the least, as it was his invariable practice to see things as they were and never to blink the truth.

It was half-past six o'clock before Alicia March entered the door of her home. Instead of going to her boudoir, she went into Senator March's study. He was at his desk hard at work--he was known as the hardest worked man in the Senate--but he had not failed to notice his wife's absence.

"Really," he said, turning in his chair and taking her hand as she came forward into the circle of light cast by the old-fashioned student lamp which burned upon his desk, "you must not stay out so late. If I had known in what direction you had walked, I should have gone to meet you at

six o'clock."

"You are fanciful," replied Alicia, and, for almost the first time in their married life, gave him an unasked caress, passing her arm around his neck and stooping to kiss him. It was not lost on Senator March.

"You know how to win pardon," he said, "but--but don't do it again. Since you have been gone I have been studying up some of the performances of your friend Colegrove, and I can't make out whether he is a virtuous sufferer or a very able and accomplished scamp."

"I met Mr. Colegrove while I was out," said Alicia, remembering the sum in her little bag, which would by no means pay all her bills, "and I promised to ask him to dinner," and then suddenly remembered that Colegrove had told her not to mention his presence in Washington. She had in truth been thinking more of her husband than of Colegrove for the last half-hour.

Senator March, however, did not observe any significance in his wife's casual words, and answered:

"Oh, very well! I am not down on Colegrove personally; he is a very good dinner guest, and there isn't any reason why you shouldn't ask him if you wish to. Will you invite him to meet the Carlyons?"

Alicia March turned a little pale at the suggestion. She had begun to be somewhat afraid of Colegrove's singular acuteness and power to make her tell things she did not mean to tell him. He might divine something of that past which had existed between Sir Percy Carlyon and herself. And Sir Percy, having known her long before either Colegrove or her husband, might suspect something between Colegrove and herself. She had, however, been used to these complications for many years, and could readily bring herself to meet them. Her sense of humour was small, but she had a glimmer when she said to her husband:

"Yes; we can have Mr. Colegrove and the Carlyons together."

X

Within a week Senator and Mrs. March one afternoon paid their first visit to the British Embassy. At the moment of greeting, Mrs. March saw that Lady Carlyon knew all of the story of what had occurred sixteen years before. Not that Lady Carlyon showed the slightest haughtiness or restraint on meeting Mrs. March; on the contrary, her bearing was perfect and her dignity and grace could not have been surpassed. Lady Carlyon was by no means the Lucy Armytage whom Mrs. March, as Alicia Vernon, had cross-examined so easily four years before. But there is a psychic understanding between women, a glance of the eye, a note of the voice, which tells the story to which the words may give a flat contradiction.

It cannot be said, however, that Sir Percy Carlyon's demeanour was perfect in spite of his sixteen years' training in diplomacy. The deep resentment which burned within him against Mrs. March was kindled into new life when he saw her shaking hands with his wife, and his greeting showed a certain restraint; nor was he over-cordial to Senator March, but this passed unobserved. There were other visitors present, and nothing in the least awkward occurred. Alicia had one moment of that revenge which is the sweetest draught a woman can quaff when, as the visit drew to a close, she said smilingly to Lady Carlyon and Sir Percy:

"Senator March tells me that you have promised to give us the pleasure of dining with us before long. Can you fix the date now?"

Sir Percy remained silent, but Lady Carlyon replied readily:

"I shall have to look at our book of engagements and I will write. You are most kind to ask us."

"Thank you," answered Alicia, with a peculiar inflection of pleasure in her voice.

It would be one of the most triumphant moments of her life when she forced Sir Percy Carlyon to bring his wife to dine with her. Senator March, standing by, expressed a frank and cordial pleasure at the prospect of seeing the Carlyons under his own roof. Man-like, he had observed nothing in the attitude of Sir Percy and Lady Carlyon, either towards himself or his wife, and Alicia was the last person on earth to enlighten him.

Within a day or two a pretty note came from Lady Carlyon saying that she and Sir Percy would have the pleasure of dining with Senator and Mrs. March on the thirtieth of January, if that date would be convenient to their hostess. Alicia passed the note over to her husband across the tea-table in her boudoir, and smiled as she tried to realise the effort it had caused the wife of the

British Ambassador to write it.

Every incident connected with the dinner was an added triumph to Mrs. March. She collected a brilliant company, even in that place of brilliant dinners--Washington--and Colegrove was among the invited guests. She had engaged a great singer to lend the magic of his voice to the evening afterwards. In every detail she had the kindest interest of her husband. She was an Englishwoman entertaining, for the first time, the Ambassador from her own country, and Senator March determined that she should do it well. He even gave his attention to his wife's gown and jewels, which were consequently superb.

On the evening of the dinner, Alicia March was dressed and in her splendid drawing-room half-an-hour before the guests were due. She was conscious of looking her best; splendour became her mature beauty. Like most Englishwomen of her class she knew how to wear jewels, her hair glittered with diamonds which fell in a glorious *rivière* upon her bosom, and sparkled on her arms. Senator March, coming down later, paid her a sincere compliment in saying that he had never seen her look so handsome. They went into the dining-room, a superb apartment in Pompeian red, and glanced into the ball-room, where the music was to take place after dinner. All was satisfactory to Senator March and more than satisfactory to his wife. With the nicety of courtesy, the first guests to arrive were the Carlyons. Lady Carlyon seemed, as Senator March had said, to have grown taller, certainly her air and figure had gained great beauty in the four years of her married life. She wore an exquisitely fitting, but perfectly simple, white gown, with a bouquet of violets on her breast; not a jewel of any description shone upon her. She had jewels, of course, as every woman of position would have, and Mrs. March happened to know that there were some very nice family jewels which Sir Percy's wife must have, but not one of them did Lady Carlyon wear on this occasion. She was a good diplomatist, as Lord Baudesert predicted she would become, but, like all women, there was a point with her where diplomacy gave way to feeling. Lady Carlyon had schooled herself to meet Alicia March, had fought and outwardly conquered the deep repugnance and disdain she felt for the woman who had made a blot upon her husband's life; but when she had the chance Lady Carlyon, like Achilles, could not forbear dragging her dead enemy at her chariot wheels. She knew that Alicia March would blaze with splendour, and therefore elected to dress with marked simplicity. She was as simply gowned as on that memorable night in her girlhood when she attended her first Embassy ball, and met her fate.

When the two women stood contrasted, Alicia March knew at once what Lady Carlyon's studied simplicity meant, and felt herself overdressed and bedizened, but she gave no hint of her chagrin. As each guest arrived Alicia March felt as if she were paying off the score between the Carlyons and herself. Her position and prestige as Senator March's wife must be obvious to the Carlyons. The last person to arrive was Colegrove. He was certainly the handsomest man present, but by no means the most distinguished, and could not have the place of honour on Alicia's left hand. When Mrs. March took Sir Percy Carlyon's arm to go in to dinner it was the first time she had so touched him since those days on the frontier of Afghanistan. She gave him a look, half mirthful, half menacing, but wholly triumphant, which Sir Percy understood. His manner to her was rather an indifferent piece of acting, but this was not observed by any one except Mrs. March and Lady Carlyon.

The dinner was splendid--rather too splendid Alicia realised; her tendency was somewhat to excess. The conversation was agreeable and sparkling. Alicia was an accomplished hostess; without great brilliance and *esprit* herself, she knew how to bring out these qualities in others, and Senator March shone in his own house. Colegrove, sitting on the opposite side of the vast round table, saw nothing at first, except the natural desire of an Englishwoman to do honour to her own Ambassador and Ambadress, but he noted the extreme simplicity of Lady Carlyon's gown, and thought her the handsomer for it. Nevertheless it puzzled him, but as soon as his eyes fell on his hostess a light dawned upon him. There was some rivalry between these two women. With that first thread to go on, he observed his hostess and her guests more closely.

When the ladies rose Mrs. March led the way into the picture gallery. Lady Carlyon did not, as Mrs. March supposed she would, subtly avoid her hostess. On the contrary, she remained close to Alicia, whom she asked to tell her the names of the artists whose pictures were on the wall, Lady Carlyon listening with smiling attention. Presently it dawned upon Alicia March's mind that Lady Carlyon was making her exhibit her possessions and give a list of them--it was Lady Carlyon now who had the upper hand and not Alicia. Mrs. March, however, went around the gallery with Lady Carlyon, and by that time the men appeared, and a few other guests invited for the after-dinner music. Colegrove was now watching with all his eyes. Senator March in his

hearty, outspoken way, had mentioned the friendship of General Talbott and Sir Percy Carlyon in those early days on the Afghan frontier, and Colegrove knew that Alicia had been with her father at that time. Sir Percy shied off from the subject very obviously, and this was not lost on Colegrove. All of this made Colegrove suspect that there had been an affair between Sir Percy Carlyon and Mrs. March. He recollected that she had never mentioned Sir Percy to him, although she had spoken freely of persons and events in her life. He sat turning these things over in his mind with the interest with which everything concerning Alicia awakened in him, at the time he was listening to the great tenor whose every note was worth a bank-note.

When the evening was over, and most of the guests had taken their departure, Colegrove, going up to Mrs. March, said to her smilingly:

"You look quite superb to-night. Lady Carlyon evidently didn't wish to be in the competition. When a woman wears a simple white gown and a bunch of violets she means something by it."

Alicia smiled faintly.

"Perhaps Lady Carlyon thought the occasion not important enough for jewels," she said.

"She won't find a more important occasion," replied Colegrove, laughing, "not even at the White House, as that is purely perfunctory, you know, when she goes in on the same footing as the Chinese Ambassador and the Korean Minister. I am afraid Lady Carlyon is slightly unappreciative. Good-night, and thank you for a charming evening."

After accepting the Marches' dinner invitation it was inevitable that they should be placed upon the dinner list of the British Embassy, so Lady Carlyon told Sir Percy, as they drove back through the January night to the Embassy, and it must be done at once; for Senator March was a man who could not be ignored either socially or politically, Lady Carlyon reminded Sir Percy, urging him at the same time to be more cordial to Senator March.

"I never saw a man I liked better than March," replied Sir Percy; "he was the first friend I made in Washington, but I admit that it staggers me to look at him in the light of Alicia Vernon's husband."

"I am afraid," answered Lady Carlyon, "that it will be observed in spite of all that I can do to smooth things over."

"I don't think I could have managed it at all without you," replied Sir Percy; "you are the better diplomatist of the two."

"Oh, you may always expect something great from Bardstown, Kentucky!" replied Lady Carlyon, and was Lucy Armytage again, looking with sweet, laughing eyes into her husband's sombre face.

Within a fortnight an invitation to dine at the British Embassy came for Senator March and his wife, and it was accepted. It was not to be supposed, however, that the Marches and the Carlyons had not met many times during that fortnight. They moved in the same orbit and were continually within sight of each other. Sir Percy, bearing in mind Lady Carlyon's caution, was more cordial in his manner to Senator March. He found no difficulty in being so, for the two men met, as they often did in the society of men alone, at men's dinners, at the club, and like places. Sir Percy, following the example of Lord Baudesert, was an indefatigable student of American affairs, and Senator March was a mine of information.

It was a source of some surprise to Senator March that there was nothing like intimacy between the Carlyons and his wife and himself. He could see that his wife and Sir Percy Carlyon did not stand to each other in the relation of old friends, although they were old acquaintances. And there was something guarded in the attitude of Lady Carlyon and Alicia March towards each other. He would have liked very much to have renewed his old friendship and even fondness for Lady Carlyon, but although she met him with unvarying sweetness, she did not take up the thread of intimacy which had existed between them from the days when she was a school-girl and he was a senator. Senator March had lived long enough to know that there are strange convolutions in personal relations, especially between women. It soon became plain that Alicia March and Lady Carlyon were not drawn together. Senator March's confidence in his wife was such that he felt sure that her course was regulated by good taste and good sense, and that was enough for him.

The dinner at the Embassy was brilliant, and Lady Carlyon did the honours with extraordinary grace. This time she wore very handsome jewels, although nothing to compare with those of Alicia March.

Senator March had intended to suggest to Alicia that she should invite the Carlyons to spend the week-end at the country place where their romance had culminated, but, seeing the futility of his plan, did not mention it even to his wife. Meanwhile great affairs pressed upon him. The big

railways had been finally brought to bay and Senator March, as chairman of the committee of investigation, had his hands full. Colegrove was in town continuously and spent many days explaining the inexplicable before the committee.

Senator March, listening, tabulating and making notes, began to have a very high admiration for Colegrove's abilities and even a belief in the man. Great corporations, Senator March knew, are not associations of archangels for the benefit of the human race, but commercial organisations, with an eye to profit. All of this was taken into account by Senator March in judging Colegrove and his *confrères*. One thing, however, was certain: Colegrove was the real man who was making the fight. His colleagues showed great confidence in him, and it was plain that he had organised, and was directing, the campaign. He had contrived, however, to arouse the antagonism of certain members of the committee; the investigation threatened to become a prosecution, and Senator March found himself often in the position of defending, and bespeaking a fair show for, Colegrove. The interest of the public in the railway question was widespread and intense. The Presidential election was less than a year off, and the party in power was relying upon its treatment of two or three great questions, of which this was one, to secure the next administration. In fact, politics entered so largely into the railway question that many public men lost sight of justice. Not so Senator March. He had no higher ambition than the senatorship, and laughed when it was suggested that he should enter the presidential race, but swore when he was asked to consider the vice-presidency. He was entirely satisfied with his place as senator, of which he was now serving his third term, and believed that he could hold it as long as he desired it. He had, in short, reached that lofty height--always a dangerous point in human affairs--when his life, his surroundings, his career, everything satisfied him exactly. He had no children, and that alone was a disappointment.

The thought that all his wishes and ambitions were satisfied came over him one afternoon in March when he reached his own door. Alicia was waiting for him in her splendid victoria, perfectly turned out in every particular. She looked uncommonly handsome, and greeted him, as always, with the greatest amiability. Senator March getting into the carriage, they drove off toward the park. Alicia wore a particularly charming white hat, and her husband told her so.

"I was afraid the hat was too young for me," she replied, smiling.

"Not at all," protested Senator March; "a charming woman is always young. It is one of my greatest sources of happiness that you are not a girl-wife who would drag me around to tea parties and balls, and not have any respect for my years."

"Have you had a hard day's work?" asked Alicia.

"Very. So much so that I have not been able to glance at the afternoon papers. If you will excuse me, I will look at the headlines."

By that time they had reached the beautiful wooded park, where, fifteen minutes from the fashionable quarter of Washington, one can be in the heart of the woods. The afternoon was balmy and the scent of the spring was in the air; all the earth was brown and green, and on the southern slopes of the hillsides little leaves were coming out shyly; already the blue birds and robins were riotous with song, and between the interlacing tree-tops, full of brown buds, the sky shone blue with the blueness of spring. The stream, swollen by the melting snows, rushed and swirled, and the little waterfalls laughed and danced madly in the golden sunlight. The park was full of smart carriages, automobiles and men and girls on horseback.

Senator March, taking the newspaper out of his pocket, adjusted his glasses and began to read. Alicia March lay back in her corner of the carriage, seeing neither her husband nor the beauty and glory of earth and sky around her. It was the old story, she knew not where to turn for money, and the sum she had spent and what she had to show for it bewildered her. Colegrove, for the third or fourth time, had demanded copies of certain letters and documents, and Alicia knew that no money would be forthcoming until she had secured them. Colegrove had not become in the least insolent in his manner; on the contrary, Alicia saw, with the eye of experience, that he was becoming more ingratiating. She even suspected that Colegrove was after another kind of stake, and more delicate plunder than legislation favourable to railways. She felt a singular and growing dislike to deceiving her husband. It was new to her, and was a part of that strange dislocation and unreality of life that she should have scruples. Formerly she had not known what scruples meant and had no fears whatever, but now she was troubled with both scruples and fears, which bewildered and tormented her. If she ceased to hold any communication with Colegrove it meant a revelation of her debts, her duns, and complications to her husband, and if she continued upon the path in which she had entered a precipice lay before her.

Alicia March and her husband sat silent for half-an-hour as the thoroughbred horses,

champing their bits, trotted slowly along the wooded road. All at once Alicia glanced at her husband; his face had turned an ashen grey, and his eyes, with a strange expression in them, were fixed upon the newspaper before him and he was as motionless as a dead man. Then as Alicia watched him with amazed and terrified eyes, he glanced at her and silently laid the newspaper in her lap.

On the front page, with great headlines, was a double-leaded article of several columns devoted to Colegrove. In it was laid bare Colegrove's whole career, especially his management of the great railway interests confided to him. As Senator March had seen long before, Colegrove had gained a complete ascendancy over his associates, who followed his leadership like so many schoolboys. Then came the most singular part of all--the assertion that Colegrove had got advance information, which was invaluable to him, through the wife of a certain public man, and although Senator March's name was not mentioned, it was so plainly indicated that it was impossible to mistake who was meant. Then came a history of Colegrove's alleged transactions in stocks for the benefit of the senator's wife, and many other particulars, which Alicia had supposed were known only to herself and Colegrove. She read the article through rapidly, to the accompaniment of the steady beat of the horse's hoofs on the park road and the soft carolling of the woodland birds. She felt herself growing benumbed like a person being paralysed by inches; when she finished reading the article she made an effort to speak, which seemed to cost her all her strength.

"Stop," she said to the footman, and then turning to her husband said: "Let us walk a little way in the woods down by the water."

The carriage stopped and the footman jumped down and assisted Senator March to alight, and Mrs. March followed him. The two walked together into a path which led down to the water where there was a bench concealed by some shrubbery. They both looked so pale, and Senator March moved so heavily, that the footman exchanged looks with the coachman and remarked, putting his finger on his nose:

"Something is up between 'em."

Down by the water Senator March dropped upon the bench and Alicia seated herself beside him.

"It is a great blow," he said after a minute, "a very great blow. It is the first aspersion cast upon me or any of my family during the thirty years of my public life. It is easy enough to disprove it, but it is humiliating and terrible that such things should be said of you and me, my poor, innocent Alicia."

It was the very phrase which General Talbott had so often used in Alicia's presence, and it always moved and touched her, but not as it did now. With her father, Alicia had ever felt a sense of triumph that she had saved him the knowledge of much that would have maddened him, but with her husband she felt a strange impulse to confess all. She was, however, not a woman to act on such impulses and she remained silent, turning her head away. She could feel at first the pity in Senator March's glance, and then by intuition she felt, rather than saw, her husband's look change from pity to startled inquiry and then to dreadful certainty. Presently he said, in a voice so stern that she scarcely recognised it as his own:

"Tell me, is it true? If you will deny it, I will take your word against that of the whole world."

It would have been so easy to say "No," and Alicia could have said it readily enough to any person on earth except her husband, but something seemed to rise within her to forbid the lie, and she remained silent: she either could not or would not speak. All around them was the silence of the woods, and they were themselves so still that a robin, more daring than his fellows, hopped close by their feet and chirruped a sweet little song. After a long pause Senator March repeated, in the same voice:

"Will you not speak? Am I to believe--" He stopped, and Alicia longed to speak, but as before no words came to her.

She rose as if to walk towards the carriage, but she swayed so that her husband took her arm to support her. Then they went up the hill and, entering the waiting carriage, were driven towards the city. Not a word was spoken during the homeward drive. When they reached the asphalted streets Senator March directed the coachman to drive to the smart hotel where Colegrove had a splendid suite of rooms. Alicia's trembling heart sank lower; she thought it a fearful blunder that Senator March's carriage should be seen at Colegrove's hotel, but Senator March had never in his life concealed anything, and he was too stunned to adopt any of the small precautions of fear. When they reached the hotel he alighted and said with somewhat of his usual composure to the footman:

"Mrs. March will drive home," and then, lifting his hat to Alicia, he walked into the hotel.

Entering the lift, the Senator went straight to Colegrove's apartments. He opened the door without knocking and turned into the study of the suite, and there found Colegrove sitting at a large table, covered with books and papers, with a couple of the greatest railways' lawyers in America sitting with him. March bowed to them politely, and then, without sitting down, said coldly to Colegrove:

"I must be allowed to interrupt these gentlemen for a few minutes while I speak with you alone."

All three men had risen as Senator March entered; he was too important a man to be received with other than the highest respect, nor did Colegrove make the slightest objection to leading the way into the next room. The light of battle was in his eye, and it was plain that he was prepared to fight. After closing the door he said at once:

"You have, of course, seen the story in the afternoon newspapers? Much of it, I need hardly say, is a batch of lies, a part of it we have no reason to conceal, and the rest can be explained. There is no occasion for anybody to fall into a panic."

"I didn't come here to discuss that with you," replied Senator March, looking fixedly at Colegrove.

"You wish to know about your wife's transactions with me?" calmly asked Colegrove, carrying the war into Africa according to his invariable custom.

Senator March remained silent; he could not bring himself to put into words what he had come to ask. Colegrove went back into the next room and, returning in a minute, brought a tin box, which he opened. Out of it he took every copy, every paper and letter which he had received from Alicia March, and every note in which she acknowledged receiving money from him. Then from a little book he read the statement of every dollar he had ever paid Alicia March. The Senator, sitting at the table with Colegrove, read every piece of writing in the tin box, then, gathering them up in his hands, he put them carefully in his breast pocket. Colegrove, watching him meanwhile, prepared to throw himself, with a vigour acquired in his college days from a good boxing master, upon Senator March if he attempted to leave the room without returning the papers.

"To-morrow," said March without a tremor, "when the Senate is convened, I shall acknowledge every charge against me. I shall also claim that every penny which went out of your pocket to my wife was paid to me, and I shall resign my seat in the Senate, telegraphing the Governor of the State to-night."

"You are a madman!" cried Colegrove.

"It is the sanest act of my life," answered Senator March.

"There is but one thing to do," persisted Colegrove, "and that is to deny everything and call for proof."

Senator March smiled slightly.

"I think, Mr. Colegrove, we have different standards. I see in your eye that you mean to attack me in order to get these letters and documents. Well, it would be of no use, because my confession and resignation will not call for proof."

Colegrove, for once staggered and at a loss, allowed Senator March to open the door into the next room, where the two lawyers stood talking in low voices. The moment for using force was lost and, besides, the Senator's promise of confession and resignation put so new a phase on the case that Colegrove was bewildered.

XI

Senator March went downstairs and passed through the hotel lobby, where everybody stared at him open-mouthed, and went out into the streets. The sun lay low in the west, and the streets were full of people, walking and driving. Many persons turned and looked at him, some with pity, some with contempt, some with incredulity. In ten minutes he reached his own door; as he entered it he said to the footman:

"Don't admit any one to-night," and passed upstairs.

He knocked at the door of his wife's boudoir, but receiving no answer, entered the luxurious little room and found it empty, but through the door leading into her bedroom he caught sight of Alicia walking up and down the floor. She had not removed her hat or even her gloves, and was

nervously twisting the handle of her lace parasol as she walked restlessly about the room. The bedroom, if possible, was more luxurious than the boudoir. The red silk hangings, which had once belonged to the Empress Eugénie, had been paid for, not by Senator March's money, as he had imagined, but with money made by the alleged sale of stocks by Colegrove. The mantel clock and candelabra, real Louis Quinze gems, had come from the same source, as had the great silver-framed mirror on the dressing-table which reflected Alicia's pale face.

Senator March entered the room without ceremony and took from his breast pocket the packet of letters and documents in Alicia's handwriting, and handed them to her silently. She took them in her trembling hands, glanced at them and then gave them back to him. His face, although perfectly composed, had the same strange greyness about it which she had noticed as they sat together on the bank of the stream in the park. For the first time in her life Alicia March felt a desire to throw wide the doors of her soul and make a confession. She was frightened at the impulse, and would have restrained it, but her will power, usually so strong, was as feeble over this impulse as the hand of a child over a maddened horse. So far she had not spoken a word since the moment, less than an hour before, when the discovery had been made, but now she burst forth:

"I don't know what to say--he invested some money for me," she began breathlessly, and then went on, blundering, stammering and sobbing, to tell him her transactions with Colegrove.

Her husband heard her incoherent story through, and when she stopped, panting and wringing her hands, he remained silent for a few minutes. Alicia turned her agonised face away from him, covering it with her hands. Presently the Senator spoke in a quiet voice:

"Say not one word of this to any one. To-morrow I will acknowledge everything, only saying that the money was paid to me instead of to you, and that you are innocent. I shall resign my seat in the Senate--I am telegraphing to-night to the Governor of the State to that effect. It is much better for us not to meet again. I shall go to my ranch in the Sierras. I gave you a deed to this house when we were married, you remember, so it is yours, with everything in it, except my books, and I will give you an income to support it and to supply every reasonable wish you may have, but on one condition only."

Alicia was looking at him with wide, wild eyes.

"What is that condition?" she gasped.

"That you make no effort whatever to see or communicate with me again. I shall leave this house to-morrow morning, never to re-enter it."



“I shall leave this house to-morrow morning, never to re-enter it”

He turned and went into his own study, closed and locked the door.

Alicia's mood of terror changed suddenly to one of fury. She had heard of these people who had no understanding of the temptations that beset the weaker ones. Her husband had decided everything as if she were a child, or rather as if she had not existed; he had hardly listened to her stumbling regrets, her sobbed-out confession. In one short hour it seemed as if his love had turned to the bitterest hate. If he would but have been reasonable something might have been done, but without one moment's hesitation he was sacrificing himself and her, too. She threw herself upon the bed, torn with fury and remorse and a multitude of emotions, which she could neither control nor understand.

The servants in the house knew that something had happened, and when dinner was announced did not expect either the Senator or Mrs. March to come down. Senator March, however, did so, with the same extraordinary coolness and courage with which he would have dined the night before his execution. The door-bell had been ringing constantly, and cards, letters and telegrams had begun to arrive in shoals. No one had been admitted, but half-a-dozen reporters were camped out on the pavement.

When Senator March's solitary dinner was over he returned to his study and called up by telephone his man of business, James Watson, arranging with him to come at ten o'clock with his stenographer, prepared to work all night if necessary. As the evening wore on, the ringing of the telephone and door-bells, the delivery of despatches and letters increased, but only one person was admitted other than Watson, who arrived punctually at ten. About eleven o'clock an elderly gentleman, whom the footman recognised as the Secretary of State, called, and when the footman gave the stereotyped message, that Senator March asked to be excused, the Secretary

paid no attention to it, walked across the hall and upstairs into the study. Watson and the stenographer rose at once, and left the floor clear for the great man and the Senator.

"What about this yarn in the afternoon newspapers?" asked the Secretary abruptly as soon as the door closed.

"I have just telegraphed to the Governor of the State that a vacancy will exist in the Senate after twelve o'clock to-morrow," answered Senator March; "I am prepared to confess everything before the Senate to-morrow and resign my seat."

"What have you to confess?" asked the Secretary, "it was your----"

He had meant to say "your wife," but something in Senator March's eyes stopped him.

"I am the guilty person," he said, looking the Secretary steadily in the eye, "it is better for me and better for the party that I should get out now."

"What do you mean?" cried the Secretary of State.

"Just what I say. Not a vote will be lost to the party in the Senate as the state legislature is ours, but I must go, and go quickly."

The Secretary began an impetuous argument but presently stopped, saying:

"I fear it is useless for me to reason with you. A Berserker madness possesses you."

"It is a question of honour," replied Senator March.

The Secretary of State, who had been walking about the room eyeing Senator March, went up to him and offered his hand.

"It is useless for me to remain," he said. "I think I know the truth of the business, and perhaps I should act just as you are acting. Good-bye."

He grasped Senator March's hand, and the two men, looking into each other's eyes, understood perfectly. If Senator March had been guilty, as he proclaimed, the Secretary of State was not the man to offer him a hand.

Meanwhile, in these eventful hours, at the White House, and at every other political centre in Washington, the agitation was profound, nor was it confined to those who had a direct interest in Senator March's downfall. That night there was a large dinner at the British Embassy, and although the subject of Senator March was uppermost in every mind little was said about it, and that with bated breath. It was too astounding and not to be intelligently discussed until Senator March had been heard. The general belief was not far from the real truth.

When the last guest was gone, Sir Percy and his wife went to Lady Carlyon's own sitting-room. It was the first moment they had been alone together since they had seen the startling news in the evening journal. As they entered the room, Lady Carlyon gave her husband his favourite chair, and drew the lamp shade so that the light should not vex him--all those graceful little attentions which are so soothing to a wearied and perplexed man. She knew by intuition what his first words would be.

"It seems to me," he said, "as if I had brought about this whole frightful catastrophe, as I introduced Senator March to Alicia Vernon. But for me, and for my folly and bad conduct sixteen years ago, Alicia Vernon and Senator March would probably never have met. All the consequences ought to have fallen upon me, but you see they don't, they fall upon the man who is the soul of truth and honour, and wreck him while I sit in peace by my own fireside with you."

Lady Carlyon, being a true woman, would rather the consequences of her husband's early misdoing should fall anywhere than on him, and with a woman's conception or misconception of abstract justice said so to Sir Percy. He felt, however, as if the Fates and Furies had fallen upon the wrong man. Lady Carlyon combated this with tender sophistry, which did not convince her husband.

"At all events," she said, "Senator March is an innocent man, and can no doubt disprove all these things. I should like to hear his disclaimer. Would there be any objection to my going to the Senate chamber, for of course the matter will be taken up at once?"

Lady Carlyon had not been brought up in a representative's family without knowing something of the way things went on in Congress.

"I think you may go," replied Sir Percy. "Of course, Senator March is innocent, but it would be just like him to sacrifice himself for his wife."

"As you or any other man, who is a man, would do," responded Lady Carlyon.

"Yes; but men are not called upon to sacrifice themselves for the right kind of women like yourself, my dainty Lady Lucy," and then they kissed each other, and forgot for a time all the troubles and perplexities and remorse of life.

The next morning dawned clear and bright and soft, an ideal spring morning in Washington. Alicia March, who had not once lost herself in sleep through all the miserable hours of the night,

rose early and dressed herself without her maid. Throughout the splendid house was the sombre and intangible atmosphere of calamity; the servants had read the newspapers, and knew that disgrace and disaster were at hand for the master and mistress of that house. They were full of curiosity, and whispered among themselves, speculating upon their chances of getting new places.

Alicia watched the whole of the early morning for some communication from her husband in his locked room, only two doors away from her, but there was no message or letter. Senator March's own brougham always came for him at half-past ten, and it was the same on this fateful morning. Alicia, looking out of the window, saw some light luggage brought down and placed upon the box. She turned to her desk, and writing a few appealing words, took them herself to the door of the study and knocked loudly. She could hear voices within--Senator March giving his directions to his secretary and to Watson, his man of business. No attention was paid to her, not even when she thrust the note under the door. There was, however, a pause, and she thought perhaps her husband was reading what she had to say. She did not hear another door of the study open and the three men pass quickly down the softly carpeted stair, but hearing the bang of the carriage door, she ran toward the window and saw her husband drive off alone. A wild desire took possession of her to see the tragedy brought about by herself played to the end. She rang the bell violently for her maid, and with great agitation was dressed in the same simple black gown and hat and thick veil she had worn when going to Colegrove's hotel in the winter. As on that day, she went out as if to walk, not caring for her carriage to be seen at the Capitol, and, calling a cab, directed the man to drive her to the dome-capped building on the hill.

She had feared being recognised, but when seeing the surging mass of people, those crowds of the unknown who year in and year out swarm through the Capitol, pack the galleries and block the corridors, who seem strangers to the town and to each other, she realised that there was little danger of her identity being known. She joined the surging mass, and was swept onward to the public gallery, where the crowd was clamouring at the doors and the doorkeepers were holding them back. Alicia, making her way toward one of the doorkeepers, whispered:

"I am Mrs. March, and desire to go inside."

The man recognised her instantly; he had often seen her passing through the corridors on the way to and from the private gallery--Senator March's wife was too important a person to be unknown to the Capitol officials. He opened the door a foot or two, and, still keeping the crowd back, passed Alicia into the gallery. There was scarcely standing room, and Alicia was almost suffocated with the pressure; nevertheless, standing at the very back of the crowd, she was safe from observation. She glanced around the great hall with its grained-glass ceiling through which the yellow sunlight filtered, casting a mellow glow upon the scene. Nearly every senator was in his seat, and every gallery, even the one sacred to the diplomats, was filled. There on the front bench sat Lady Carlyon. Never had she appeared more handsome; she wore a white gown and a hat decked with roses, and seemed the epitome of the spring. She was smiling and talking to the French Ambassador, who was leaning over toward her. To Alicia's miserable eyes it seemed as if Lady Carlyon were there to flaunt her happiness, her splendid position, her youth and beauty, in the face of the storm and shipwreck which would that day befall Alicia March and her husband.

It was still half-an-hour before the Vice-President's gavel would fall, and it was one of the most painful half-hours in Alicia March's life. She cowered behind her neighbours and dreaded to be seen, while Lady Carlyon seemed to court the attention of which she was the object. Precisely at twelve o'clock the Senate was called to order and the Chaplain offered a short prayer. Just as the prayer was concluded, Senator March entered the chamber; except for his deathly pallor, he gave no indication of what he had undergone, nor of the ordeal before him. He walked to his desk and sat down; every eye was fixed upon him, but there was some pretence of beginning routine business. When he rose and, catching the Vice-President's eye, asked to be heard upon a point of the highest privilege, the Vice-President bowed, and instantly silence like that of death fell upon the Senate Chamber. Senator March spoke in a perfectly composed manner and his voice, though low and agreeable, had a carrying power which made it distinctly audible in every part of the vast hall and galleries. He alluded to the publication of the charges affecting him, and then declared, without a quaver, that there was enough of truth in them to make it advisable that he should resign his seat in the Senate, adding that he had already telegraphed his resignation to the Governor of the State. He had nothing to say in extenuation, and only one thing to say in explanation; this last was that he alone was concerned in the A.F.&O. transactions.

"There have been certain innuendos," he said, raising his voice slightly, "against an innocent person, a perfectly innocent and helpless person, whom I now appear to defend. To bring, even

by implication, the name of this person into this matter was most cruel and unjustifiable, and I hereby protest against it with all my might. I ask no consideration for myself, but I demand it for that misjudged and blameless person who has been attacked under the cover of the public press. I leave this chamber never to return to it; if a lifetime of regret can atone for what, I now feel, was not the proper use of my position as senator, these acts of mine will be atoned. I can say no more, and I can say no less."

The whole incident did not occupy five minutes. The breathless silence was maintained as Senator March came out into the aisle and bowed low to the Vice-President, by whom the bow was scrupulously returned, and at the same moment, acting by a common impulse, every senator rose to his feet; this was followed by a sound like the waves upon the seashore, for every spectator in the galleries also rose, moved by that spectacle of the most high-minded of men taking upon himself the burden of another's guilt.

Senator March stopped for a moment and glanced around the chamber in which he had had a place for nearly fifteen years. The great wave of sympathy and respect made itself obvious to him. The colour rushed to his pale face, and then as suddenly departed, leaving him whiter than before. He walked with a steady step towards the door and the door-keepers, in throwing the leaves wide for him, bowed low, a salute which Senator March returned with formal courtesy.

Then the silence was broken by a faint cry and a commotion in the public gallery; it was thought that some one, overcome by the crowd and excitement, had fainted. Not so; it was Alicia March who had uttered that faint cry, but the next moment she had slipped through the door and was making her way swiftly out of the place. No one stopped her or even recognised her, and she made her way to the ground-floor entrance, where Senator March's carriage was drawn up. She saw her husband pass out directly in front of her. His step was still steady and his iron composure had not deserted him. He entered the waiting carriage, which was driven rapidly off, and when it was out of sight down the hill Alicia crept forth and stepped into the shabby cab, in which the most luxurious of women had gone, as it were, to the place of execution.

XII

It took half-an-hour for the decrepit cab horse to drag the vehicle to the door of the splendid home which was now Alicia March's alone. As she entered she met Watson.

"Is my husband here?" she asked.

Watson raised his eyebrows in cool contempt.

"He is on his way to his ranch in the West, never to return. May I see you now for a few minutes to transact some necessary business?"

Alicia without a word led the way to her own boudoir, passing the door of her husband's study. The desk was clear and already men were at work packing the books which were all that Roger March took from the noble fittings of what had once been his home. It was so like removing the paraphernalia of a dead man that Alicia shuddered as she passed the door. Seated at a table in her own rooms, Watson passed over to her certain deeds, papers, and a bank-book showing a large sum of money deposited to her credit at the bank.

For all of these he required Alicia's signed receipt, which she mechanically gave, understanding little of the details of business. When it was over, Watson rose and took his hat.

"But," said Alicia, dazed and distraught by all that had passed so quickly, and helpless in the management of affairs, "what shall I do with these things? Will you take charge of them? I really don't--don't understand."

"Excuse me," answered Watson coldly, "it is impossible for me to act further in your affairs. If you wish any more information, and will notify me who is your man of business, I will consult with him at any time." And without saying good-morning, and putting his hat on in her presence, Watson left the room.

Alicia sat stunned, but dimly conscious of the indignity and affront put upon her. She was of a caste accustomed to all the niceties of respect, and she had managed to retain them until now. She began to ask herself, if she received such treatment from Watson, what might she expect from the whole world? And then there was an awful sense of loss in the mere absence of her husband. Often during the four years of her last marriage it had seemed to her as if her husband was the person who put everything out of joint. She had her establishment, her money, her liberty, and could do as she pleased, which was freely granted her, and life would have been

delightful, but close to her always was this man before whom she must ever act the part of a perfectly upright woman. It was that which had produced the curious sense of dislocation and bewilderment which had always haunted her. Now that he was gone, however, the dislocation and bewilderment seemed greater than ever. She came of good fighting stock, and presently she found a little of her courage, and began to think what was best to do in order to save herself. The first thing, of course, was to have her father come to her. She wrote out a long and urgent cablegram, certain to bring General Talbott at once, and then ringing for a servant, sent it off. There would be time enough before General Talbott's arrival to consider what she should tell and what should remain unknown. Then the thought that Sir Percy and Lady Carlyon must surmise the truth came to her, and it was poignant enough to make itself felt even in those first hours of shock. She was no more able to rid herself of the involuntary hold which Sir Percy Carlyon had upon her than she had been a dozen years before. With the Carlyons, however, she had a strong card to play in General Talbott, who would soon be at hand. She sent for the servants and calmly informed them that her husband, whom she called Mr. March for the first time, would be absent indefinitely, and that the establishment would be kept up, and they could retain their positions if their conduct remained good.

In the afternoon Colegrove's card was brought up to her. She went down into one of the vast, silent drawing-rooms to see him. Colegrove was not pleased at this, and would rather have seen her in her boudoir, but nevertheless met her with a smile and debonair manner. Alicia looked pale, but her manner was quite composed.

"I hope you will pardon me for saying that I am afraid your husband has acted hastily," said Colegrove, when they were seated, "but of course the career of a man like that can't be closed so suddenly. All this will blow over in time, and five years from to-day we may see him in the Senate again. As far as I am concerned, I have lost a good friend, and I shall now be hounded into retirement, if not into prison."

He smiled as he spoke, showing his white even teeth, and Alicia could not but admire his cool courage in the face of what must have been to him a catastrophe scarcely less than her own. They were sitting in the embrasure of a window, and their low voices were lost in the expanse of the great room. Nevertheless Colegrove did not consider it an ideal place to say what he had come to say. He said it, however, glancing through the wide-open doors to see that no person was in hearing.

"March has accused himself of what no one believes, but has left you to bear the real burden. That is really what his alleged confession amounts to. I don't think that you owe him anything. If he stays away, as you tell me he means to, you may claim your freedom at any time, and then perhaps you will consider me, who would never leave you as March has done. For my own part, I, of course, can get a divorce any day I choose."

The same strange feeling of indignation came over Alicia which she felt when Colegrove had once before made implication against Roger March. Still she did not repulse him, who was the only human being that had voluntarily come to her that day, and she felt intuitively that he was the only one who would continue to come.

"You must not speak of such things," she said coldly, and rising.

Colegrove rose too. He had implanted the notion in her mind that March, after all, had sacrificed her, and that she was nothing to him. A new expression came into Alicia's speaking eyes. She looked fixedly at Colegrove and then bent her head in reflection.

"I go now," said Colegrove, "to fight my battle. I don't know how, or when, or where it will end, but if they drag me down I will, like Samson, drag down all I can with me, and the crash will be heard from one end of this continent to the other. Here is an address that will always find me."

He lifted her passive hand to his lips, put a card within it, and went away without another word.

Alicia spent the intervening hours between then and a solitary dinner walking up and down the great drawing-rooms. She did not give Colegrove a thought; her mind, agonised and tormented, was working upon the problem whether or not March, in the intensity of his anger, had deliberately sacrificed her.

The sense of fitness and good taste, which had never left Alicia Vernon, remained with Alicia March. She did not run away from Washington, but, having determined to take up the attitude of an injured woman, remained in her house, but in strict seclusion. Every day she took the air in a closed carriage, or, heavily veiled, walked for hours. She continually met her acquaintances, who spoke to her coolly and passed on, and Alicia did the same. A few persons, chiefly silly women and foolish young men, left cards for her, but Mrs. March, knowing that such backing was a

detriment instead of a help, was excused at the door. She had received an immediate response from her father, who had taken the first steamer for America. Within a fortnight from the day Roger March left his home General Talbott arrived. He knew of March's resignation from the Senate, and Alicia, in the first hour of her father's arrival, put in his hand the newspaper which contained the charges and *The Congressional Record*, with March's speech, and left him to draw his own conclusion. General Talbott read them through carefully, and then, taking Alicia's hand, said to her with tears in his brave old eyes:

"My child, you have been singled out for ill-treatment, and to bear the sins of others. March's conduct was inherently wrong, but it showed a cruel disregard of you not to make some show of fight for his name. Your father, however, will remain your steadfast friend."

The presence of General Talbott sensibly improved Alicia March's position in Washington. His old friends, of whom he had many, called to see him, and perforce left cards for Mrs. March. Among them was the card of Sir Percy Carlyon, but no card was left for Alicia, nor did Lady Carlyon's card accompany her husband's. Alicia observed this, but she did not choose to notice it openly at present. She meant that considerable time should pass before she began an active struggle to regain her lost position.

Early in May the great house was shut up and Alicia March and her father sailed for England. It was two years and a half before she reappeared in Washington. During that interval no one in Washington heard of March, except Watson, who received occasional communications from him on business. He seemed to have dropped out of the world; the depths of the Sierras is a very good hiding-place for a broken-hearted man.

Those two years and a half seemed to be unclouded for the Carlyons. Sir Percy found his mission exactly to his liking, and his prestige was steadily increased by his management of affairs. It even met with the approval of Lord Baudesert, who found himself unable to keep away from his beloved Washington. Mrs. Chantrey, whose hopes of being an Ambassadors had been dashed by Lord Baudesert's retirement, still cherished dreams of being Lady Baudesert, and was warmly encouraged in her aspirations by that wicked old gentleman during his whole visit to Washington. Eleanor Chantrey had remained unmarried. Her beauty and her fortune would have enabled her to make a choice of many brilliant marriages, but deep in her heart rankled something like disappointment. She had not been in love with Sir Percy Carlyon, but she would have married him if he had asked her, an attitude of mind commoner among women towards men than is generally supposed. Eleanor was certainly fitted to be an Ambassador, but Lady Carlyon had fitted herself with consummate address for that lofty position. Lord Baudesert was openly delighted at the position which Lady Carlyon had made for herself. Her dignity, her sweetness and good sense had given her also a prestige which made her backing of the greatest value. Every woman in Washington society whose social and personal record was not like the driven snow was eager for the support of Lady Carlyon. With natural good judgment and acquired prudence Lady Lucy, as Lord Baudesert, like Sir Percy, called her, managed to escape every pitfall. She could neither be used, nor worked, wheedled, nor bullied, but pursued a course inspired alike by good taste and good feeling. Her two boys increased day by day in beauty and intelligence, and Sir Percy would have reckoned himself among the happiest as well as the most successful of men but for the memory of Alicia March. He was haunted by the thought, not without reason, that he was responsible for the tragedy which had befallen Roger March. He could readily imagine the motive which inspired March, and the thought of him dragged down by his wife's dishonour, seeking oblivion in the farthest corner of the continent, was a keen and ever-present regret to Sir Percy Carlyon. He had heard occasionally from General Talbott, who was abroad with his daughter. The great March house remained closed but tenantless, and Sir Percy surmised that Alicia March would in time return to the scene of her greatest triumphs and her deepest humiliation.

The echoes of the great railway scandal lasted during all of these two years and a half. Colegrove was not the man to go down without a terrific struggle. March's acknowledgment of the charges and his resignation would have been too strong for any except the strongest of men to withstand, but Colegrove, finding himself with his back to the wall, fought with a desperation worthy of a better cause. He had the money, the courage and the adroitness to drag everything into the courts, where the law's delay was a great help to him. So many powerful interests were involved that they made a bulwark around him. At the end of the two years and a half he was actually in much better case than he had been when he had first been pinned to the wall by his enemies, and his supply of ammunition had been increased. He had succeeded, by pouring out money like water, in enmeshing everybody and everything in a legal tangle from which no one

could see a way out. His natural genius for making money was such that he could always contrive to make vast sums, and the wonder was, as with a clever pickpocket, why he did not satisfy himself with the brilliant success he could have made legitimately. Every two or three months during that time he communicated with Alicia March. He had an apparent reason for doing so, as he represented that the stocks held for her in his name were always earning dividends, and every letter contained a cheque. One of these letters informed her that his wife had got a divorce from him. The poor lady had in truth been goaded into it. Alicia March made no reference to this in the brief replies she sent to his letters.

XIII

One afternoon in December, nearly three years after Mrs. March had left Washington, Lady Carlyon was driving through the fashionable street in which the March house was situated. Lord Baudesert, who was on his annual visit to Washington, was in the carriage with her.

"Look, my Lady Lucy!" he said; "Mrs. March has come back, like another Joan of Arc, to defy her enemies. By Jupiter! that woman is as brave as Hector and Lord Nelson rolled in one. I have heard some pretty stories about her."

Some of these stories related to Lady Carlyon's husband, but Lord Baudesert gave no hint of this. Lady Carlyon glanced out of the carriage window and saw that the splendid March house was occupied. A handsome carriage, with a pink and white footman and coachman to match exactly, was standing before the door, and at that moment Alicia March, accompanied by General Talbott, came out and entered the carriage. Lady Carlyon, whose eyes were quick, got a brief but complete view of her.

"She seems quite unchanged," said Lady Carlyon to Lord Baudesert, "and doesn't look a day older than when she left Washington."

"How keen you women are about this thing of looks," replied Lord Baudesert, his black eyes twinkling under his beetling brows.

"It is you who make us value our youth and looks so much," said Lady Carlyon in response, smiling and composed, though all the while her heart was beating with pain--pain for herself and for her husband.

"Mrs. March, I see, has brought Talbott with her, and Talbott's backing, I take it, is worth that of ten ordinary men with pistols in their pockets," was Lord Baudesert's next remark.

"Sir Percy can never forget his obligations to General Talbott," replied Lady Carlyon.

"And Alicia March won't let him forget them if he would." Then, catching sight of Mrs. Chantrey taking her constitutional, Lord Baudesert halted the carriage, scrambled out, and was soon promenading up and down Connecticut Avenue with that eternally hopeful lady, to her undisguised rapture. She lamented to Lord Baudesert Eleanor's hardness of heart toward the other sex, and Lord Baudesert was lauding the unexpected good sense of the three Vereker girls, each one of whom had married a curate, and could not expect to do any better.

Lady Carlyon, when she reached home, and was alone with her husband, told him of the new arrivals.

"You must prepare to meet them," she said resolutely, "and even to have them to dinner."

Sir Percy sighed heavily.

"What have I not brought upon you, my poor child?" he said.

"Nothing I cannot bear," responded Lady Carlyon.

Three days afterwards the expected happened--Alicia March and General Talbott called at the British Embassy. They came at an hour when they were sure to find the Carlyons at home. As Lady Carlyon had said, Mrs. March gave no outward sign of the stress and storm through which she must have passed. She and Lady Carlyon met and talked as do two women of the world who mutually hate and distrust each other, but who expect to meet at dinner. Mrs. March spoke pleasantly of her travels with her father. They had spent two winters in Egypt, and their summers cruising on the Dalmatian coast, but, after all, she said, Washington was the most agreeable place of all the winter resorts she had ever known, and she had determined to pass her winters there hereafter. She did not tell Lady Carlyon of the strange desire she felt to get back to the same orbit in which Sir Percy moved, nor of the equally strange inability she had to forget her husband. She had every reason to remain abroad, where the catastrophe of her Washington life was little known, and where the prestige of her father's name was greater and more general, but

that strange instinct which makes a murderer return to the scene of his crime will always make a woman like Alicia March return to the scene of her adventures.

Lady Carlyon said to the General what she could not very well avoid saying, that she hoped he would soon come to dine with them, but named no date. It required all Sir Percy's self-control to prevent General Talbott from seeing how unwelcome his daughter was at the British Embassy. Nevertheless, this was accomplished, and after a longish visit General Talbott went away feeling that in Sir Percy and Lady Carlyon his poor Alicia had two staunch friends.

There was, however, no escape for the Carlyons for the dinner invitation to Alicia March with General Talbott, and a few days afterwards it was despatched and promptly accepted. Mrs. March's presence at the British Embassy did much to re-establish her, for there were many persons, especially in public life, who surmised the truth, and that Roger March was simply lying like a gentleman when he took the blame upon himself. The smart set, however, does not always keep labels on public men and things, and besides its members have short memories. Roger March's name was never mentioned by his wife or in her presence; Alicia March took up the attitude of an injured woman who bears in silence the defection of her husband; therefore, by the exercise of tact, courage and industry, knowing where to leave cards and where not, she found herself steadily regaining her former position in Washington society. When it was getting on best, however, it was suddenly retarded by the appearance of Colegrove, and his frequent visits to Mrs. March. Alicia knew the world too well not to understand the risk of any association with Colegrove. But Colegrove, himself, had impressed upon her at his first visit that she must assume the attitude of a perfectly innocent woman and not decline his visits. He had in him such power of coercing her that Alicia accepted his views, as most others did when brought into contact with him.

Alicia never saw him alone--she always had her father to act as sheepdog. When General Talbott was not at home Colegrove was always informed that Mrs. March asked to be excused. Colegrove took his rebuffs coolly, and continued to call during the visiting hours when he was likely to be seen at Mrs. March's door. He was in the act of pulling the bell on the day when Lady Carlyon called to leave cards on Mrs. March. Twice afterwards in the same week Lady Carlyon saw Colegrove evidently coming from Mrs. March's house, and she spoke of it to Sir Percy. The very next day came a dinner invitation from Alicia March asking Lady Carlyon to name an evening when she and Sir Percy could dine with Mrs. March and General Talbott. Sir Percy ground his teeth when Lady Carlyon was writing a conventional note of acceptance, naming a date some weeks ahead.

The week before the dinner a note came from Lady Carlyon saying that Sir Percy and herself were asked to the White House to meet a distinguished Englishman visiting the United States, and must, therefore, ask to be excused from Mrs. March's dinner. Alicia replied with an equally conventional note. A fortnight later she called at the Embassy, and with her sweetest voice and manner asked Lady Carlyon to name another date for dining with her. Again Lady Carlyon named a date. The morning of the dinner Sir Percy went into his wife's boudoir, and after standing silent for a while with an angry and sombre face, said to her:

"I can't have you dining with Alicia March. I always hated it, and I find that man Colegrove is at her house a great deal. You must have a headache, cold or something by which you can excuse yourself. I will go; I am not better than Alicia March, but you are ten thousand times better than she."

Usually Lady Carlyon could reason with her husband, but on this occasion he was quite intractable. Lady Carlyon therefore wrote a note of excuse and secluded herself for the day, alleging illness. Sir Percy went to the dinner, and found an odd conglomeration of guests, very much like that collected by the rich man in the Bible for his son's wedding. Alicia was perfectly conscious of the collection she had made, but bore herself with her usual dignity and outward composure. Even General Talbott, who had felt a secret uneasiness concerning Alicia's reception in Washington, was conscious that her dinner guests were of a somewhat mixed variety, and hinted as much to her the next day. He even mentioned that Colegrove's visits to the house might be misunderstood. Alicia was of the same opinion. Colegrove still possessed for her the interest a woman feels for a man who is deeply interested in her, and, besides, Colegrove was the only man she had ever known who understood her inability to make any income she might have meet her expenses. He never scolded her, but seemed to think her continual want of money an amiable weakness. Nevertheless Alicia, growing frightened at the changing attitude of society toward her, wrote a note to Colegrove imploring him not to come again to see her. In reply, Colegrove called to ask for an explanation. He caught Alicia just as she was entering the house. Without waiting

for an invitation, he walked into the great drawing-room, where their last private interview had occurred, nearly three years before.

"Of course," said Alicia, when they were out of hearing, though not out of sight, "you are trying to compromise me."

"All is fair in love," replied Colegrove calmly; "you had better let me come openly, and ask me to dinner."

Alicia would make no promise, but when she was alone in her boudoir she reflected upon the strangeness of the American character. Two Americans loved her; one had made a stupendous sacrifice for her, and the other was pursuing her with an ingenuity of persistence, a handiness of resource, which was new and puzzling to her English mind. And then as women do who know how to think, she began to consider with a kind of sad wonder why she could not emancipate herself from the influence of Colegrove, and from that of Sir Percy Carlyon, and, what was strangest of all, from the memory of Roger March, and did not realise that men only have the art of forgetting.

"No woman, alas! forgets," she thought to herself, and, rising, went to her husband's rooms, and, closing the door after her, she walked about them aimlessly. Roger March had done her a fearful injury; such quixotism as his could benefit no one. She felt a deep resentment against him, but that was far from forgetting him. In the four years and a half of her life with Roger March there had been a continual sense of discomfort; his personality, agreeable though it was, seemed perpetually at war with her secret self. She had taken him as the necessary adjunct of his fortune, and she should have been glad to get rid of him, if only she could forget him. But she found herself continually thinking about him, wondering what kind of existence he led, and if he ever felt any regret as to what he had done. She had thought herself the coolest-headed and best-balanced of women, but she seemed, as she grew older, to be losing rather than gaining her self-possession.

Things had come to such a pass by the end of the season that Alicia was slipping back socially. One thing which she felt necessary for her to do, if she was to remain in Washington, was to have Lady Carlyon seen at her house. She could not for ever go on giving invitations which were cleverly evaded. The only thing was to seek Lady Carlyon and bring the matter to an issue. To do this it would be necessary to take Lady Carlyon unawares, for she would certainly excuse herself if Mrs. March called at the Embassy at an unusual time, and there would be no chance for her if she went at the customary visiting hour. Alicia therefore watched for her opportunity and determined to seize it anywhere and at any time. It came most unexpectedly.

One night she and General Talbott were at the theatre, and when the first act of the play was half over Sir Percy and Lady Carlyon appeared in an upper box alone. Sir Percy, after seating his wife comfortably, said a few words and went out, carrying his hat and great-coat. Lady Carlyon, sitting far back in the box, watched the play and was quite unobserved by any one in the audience except Alicia March. When General Talbott went out of the theatre after the curtain came down on the first act, Alicia, seeing the way clear before her, climbed the narrow stairs to the box and walked in on Lady Carlyon. Never did Lady Carlyon have a more unwelcome guest, or one with whom she less desired a private conversation. She greeted Alicia politely, however, and said:

"Sir Percy will return in a little while. He had an appointment for half-an-hour this evening, and brought me to the play to await him."

"I am very glad," replied Alicia in her sweetest voice, "that he is absent, because I wish to ask you a question of the most private nature."

Then she took a chair, and the two women, each perfect mistress of herself, began the duello. "It is," continued Alicia softly, "whether you have any real objection to entering my house?"

Lady Carlyon remained silent, and after a minute Alicia March spoke again:

"I see you have; I may as well speak frankly. As an Englishwoman, and strangely situated as I am, I can't expect any recognition if the British Ambassador, who is supposed to be one of my oldest acquaintances, and certainly my father's greatest friend, refuses to allow his wife, or his wife refuses, to come to my house. It is not much to ask."

"Sir Percy feels that it is a great deal to ask," replied Lady Carlyon, a faint colour appearing in her usually pale cheeks.

Their voices were so low that not a person, even those in the next box, could make out what they were saying. All over the theatre was the buzz of conversation, and the brilliant lights penetrated even the dim interior of the upper box.

"Sir Percy, then," said Alicia after a pause, "has told you all?"

Lady Carlyon inclined her head silently, her eyes lighting up with anger as she looked resolutely in Alicia March's calm face.

"Tell him from me, please," Alicia continued after a pause, while the two women steadily eyed each other, "that he may take his choice, either of sending you to my house or having that early story between us made known to certain persons in power. You know these Americans are a prudish people, and, ridiculous as it may seem, the fact of the relations between your husband and myself in our youth being made known, and the fact that he has been at my house and I have been to yours, would cause an intimation to him that he had better leave Washington. You may tell Sir Percy, also, that your absence from my house is perplexing and troubling to my father, and for that reason, if for no other, I mean that you shall come to my house, or Sir Percy's diplomatic career in Washington will be ended."

"Sir Percy is not a man to yield to threats," replied Sir Percy's wife. By this time her cheeks were crimson, but her voice was still composed.

"These are not threats, but promises. I grant you I could not do this except in Washington. I should be laughed at anywhere in Europe if I attempted to make known certain facts about Sir Percy's early life, and I could not do him the slightest harm, but you see these people are very different. Ambassadors have been quietly notified, before this, that their presence was not acceptable. The public are not taken into the confidence of the people in power, nevertheless Ambassadors are ruined. There will not be a public scandal; if there were my father would know it, and I believe that he would shoot himself. All that I promise will be done very quietly, but it will be done, if you and Sir Percy continue obstinate. I shall be at home all day to-morrow and shall expect Sir Percy to call to see me. Good-evening."

She rose and left the box, and as she passed through the narrow lobby outside she came face to face with Sir Percy Carlyon.

"I have just had an interview with Lady Carlyon," said Alicia March composedly, "and I shall expect to see you at my house some time to-morrow."

Sir Percy bowed in silence without showing the least surprise, and stepped into the box. Lady Carlyon had taken a chair well at the front of the box, and with her slender, shapely arm resting upon the ledge, was in full view of the house. Her face was quite calm, but a deep flush upon her usually pale cheeks showed Sir Percy that the interview between her and Alicia March had been of an unusual nature. Obeying an indication from his wife, Sir Percy sat also in full view of the audience and of Alicia March, once more among the audience. She had reached her seat before General Talbott's return, and he had no idea that she had left it during his absence.

"Look, my love!" he said, "there are the Carlyons. Lady Carlyon is looking remarkably handsome and animated to-night. I think I will go and speak with them during the next interval."

Alicia smiled, but said nothing. It would be an added torment to the Carlyons to have General Talbott with them.

When the curtain came down for the second time General Talbott, as good as his word, went to the Carlyons' box. Alicia, from below, saw him cordially received, and Lady Carlyon, all smiles and composure, talking with him. He left the box just before the curtain went up, and when the Carlyons were alone Sir Percy said to his wife:

"Would you like to leave the theatre now?"

"By no means," answered Lady Carlyon promptly; "we will remain through the play, and you must wait until then to know what has happened."

"You are a brave creature, my Lady Lucy," responded her husband.

The Carlyons were among the last people to leave the theatre, and when they were in their carriage Lady Carlyon told her husband what had happened. He heard it in silence and made no comment. Later, when they had reached home and were alone, Lady Carlyon would have spoken of it again, but Sir Percy stopped her.

"Not any more to-night," he said; "to-morrow will be time enough."

XIV

Next morning, although it was the beginning of spring, the snow was falling, and a biting northeast wind made the day look like one in December. Lady Carlyon was sitting in her morning-room with her two beautiful children at her knees when Sir Percy entered about twelve o'clock. Nothing is so beautiful and interesting as a young mother with her children, and Sir Percy,

standing on the hearth-rug, paid his wife the tribute of admiration. She played with the children and danced about the room with them as if she were a child herself. Sir Percy was not surprised at her cheerfulness; he had ever found in her that admirable quality of courage and gaiety of heart in the presence of danger which is half the battle. It is commonly observed that this presence of danger produces in brave men a quickening of the intellect as well as an exhilaration of spirits, and it is equally true of brave women. Lady Carlyon was singularly fearless; her pride was up in arms. Alicia March had made claim to some part and lot in Sir Percy Carlyon's life, a claim which Lady Carlyon treated with fine scorn, and Alicia March had made threats and had assumed the power of disposing of Sir Percy Carlyon's career. This aroused in Lady Carlyon the spirit of defiance. These things brought smiles to her face, a new light to her eyes, and a haughtier carriage to her delicate head. Sir Percy knew well these signs. Presently, however, the children were sent away and the husband and wife were alone.

"I am going now to see Mrs. March," said Sir Percy coolly; "I think I may as well give up the fight. Alicia March is not the woman to make idle threats, and she can do precisely what she says she can. Besides, General Talbott has to be considered. It will be difficult to keep such an affair from him, and he is one of these mediæval men, something like March himself, of whom no one can predict anything when a question of his own or his daughter's honour is involved. I can quietly resign and go away. We shall have enough to live upon modestly, and in some quiet corner of England we can forget Alicia March, and live for each other and our children. It is a downfall for you, my Lady Lucy, and I am the one who has brought it upon you."

Lady Carlyon went up to him, laying her hand on his arm, and said with sparkling eyes:

"Give up the fight, do you mean, and let Mrs. March drive you from your position?"

"There is nothing else to be done," replied Sir Percy quietly. "Think for a moment; I can't make a fight without making it public. If I were alone I shouldn't care for the publicity, but you--not for twenty ambassadorships would I bring you into anything like this."

Lady Carlyon dropped her head upon his shoulder and burst into tears, which wrung his heart, but did not change his resolution. Half-an-hour afterwards he was ushered into Mrs. March's boudoir, where Alicia waited for him. Sir Percy refused the chair which she offered him and remained standing, hat in hand. Alicia March felt a sense of triumph which glowed in her eyes; Sir Percy had wearied of her and had scorned her, but in the end, when he had reached the height of his ambition, she had brought him to heel roundly after nearly nineteen years.

"Lady Carlyon gave me your message," he said, when the first cool greetings were exchanged. "You are quite able to do all that you have threatened. If I were alone I should make a fight, but for Lady Carlyon's sake I am willing to surrender. I shall require a few weeks to arrange matters and to give the Home Government a chance to appoint my successor, and then I shall leave the diplomatic service. That, I think, should satisfy you."

Alicia March remained silent, looking down. This then was her triumph! It was not really what she wanted. She had desired the greater triumph of having her way with Lady Carlyon. After a moment or two she spoke:

"It is a small thing for which you are giving up your diplomatic career--let me see, you are not forty-five. I ask only that your wife come to my house once in a season."

To this Sir Percy, with a cool smile, made answer:

"I would prefer to give up the ambassadorship and retire from the diplomatic service."

His contempt for her pierced Alicia March's soul, yet she began to have a dim apprehension of the nature of such men as Sir Percy Carlyon and Roger March, who could not be moved from the point of honour. Then, as there was nothing more to say, Sir Percy Carlyon bowed and left the room. He had not been in the house five minutes all told.

Alicia drew her chair up to the fireside and watched the scurrying snow and listened to the wind clattering wildly under the eaves. She did not know whether to feel herself victor or vanquished. The time was, only a few years ago, when she would have glowed with the beauty and completeness of her revenge--all women are revengeful, but it is in general an unsated passion. Like most things ardently desired and long delayed, her triumph over Sir Percy Carlyon had lost its savour. She would be no better off if the Carlyons left Washington, and she felt tolerably sure that the next Ambassador would be as equally obdurate towards her as was Lady Carlyon. Alicia March sighed and looked out of the window, where the fierce blasts tortured the budding trees, and the tender young grass shivered tinder the cruel sleet and snow. Alicia had felt herself strange in the position of an honourable, honoured woman, which Roger March had given her, but she felt more strange and forlorn when suddenly cast down into the abyss from which she had been raised. Pursued by intolerable loneliness, she returned to her own room, only

to find herself more lonely still. While she sat in aimless reverie a letter in Colegrove's handwriting was brought into her. She looked at it with faint interest, but it lay in her lap unopened for half-an-hour; then she broke the seal and read:

"I have just heard that Roger March has been mortally ill for months, and is probably dead by this time. I must see you soon."

An hour later the same footman who had brought the note came to announce luncheon. Alicia was sitting in the same position, her eyes fixed upon the open letter. A strange leaven had been at work in her mind; an overwhelming desire to see and be with Roger March. Suddenly Sir Percy Carlyon and Colegrove had become insignificant to her; even her father was, for once, forgotten. She rose and went downstairs, trying to shake from her this new and strange obsession. What insanity would it be for her to go to Roger March! Almost every penny she had in the world, her house, her carriages, nine-tenths of her income, would be forfeited by the least attempt to see or communicate with her husband. General Talbott was awaiting her, and together they sat down in the gorgeous dining-room to the small round table which they commonly used when alone. General Talbott noticed nothing out of the usual in his daughter except that she was rather silent and ate nothing. Alicia herself scarcely recognised her own mind and heart and soul engaged in a conflict with her own closest and greatest interests. When luncheon was over, General Talbott said:

"This wintry weather will keep me indoors for the afternoon."

To which Alicia replied:

"I, too, shall remain at home and shall not see any visitors."

She went up to her boudoir, fighting at every step the impulse within her to take the first train for the Northwest. As a bar to her leaving the house, she rang for her maid and put on a *négligée* robe and slippers, and lying down among the pillows of a luxurious sofa, drawn up to the fire, shut her eyes and tried to sleep. It was in vain. Before her came the vision of her husband, "mortally ill," as Colegrove had said. She had never seen Roger March ill in her life, but she had a prophetic vision of how he looked, pale and grey, with a gentle stoicism, a stern patience, and he was alone in an adobe hut among the far-off hills of the Northwest. If she went to him he would no doubt repulse her. She repeated this to herself resolutely, and in the act of repeating it rose and dressed herself, without the assistance of her maid, in a travelling dress, and put a few things in a travelling case. Two voices, each trying to drown the other, shrieked within her, the one representing the madness of going to Roger March, and the other dragging her against her will. She rang for her carriage and then, sitting at her desk, wrote a few lines to her father:

"I have heard that my husband is fatally ill. I am going to him, although I lose most of what I have by it."

She rang for a footman, gave him the note, and directed him not to give it to General Talbott unless she should not return in time for dinner. The footman, wondering, carried the travelling bag down and put it in the carriage. Alicia, as all human beings do when leaving their habitat for the last time, walked through the rooms which, up to that time, had been hers. They were exquisite in their beauty, luxury and comfort. In her bedroom she looked about her, saying to herself:

"What madness is mine to jeopardise all of this, or rather to sacrifice it! I remember so well how he looked when he told me that if I ever attempted to see him I would sacrifice everything but a bare living, and he is a man of his word."

But even as these thoughts went through her mind her feet bore her unwillingly towards the door. As she entered her boudoir she came face to face with Colegrove.

"Don't blame the flunkey," he said; "he tried to stop me, but I walked past him, and he knew perfectly well that if he had laid a finger on me I would knock him down. I saw your carriage at the door with luggage on it. Where are you going?"

"To my husband," replied Alicia in a low voice.

Alicia had expected a strong protest, even that Colegrove would seek to restrain her, but, on the contrary, he looked at her with a smile in his keen eyes and said, as if answering a question:

"Yes, I have nothing to say against your going. If Roger March is living you will lose every penny you have except a paltry thousand or so a year; then what I can offer you will probably

bring you to my arms. Men who don't know me think I am greedy for money. So I am, but only to buy with it things more precious than money. But I would be glad to see you sacrifice all the money that Roger March gave you if it would bring you to me with nothing but the clothes on your back."

Alicia had listened to him at first with a preoccupied air, but when his meaning dawned upon her she turned towards him with a look which implied that gratitude and respect for a man which every woman feels when he is ready to sacrifice money for love.

"So you see," he continued in the same cool, unmoved voice, "I sha'n't stop you; but I think, from what I hear, that you won't find Roger March alive. Then remember I have a claim on you, and it sha'n't grow rusty for want of urging. If you are ever my wife you needn't be afraid of telling me of your debts, as you were afraid to tell Roger March and General Talbott. I can live on five thousand a year, and the rest of what I have is for you to spend, and when that is spent I can make more. May I see you to your carriage?"

Alicia, like a sleep-walker, passed down the stairs with him. The thought occurred to her that Colegrove's passion for her was like her own early infatuation for Sir Percy Carlyon, a thing which, rightly directed, might have reached the sublimest height of self-abnegation. But in the unfamiliar mood which possessed her, body and soul, neither Colegrove nor Sir Percy Carlyon seemed to matter. Her mind reverted to Roger March and remained concentrated upon him. When she was in the carriage Colegrove held out his hand and clasped Alicia's. She looked at him with strange and puzzled eyes. If only he had tried to keep her back; but, instead, he was rather urging her on upon the new path she was now treading. The footman asked where she would be driven, and Alicia replied mechanically:

"To the railway station."

In a little while, however, she remembered that she had not even an idea of Roger March's address, and changing the order, she directed the coachman to take her to Watson's offices. On the way she was saying to herself:

"This is a dream; it is not possible that I should really go to my husband; I will turn back at the station or somewhere upon the long journey. This strange spirit will cease to trouble me; I shall be myself again and will return."

Watson's offices were in a building not far from the railway station. When Alicia March alighted from her carriage and went into his rooms, the clerk, a soft-spoken young man, informed her that Mr. Watson was out, but was expected to return at any moment. Alicia sat down in the comfortable and well-furnished inner room, the walls covered with books, and everything bespeaking the successful and methodical man of business. She began to consider that Watson after all might refuse to give her Roger March's address. At that moment her eye fell upon the table, where lay Watson's address-book; in half-a-minute she had found Roger March's address. She had no need to copy it--she could not have forgotten it if she had tried. Then going back into the ante-room she said politely to the clerk:

"I think I need not trouble Mr. Watson after all. Good-day."

When she was in her carriage she looked at her watch. There was a train for the West leaving within the hour. She drove to the station, dismissed her carriage, then, buying her ticket, sat down to wait, feeling that she had consummated the act of madness. She wondered what General Talbott would think of her, whether she went or whether she stayed. No thought of Sir Percy Carlyon or Colegrove entered her mind. When the train was called she found a porter to carry her bag and walked through the gate. Then the habit of a lifetime made one last desperate effort; she walked back through another gate and called a cab, firmly resolving to go home. She got as far as the door of the station, and then, glancing at the clock, saw that there was still one minute before the train left. She turned and ran the length of the station through the gate towards the train, which was just about to move. The conductor, seeing her running towards it, caught her deftly by the arm and put her aboard, stepping after her himself. The porter found her a seat, and Alicia sank into it breathless and bewildered.

"I may yet turn back," she said to herself. "It is impossible that this impulse will hold out long enough for me to reach my husband."

At eight o'clock that evening, as General Talbott was leaving his room for dinner, the footman put Alicia's note into his hands. He was an old man and things shook him as they had not done in the days when Sir Percy Carlyon thought him the most resolute of men. Nevertheless he maintained enough composure to say coolly to the servant:

"Your mistress has been suddenly called out of town, and may be absent a week or two." Then he went down to dinner.

When it was over, he did what an Englishman regards as an act of emergency--went out for an evening visit. He rang the bell of the British Embassy, asked to see Sir Percy Carlyon, and was shown into the library. When his card was handed to Sir Percy, who was taking his coffee with Lady Carlyon in the drawing-room, he said to her, growing a little pale:

"It is General Talbott; it would be best for me to see him alone."

They both thought that this meant another step in Alicia March's programme to ruin Sir Percy Carlyon.

Sir Percy went into the library, and as soon as he had shaken hands General Talbott silently handed him Alicia's note. Sir Percy studied it attentively. He knew Alicia quite as well as she knew herself, and was as much astounded as she was at her action. Likewise he was incredulous that she should carry it through.

"It is four or five days' journey to the region where Roger March is," said Sir Percy to General Talbott, "and Mrs. March may change her mind in the meantime."

"Yes," replied General Talbott, "but did you ever notice the strange appeal which bodily suffering makes to a woman? Anything on earth might have happened to March, and my daughter perhaps would have felt no inclination to rejoin him; but for him to be ill, suffering, dying, that was too much for her tender heart."

Sir Percy remained silent; he, too, had often, noticed that few women can shut their ears to the cry of bodily pain.

"It is very perplexing," was all he could say, handing the note back to General Talbott.

"I am afraid, my dear fellow," said General Talbott, smiling a little, "that I am growing old, for I felt so agitated and disturbed when I got this note that I was compelled to seek a friend's companionship. I will not say counsel, for there is nothing to do in the matter. There are circumstances connected with this of a strictly private nature, which I do not feel at liberty to mention, so I can scarcely ask for advice."

"You can, however, be perfectly sure of my sympathy, and if I can be of any assistance to you, at any moment, I think you will allow me the privilege. Come into the drawing-room now with me and see Lady Carlyon."

"Please excuse me," answered General Talbott. "I scarcely feel equal to seeing any one but yourself this evening," for the recollection came to him that Lady Carlyon had not been over friendly to his poor Alicia, and it gave his honest old heart another pang.

Sir Percy kept him for half-an-hour, then walked back with him through the silent streets. A thin mantle of snow was dissolving in a ghostly white mist, which rose toward a pallid night sky in which a haggard moon shone dimly. Sir Percy left General Talbott at his own door and returned to the Embassy. Lady Carlyon was still in the drawing-room, and when he entered and told her what had happened she remained silent and thoughtful. Presently she said:

"Perhaps there is a regeneration for Mrs. March."

It is not in the nature of men to believe in the reform of women, and Sir Percy said so, but Lady Carlyon answered him with the old feminine plea:

"Her husband is ill, is suffering; she cannot remain away from him: she is a woman and not a monster."

XV

The early spring in the Sierras is still winter. The great masses of snow yield only to the burning sun of summer, and the air is as sharp as a dagger so long as the snow lasts. Black cliffs, stern precipices and crevices holding cold and darkness bar out the spring and turn a stony face towards her caresses. So thought Alicia March, as in the wintry dusk she alighted from the train at the lonely mountain station. All around her was desolation. The dusk was at hand, but on the far-off horizon a pale green light still glowed upon the distant peaks. Below her lay the valleys, dark, sombre and mysterious, with here and there a light from some small homestead showing in the twilight, and a waving line of sheep, huddling together as they were driven towards the great sheepfold. The only house in sight upon the mountain side was an adobe hut upon a little plateau. It was surrounded by melancholy cedars and dark and bare-limbed ilex-trees.

"Can you tell me," she said, going up to the station-master in his little box of an office, "where Mr. Roger March lives?"

The station-master, a phlegmatic person in buckskin clothes, answered her by jerking his

thumb over his shoulder towards the open door.

"That's his house," he said--"over there on the hill."

His eyes fell upon Alicia, and his dull mind, as little subject to curiosity as interest, was suddenly moved. The expression of longing despair in her eyes penetrated him a little. He then surmised the question that Alicia would have asked but could not.

"Mr. March is living, but in a pretty bad way, so my wife says; he is a heap better than we ever thought he would be. My wife goes there every day or two to look after him. He was mighty good to us when our shack was burnt."

Alicia, without another word, went out and followed the rude path which led to the little adobe house. The station-master made no comment; he was accustomed to strange meetings and partings in his remote world.

The night had fallen when Alicia found herself outside the 'door of the rude little house where Roger March had hidden his broken heart. Long ago the voice of protest within Alicia had been silenced. She would have fought and struggled to have gone to her husband. She stood trembling in the dusk outside, afraid to raise the latch. Close to her was an uncurtained window, through which the light of a fire gleamed. She stole towards the window and, looking in, saw Roger March for the first time since he had repudiated her. He sat in a rough wooden chair, drawn up to the wide, low fireplace; his face was white like that of a dead man, and his shrunken figure was almost lost in his clothes. His eyes alone appeared to have life in them as he gazed steadily at the fire. Sadness, hopelessness and humiliation were in his gaze, but he was still sentient, living, breathing.

The first thought that occurred to Alicia was that he yet had strength enough left to repulse her. The evening had grown sharper, and she stood so long outside the door that the cold penetrated to the very marrow of her bones, and it was this, at last, which gave her the courage to raise the latch and enter. She opened the door of the room in which Roger March sat and then closed it softly behind her, and going towards her husband, stopped on the other side of the fireplace some distance from him. March raised his eyes and started and shuddered violently when his glance fell upon Alicia, almost as pale as himself, shivering with cold and agitation and involuntarily drawing near the blazing fire. He attempted to rise from his chair, but fell back, unequal to the effort. As his head rested against the back of his chair, Alicia, with downcast head, yet saw the marks of illness and age and grief in him, and it brought a pang to her heart such as she had never felt before in her life. Her apparition, so strange and unexpected, agitated March more than he could bear. Alicia did not speak for some minutes, and then she said in the low, delicious voice which had not lost its charm for the man who once adored her:

"I came because I couldn't help it. I heard that you were ill. I know you hate me, and I knew that I would lose all I had if I came, but something stronger than myself brought me. I don't excuse what I have done, but--but I could not keep away."

March's pallid lips formed one word.

"Colegrove?"

Alicia answered in the same quiet, despairing voice:

"He told me of your illness and reminded me that if I tried to see you I would lose everything, but I scarcely heard what he was saying. I could not keep away. He overtook me on the journey yesterday morning and wished to make me promise if I found you dead that I would marry him--he is divorced. I felt such rage against him--" She stopped and raised her hands and clenched them with a gesture which implied a hatred of Colegrove greater than any words could convey. "I never was worthy of you, but perhaps if it had not been for Nicholas Colegrove I should not have wrecked and ruined you as I have done, so it is only just that I should be wrecked and ruined, too." Then she came nearer to him and suddenly burst into sobs and, clasping her hands, cried: "Let me stay--let me stay, if only for this one night. It is so cold outside, and I know not where to go. I never wronged you with Nicholas Colegrove except about money. Let me stay! Would you drive me out like a houseless dog?"

She had not yet ventured near enough to her husband to touch him. March put his thin hands over his face, his features were convulsed, but he said no word. Then Alicia, laying her hand on the arm of his chair, cried:

"You haven't told me to go away. You can't do it. I will go after a while, when you are well, but even if you send me away I sha'n't go very far, and something will always drag me back to you."

March remained silent. The wind outside steadily rose and howled wolfishly around the little house. An ilex-tree, which overhung the roof, was beating fiercely upon it, and its strong

branches tore at the little house like the claws of a wild beast seeking to destroy it.

No, he could not turn her out like a houseless dog!

Then Alicia, kneeling by his chair, begged and prayed him to let her stay. March remained silent as much from weakness as from the tumult in his soul. The wind grew fiercer and the night wilder. At last Alicia's hand timidly sought her husband's.

"If you tell me to go, I will go," she whispered between her sobs, but he could not tell her to go.

* * * * *

A year later, on a beautiful spring afternoon, Sir Percy and Lady Carlyon were walking together through the park at Washington. Never had Lady Carlyon appeared brighter or lovelier. Health, happiness and beauty radiated from her sparkling face and beautiful dark eyes, and her graceful step and airy movements were in themselves exhilarating. Sir Percy, too, looked like a man whose heart was at rest as he walked by his wife's side through the woods in which the mystery of the spring was unfolding.

"It is just a year," said Lady Carlyon, turning to her husband, "since you got that strange letter from Mrs. March. Remember it was not I but you who gave up the fight. Oh, how much braver are women than men!"

"Yes," answered Sir Percy, "there is a time when a man is ready to surrender, but I never saw the time when you, my Lady Lucy, were ready to surrender."

"Quite true," replied Lady Carlyon, smiling and glancing at her husband under her long lashes, "but, after all, wasn't Mrs. March braver than I?"

"Perhaps so," answered Sir Percy. "She is altogether the strangest woman I ever knew. I had thought her one of the worst, yet behold she has buried herself in the wilderness with March, has given over all that once seemed essential to her, and has cried quits with the world."

* * * * *

The spring in the Sierras was not so far advanced as in Washington, but the sun shone bravely and the birds, who rested under the southern eaves of the little adobe house on the mountain-side, flashed back and forth merrily in the clear, blue air. The place had undergone the subtle change which a woman's presence makes everywhere. Another room or two and a rude veranda had been added to the original structure. Blooming plants at the open windows leaned their bold, pretty faces to the sun; a table on the veranda held magazines and books, and a woman's shawl was thrown over the back of a rustic chair. A little dog--a woman's dog--was racing gaily up and down the sunny plateau on which the little house stood. All around was the serene stillness of the mountains and far below in the valleys could be heard through the thin, sharp air the tinkle of a sheep bell and a faint echo of the herdsman's voice. Standing in the golden glow of the sun was Roger March. He had a book in his hand, but was not reading it, and looked towards a little garden which had been made on the southern slope of the hillside. A woman in a garden hat was kneeling down before a bed of violets picking a few blossoms which had dared to show their downcast faces to the rude world. Roger March strolled towards the kneeling woman, who rose and met him half way, holding out her hand filled with violets. It was Alicia.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WHIRL ***

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