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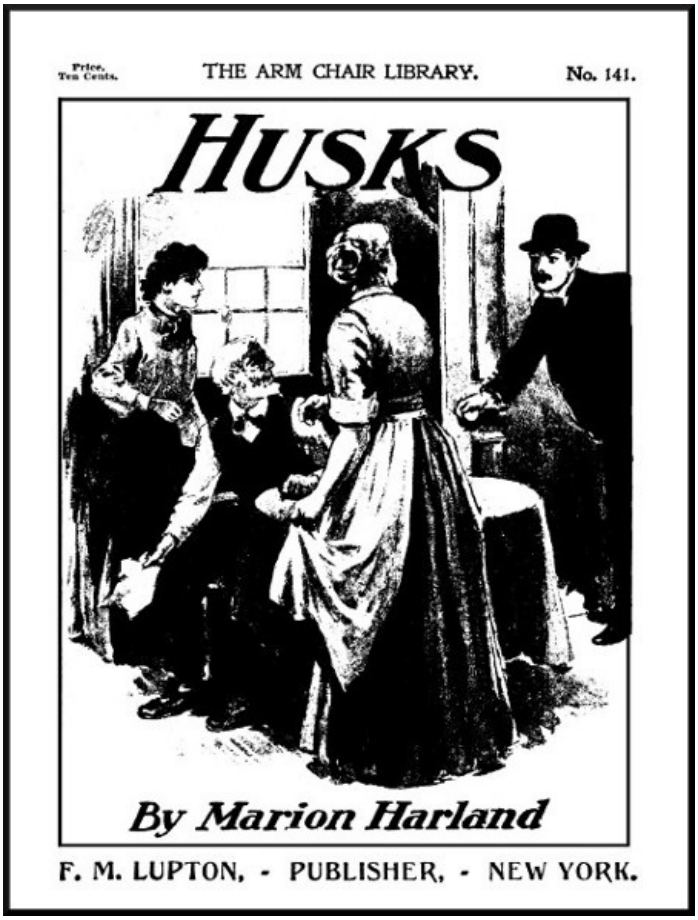

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HUSKS.

BY MARION HARLAND.

CHAPTER I.

It was a decided uncompromising rainy day. There were no showers, coquetted with by veering winds or dubious mists, that at times grew brighter, as if the sun were burning away their lining; but a uniform expanse of iron-gray clouds—kept in close, grim column by a steady, although not violent east wind—sent straight lines of heavy rain upon the earth. The naked trees, that, during the earlier hours of the deluge had seemed to shiver for the immature leaf-buds, so unfit to endure the rough handling of the storm, now held out still, patient arms, the rising sap curdled within their hearts. The gutters were brimming streams, and the sidewalks were glazed with thin sheets of water.

The block of buildings before which our story pauses, was, as a glance would have showed the initiated in the grades of Gotham life, highly respectable, even in the rain. On a clear day when the half-folded blinds revealed the lace, silken and damask draperies within, when young misses and masters—galvanized show-blocks of purple and fine linen, that would have passed muster behind the plate-glass of Genin or Madame Demorest—tripped after hoops or promenaded the smooth pavement; when pretty, jaunty one-horse carriages, and more pretentious equipages, each with a pair of prancing steeds, and two "outside passengers" in broadcloth and tinsel hatbands, received and discharged their loads before the brown-stone fronts—had the afore-mentioned spectator chanced to perambulate this not spacious street, he would have conceded to it some degree of the fashion claimed for it by its inhabitants. There were larger houses and wider pavements to be had for the same price a few blocks further on, in more than one direction, but these were unanimously voted "less eligible" and "deficient in style," in spite of the fact that as good and better materials were employed in their construction, and they were in all respects equal in external show and inside finish to those in this model quarter. "But our block has a certain air—well—I don't know what; but it is just the thing, you know, and so convenient! So near the avenue!" would be the concluding argument.

The nameless, indescribable charm of the locality lay in the last clause. "Just step around the corner and you are in the avenue," said the favored dwellers in this vicinity, as the climax in the description of their abode, and "that way fashion lies" to every right-minded New Yorker of the feminine gender.

But the aristocratic quiet of the neighborhood, rendered oppressive and depressing by the gloom of the day, was disturbed by a discordant sound—a child's cry, and what was especially martyrizing to refined auriculars, the lament had the unmistakable plebeian accent. The passionate scream with which the pampered darling of the nursery resents interference with his rights and liberty of tyranny or the angry remonstrance of his injured playmates, would have been quite another species of natural eloquence, as regards both quality and force, from the weak, broken wail that sobbed along the wet streets. Moreover, what respectable child could be abroad on foot in this weather? So, the disrespectable juvenile pursued her melancholy way unnoticed and unquestioned until she reached the middle of the square. There a face appeared at a window in the second story of a house—which only differed from those to its right, left and opposite in the number upon the door—vanished and in half a minute more a young lady appeared in the sheltered vestibule.

"What is the matter, little girl?"

The tone was not winning, yet the sobs ceased, and the child looked up, as to a friendly questioner. She was about eleven years of age, if one had judged from her size and form; but her features were pinched into unnatural maturity. Her attire was wretched, at its best estate; now, soaked by the rain, the dingy hood drooped over her eyes; the dark cotton shawl retained not one of its original colors, and the muddy dress flapped and dripped about her ankles. Upon one foot she wore an old cloth gaiter, probably picked up from an ash heap; the remains of a more sorry slipper were tied around the other.

"I am so cold and wet, and my matches is all sp'ilt," she answered in a dolorous tone, lifting the corner of a scrap of oil-cloth, which covered a basket, tucked for further security under her shawl.

"No wonder! What else could you expect, if you would go out to sell them on a day like this? Go down into the area, there, and wait until I let you in."

The precaution was a wise one. No servant in that well-regulated household would have admitted so questionable a figure as that which crept after their young mistress into the comfortable kitchen. The cook paused in the act of dissecting a chicken; the butler—on carriage days the footman—checked his flirtation with the plump and laughing chambermaid, to stare at the wretched apparition. The scrutiny of the first named functionary was speedily diverted to the

dirty trail left by the intruder upon the carpet. A scowl puckered her red face, and her wrathful glance included both of the visitants as alike guilty of this desecration of her premises. The housemaid rolled up her eyes and clasped her hands in dumb show of horror and contempt to her gallant, who replied with a shrug and a grin. But not a word of remonstrance or inquiry was spoken. It was rather a habit of this young lady's to have her own way whenever she could, and that she was bent upon doing this now was clear. [2]

"Sit down," she said, bringing up a chair to the fire.

The storm beaten wanderer obeyed, and eagerly held up her sodden feet to the red grate.

"Have you no better shoes than those?"

"No, ma'am."

"Humph! Nor dress, nor shawl?"

"No, ma'am."

"Are you hungry?"

A ray shot from the swollen eyes. "Yes, ma'am."

The lady disappeared in the pantry and presently returned with five or six slices of bread and butter hastily cut and thickly spread, with cheese and cold meat between them.

"Eat!" She thrust them into the match-girl's fingers. "Wait here, while I go and look for some clothes for you."

As may be supposed, the insulted oracle of kitchen mysteries improved the time of the benefactress's absence by a very plain expression of her sentiments towards beggars in general, and this one in particular; which harangue was received with applause by her fellow-servants and perfect equanimity by its object. She munched her sandwiches with greedy satisfaction, watching, the while, the little clouds of steam that ascended from her heated toes. She was, to all appearances, neither a sensitive nor intelligent child, and had known too much of animal want and suffering to allow trifles to spoil her enjoyment of whatever physical comfort fell to her lot. Her mother at home could scold quite as violently as the cook was now doing, and she was more afraid of her anger, because she beat while she berated her. She was convinced that she stood in no such peril here, for her protectress was one in power.

"Have you eaten enough?" said the clear, abrupt voice behind her, as she held two sandwiches in her fingers, without offering to put them to her lips.

"Yes, ma'am. May I take 'em home?"

"Certainly, if you like. Stand up and take off your shawl."

She put around the forlorn figure a thick cloak, rusty and obsolete in fashion, but which was a warm and ample covering for the child, extending to the hem of her dress. The damp elf-locks were hidden by a knitted hood, and for the feet there were stockings and shoes and a pair of India-rubbers to protect these last from the water.

"Now," said the Humane Society of One, when the refitting was at an end, "where do you live? Never mind—I don't care to know that yet! Here is a small umbrella—a good one—which belongs to me. I have no other for myself when I go out in bad weather. I mean to lend it to you, to-day, upon the condition that you will bring it back to-morrow, or the first clear day. Will you do it?"

The promise was readily given.

"Here's an old thing, Miss Sarah," ventured the butler, respectfully, producing a bulky, ragged cotton umbrella from a corner of the kitchen closet. "It's risky—trusting such as that with your nice silk one."

"That will let in the rain, and it is entirely too large for her to carry. You understand, child? You are to bring this safely back to me, the first time the sun shines. Can you find your way to this house again?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, easy. Thank you, ma'am!"

She dropped an awkward curtsey as Miss Sarah held open the door for her to pass, and went out into the rain—warm, dry and shielded against further damage from the storm.

Unheeding the significant looks of the culinary cabinet, Sarah Hunt turned away and ascended the stairs. She was a striking-looking girl, although her features, when in repose, could claim neither beauty of form nor expression. Her complexion was dark and pale, with a slight tinge of olive, and her hair a deep brown, lips whose compression was habitual, an aquiline nose, and eyes that changed from dreamy hazel to midnight blackness at the call of mind or feeling, gave marked character to her countenance. Her sententious style of address to the child she had just dismissed was natural, and usual to her in ordinary conversation, as was also the gravity, verging upon sombreness, which had not once during the interview relaxed into a smile.

The family sitting-room, her destination at present, and to which we will take the liberty of preceding her, was furnished elegantly and substantially, and there, leaning back in lounging chairs, were Miss Lucy Hunt, the eldest daughter of the household, and her bosom friend, Miss Victoria West. Each held and wielded a crochet needle, and had upon her lap a basket of many-hued balls of double or single zephyr worsted, or Shetland or Saxony wool, or whatever was the fashionable article for such pretty trifling at that date. Miss West had completed one-quarter of a shawl for herself, white and scarlet, and her friend had made precisely the same progress in the

arduous manufacture of one whose centre was white and its border blue.

"Yours will be the prettiest," remarked Lucy regretfully. "Blue never looks well in worsteds. Why, I can't say, I'm sure. It is too bad that I can wear so few other colors. But I am such a fright in pink or scarlet or any shade of red!"

"As if you could be a fright in anything," returned her companion, with seeming indignation.

Lucy smiled, showing a set of faultless teeth that, to a stranger's first glance, would have appeared by far the most attractive point of her physiognomy. If closer examination discovered that her skin was pearly in whiteness and transparency, that her form was exquisite, with a sort of voluptuous grace; her hands worthy, in shape and hue, to become a sculptor's model; still, in the cold, unflattering light of this rainy afternoon her want of color, her light gray eyes, her yellow hair, drawn straight back from the broad, low brow, precluded the idea that she could ever, with all the accessories of artificial glare, dress and animation, be more than a merely pretty girl. Miss West knew better, and Lucy realized the power of her own charms with full and complete complacency. Secure in this pleasant self-appreciation, she could afford to be careless as to her every-day looks and home people. She saw and enjoyed the manifest surprise of those who, having seen her once in morning deshabille, beheld her afterwards in elaborate evening toilet. Then the abundant hair waved in golden ripples about the classic head, the most artfully simple of tasteful ornaments—a camellia, a rosebud, or a pearl hairpin, its sole adornment; her eyes, large, full and soft, were blue instead of gray, while the heat of the assembly-room, the excitement of the crowd, or the exultation of gratified vanity supplied the rounded cheek with rich bloom and dewy vermillion to the lips. But nature's rarest gift to her was her voice, a mellow contralto, whose skillful modulations stole refreshingly to the senses amid the sharp clash of strained and higher tones, the castanet-like jingle which most American belles ring unmercifully into the ears of their auditors. Lucy Hunt was not "a great talker," still less was she profound or brilliant when she did speak; yet she invariably conveyed the impression to the mind of a new acquaintance of a thoroughly cultivated woman, one whose acquirements were far beyond her modest exhibition of thought and sentiment. The most commonplace phrase came smoothly and roundly from her tongue, and he was censorious indeed who was willing to lose the pleasure afforded by its musical utterance in weighing its meaning. At school she had never been diligent, except in the study of music, and her painstaking in this respect was rewarded by the reputation, justly earned, of being the finest vocalist in her circle of associates. In society she shone as a rising star of the first magnitude; at home she was happy, cheerful and indolently amiable. Why should she be otherwise? From her babyhood she had been petted and admired by her family, and the world—her world—was as ready with its meed of the adulation which was her element.

There were, besides the two sisters already introduced to the reader, three other children in the Hunt household—a couple of sturdy lads, twelve and fourteen years of age, and little Jeannie, a delicate child of six, whom Lucy caressed with pet titles and sugar-plums of flattery, and Sarah served in secret and idolatrous fondness. This family it was Mrs. Hunt's care and pride to rear and maintain, not only in comfort, but apparent luxury, upon the salary which her husband received as cashier of a prominent city bank, an income sufficient to support them in modest elegance, but which few besides Mrs. Hunt could have stretched to cover the expense of their ostensible style of living. But this notable manager had learned economy in excellent schools, primarily as a country girl, whose holiday finery was purchased with the proceeds of her own butter-making and poultry-yard; then as the brisk, lively wife of the young clerk, whose slender salary had, up to the time of his marriage, barely sufficed to pay for his own board and clothes, and whose only vested capital was his pen, his good character and perfect knowledge of book-keeping. But if his help-meet was a clever housewife, she was likewise ambitious. With the exception of the sum requisite for the yearly payment of the premium upon Mr. Hunt's life [3] insurance policy, their annual expenses devoured every cent of their receipts. Indeed, it was currently believed among outsiders that they had other resources than the cashier's wages, and Mrs. Hunt indirectly encouraged the report that she held property in her own right. They lived "as their neighbors did," as "everybody in their position in society was bound to do," and "everybody" else was too intent upon his personal affairs, too busy with his private train of plans and operations to examine closely the cogs and levers and boilers of the locomotive Hunt. If it went ahead, and kept upon the track assigned it, was always "up to time," and avoided unpleasant collisions, it was nobody's business how the steam was gotten up.

Every human plant of note has its parasite, and Miss Lucy Hunt was not without hers. There existed no reason in the outward circumstances of the two girls why Miss Hunt should not court Miss West rather than Miss West toady Miss Hunt. In a business—that is, a pecuniary—point of view, the former appeared the more likely state of the case, inasmuch as Victoria's father was a stock-broker of reputed wealth, and with a probable millionaireship in prospective, if his future good fortune equalled his past, while Mr. Hunt, as has been stated, depended entirely upon a certain and not an extravagant stipend. But the girls became intimate at school, "came out" the same winter at the same party, where Lucy created a "sensation," and Victoria would have been overlooked but for the sentimental connection between the debutantes. Since then, although the confidante would have scouted the imputation of interested motives with virtuous indignation of wounded affection, she had nevertheless "made a good thing of it," as her respected father would have phrased it, by playing hanger-on, second fiddle, and trumpeter general to the belle.

"As if you could be a fright in anything," she had said, naturally and perhaps sincerely.

Lucy's smile was succeeded by a serious look. "I am sadly tempted sometimes! Those lovely peach-blossom hats that you and Sarah wore this past winter were absolute trials to my sense of right. And no longer ago than Mrs. Crossman's party I was guilty of the sin of coveting the

complexion that enabled Maria Johnston to wear that sweet rose-colored silk, with the lace skirt looped with rosebuds."

"You envy Maria Johnston's complexion? Why don't you go further and fall in love with her small eyes and pug nose?" inquired Victoria, severely ironical. "I have heard that people were never contented with their own gifts, but such a case of blindness as this has never before come under my observation."

"No, no! I am not quite so humble with regard to my personal appearance as you would make out. Yet"—and the plaintive voice might have been the murmur of a grieving angel—"I think that there are compensations in the lot of plain people that we know nothing about. They escape the censure and unkind remarks that uncharitable and envious women heap upon those who happen to be attractive. Now, there is Sarah, who never cares a button about her looks, so long as her hair is smooth and her dress clean and whole. She hates parties and is glad of any excuse to stay [4] out of the parlor when gentlemen call. Give her her books and that 'snuggery,' as she calls it, of a room upstairs, and she is happier than if she were in the gayest company in the world. Who criticises her? Nobody is jealous of her face or manners or conversation. And she would not mind it if they were."

"She has a more independent nature than yours, my dear. I, for one, am rejoiced that you two are unlike. I could not endure to lose my darling friend, and somehow I never could understand Sarah; never could get near to her, you know."

"I do not wonder at that. It is just so with me, sisters though we are. However, Sarah means well, if her manner is blunt and sometimes cold."

The entrance of the person under discussion checked the conversation at this point, and both young ladies began to count their stitches aloud, to avoid the appearance of the foolish embarrassment that ever overtakes a brace of gossips at being thus interrupted.

Sarah's work lay on her stand near the window, where she had thrown it when the crying child attracted her notice, and she resumed it now. It was a dress for Jeannie. It was a rare occurrence for the second sister to fashion anything so pretty and gay for her own wear.

"Have you taken to fancy work at last?" asked Victoria, seeing that the unmade skirt was stamped with a rich, heavy pattern for embroidery.

"No!" Sarah did not affect her sister's friend, and did not trouble herself to disguise her feelings towards her.

Lucy explained: "She is making it for Jeannie. She does everything for that child."

"You are very sisterly and kind, I am sure," Victoria continued, patronizingly. "You must quite despise Lucy and myself for thinking of and doing so much for ourselves, while you are such a pattern of self-denial."

A blaze shot up in Sarah's eye; then she said, coldly: "I am not self-denying. Have I ever found fault with you or Lucy for doing as you like?"

"Oh, no, my dear. But you take no interest in what we enjoy. I dare say, now, you would think it a dull business to work day after day for three or four weeks together, crocheting a shawl which may go out of fashion before one has a chance to sport it at a watering-place."

"I certainly should!" The curl of the thin upper lip would have answered for her had she not spoken.

"And you hate the very sight of shellwork and cone-frames, and Grecian painting, and all such vanities?"

"If I must speak the truth, I do—most heartily."

Victoria was not easily turned from her purpose.

"Come, Sarah! Tell us what you would have us, poor trifling, silly things, do to kill the time."

"If you must be a murderer, do it in your own way. I have nothing to say in the matter."

"Do you mean that time never hangs upon your hands—that you are never ennuyee—blasee?"

"Speak English, and I will answer you."

"I want to know," said the persevering tormentor, "if the hum-drum books upstairs, your paint-box and your easel are such good company that you are contented and happy always when you are with them—if you never get cross with yourself and everybody else, and wonder what you were put into the world for, and why the world itself was made, and wish that you could sleep until doomsday. Do you ever feel like this?"

Sarah lifted her eyes with a wondering, incredulous stare at the flippant inquisitor.

"I have felt thus, but I did not suppose that you had."

"Oh, I have a 'blue' turn now and then, but the disease is always more dangerous with girls of your sort—the reading, thinking, strong-minded kind. And the older you grow, the worse you will get. I haven't as much book knowledge as you have, but I know more of the world we live in. Take my advice and settle down to woman's right sphere. Drive away the vapors with beaux and fancy-work now. By-and-by a husband and an establishment will give you something else to think about."

Sarah would have replied, but Lucy broke in with a laugh, light and sweet.

"You two are always at cross-questions! Why can't you be satisfied to let one another alone? Sarah and I never quarrel, Vic.. We agree to disagree. She gives me my way, and I don't meddle with her. If she likes the blues (they say some people enjoy them), where's the harm of her having them? They never come near me. If I get stupid, I go to bed and sleep it off. Don't you think I have done ten rows since breakfast? What a godsend a rainy day is, when one has a fascinating piece of work on hand!"

Too proud to seem to abandon the field, Sarah sat for half an hour longer, stitching steadily away at the complicated tracery upon the ground to be worked; then, as the dimmer daylight caused the others to draw near to the windows, she pushed aside her table and put by her sewing.

"Don't let us drive you away!" said Victoria's mock-polite tones, and Lucy added, kindly, "We do not mean to disturb you, Sarah, dear."

"You do not disturb me!" was the reply to the latter. The other had neither glance nor word.

Up another flight she mounted to a room, much smaller than that she had left and far plainer in its appointments. The higher one went in Mrs. Hunt's house the less splendid everything became. In the state spare chamber—a story below—nothing of comfort and luxury was wanting, from the carved rosewood bedstead, with the regal-looking canopy overshadowing its pillows, down to the Bohemian and cut-glass scent bottles upon the marble of the dressing-cabinet. Sarah's carpet was common ingrain, neither pretty nor new; a cottage bedstead of painted wood; bureau and washstand of the same material; two chairs and a small table were all the furniture her mother adjudged needful. To these the girl had added, from her pittance of pocket-money, a set of hanging bookshelves, a portable desk, an easel and two or three good engravings that adorned the walls.

She locked the door after her, with a kind of angry satisfaction in her face, and going straight to the window leaned upon the sash and looked down into the flooded street. Her eyes were dry, but there was a heaving in her throat, a tightening of the muscles about the mouth that would have made most women weep for very relief. Sarah Hunt would have scorned the ease purchased by such weakness. She did not despise the sad loneliness that girt her around, any more than the captive warrior does his cell of iron or stone, but she held that it would be a cowardly succumbing to Fate to wound herself by dashing against the grim walls, or bring out their sleeping echoes by womanish wailings. So, presently, her throat ached and throbbed no longer, the rigid muscles compressed the lips no more than was their wont, the hands loosened their vise-like grasp of one another—the brain was free to think.

The rain fell still with a solemn stateliness that befitted the coming twilight. It was a silent storm for one so heavy. The faint hum of the city, the tinkle of the car-bell, three blocks off, arose to her window above its plashing fall upon the pavement, and the trickle of the drops from sash to sill. A stream of light from the lamp-post at the corner flashed athwart the sidewalk, glittered upon the swollen gutter, made gold and silver blocks of the paving stones. As if they had waited for this signal, other lights now shone out from the windows across the way, and from time to time a broad, transient gleam from opening doors told of the return of fathers, brothers, husbands from their day's employment.

> "In happy homes he sees the light."

What was there in the line that should make the watcher catch her breath in sudden pain and lay her hand, with stifled moan, over her heart, as she repeated it aloud?

Witness with me, ye maternal Hunts, who read this page—you, the careful and solicitous about many things—in nothing more ambitious than for the advancement and success in life of your offspring—add your testimony to mine that this girl had all that was desirable for one of her age and in her circumstances. A house as handsome as her neighbors, an education unsurpassed by any of her late school-fellows, a "position in society;" a reasonable share of good looks, which only required care and cultivation on her part to become really distingue; indulgent parents and peaceably inclined brothers and sisters—read the list, and solve me, if you can, the enigma of this perturbed spirit—this hungering and thirsting after contraband or unattainable pleasures.

"Some girls will do so!" Mrs. Hunt assured her husband when he "thought that Sarah did not seem so happy as Lucy. He hoped nothing ailed the child. Perhaps the doctor had better drop in to see her. Could she be fretting for anything, or had her feelings been hurt?"

"Bless your soul, Mr. H. There's nothing the matter with her. She always was kind o' queer!" (Mrs. Hunt did not use her company grammar every day.) "And she's jest eighteen year old. That's the whole of it! She'll come 'round in good time, 'specially if Lucy should marry off pretty soon. When Sarah is 'Miss Hunt,' she'll be as crazy for beaux and company and as ready to jump at a prime offer as any of 'em. I know girls' ways!"

Nor am I prepared to say that Sarah, as she quitted her look-out at the high window at the sound of the dinner bell, could have given a more satisfactory reason for her discontent and want of spirits.

CHAPTER II.

[5]

Mrs. Hunt's china, like her grammar, was of two sorts. When her duty to "society" or the

necessity of circumstances forced her to be hospitable, she "did the thing" well. At a notice of moderate length she could get up a handsome, if not a bountiful, entertainment, to which no man need have been ashamed to seat his friends, and when the occasion warranted the display she grudged not the "other" china, the other silver, nor the other table-linen.

She did, however, set her face, like a broad flint, against the irregularity of inviting chance visitors to partake of the family bread and salt. Intimate as Victoria West was with Lucy, she met only a civil show of regretful acquiescence in her proposal to go home as the dinner hour approached, and Robbie or Richard Hunt was promptly offered to escort her to her abode upon the next block. If she remained to luncheon, as she would do occasionally, Lucy, in her hearing, begged her mother to excuse them from going down, and to send up two cups of tea and a few sandwiches to the sitting-room. This slight repast was served by the butler upon a neat little tray, in a tete-a-tete service—a Christmas gift to Lucy "from her ever-loving Victoria," and sentimentally dedicated to the use of the pair of adopted sisters.

Therefore, Sarah was not surprised to find Victoria gone, despite the storm, when she entered the dining-room. An immense crumb-cloth covered the carpet; a row of shrouded chairs, packed elbow to elbow, stood against the further end of the apartment, and a set of very ordinary ones were around the table. The cloth was of whity-brown material, and the dishes a motley collection of halt and maimed—for all Mrs. Hunt's vigilance could not make servants miraculously careful. There was no propriety, however, according to her system of economy, in condemning a plate or cup as past service because it had come off second best, to the extent of a crack or nick or an amputated handle, in an encounter with some other member of the crockery tribe. "While there is life there is hope," was, in these cases, paraphrased by her to the effect that while a utensil would hold water it was too good to be thrown away.

It was not a sumptuous repast to which Sarah sat down after she had placed Jeannie in her high chair and tied the great gingham bib around her neck. On the contrary, it came near being a scant provision for the healthy appetites of seven people. Before Mr. Hunt, a mild, quiet little man, was a dish of stew, which was, in its peculiar line, a thing—not of beauty, but wonder.

Only a few days since, as I stood near the stall of a poultry vender in market, a lady inquired for chickens.

"Yes, ma'am. Roasting size, ma'am?"

"No. I want them for a fricassee."

"Ah"—with a look of shrewd intelligence. "Then, ma'am, I take it, you don't care to have 'em overly tender. Most ladies prefers the old ones for fricassee. They come cheaper and very often bile tender."

"Thank you," was the amused rejoinder. "The difference in the price is no consideration where the safety of our teeth is concerned."

Mrs. Hunt suffered not these scruples to hinder her negotiations with knowing poultry merchants. A cent less per pound would be three cents saved upon the chicken, and three cents would buy enough turnips for dinner. It is an ignorant housekeeper who needs to be informed that stewed chicken "goes further" than the same fowl made into any other savory combination. Mrs. Hunt's stews were concocted after a recipe of her own invention. Imprimis, one chicken, weight varying from two and a half to three pounds; salt pork, a quarter of a pound; gravy abundant; dumplings innumerable. It was all "stew," and if Jeannie's share was but a bare drumstick, swimming in gravy and buried in boiled dough, there was the chicken flavor through the portion. [6]

For classic antecedent the reader is referred to the fable of the rose-scented clay.

To leave the principal dish, which justice to Mrs. Hunt's genius would not permit me to pass with briefer mention, there were, besides, potatoes, served whole (mashed ones required butter and cream), turnips and bread, and Mrs. Hunt presided over a shallow platter of pork and beans. What was left of that dish would be warmed over to piece out breakfast next morning. The children behaved well, and the most minute by-law of table etiquette was observed with a strictness that imparted an air of ceremonious restraint to the meal. If Mrs. Hunt's young people were not in time finished ladies and gentlemen, it was not her fault, nor was it for the lack of drilling.

"Do as I tell you; not as I do," were her orders in these matters. Since Lucy had completed her education, the mother added, "Look at your sister; she is never awkward." This was true. Lucy was born the fine lady. Refinement of manner and grace of movement, an instinctive avoidance of whatever looked common or underbred were a part of her nature. Only the usage of years had accustomed her to her mother's somewhat "fussy" ways.

Had she met her in company as Mrs. Anybody else, she would have yielded her the right of way with a feeling of amazement and amiable pity that one who meant so well should so often overdo the thing she aimed to accomplish easily and gracefully. Following out her excellent system of training, the worthy dame demanded as diligent and alert watching from her butler as if she were having a dinner party. The eggless rice pudding was brought on with a state that was absolutely ludicrous; but the family were used to the unsubstantial show and took it as a matter of course.

After the meal was over Mrs. Hunt withdrew to the kitchen for a short conference with the cook and a sharp glance through the closets. It was impossible that the abstraction of six slices of bread from the baking of the preceding day, three thick pieces of cheese and more than half of the cold meat she had decided would, in the form of hash, supply the other piece of the breakfast

at which the beans were to assist, should escape her notice.

Mr. Hunt was reading the evening paper by the droplight in the sitting-room, Lucy was busy with her shawl, and Sarah told a simple tale in a low voice to Jeannie as she leaned upon her lap, when the wife and mother entered, with something like a bluster. All present looked up, and each one remarked the cloud upon her brow.

"What is the matter, mother?" said Mr. Hunt, in a tone not free from alarm.

"I am worried! That's the whole of it. I am downright vexed with you, Sarah, and surprised, too! What upon earth possessed you, child, to take that beggar into my kitchen to-day? After all I have told you and tried to learn you about these shameful impostors! I declare I was beat out when I heard it. And to throw away provisions and clothes upon such a brat!"

Lucy opened her great eyes at her sister, and Mr. Hunt looked perplexedly towards his favorite, for at heart he was partial to his second child.

"I took the poor creature to the fire, mother, because she was wet and cold; I fed her because she was hungry; I gave her some old, warm clothes of mine because hers were thin and soaked with rain."

"Poor little girl!" murmured Jeannie compassionately.

Sarah's hand closed instantly over the little fingers. The simple-hearted babe understood and sympathized with her motive and act better than did her wiser elders.

"Oh, I have no doubt she told a pitiful story, and shed enough tears to wet her through, if the rain had not done it already. If you listen to what these wretches say, and undertake to relieve their wants, you will soon have not a dress to your back nor a house over your head. Why didn't you send her to some society for the relief of the poor?"

"I did not know where to find one, ma'am."

This plain truth, respectfully uttered, confounded Mrs. Hunt for a second.

"Mrs. James is one of the managers in a benevolent association," she said, recovering herself. "You had ought to have given your beggar her address."

"Even if I had known that fact, mother, the girl would have been obliged to walk half a mile in the storm to find this one manager. What do you suppose Mrs. James would have done for her that was not in my power to perform?"

"She would have asked the child whereabouts she lived, and to-morrow she would have gone to hunt her up. If she found all as she had been told, which is not likely—these creatures don't give a right direction once in ten times—why, she would have brought the case before the board at their next meeting, and they would help them, if neither of her parents was a drinking character."

"God help the poor!" ejaculated Sarah, energetically. "God help the poor, if this is man's style of relieving his starving brother! Mother, do you think that hunger pinches any the less when the famished being is told that next week or next month may bring him one good meal? Will the promise of a bushel of coal or a blanket, to be given ten days hence, warm the limbs that are freezing to-night? Is present help for present need, then always unsafe, imprudent, insane?"

"That all sounds very fine, my dear." Mrs. Hunt grew cool as her daughter waxed warm. "But when you have seen as much of the world as I have you will understand how necessary it is to be careful about believing all that we hear. Another thing you must not forget, and that is that we are not able to give freely, no matter how much disposed we may be to do so. It's pretty hard for a generous person to say 'No,' but it can't be helped. People in our circumstances must learn this lesson." Mrs. Hunt sighed at thought of the curb put upon her benevolent desires by bitter necessity. "And, after all, very few—you've no idea how few—of these pretended sufferers are really in want."

This preluded a recital of sundry barefaced impositions and successful swindles practiced upon herself and acquaintances, to which Mr. Hunt subjoined certain of his personal experiences, all tending to establish the principle that in a vast majority of cases of seeming destitution the supplicant was an accomplished rogue and the giver of alms the victim of his own soft heart and a villain's wiles. Jeannie drank in every syllable, until her ideal beggar quite equalled the ogre who would have made a light supper off of Hop-o'-my-Thumb and brothers.

"You gave this match-girl no money, I hope?" said Mrs. Hunt, at length.

"I did not, madam. I had none to give her." Impelled by her straightforward sense of honesty that would not allow her to receive commendation for prudence she had not shown, she said, bravely: "But I lent her my umbrella upon her promise to return it to-morrow."

"Well!"

Mrs. Hunt dropped her hands in her lap, and stared in speechless dismay at her daughter. Even her husband felt it his duty to express his disapprobation.

"That was very unwise, my daughter. You will never see it again."

"I think differently, father."

"You are too easily imposed upon, Sarah. There is not the least probability that your property will be returned. Was it a good umbrella?"

"It was the one I always use."

"Black silk, the best make, with a carved ivory handle—cost six dollars a month ago!" gasped Mrs. Hunt. "I never heard of such a piece of shameful imprudence in all my born days. And I shouldn't wonder if you never once thought to ask her where she lived, that you might send a police officer after it, if the little thief didn't bring it back to you?"

"I did think of it." Sarah paused, then forced out the confession she foresaw would subject her to the charge of yet more ridiculous folly. "I did think of it, but concluded to throw the girl upon her honor, not to suggest the theft to her by insinuating a doubt of her integrity."

Mr. Hunt was annoyed with and sorry for the culprit, yet he could not help smiling at this high-flown generosity of confidence. "You are certainly the most unsophisticated girl of your age I ever met with, my daughter. I shall not mind the loss of the umbrella if it prove to be the means of giving you a lesson in human nature. In this world, dear, it will not do to wear your heart upon your sleeve. Never believe a pretty story until you have had the opportunity to ascertain for yourself whether it is true or false." And with these titbits of wordly wisdom, the cashier picked up his paper.

"Six dollars! I declare I don't know what to say to you, Sarah!" persisted the ruffled mother. "You cannot expect me to buy you another umbrella this season. You must give up your walks in damp weather after this. I can't say that I'm very sorry for that, though. I never did fancy your traipsing [7] off two or three miles, rain or shine, like a sewing girl."

"Very well, madam!"

But, steadied by pride as was her voice, her heart sank at the possibility of resigning the exercise upon which she deemed that so much of her health, physical and mental, depended. These long, solitary walks were one of the un-American habits that earned for Sarah Hunt the reputation of eccentricity. They were usually taken immediately after breakfast, and few in the neighborhood who were abroad or happened to look out at that hour, were not familiar with the straight, proud figure, habited in its walking dress of gray and black, stout boots, and gray hat with black plume. It was a uniform selected by herself, and which her mother permitted her to assume, because it "looked genteel," and became the wearer. Especially did she enjoy these tramps when the threatening storm, in its early stages, kept others of her class and sex at home. The untamed spirit found a fierce pleasure in wrestling with the wind; the hail that ushered in the snow-storm, as it beat in her face, called up lustre to the eye and warm color to the cheek. To a soul sickening of the glare and perfume of the artificial life to which she was confined, the roughest and wildest aspects of nature were a welcome change.

I remember laughing heartily, as I doubt not you did also, dear reader, if you saw it, at a cut which appeared several years ago in the Punch department of "Harper's Magazine." A "wee toddler," perhaps four years old, with a most lack-a-daisical expression upon her chubby visage, accosts her grandmother after this fashion: "I am tired of life, grandmamma! The world is hollow, and my doll is stuffed with sawdust, and if you please, ma'am, I should like to go to a nunnery!"

Yet, that there are natures upon which the feeling of emptiness and longing herein burlesqued seizes in mere babyhood is sadly true. And what wonder? From their cradles, hundreds of children, in our so-called better classes, are fed upon husks. A superficial education, in which all that is not showy accomplishment is so dry and uninviting that the student has little disposition to seek further for the rich kernel, the strong meat of knowledge, is the preparatory course to a premature introduction into the world, to many the only phase of life they are permitted to see, a scene where all is flash and froth, empty bubbles of prizes, chased by men and women with empty heads, and oh, how often empty, aching hearts! Outside principles, outside affections, outside smiles, and most pitiable of all, outside piety! Penury of heart and stomach at home; abroad a parade of reckless extravagance and ostentatious profession of fine feeling and liberal sentiments!

"Woe," cried the preacher, "to them that make haste to be rich!" If he had lived in our day, in what biting terms of reprobation and contempt would he have declaimed against the insane ambition of those who forego the solid comforts of judicious expenditure of a moderate income would afford; spurn the holy quiet of domestic joys—neglect soul with heart culture—in their haste to seem rich, when Providence has seen that wealth is not to be desired for them! Out upon the disgusting, indecent race and scramble! The worship of the golden calf is bad enough, but [8] when this bestial idolatry rises to such a pitch of fanaticism, that in thousands of households copies in pinchbeck and plated-ware are set up and served, the spectacle is too monstrous in its abomination! This it is that crowds our counting-rooms with bankrupts and our state-prisons with defaulters; that is fast turning our ball-rooms and other places of fashionable rendezvous into vile caricatures of foreign courts, foreign manners, and foreign vices; while the people we ape—our chosen models and exemplars—hold their side in inextinguishable laughter at the grave absurdity of our laborious imitation. It is no cause for marvel that, in just retribution, there should be sent a panic-earthquake, every three years, to shake men to their senses.

Such was the atmosphere in which Sarah Hunt had always lived. In the code subscribed to by her mother, and the many who lived and felt and panted and pushed as she did for social distinction, nothing was of real, absolute value except the hard cash. Gold and silver were facts. All things else were comparative in use and worth. The garment which, last winter, no lady felt dressed without, was an obsolete horror this season. The pattern of curtains and furniture that nearly drove the fortunate purchaser wild with delight, three years back, was now only fit for the auction room. In vain might the poor depleted husband plead for and extol their beauties. The fiat of fashion had gone forth, and his better half seasoned his food with lamentations, and moistened her pillow with tears until she carried her point. We have intimated that Sarah was a peculiar

girl. Whence she derived her vigorous intellect; her strong, original turn of thought; her deep heart, was a puzzle to those who knew her parents. The mother was energetic, the father sensible, but both were commonplace, and followed, like industrious puppets, in the wake of others. They were pleased that Sarah brought home all the prizes offered at school, and both considered that she gained a right, by these victories, to pursue her studies at home, provided she did not obtrude her singular views and tastes upon other people. Mrs. Hunt sighed, frequently and loudly, in her presence, that her genius had not been for shell, or bead, or worsted work, instead of for reading volumes, that did not even decorate the show book-case in the library.

"If you must have so many books, why don't you pick out them with the tasty bindings?" she had asked her daughter more than once. "And I wish you would paint some bright, lively pictures, that would look handsome on the walls, instead of those queer men and women and cloudy things you have got upstairs. I'd have 'em framed right away, and be real proud to tell who done them."

Sarah remained proof against such hints and temptation, and, shrinking more and more from the uncongenial whirl around her, she turned her eager, restless spirit into her secret, inner life, where, at times, it was flattered into content by the idealities upon which it was fed; at others, ramped and raved, like any other chained wild thing. The sweetest drop of pleasure she had tasted for many a day was the thrill she experienced when the forlorn object she had rescued from the power of the storm stood before her, decently and comfortably clad. The rash confidence she had reposed in so suspicious a stranger was the outgoing of a heart too noble and true in every impulse to pause, for a moment, to speculate upon the chances of another's good or bad faith. The great world of the confessedly poor was an unknown field to her—one she longed to explore. Her footsteps loitered more often near the entrance of some narrow, reeking street or alley, down which she had promised her mother not to go, than on the spacious pave, where over-dressed women and foppish men halted at, and hung around bewitching shop windows. She wondered how such throngs of breathing beings contrived to exist in those fetid, cramped quarters; how they lived, spoke, acted, felt. The great tie of human brotherhood became daily more tense, as she pondered these things in her heart.

On this particular day, as she sat, silent and thoughtful, at her needle, the chit-chat of her companions less heeded than the continual dropping of the rain without, the wail of the shivering wanderer caused a painful vibration through every nerve. The deed was done! the experiment was tried. She was ashamed that an event so trivial held her eyes waking, far into the night. At least, she said to herself, she would not be without a lesson of some kind; would learn whether deceit and falsehood prevailed in the lowest, as well as the higher ranks of society. If, as she still strove to believe would be the case, the child returned the borrowed property, she would make use of her, as the means of entering upon a new sphere of research and action. After so complete a refutation of her theories respecting the utter corruption of all people, who had not enough to eat and to wear, her mother could not withhold her consent to her petition that she might become a lay-missionary—a present relief committee to a small portion of the suffering, toiling, ill-paid masses. She would then have a work to do—something to call out energy and engage feeling in healthy exercise—and soothed by the romantic vision, she fell asleep with a smile upon her lips.

The morning dawned between breaking clouds, that soon left the sky clear and bright. All through the day Sarah watched for her visitor of the preceding day—watched with nervousness she could not wholly conceal, from morn to night, for two, three days—for a week. Then she looked no longer while at home; her question, at entering the house, after a drive or walk, ceased to be, "Has any thing been left for me?" So palpable was her disappointment that her father forbore to make any allusion to her loss, and Lucy, albeit she was somewhat obtuse to the finer points of her sister's character, good-naturedly interposed to change the subject when her mother sought to improve the incident to her daughter's edification and future profit. Mr. Hunt was right in supposing that the "unsophisticated girl" had learned something. Whether she were happier or better for the lesson thus acquired was another thing.

Once again Sarah had an opportunity for speech with her delinquent protege. Two months later she was passing through a by-street in a mean neighborhood, very far up town, in her morning ramble, when her progress was arrested, for an instant, by two boys, who ran out of an alley across the walk. One overtook the other just in front of the lady, and catching him by his ragged collar, threw him down.

"That's right! beat him well! I'll help!" screeched a girl, rushing out of the court whence they had come.

Grinning with delight, she flung herself upon the prostrate form and commenced a vigorous assault, accompanied by language alike foul and profane.

Sarah recognized her instantly, and while she paused in mingled amazement and anger, the child looked up and saw her. In a twinkling she relinquished her grip of the boy's hair—jumped up and sped back into the dirty alley, with the blind haste of guilty fear.

Yes! Mr. Hunt was a wise man, who knew the world, and trebly sage in her generation was his spouse. If their daughter had never acknowledged this before, she did now, in her disgust and dismay at this utter overthrow of her dreams of the virtuous simplicity to be found in lowly homes, where riches and fashions were things unknown.

CHAPTER III.

Summer had come to the country with its bloom and its beauty, its harvests and its holidays. In town, its fever heat drew noisome smells from overcharged sewers, and the black, oily paste to which the shower that should have been refreshing had changed the dust of crowded thoroughfares. Cleaner pavements, in the higher portions of the city, burned through shoe-soles; glass radiated heat to polished stone, and stone radiated, in its turn, to brick, that waited until the evening to throw off its surplus caloric in hot, suffocating waves that made yet more oppressive the close nights. The gay procession of fashionable humming birds had commenced their migrations, steamboats and excursion craft multiplied at the wharves, and the iron steed put forth all his tremendous might to bear onward the long train of self-exiled travelers.

The Hunts, too, must leave town; Lucy must, at all events, have a full season, and a brilliant one, if possible, for it was her second summer, and much might depend upon it. Her mother would accompany her, of course; and equally of course her father could not; that is, he must return after escorting them to Saratoga, and spend the remainder of the warm months at home. His business would not allow him to take an extended vacation. The boys were easily disposed of, being boarded every summer at the farmhouse of an early friend of Mr. Hunt, where they were acceptable inmates, their clothes as well cared for as they were at home, and their morals more diligently cultivated. The younger girls caused that excellent manager, their mother, more perplexity. This was not the first time she had repented her indiscretion in allowing Sarah to "come out" before her elder sister had "gone off." But "Sarah was so tall and so womanly in her appearance that it looked queer, and would set people to talking if I kept her back," she was accustomed to excuse her impolitic move to her friends. This summer she realized, as she had not done before, the inconvenience of having two full-fledged young ladies upon the carpet at once. [9] Lucy's elegant and varied wardrobe, and the certain expenses in prospect for her and her chaperon at Spa, seaside, and en route, left a balance in hand of the sum allotted for the season's expenditure that was startling in its meagerness. Mrs. Hunt was a capital financier, a peerless economist, but the exigency taxed her resources to the utmost.

One morning she arose with a lightened heart and a smoother brow. "I've settled it!" she exclaimed to her husband, shaking him from his matutinal doze.

The "Eureka!" of the Syracusan mathematician was not more lofty in its exultation. Forthwith she unfolded to him her scheme. She was a native of New Jersey, "the Jarseys" she had heard it called in her father's house—had probably thus denominated the gallant little state herself in her girlhood. In and around the pretty, quiet village of Shrewsbury there were still resident scores of her relatives whose very names she had sedulously forgotten. One alone she could not, in conscience or in nature, dismiss to such oblivion. This was her elder and only sister, long married to a respectable and worthy farmer, and living within a mile of "the old place," where both sisters had drawn the first breath of life. Twice since Mrs. Hunt had lived in the city had this kind friend been summoned on account of the dangerous illness of the former, and her presence and nursing had restored peace, order, and health to the household. The earlier of these occasions was that of the second child's birth, and in the softened mood of her convalescence Mrs. Hunt had bestowed upon the babe her sister's name—Sarah Benson—a homely appellative she had ofttimes regretted since. At distant and irregular intervals, one, two, three years, Mr. or Mrs. Benson visited their connections in "York;" but the intercourse grew more difficult and broken as time rolled on and the distance widened between the plain country folk and their rising relations. Then, again, death had been busy in the farmhouse; coffin after coffin, of varying lengths, but all short, was lifted over the threshold and laid away in the village graveyard, until but one was left to the parents of the seven little ones that had been given to them, and to that one nature had denied the gifts of speech and hearing. Grief and the infirmities of approaching old age disinclined the worthy pair to stir from home, and their ambitious sister was too busy in building up a "set" of her own, and paving the way for her daughters' distinction, to hide her light for ever so short a period in so obscure a corner as her former home.

Aunt Sarah, however, could not forget her nurseling. Every few months there arrived some simple token of affectionate remembrance to "the child" she had not seen since she wore short frocks and pinafores. The reception of a basket of fruit, thus despatched, was the suggestive power to Mrs. Hunt's present plan. She had made up her mind, so she informed her husband straightway, to write that very day—yes! that very forenoon, to "Sister Benson," and inquire whether she would board Sarah and Jeannie for a couple of months.

"I don't s'pose she will let me pay board for them, but she will be pleased to have 'em as long as they like to stay. It's never been exactly convenient for me to let any of the children go there for [10] so many years, and it's so fur off. But dear me! sometimes I feel real bad about seeing so little of my only sister!"—a heavy sigh. "And there'll be the expenses of two saved, out and out, for they won't need a great variety of clothes in that out-of-the-way place."

"But how will the girls, Sarah and Jeannie, fancy being sent off so?" inquired Mr. Hunt.

"Oh, as to that, it is late in the day for my children to dispute what I say shall be done; and Sarah's jest that odd that she'll like this notion twenty times better than going to Newport or Saratoga. I know her! As to Jeannie, she is satisfied to be with her sister anywhere. She is getting thin, too; she looks real peaked, and there's nothing in creation so good for ailing children as the salt-water bath. They have first-rate still-water bathing not a quarter of a mile from sister's. It's jest the thing, I tell you! The wonder is it never came into my head before."

Mr. Hunt had his sigh now. "Somehow or other he was always down in the mouth when the

family broke up for the summer," his wife frequently complained, and his lack of sympathy now excited her just ire.

"Upon my word, Mr. H.! anybody would think that I was the poorest wife in the world to you to see and hear you whenever I talk to you of my plans and household affairs. You look as if you was about to be hanged, instead of feeling obliged to me for turning, and twisting, and contriving, and studying, day and night, how to save your money, and spend what we must lay out to the best advantage. I can tell you what—there's few women would make your income go as far as I do."

"I know that, my dear. The question is"—Mr. Hunt paused, cleared his throat and strained his nerves for a mighty effort, an unprecedented exercise of moral courage—"the question is, Betsy, whether our income is stretched in the right direction!" Mistaking the stare of petrified incredulity he received for fixed attention, the infatuated man went on: "This doubt is always forced upon me when we separate in July, some to go to one place, some to another, a broken, wandering family for months together. I am growing old, and I love to have my children about me; I begin to feel the want of a home. There is Johnson, in the —— Bank, gets five hundred less per annum than I do; yet, after living quietly here a few years, he bought himself a snug cottage up the river, and has his family there in their own house, everything handsome and comfortable about them. I have been in the harness for a long while; I expect to die in it. I don't mind work—hard work! but it seems to me sometimes that we would all be better satisfied if we had more to show, or to hold, for our money; if there were less of this straining after appearances, this constant study to make both ends meet."

"And it has come to this!" Mrs. Hunt sank into a chair and began to cry. "This is my thanks for slaving and toiling for better than twenty years to get you and your children a stand in the world! It isn't for myself that I care. I can work my fingers to the bone, and live upon a crust! I can scrape and save five dollars or so a month! I can bury myself in the country! But your children! those dear, sweet girls, that have had the best education money can buy, and that to-day visit such people as the Murrays, and Sandersons, and Hoopers, and Baylors, and meet the Castors and Crinnalls at parties—millionaires, all of 'em, the cream of the upper crust! I don't deny that I have been ambitious for them, and I did hope that you had something of the same spirit; and now to think of your complaining, and moping, and groaning over the money you say I've been and wasted; oh! oh! oh!"

"You misunderstand me, my dear; I merely questioned whether we were acting wisely in making so much display upon so little substance. We are not millionaires, whatever may be said of the girls' visiting acquaintances, and I tremble sometimes to think how all this false show may end."

Mr. Hunt's borrowed courage had not evaporated entirely.

"That's distrusting Providence, Mr. H.! It's downright sinful, and what I shouldn't have looked for from you. I can tell you how it will end. If both of us live ten years longer, you will see your daughters riding in their own carriages, and leaders of the tong, and your sons among the first gentlemen of the city. If this does not turn out true, you needn't ever trust my word again. I've set my head upon getting Lucy off my hands this summer, and well off; and mark my words, Mr. H., it shall be done."

One part of her mother's prophecy was fulfilled in Sarah's manner of receiving the proposition so nearly affecting her comfort during the summer. Lucy wondered at the cheerful alacrity with which she consented to be "hidden away in that horrid bore of a farmhouse," and Jeannie cried as her elder sister "supposed that they would eat in Aunt Sarah's kitchen, along with the servant men."

"Lucy, be quiet!" interposed her mother. "Your aunt is not a common poor person. Mr. Benson is a man of independent means, quite rich for the country. They live very nicely, and I have no doubt but that your sisters will be happy there."

Sarah had drawn Jeannie to her, and was telling her of the rides and walks they would take together, the ducks and chickens they would feed, and the merry plunges in the salt water that were to be daily luxuries. Ere the recital was concluded, the child was impatient for the hour of departure, and indignant when she heard that Aunt Sarah must be heard from before they could venture to present themselves, bag and baggage, at her door. There was nothing feigned in Sarah's satisfaction; her preparations were made with far more pleasure than if she were to accompany Lucy. The seclusion that would have been slow death to the latter was full of charms for the book-loving sister. Aunt Sarah would be kind; the novel phases of human nature she would meet would amuse and interest her; and, besides these, there was Jeannie to love and pet, and river, field, and grove for studies and society. She panted for the country and liberty from the tyrannous shackles of city customs.

Aunt Sarah wrote promptly and cordially, rejecting the offered compensation, and begging for her nieces' company as long as they could content themselves in so retired a place. Simple-minded as she was, she knew enough to be sure that the belles and beaux of the neighborhood would be very unsuitable mates for her expected visitors. If her own girls had lived, she would have asked nothing higher for them in this world than to have them grow up respected, beloved, and happy, among the acquaintances and friends of their parents; but "Sister Betsy's children had been raised so differently!" she said to her husband. "I don't know what we will do to amuse them."

"They will find amusement—never fear," was the farmer's response. "Let city folks alone for seeing wonders where those that have lived among them all their lives never found anything uncommon. They are welcome to the pony whenever they've a mind to ride, and Jim or I will find

time to drive them around a'most every day; and what with riding, and boating, and bathing, I guess they can get rid of the time."

Before the day set for the coming of the guests there appeared upon the stage an unexpected and welcome ally to Aunt Sarah's benevolent design of making her nieces' sojourn agreeable. This personage we will let the good woman herself describe.

"You needn't trouble yourself to fix up for tea, dear," she said to Sarah, the afternoon of her arrival, as she prepared to remove her traveling dress. "There's nobody here besides husband, and me, and Charley, except husband's nephew, Philip Benson, from the South. He comes North 'most every summer, and never goes back without paying us a visit. He's been here three days now. But he is just as easy as an old shoe, and sociable as can be, so you won't mind him."

"Uncle Benson has relatives at the South, then?" said Sarah, seeing herself called upon to say something.

"One brother—James. He went to Georgy when he wasn't more than sixteen years old, and has lived there ever since. He married a rich wife, I believe"—sinking her voice—"and has made money fast, I've heard. Philip never says a word about their wealth, but his father owns a great plantation, for husband asked him how many acres they worked. Then the children—there are four of them—have had fine educations, and always spend money freely. Philip is not the sort to boast of anything that belongs to him or his. He is a good-hearted boy. He was here the August my last daughter—my Betsy—died, and I shall never forget how kind and tender he was then. I can't look at him without thinking how my Alick would have been just his age if he had lived. One was born on the fourth and the other the fifth of the same April."

Keeping up a decent show of interest in these family details, Sarah divested Jeannie of her sacque and dress, and substituted a cool blue gingham and a muslin apron. Then, as the child was wild to run out of doors, she suffered her to go, charging her not to pass the boundary of the yard fence. Aunt Sarah was dressed in a second mourning delaine, with a very plain cap, and while the heat obliged Sarah to lay aside the thick and dusty garment she had worn all day, she had too much tact to offer a strong contrast in her own attire to her unpretending surroundings. [11]
A neat sprigged lawn, modest and inexpensive, was not out of place among the old-fashioned furniture of her chamber, nor in the "best room," to which they presently descended.

Aunt Sarah ushered her into the apartment with some stiffness of ceremony. In truth, she was not herself there often, or long enough to feel quite at ease, her property though it was. Alleging the necessity of "seeing to the tea," she bade her niece "make herself at home," threw open a blind that she "might see the river," and left her.

First, Sarah looked around the room. It was large and square, and had four windows, two in front and two in the rear. The floor was covered by a well-saved carpet, of a pattern so antique that it was in itself a curiosity; heavy tables of a mahogany dark with age; upright chairs, with slippery leathern seats; a ponderous sofa, covered with haircloth; small mirrors, with twisted frames, between the windows; two black profiles, of life-size, over the mantel, and in the fireplace a jar of asparagus boughs, were appointments that might have repelled the looker-on, but for the scrupulous, shining cleanliness of every article. It was a scene so strange to Sarah that she could not but smile as she withdrew her eyes and turned to the landscape commanded by her window.

The sight changed the gleam of good-humored amusement to one of more heartfelt pleasure. Beyond the grassy walks and flower-borders of the garden behind the house lay green meadows, sloping down to the river, broad and smooth at this point, so placid now that it mirrored every rope and seam of the sails resting quietly upon its surface, and the white cottages along the banks, while the banks themselves, with their tufts and crowns of foliage, drooping willows and lofty elms, found a faithful yet a beautified counterpart in the stream. The reflected blush of the crimson west upon its bosom was shot with flickers of golden light, and faded in the distance into the blue-gray twilight. The air seemed to grow more deliciously cool as the gazer thought of the hot, pent-up city, and the beds of thyme and lavender added their evening incense.

The hum of cheerful voices joined pleasantly with the soothing influences of the hour, and, changing her position slightly, Sarah beheld the speakers. Upon a turfy mound, at the foot of an apple tree, sat Jeannie beside a gentleman, whose hands she watched with pleased interest, as did also a boy of fifteen or thereabouts, who knelt on the grass before them. Sarah divined at once that this was her aunt's deaf and dumb son. The gentleman was apparently interpreting to Jeannie all that passed between himself and the lad, and her gleeful laugh showed it to be a lively dialogue. Could this be Mr. Benson's nephew, the beardless youth Sarah had pictured him to herself from Aunt Sarah's description? He could not have been less than six-and-twenty, had dark hair and a close curling beard, an intelligent, handsome face, and notwithstanding his loose summer sack and lounging attitude, one discerned plainly traces of uncommon grace and strength in his form.

"What is he, I wonder? A gallant, professional beau, who will entangle me in my speech, and be an inevitable appendage in the excursions? I flattered myself I would be safe from all such [12]
drawbacks," thought Sarah, in genuine vexation, as she obeyed her aunt's summons to tea.

Perhaps Mr. Benson read as much in her countenance, for, beyond a few polite, very unremarkable observations, addressed to her when his hosts made it necessary for him to do so, he paid her no visible attention during the whole of the evening. The next day he set off, the minute breakfast was over, with his gun and game-bag, and was gone until sunset.

Sarah sat at her chamber window as he came up to the back door; and, screened by the vine

trained over the sash, she watched him as he tossed his game-bag to Charley and shook hands with Jeannie, who ran up to him with the familiarity of an old acquaintance.

"What luck?" questioned his uncle.

"Nothing to boast of, sir; yet enough to repay me for my tramp. I have been down to the shore."

"Philip Benson! Well, you beat everything! I suppose you have walked as much as ten miles in all!" exclaimed Aunt Sarah, with a sort of reproachful admiration.

"I dare say, madam, and am none the worse for it to-night. I am getting used to your sand, uncle; it used to tire me, I confess."

He disappeared into the kitchen, probably to perform the ablutions needful after his day's walk and work, for it was several minutes before he returned. Charley had carried the game-bag to the mound under the tree, and was exhibiting its contents—mostly snipe and red-winged black birds—to his little cousin.

"It is refreshing to see something in the shape of man that is neither an effeminate dandy nor a business machine," soliloquized Sarah. "Ten miles on foot! I would like to set that task for certain of our Broadway exquisites!"

"She isn't a bit like a city girl!" Aunt Sarah was saying, as she followed Philip into the outer air.

"I am glad to hear that she is likely to be a nice companion for you, madam. I thought, from her appearance, that you would suit each other," was the reply, certainly respectful enough, but whose lurking accent of dry indifference sent the blood to Sarah's face.

Hastily withdrawing from the open window, and beyond the reach of the voices that discussed her merits, she waited to recover her equanimity before going downstairs. In vain she chided herself for her sudden heat. Mortified she was, and even more ashamed of herself than angry with the cool young man who had pronounced her to be a fitting associate for her excellent but unpolished aunt. While his every look and intonation bespoke the educated gentleman, a being as different in mental as in physical muscle from the fops who formed her sister's train, had he weighed her against the refined woman of his own class and clime, and adjudged her this place? At heart she felt the injustice, and, stimulated by the sting, arose the resolve that he should learn and confess his error. Not tamely or willingly would she accept an ignoble station at the hands of one whom she inwardly recognized as capable of a true valuation of what she esteemed worthy.

She looked haughty, not humbled, when she took her seat opposite her critic at the tea-table. "A nice companion," she was saying over to herself. The very phrase, borrowed, as it was, from Aunt Sarah's vocabulary, seemed to her seasoned with contempt. She kept down fire and scorn, however, when Mr. Benson accosted her with the tritest of remarks upon the probable heat of the day in town as contrasted with the invigorating breeze, with its faint, delicious sea flavor, that rustled the grapevines and fluttered the white curtains at the dining-room door and windows. Her answer was not exactly gracious, but it advanced the one tempting step beyond a mere reply.

Thus was the ice broken, and for the rest of the meal, Aunt Sarah and "Uncle Nathan"—as he requested his nieces to style him—had respite from the duty of active entertainment, so far as conversation went. To Sarah's surprise, Mr. Benson talked to her almost as he would have done to another man. He spoke of notable persons, places, and books—things of which she had heard and read—without affectation of reserve or a shade of pretension; and to her rejoinders—brief and constrained for awhile—then, as she forgot herself in her subject, pertinent, earnest, salient, he gave more than courteous heed. It was the unaffected interest of an inquirer; the entire attention of one who felt that he received more than he gave.

They parted for the night with a bow and a smile that was with each a mute acknowledgment of pleasure derived from the companionship of the other; and if neither looked forward to the meeting of the morrow as a renewal of congenial intercourse, both carried to their rest the effects of an agreeable surprise in the events of the evening.

CHAPTER IV.

A week had passed since the arrival of the city nieces at the farmhouse. An early tea, one of Aunt Sarah's generous and appetizing repasts, was over; and through the garden, out at the gate that terminated the middle walk, and across the strip of meadow-land, danced Charley and Jeannie, followed at a more sedate pace by Philip Benson and Sarah. Seven days' rustication had wrought a marked change in the town-bred girl. There was a lighter bound in her step, and in her cheek a clear, pink glow, while her eyes looked softly, yet brightly, from out the shadow of her gypsy hat, a look of half surprise, half confidence in her companion's face.

"One week ago," he was saying, "how firmly I made up my mind that you and I could never be anything but strangers to each other! How I disliked you for coming down here to interfere with my liberty and leisure!"

"But even then you thought that I would prove a 'nice companion for Aunt Sarah'—perceived my suitableness to her society," was the demure reply.

"Who told you that I said so?"

"Not Aunt Sarah herself, although she considered it honest praise. I overheard it accidentally

from my window, and I can assure you properly appreciated the compliment, which, by the way, was more in the tone than the words."

"And you were thereby piqued to a different style of behavior. Bravo! did ever another seed so worthless bring forth so rich a harvest? I am glad I said it! Here is the boat."

It was a pretty little affair—Charley's property and care, and he was already in his seat at the bow, oar in hand. Philip helped Sarah in, placed Jeannie beside her, and stationing himself upon the middle bench took up a second pair of oars. A noiseless dip of the four, and the craft glided out into the stream, then up against the tide, the water rippling into a foamy wake on either side of the sharp bow. A row was now the regular sequel to the day's enjoyments, and to Jeannie, at least, the climax of its pleasures.

"Pull that way, please, Mr. Benson!" she cried. "There! right through that beautiful red water!"

A skilful sweep brought them to the spot designated, but the crimson deserted the wave as they neared it, and left dull gray in its stead.

"It is too bad!" complained the child, pointing back to the track of their boat, quivering amidst the fickle radiance she had thought to reach by this change of course. "It is behind us and before us—everywhere but where we are!"

"Is there a moral in that?" questioned Philip, smiling at Sarah.

"Perhaps so."

A fortnight before, how assured would have been her reply! How gloomy her recognition of the analogy! Changed as was her mood, a shade fell over her countenance. Was it of apprehension, and did Philip thus interpret it?

"I could not love life and this fair world as I do, if I conceded this to be universally true," he said. "That there comes, sometimes, a glory to the present, besides which the hues of past and future fade and are forgotten, I must and will believe. Such, it seems to me, must be the rapture of reciprocal and acknowledged affection; the joy of reunion after long separation from the beloved one; the bliss of reconciliation after estrangement. Have you ever thought how much happier we would be if we were to live only in the Now we have, and never strain our eyes with searching for, the lights and shades of what may be before us, or with 'mournful looking' after what is gone?"

"Yet is this possible?" asked Sarah, earnestly. "Does not the very constitution of our natures forbid it? To me that would be a miserably tame, dead-level existence over which Hope sheds no enchanting illusions; like this river, as we saw it three days ago, cold and sombre as the rain-clouds that hung above it. Oh, no! give me anything but the chill, neutral tint of such a life as thousands are content to lead—people who expect nothing, fear nothing—I had almost said, feel nothing!"

"That is because every principle of your being is at war with common-places. Tell me frankly, Miss Sarah, did you ever meet another woman who had as much character as yourself?"

"I do not know that I understand the full bearing of your question." She leaned on the side of the boat, her hand playing in the water, her lips working in an irresolute timidity that was oddly at variance with their habitual firmness.

"I am aware," she began slowly and gravely, "that I express myself too strongly at times; that I am more abrupt in language and action than most other girls. I have always been told so; but it is [13] natural to me. My character has many rough and sharp edges that need softening and rounding"—

"In order to render you one of the pretty automatons, the well-draped, thoroughly-oiled pieces of human clockwork that decorates men's homes—falsely so called—in these days of gloss and humbug!" interrupted Philip with energy. "I am sick to death of the dollish 'sweet creatures' every boarding-school turns out by the score. I understand all the wires that work the dear puppets—flatter myself that I can put them through their paces (excuse the slang!) in as short a time as any other man of my age in the country. The delightful divinities! A little music, and a little less French; a skimming of the arts and sciences; and it is a rare thing to meet one who can tell an art from a science ten days after she has graduated—a stock of pet phrases—all hyperbolical, consequently unmeaning—a glib utterance of the same; a steady devotion to balls, beau-catching, gossip, and fancy-work; voila the modern fine lady—the stuff we are expected to make wives of! Wives! save the mark! I never think of the possibility of being thus ensnared without an involuntary repetition of a portion of the Litany—'From all such, etc., etc.!'"

He plied his oars with renewed activity for a moment, then suspended them to continue, in a softer tone: "And this is the representative woman of your Utopia, Miss Sarah?"

"Did I intimate, much less assert, such a heresy?" responded she, laughing. "But there is a golden mean somewhere—a union of gentleness and energy; of domestic and literary taste; of independence and submission. I have seen such in my day dreams. She is my ideal."

"Which you will one day embody. No reproachful looks! This is the sincerity of a friend. I have promised never to flatter you again, and do not violate the pledge in speaking thus. From my boyhood, I have made human nature my study, and it would be hard to convince me that I err in this case."

"You do! indeed you do!" exclaimed Sarah, with a look of real pain. "I lack the first characteristic of the portrait I have drawn. I am not gentle! I never was. I fear that I never will be!"

"Let us hear a competent witness on that head. Jeannie!" to the child, who was busy spelling on her fingers to Charley; his nods and smiles to her, from the far end of the boat, being more intelligible to her than were her attempts to signal her meaning to him. "Jeannie!" repeated Philip, as he caught her eye. "Come, and whisper in my ear which of your sisters you love the best. Maybe I won't tell tales out of school to the one you care least for."

"I don't care who knows!" said the saucy, but affectionate child. "Sis' Lucy is the prettiest, and she never scolds me either; but she doesn't make my clothes, and tell me nice stories, and help me with my lessons, and all that, you know. She isn't my dear, best sister!" And, springing up suddenly, she threw her arms around Sarah's neck, with a kiss that answered the question with emphasis.

Sarah's lip trembled. The share of affection she had hitherto dared to claim as her own had barely sufficed to keep her heart from starving outright. She had often dreamed of fulness of love [14]
as a stay and comfort, as solace and nutriment in a world whose wrong side was ever turned to her. Now there dawned upon her the sweetness and beauty of a new revelation, the bliss of loving and being beloved. Over life floated a warm, purple tinge, like the sunset light upon the river. For the first time within the reach of her memory her heart rested!

In the smile whose overflowing gave a tender loveliness to her features, Philip saw the effect he had wished and anticipated, and, motioning to Charley to let the boat drift with the current, he picked up the guitar, that by Sarah's request was always taken along in these excursions.

"The dew is on the blossom,
  And the young moon on the sea;
It is the twilight hour—
  The hour for you and me;
The time when memory lingers
  Across life's dreary track,
When the past floats up before us,
  And the lost comes stealing back."

It was a love song, inimitable in its purity and tenderness, with just the touch of sadness that insured its passage to the heart. Sarah's smile was softer, but it was a smile still, as the melody arose on the quiet air. When the ballad was concluded, she only said, "Another, please!"

Philip sang more than well. Without extraordinary power, his voice had a rich and flexible quality of tone and a delicacy of expression that never failed to fascinate. To the rapt and listening girl it seemed as if time could bring no more delicious fate than thus to glide on ever upon this empurpled, enchanted stream, the summer heavens above her, and, thrilling ear and soul, the witching lullaby that rocked her spirit to dreams of the youth she had never had, the love for which she had longed with all the wild intensity, the fervent yearning, her deep heart could feel.

Still they floated on with the receding tide, its low washing against the sides of their boat filling up the pauses of the music. The burning red and gold of the sky cooled into the mellower tints of twilight, and the pale curve of the young moon shone with increasing lustre. Jeannie fell asleep, her head upon her sister's lap; the dumb boy sat motionless as stone, his dark eyes fixed on the moon; there seemed some spell upon the little party. Boat after boat passed them, almost noiselessly, for far into the clear evening went the tones of the singer's voice, and the dullest hearer could not withhold the tribute of admiring silence until beyond its reach.

And Sarah, happy in the strange, restful languor that locked her senses to all except the blessed present, dreamed on, the music but a part of her ideal world, this new and beautiful life. Into it stole presently a theme of sadness, a strain of grief, a heart-cry, that, ere she was aware, wrung her own heart-strings with anguish.

"The long, long weary day
  Is passed in tears away,
And still at evening I am weeping.
  When from my window's height
  I look out on the night,
  I am still weeping,
  My lone watch keeping.

"When I, his truth to prove,
  Would trifle with my love,
He'd say, 'For me thou wilt be weeping,
  When, at some future day,
  I shall be far away;
  Thou wilt be weeping,
  Thy lone watch keeping.'

"Alas! if land or sea
  Had parted him from me,
I would not these sad tears be weeping;
  But hope he'd come once more,
  And love me as before;
  And say, 'Cease weeping,
  Thy lone watch keeping.'

"But he is dead and gone,
Whose heart was mine alone,
And now for him I'm sadly weeping.
His face I ne'er shall see,
And naught is left to me
But bitter weeping,
My lone watch keeping."

If ever a pierced and utterly hopeless soul poured forth its plaint in musical measure, it was in the wondrously simple and unspeakably plaintive air to which these words are set. There breathes in it a spirit wail so mournfully sincere that one recognizes its sob in the very chords of the accompaniment. The mere murmur of the melody, were no words uttered, tells the story of grieving desolation.

Sarah did not move or speak, yet upon her enchanted ground a cloud had fallen. She saw the high casement and its tearful gazer into the night, a night not of music, and moonlight, and love, but chill, and wet, and dreary. Rain dripped from eaves and trees; stone steps and pavements caught a ghastly gleam from street lamps; save that sorrowful watcher, there was no living creature abroad or awake. She grew cold and sick with looking into those despairing eyes; the gloom, the loneliness, the woe of that vigil became her own, and her heart sank swooning beneath the burden.

As he ceased the song, Philip looked up for some comment or request. To his surprise, she only clasped her hands in a gesture that might have been either relief from or abandonment to woe, and bowed her head upon them. Puzzled, yet flattered by her emotion, he refrained from interrupting her; and, resuming his oars, lent the impetus of their stroke to that of the tide. Nothing was said until the keel grated upon the shelly beach opposite the farmhouse. Then, as Philip stooped to lift the unconscious Jeannie, he imagined that he discerned the gleam of the sinking moon upon Sarah's dripping eyelashes.

The fancy pursued him after he had gone up to his room. Seated at his window, looking out upon the now starlit sky, he smoked more than one cigar before his musing fit was ended. It was not the love-reverie of a smitten boy. He believed that he had passed that stage of sentimentalism ten years before. That Southerner of the male gender who has not been consumed by the fires and risen as good as new from the ashes of half a dozen never-dying passions before he is eighteen, who has not offered the heart and hand, which as often as otherwise constitute his chiefest earthly possessions, to some elect fair one by the time he is one-and-twenty, is voted "slow" invulnerable. If these susceptible sons of a fervid clime did not take to love-making as naturally as does a duckling to the pond by the time the eggshell is fairly off its head, they would certainly be initiated while in the callow state by the rules and customs of society. Courtship is at first a pastime, then an art, then when the earnestness of a real attachment takes hold of their impassioned natures, it is the one all-absorbing, eager pursuit of existence, until rewarded by the acquisition of its object or thwarted by the decided refusal of the hard-hearted Dulcinea.

This state of things, this code of Cupid, every Southern girl understands, and shapes her conduct accordingly. Sportively, yet warily, she plays around the hook, and he is a very fortunate angler who does not in the moment of fancied success discover that she has carried off the bait as a trophy upon which to feed her vanity, and left him to be the laughing-stock of the curious spectators of this double game. She is imperturbable to meaning equivoques, receives pretty speeches and tender glances at their current value, and not until the suit becomes close and ardent, the attachment palpable to every one else, and is confessed in so many words, does she allow herself to be persuaded that her adorer is "in earnest," and really desires to awaken a sympathetic emotion in her bosom.

Philip Benson was no wanton trifler with woman's feelings. On the contrary, he had gained the reputation in his circle of an invincible, indifferent looker-on of the pseudo and real combats, in Love's name, that were continually transpiring around him. Chivalrous in tone, gallant in action, as he was, the girls feared while they liked and admired him. They called him critical, fastidious, cold; and mockingly wondered why he persisted in going into company that, judging the future by the past, was so unlikely to furnish him with the consort he must be seeking. In reality, he was what he had avowed himself to Sarah—a student of human nature; an amateur in this species of social research—than which no other so frequently results in the complete deception of the inquirer. Certainly no other is so apt to find its culmination of devotion in a cold-blooded dissection of motive, morals, and sentiment; an unprincipled, reckless application of trial and test to the hearts and lives of its victims and final infidelity in all human good, except what is concentrated in the inspector's individual, personal self. Grown dainty amid the abundant supply of ordinary material, he comes at length to disdain common "subjects." Still less would he touch one already loathsome in the popular estimation, through excess of known and actual crime. But a character fresh and noble from the Creator's hand; a soul that dares to think and feel according to its innate sense of right; an intellect unhackneyed, not vitiated by worldly policy or the dogmas of the schools; a heart, tender and delicate—yet passionate in love or abhorrence; what an opportunity is here presented for the scalpel, the detective acid, the crucible, the microscope! It is not in fallible mortality to resist the temptation, and even professors of this ennobling pursuit, whose motto is, "The proper study of mankind is Man," are, as they allow with shame and confusion of face, themselves mortal. Of all the dignified humbugs of the solemn farce of life, deliver me from that creature self-styled "a student and judge of character!" [15]

In Sarah Hunt, Philip discovered, to his surprise, a rare "specimen;" a volume, each leaf of which

revealed new matter of interest. The attentions he had considered himself bound to pay her, in order to avoid wounding their kind hosts, were soon rendered from a widely different motive. It did not occur to him that he was transcending the limits of merely friendly courtesy, as prescribed by the etiquette of the region in which he was now a sojourner. He was by no means deficient in appreciation of his personal gifts; rated his powers of pleasing quite as highly as did his warmest admirers, although he had the common sense and tact to conceal this; but he would have repelled, as an aspersion upon his honor, the charge that he was endeavoring to win this young girl's affections, his heart being as yet untouched.

"Was it then altogether whole?" he asked himself to-night, with a coolness that should have been an immediate reply to the suggestion.

Side by side, he set two mental portraits, and strove deliberately, impartially, to discern any traces of resemblance between the two. The future Mrs. Benson was a personage that engrossed much of his thoughts, and by long practice in the portrayal of her lineaments, he had brought his fancy sketch very nearly to perfection. A tall, Juno-like figure, with raven locks, and large, melting eyes, unfathomable as clear; features of classic mould; an elastic, yet stately form; a disposition in which amiability tempered natural impetuosity, and generous impulse gave direction to gentle word and deed; a mind profoundly imbued with the love of learning, and in cultivation, if not strength, equal to his own; discretion, penetration, and docility combined in such proportions as should render her her husband's safest counsellor, yet willing follower; and controlling and toning the harmonious whole, a devotion to himself only second in degree, not inferior in quality, to worship of her Creator. This was the ideal for whose embodiment our reasonable, modest Cœlebs was patiently waiting. Answer, oh ye expectant, incipient Griseldas! who, from your beauteous ranks, will step into the prepared niche, and make the goddess a reality?

And how appeared the rival picture in comparison?

"No, no!" he ejaculated, tossing the remnant of his third cigar into the garden. "I must seek further for the 'golden mean.' Intellect and heart are here, undoubtedly. I must have beauty and grace as well. Yet," he continued, relentingly, "there are times when she would be quite handsome if she dressed better. It is a pity her love for the beautiful does not enter into her choice of wearing apparel!"

In ten minutes more he was asleep, and dreamed that he stood at the altar with his long sought ideal, when, as the last binding words were spoken, she changed to Sarah Hunt, arrayed in a light blue lawn of last year's fashion, that made her look as sallow as a lemon, and, to his taste, as little to be desired for "human nature's daily food."

Poor Sarah! The visionary robe was a faithful reflection upon the dreamer's mental retina of a certain organdie which had formed a part of Lucy's wardrobe the previous summer, and having become antiquated in six months' time, was altogether inadmissible in the belle's outfit of this season. [16]

"Yet it cost an awful sum when it was new!" reasoned Mrs. Hunt, "and will make you a very useful dress while you are with your Aunt Sarah. It's too good to cut up for Jeannie!"

"But the color, mother?" objected the unwilling recipient.

"Pooh! who will notice that? Besides, if you had a good complexion, you could wear blue as well as anybody."

Sarah's stock of thin dresses was not plentiful, and, recalling this observation, she coupled it with the fact that she was growing rosy, and dared to equip herself in the azure garment, with what effect she did not dream and Mr. Philip Benson did!

CHAPTER V.

On a pleasant, although rather cloudy forenoon in July, our young pleasure-seekers carried into execution a long-talked-of expedition to the Deal Beach, distant about ten miles from Shrewsbury.

By Aunt Sarah's arrangement, Charley and Jeannie occupied the back seat of the light wagon, and Sarah was to sit by Philip in front, that she "might see the country." Having accomplished this apparently artless manoeuvre, the good woman handed up to them a portly basket of luncheon, and two or three additional shawls, in case of rain or change of weather, and bade the gay party "good-bye" with a satisfied glow in heart and face. To her guileless apprehension there was no question how affairs were progressing between her niece and her nephew-in-law; and in sundry conferences on the subject between "husband" and herself, it had been agreed that a matrimonial alliance would be the best thing that could happen to either of the supposed lovers. In her simple, pious soul, the dear old lady already blessed the Providence that had accomplished the meeting and intercourse under her roof, while she wondered at "the strange things that come about in this world."

Philip had been aware of her innocent attempts to facilitate his suit for several days past, and Sarah's blush, as she hesitated before accepting the proffered seat by the driver, showed that this move was so transparent as to convey the alarm to her also. For a full half mile Philip did not

speak, except a word now and then to the pair of stout grays, who were Uncle Nathan's greatest earthly boast. He appeared thoughtful, perhaps perturbed—so Sarah's single stolen glance at him showed—and in the eyes that looked straight onward to the horizon, there was a hardness she had never seen there before. She was surprised, therefore, when he broke the silence by an unimportant observation, uttered in his usual friendly tone, and for the remainder of the ride was gay and kind, with a show of light-heartedness that was not surpassed by the merry children behind them.

There was hardly enough variety in the unpicturesque country bordering their route to give the shadow of reasonableness to Aunt Sarah's pretext in selecting her namesake's seat, and, despite her escort's considerate attentions, Sarah had an uncomfortable ride; while her manner evinced more of the haughty reserve of their introduction than she had shown at any subsequent stage of their acquaintance. The grays traveled well, and a little after noon they were detached from the carriage, and tied in the grove of scrub-oaks skirting the beach.

While Philip was busied with them, the others continued their course down to the shore; the children, hand-in-hand, skipping over the sand-hills, and stopping to pick up stones; Sarah strolling slowly after them. She had seen the ocean surf before, but never aught like this, with its huge swells of water, a mile in length, gathering blackness and height on their landward career; as they struck the invisible barriers that commanded, "Thus far and no farther!" breaking in white fury, with the leap of a baffled fiend, and a roar like thunder, against their resistless opponent, then recoiling, sullenly, to gather new force for another, and as useless an attack. The beach was wide and uneven, of sand, whose whiteness would have glared intolerably had the day been sunny, drifted into hillocks and undulating ridges, like the waves of the sea. Here and there the hardy heather found a foothold amid the otherwise blank sterility, the green patches adding to, rather than lessening the wild, desolate aspect of the tract. Fragments of timber were strewn in all directions, and Sarah's quick eye perceived that it was not formless, chance driftwood. There were hewn beams and shapely spars, and planks in which great iron bolts were still fast. When Philip overtook her, she was standing by an immense piece of solid wood, lying far beyond the reach of the highest summer tides. One end was buried in the sand; the other, bleached by sun and wind, and seamed with cracks, was curved like the extremity of a bow. Her late embarrassment or hauteur was forgotten in the direct earnestness of her appealing look.

"Am I mistaken?" she said, in a low, awed tone. "Is not this the keel of a ship?"

"It is. There have been many wrecked on this coast."

"Here!" She glanced from the fierce, bellowing breakers to the melancholy testimonials of their destructive might. "I have never heard that this was esteemed a dangerous point."

"You can form an imperfect idea of what this beach is in winter," remarked Philip, signing to her to seat herself upon the sand and throwing himself down beside her. "I was here once, late in the autumn, and saw a vessel go to pieces, scarcely a stone's throw from where we are now sitting. The sea was high, the wind blowing a perfect gale, and this schooner, having lost one of her most important sails, was at the mercy of the elements. She was cast upon the shore, and her crew, watching their opportunity, sprang overboard as the waves receded and reached firm ground in safety. Then came a monster billow, and lifting the vessel farther upon the sand, left her careened towards the land. It was pitiful to see the poor thing! So like life were her shudders and groans as the cruel surf beat against her, that my heart fairly ached. The spray at every dash rose nearly as high as her mast-head, and a cataract of water swept over her deck. Piece by piece she broke up, and we could only stand and look on, while the scattered portions were thrown to our feet. I shall never forget the sight. It taught me the truth of man's impotence and nature's strength as I had never read it before."

"But there were no lives lost! You were spared the spectacle of that most terrible scene in the tragedy of shipwreck?"

"Yes. But the light of many a life has been quenched in that raging caldron. A young man, a resident of Shrewsbury, with whom I hunted last year, described to me a catalogue of horrors which he had beheld here, that has visited me in dreams often since. An emigrant ship was cast away on this coast in midwinter. High above the roar of the wind and the booming surf was heard the cry of the doomed wretches, perishing within hail of the crowd of fellow-beings who had collected at news of the catastrophe. The cold was intense; mast and sail and rope were coated with ice, and the benumbed, freezing wretches were exposed every instant to the torrents of brine that swept over them like sleet. The agony was horrible beyond description, but it was soon over. Before the vessel parted, the accent of mortal woe was hushed. Not a man survived to tell the tale."

For an hour they sat thus and talked. The subject had, for Sarah, a fearful fascination, and, led on by her absorbed attention, Philip rehearsed to her wonders and stories of the mysterious old ocean, that to-day stretched before them, blanched and angry, under the veil of summer cloud, until to his auditor there were bitter wailings blent with the surge's roar; arms, strained and bare, were tossed above the dark, serpent-like swell of water, in unavailing supplication, and livid, dead faces stared upon her from beneath the curling crests of the breakers.

That day on the Deal Beach! How quietly happy was its seeming! How full of event, emotion, fate—was its reality! Charley and Jeannie wandered up and down the coast, filling their baskets with shells and pebbles; chasing the retiring waves as far as they dared, and scampering back, with shrieks of laughter, as the succeeding billow rolled rapidly after them; building sand-houses, and digging wells to be filled by salt water; exulting greatly when a rough coralline fragment or a

jelly-fish of unusual dimensions was thrown in their way. They all lunched together, seated upon the heather-clumps, around Aunt Sarah's liberal hamper.

"Sister," said Jeannie, when the edge of her seaside appetite was somewhat blunted by her repast, "I like living here better than in New York—don't you?"

"It is more pleasant in summer, my dear."

"But I mean that I am happier here. I wish you would write to mother and ask her to let us live here always."

"But what would she do without her baby?" asked Philip, emphasizing the last word.

The little lady bridled instantly.

"Cousin Philip, I do wish you would never call me a 'baby' again. I am seven years and two weeks old. I could get along very well without mother for awhile. Of course, I would go over sometimes and pay her a visit and get new dresses. Shrewsbury is a nice place; I would like to buy that pretty white house next to Uncle Nathan's, and live there—sister and Charley and I—and you—if [17] you would promise not to tease me ever."

"Thank you!" said Philip, with admirable gravity, seeming not to notice Sarah's heightened color at this proposal of co-partnership. "You are very kind to include me in your household arrangements, and nothing would please me better, if I could stay here. But you know, Jeannie, my dear little cousin, that my home is far away from this quarter of the world. I have remained here too long already." There was a touch of feeling or nervousness in his voice. "I had a letter last night, reminding me that I ought to have left a week ago to join a party of friends, whom I promised to meet in New York and travel with them until the time for our return to the South."

He did not look at Sarah, but she felt that the explanation was intended for her—that, whether intentionally or not, he was preparing her for a blow to heart and hope.

"I shall be obliged to leave Shrewsbury and all my friends there to-morrow morning, Jeannie."

The child's exclamation of dismay, and Charley's quick, mute remonstrance to his cousin, as his playfellow communicated the news to him, gave Sarah time to rally firmness and words.

"This is unexpected intelligence," she said, calmly. "We shall miss you. Your kindness has, directly and indirectly, been the means of affording us much pleasure during our visit to our good aunt. It will seem dull when you are gone."

There was a flash in Philip's eye that looked like pleasure—a mixture of relief and surprise, as he turned to her.

"I am selfish enough to hope that you will miss me for a time, at least. I shall not then be so soon forgotten. We have had some pleasant days and weeks together, have we not?"

"I have enjoyed them, assuredly."

She was a little pale, Philip thought, but that might be the effect of fatigue. Her cheek was seldom blooming, unless when flushed in animated speech, or by brisk exercise. She spoke of his going with politeness, that seemed scarce one remove from carelessness; and, man-like, his pleasure at the thought that their association in the country house had not been followed by the results Aunt Sarah wished and predicted, gave way to a feeling of wounded vanity and vexation, that his summer's companion could relinquish him so easily. While he repeated to himself his congratulations that his friendly and gallant attentions had not been misconstrued, had not awakened any inconvenient because futile "expectations," he wondered if it were a possibility for a girl of so much sense and feeling, such genuine appreciation of his talents and tastes, to know him well—even intimately—without experiencing a warmer sentiment than mere approval of an agreeable associate's mind and manners, and Platonic liking for him on these accounts.

With the respectful familiarity of a privileged acquaintance, he drew her hand within his arm as they arose at the conclusion of the collation.

"We have yet two hours and more to spend here, before we set out for home. We can have one more walk and talk together."

They took but one turn on the beach, and returning to their morning's seat beside the half-buried [18] keel tried to talk as they had done then. It was hard work, even to the man of the world, the heart-free student of human nature. Gradually the conversation languished and died away, and for awhile both sat silent, looking out upon the sea. Then Philip's gaze came back to his companion—stealthily at first, and, as she remained unconscious of his scrutiny, it lingered long and searchingly upon features, form and attire.

There were white, tight lines about her mouth, and a slight knitting of the brow, that imparted a care-worn look to the young face it pained him to see. Her hands were clasped upon her knee, and the fingers were bloodless where they interlaced one another. Was she suffering? Was the threatened parting the cause of her disquiet? If this were so, what was his duty as a man of honor—of common humanity? And if he were forced to admit that he held her happiness in his power, and to accept the consequences that must ensue from his idle gallantry and her mistaken reading of the same, was the thought really repulsive? Would it be a total sacrifice of feeling to a sense of right? It was a repetition, grave and careful, of the revery of that July night two weeks ago.

Sarah's hat—a broad-brimmed "flat" of brown straw—had fallen back upon her shoulders, and the sea breeze played in her hair, raising the short and loose strands and giving to the whole a rough, "frowzy" look. Her plain linen collar and undersleeves showed her complexion and hands

to the worst possible advantage. Upon her cheeks, this same unfriendly wind had bestowed a coat of tan and a few freckles, that were all the more conspicuous from her pallor, while her fingers were as brown as a gypsy's. Her gray poplin dress had lost most of its original gloss, and being one of Mrs. Hunt's bargains—"a cheap thing, but plenty good for that outlandish Shrewsbury"—already betrayed its cotton warp by creases that would not be smoothed, and an aspect of general limpness—a prophecy of speedy, irremediable shabbiness. Cast loosely about her shoulders was a light shawl, green, with black sprigs—another bargain; and beyond the skirt of her robe appeared the toe and instep of a thick-soled gaiter, very suitable for a tramp through damp sand, yet anything but becoming to the foot it protected.

With an impatient shake of the head, involuntary and positive, Philip closed his final observation. And cutting off a large splinter from the weather-beaten timber against which he leaned, set about trimming it, wearing a serious, settled face, that said his mind was fully made up.

What had Sarah seen all this while?

Heavens, over which the films of the forenoon had thickened into dun cloud-curtains, stretching above and enwrapping the world; a wild, dreary expanse of troubled waters, whose horizon line was lost in the misty blending of sea and sky, ever hurrying and heaving to moan out their unrest upon the barren beach. In the distance was a solitary sail; nearer to the land, a large sea-bird flew heavily against the wind. In such mateless, weary night must her life be passed; that lone, frail craft was not so hopelessly forlorn upon a gloomy sea, beneath a sky that gloomed yet more darkly—as was her heart, torn suddenly from its moorings—anchor and rudder and compass gone. Yet who could syllable the mighty sorrow of the complaining sea? And were there words in human language that could tell the anguish of the swelling flood beating within her breast?

"Going away! To-morrow!" For a little space this was all the lament she kept repeating over to herself. Pregnant with woe she knew it to be, yet it was not until she was allowed to meditate in silence upon the meaning of the words that she realized what had truly come upon her. She had thrown away all her hope of earthly happiness—risked it as madly, lost it as surely, as if she had tossed it—a tangible pearl—into the yawning ocean. Her instinct assured her that, were it otherwise, the tidings of Philip's intended departure, his suddenly formed resolution to leave her, would have been conveyed to her in a far different manner. Her keen backward glance penetrated Aunt Sarah's simple wiles; his obvious annoyance thereat; his determination to save himself from suspicion; his honorable fear lest she, too, should imagine him loving, where he was only civil and kind. Yes, it was all over! The best thing she could hope to do, the brightest prospect life had now for her, was that her secret should remain hers alone, until the troubled heart moaned itself into rest which knows no waking. She was used to concealment. All her existence, excepting the sweet delusive dream of the past three weeks, had been a stern preparation for this trial. But she was already weary and faint—fit to lie down and die, so intense had been the throe of this one struggle.

"How long is this to last? How long?"

The exclamation actually broke, in an inarticulate murmur, from her lips.

"Did you speak?" inquired Philip.

"I think not. I am not sure. I did not intend to do so."

"Grant me credit for my forebearance in not obtruding my prosaic talk upon your musings," he went on, playfully. "It was a powerful temptation—for I remember, constantly, that this is our last opportunity for a genuine heart and head confabulation, such as I shall often linger for after I leave you—and sincerity! You have done me good, Miss Sarah; taught me Faith, Hope, Charity—a blessed sisterhood!"

"May they ever attend you!"

"Amen! and thank you! And what wish shall I make in return for your beautiful benediction?"

"Whatever you like. My desires are not many or extravagant."

"You are wrong. You have a craving heart and a craving mind. May both be fed to the full, with food convenient for them—in measures pressed down, shaken together and running over."

"Of what? Husks?" was Sarah's unspoken and bitter reply. She could not thank him, as he had done her. She only bowed, and, bending forward, took up a handful of the fine white sand that formed the shore. Slowly sifting it through her fingers, she waited for him to speak again.

Was this careless equanimity real or feigned? The judge of character, the harpist upon heart-chords, made the next move—not the candid, manly friend.

"I am going to ask a favor of you—a bold one."

"Say on."

"By the time I am ready to retrace my steps southward you will be again settled in New York. Will you think me presumptuous if I call at your father's house to continue an acquaintance which has been, to me, at once agreeable and profitable?"

The fingers were still, suddenly. A warm glow, like sunrise, swept over cheek and forehead. A smile, slight but sweet, quivered upon her lips. Drowning in the depths, she heard across the billow a hail that spoke of hope, life, happiness.

"We will all be glad to see you," she said, with affected composure.

"Not half so glad as I shall be to come. Will you now, while you think of it, give me your address?"

He handed her a card and a pencil. She wrote the required direction and received in exchange for it the now smooth bit of wood, which had afforded occupation to Philip for half an hour past. It was tendered in mock ceremony, and accepted smilingly. Upon the gray tablet was inscribed "Philip Benson, Deal Beach, July 27th, 1856." A playful or thoughtless impulse caused him to extend his hand for it, after she had read it, and to add a motto, stale as innocent in his eyes: "Pensez a moi!"

"I shall preserve it as a souvenir of the day and place," observed Sarah, slipping it into her pocket.

Twilight overtook them before they reached home, and the night was too cloudy and damp for a promenade, such as they often had in the garden walks and lane, or for the customary family gathering in the long porch. Yet Aunt Sarah was surprised that Philip was apparently content to spend the evening in the sitting-room, with herself and husband by to spoil the tete-a-tete he must be longing for.

Still more confounded was she, when, after her clever strategy of coaxing Uncle Nathan into the kitchen, that the coast might be clear, she heard Philip's step close behind them.

"I must clean my gun to-night, aunt," he said, taking it from the corner. "I shall not have time to do it to-morrow."

With the utmost nonchalance he began the operation, whistling softly a lively air over his work. Aunt Sarah gave her partner a look of bewildered despair, which he returned by a confirmatory nod, and a smile, half comic, half regretful.

After breakfast next morning the nephew-guest said affectionate farewells to his relatives and Jeannie; a grave, gentle adieu to Sarah, accompanied by a momentary pressure of the hand, that may have meant much or little, and upon the snug homestead settled a quiet that was dreariness itself to one of its inmates.

CHAPTER VI.

Meanwhile, how had the time sped to the nominal head of the Hunt household—the solitary, toiling father and husband? The servants were dismissed when "the family" left town, although Mr. Hunt continued to sleep at home. A peripatetic maid-of-all-work—what the English denominate a charwoman—was engaged to come early every morning to clear up the only room in the establishment that was used before the cashier went out for his breakfast, which he procured at a restaurant pretty far down town. The same quiet coffee-house furnished him with dinner and an early tea, after which last refreshment he was at liberty to pass the evening in [19] whatever manner he liked best. There was nothing in the city worth seeing at this season, even if he had not lost all taste for shows and gayety. Those of his acquaintances who were not absent with their wives and daughters were living like himself, furniture in overalls, carpets covered, apartments closed, with the exception, perhaps, of one bedroom, and had no place in which to receive him if he had been in the habit of visiting, which he was not. He was very tired, moreover, by the time night came on, and as the heat increased and the days grew longer, his strength waned more and more, and his spirits with it. Meekly and uncomplainingly he plodded through his routine of bank duties, so steady and so faithful that his fellow-workers and customers had come to regard him as a reliable fixture, a piece of machinery, whose winding up was self-performed and whose accuracy was infallible.

When, therefore, on a sultry August afternoon, he turned to leave his desk at the close of business hours, grew terribly pale and dropped upon the floor in a fit of death-like faintness, there was great consternation, and as much wonder as if no human clock-work had ever given out before, under a like process of exhausting demands.

Clumsily, but with the best of intentions, they brought him to his senses, and in half an hour or so he was sufficiently recovered to be taken home. There was a twitching of the lips that might have passed for a sarcastic smile, as he heard the proposal to convey him to his house; but he only gave his street and number, and lay silently back in the carriage, supported by his friends, two of whom insisted upon seeing him safely to his own abode.

"Is this the place? Why, it is all shut up!" exclaimed one of these gentlemen as the driver drew up before the dusty steps.

Mrs. Hunt's orders were that the entrance to her mansion should present the most desolate air possible during her absence. It had "an aristocratical look in the summer time, when everybody but nobodies was rusticating."

Again that singular contortion of the mouth, and the master (?) of the forlorn-looking habitation prepared to descend, fumbling in his pocket for his pass-key.

"I am obliged to you, gentlemen, for your great kindness, and will—not—trouble—you—longer."

In trying to raise his hand to his hat for a bow, the ghastly hue again overspread his face, and he staggered. Without further parley his two aids laid hold of him, one on each side, and supported him into the house, up one, two flights of linen-draped stairs, to a back bedroom.

Mrs. Hunt would have let her husband faint on the sidewalk before she would have received

company in that chamber in its present condition; for the handsomest articles of furniture stood covered up in another apartment, and their place was supplied by a plain bureau, wash-stand and bed belonging to the boys' room, a story higher up. The wisdom of this precaution was manifest in the signs of neglect and slovenliness displayed on all sides. One could have written his name in the dust upon the glass; there was dirt in every corner and under each chair and table; the wash-basin was partly full of dirty suds, and the towels and counterpane shockingly dingy. [20]

These things were not remarked by the intruders until they had got their charge to bed, resisted no longer by him, for he began to comprehend his inability to help himself.

"There is no one besides ourselves on the premises, not even a servant," one of them said apart to his associate, after a brief absence from the room. "If you will stay with him until I come back I will go for a doctor."

The invalid caught the last word.

"Indeed, Mr. Hammond, there is no need for you to do anything more—no necessity for calling in a physician. I am quite comfortable now, and shall be well by morning."

Mr. Hammond, who was a director in the bank, and sincerely honored the honest veteran now prostrated by his devoted performance of duty, took the hot, tremulous hand in his.

"I cannot allow you to peril your valuable health, my dear sir. Unless you positively forbid it, I shall not only call your physician, but drop in again myself this evening, and satisfy my mind as to whether you require my presence through the night."

He was as good as his word; but no amount of persuasion could induce Mr. Hunt to accept his offered watch. He would be "uneasy, unhappy, if his young friend sacrificed his own rest so uselessly," and loath as he was to leave him to solitude and suffering, Mr. Hammond had to yield. At his morning visit, he found the patient more tractable. After tedious hours of fevered wakefulness, he had endeavored to rise, only to sink back again upon his pillow—dizzy, sick, and now thoroughly alarmed at the state of his system. He did not combat his friend's proposal to obtain a competent nurse, and to look in on him in person as often as practicable; still, utterly refused to allow his wife to be written to on the subject of his indisposition.

"I shall be better in a day or two, probably before she could reach me. I have never had a spell of illness. It is not likely that this will be anything of consequence. I greatly prefer that she should not be apprised of this attack."

Mr. Hammond was resolute on his part—the more determined, when the physician had paid another visit, and pronounced the malady a low fever, that would, doubtless, confine the sick man to his bed for several days, if not weeks.

"It is not just to your wife and children, Mr. Hunt, to keep them in ignorance of so important a matter!" he urged. "They will have cause to feel themselves aggrieved by you, and ill-treated by me, if we practice this deception upon them."

Mr. Hunt lay quiet for some minutes.

"Perhaps you are in the right," he said. "Sarah would be wounded, I know. I will send for her!" he concluded, with more animation. "She will come as soon as she receives the letter."

"Of course she will!" rejoined Mr. Hammond, confidently; "you are not able to write. Suffer me to be your amanuensis." He sat down at a stand, and took out his pen. "Where is Mrs. Hunt at present?"

"I am not sure. Either at Saratoga or Newport."

Mr. Hammond looked surprised. "But it is necessary, sir, that we should know with some degree of certainty, or the letter may miscarry. Perhaps it would be well to write to both places."

"The letter! Both places!" repeated Mr. Hunt, with perplexity. "I alluded to my daughter Sarah, sir, my second child, who is spending the summer with her aunt in Shrewsbury, New Jersey. May I take the liberty of asking you to write her a short note, mentioning my sickness in as guarded terms as you can use, and requesting her to come up to the city for a few days? She has my youngest child—a little girl—with her. If she can be contented to remain with her aunt, Sarah had better leave her there. She would be an additional burden to her sister if she were here."

Whatever Mr. Hammond thought of the marked preference shown to the daughter above the wife, he said nothing, but proceeded to indite the desired epistle, adding, in a postscript, on his own account, that he would take pleasure in meeting Miss Hunt at the wharf, on her arrival, and for this purpose would be at the boat each day, until she made her appearance in New York.

He went, accordingly, the next afternoon, although very confident that she could not have received his letter in season to take that boat. Mr. Hunt had proved to him and to himself the utter impossibility of her coming, yet his eyes brightened with expectancy as his friend entered, and faded into sadness as he reported the ill-success of his errand.

"He is evidently extremely partial to this one of his children," thought Mr. Hammond, as he paced the wharf on the second evening, watching, amid noisy hack-drivers and expressmen, for the steamer. "I have seen the girls at parties, but do not remember their names. One of them is very pretty. I wonder if she is 'Sarah!'"

It was growing dusk as the boat touched the pier. So dim was the light, that Mr. Hammond was obliged to station himself close beside the gangway, and inspect the features of each lady passenger more narrowly than politeness would, in other circumstances, have warranted. They

hurried across, men and women, tall and short, stout and slender, until there tripped towards him the figure of a young girl, attired in a gray dress and mantle, and carrying a small traveling bag in her hand. She would have passed him, had he not stepped forward and spoken.

"Miss Hunt, I believe!"

In the uncertain twilight, he could see that she grew very pale.

"How is my father?"

There was no preamble of civility or diffidence; no reserve in addressing him, a mere stranger; no trembling, preparatory queries; but a point-blank question, in a tone whose impatient anguish moved his kind heart; a piercing look, that would know the truth then and there!

"He is better, to-day"—and he led her out of the press of the onward stream. "He has not been dangerously ill. We hope and believe that he will not be."

"Is that true?" Her fingers tightened upon his arm.

"It is! I would not, for the world, deceive you in such a matter."

"I believe you! Thank Heaven! I feared the worst!" She covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears.

Hammond beckoned a hackman, close by, and when the short-lived reaction of overwrought feeling subsided so far as to allow Sarah to notice surrounding objects, she was seated in the carriage, screened from curious or impertinent gazers, and her escort was nowhere to be seen. Several minutes elapsed before he again showed himself at the window.

"I must trouble you for your checks, Miss Hunt, in order to get your baggage."

Already ashamed of her emotion, she obeyed his demand without speaking.

"You have given me but one," he said, turning it over in his hand.

"That is all, sir."

"Indeed! You are a model traveler! I thought no young lady, in these days, ever stirred from home without half a dozen trunks." To himself he added, "A sensible girl! An exception to most of her sex, in one thing, at any rate!"

Sarah sat well back into her corner, as they drove up lighted Broadway, and was almost rudely taciturn, while her companion related the particulars of her father's seizure and subsequent confinement to his room. Yet, that she listened with intense interest, the narrator knew by her irregular breathing and immovable attitude. As they neared their destination, this fixedness of attention and posture was exchanged for an eager restlessness. She leaned forward to look out of the window, and when they turned into the last street, quick as was Mr. Hammond's motion to unfasten the door of the vehicle, her hand was first upon the lock. It was cold as ice, and trembled so much as to be powerless. Gently removing it, he undid the catch, and assisted her to alight.

The hired nurse answered their ring, and while Sarah brushed past her, and flew up the stairway, Mr. Hammond detained the woman to make inquiries and issue directions.

"It is all very dreary-like, sir," she complained. "Everything is packed away and locked up. There's no getting at a lump of sugar without a hunt for the key, and all he's seemed to care for this blessed day, was that his daughter should be made comfortable. He sent me out this afternoon to buy biscuits, and sardines, and peaches for her tea, and told me where I'd find silver and china. It is not at all the thing for him to be worrying at such a rate. He'll be worse for it to-morrow, and so I've told him, Mr. Hammond."

"Perhaps not, Mrs. Kerr. His daughter's coming will cheer him and quiet him, too, I doubt not. I will not go up now. Please present my regards to Mr. Hunt, and say that I will call to-morrow."

He purposely deferred his visit until the afternoon, supposing that Miss Hunt might object to his early and unceremonious appearance in the realms now under her control; nor when he went did he ascend at once to the sick-chamber, as was his custom before the transfer of its superintendence. Sending up his name by the nurse, he awaited a formal invitation, among the shrouded sofas and chairs of the sitting-room.

"You'll please to walk up, sir!" was the message he received; and the woman subjoined, confidentially, "Things is brighter to-day, sir."

They certainly were. With wonderfully little noise and confusion, Sarah, assisted by the nurse, [21]
had wrought an utter change in the desolate apartment. With the exception of the bureau, which had been drawn out of sight into the adjoining dressing-room, and the bedstead, the common, defaced furniture had disappeared, and its place was supplied by more comfortable and elegant articles. The windows were shaded, without giving an aspect of gloom to the chamber; the bed-coverings were clean and fresh; and the sick man, supported by larger and plumper pillows than those among which he had tossed for many a weary night, greeted his visitor with a cordial smile and outstretched hand.

"I thank you for your kind care of my daughter last evening, sir. Sarah, my dear, this is my friend, Mr. Hammond, to whose goodness I am so much indebted."

"The debt is mine no less," was the frank reply, as she shook hands with her new acquaintance. "We can never thank you sufficiently, Mr. Hammond, for all you have done for us, in taking care of him."

"A genuine woman! a dutiful, affectionate daughter!" was now Hammond's comment, as he disclaimed all right to her gratitude. "None of your sentimental, affected absurdities, with nothing in either head or heart!"

This impression was confirmed by daily observation; for politeness first, then inclination, induced him to continue his "professional" calls, as Sarah styled them. He seemed to divide with her the responsibility of her position. Its duties were onerous; but for this she did not care. She was strong and active, and love made labor light—even welcome to her. A competent cook was inducted into office below stairs, and household matters went forward with system and despatch. The eye of the mistress, pro tem., was over all; her hand ever ready to lift her share of the load, yet her attendance at her father's bedside appeared unremitting. His disease, without being violent, was distressing and wearing, destroying sleep and appetite, and preying constantly upon the nerves. To soothe these, Sarah read and talked cheerfully, and often, at his request, sang old-time ballads and childish lullabys to court diversion and slumber.

Occasionally Lewis Hammond paused without the door until the strain was concluded, drinking in the notes with more pleasure than he was wont to feel in listening to the bravuras and startling, astonishing cadenzas that were warbled in his ears by the amateur cantatrices of the "best circles;" then, when the sounds from within ceased, he delayed his entrance some moments longer, lest the songstress should suspect his eavesdropping. He ceased to speculate upon the reasons of Mrs. Hunt's protracted absence at a time when no true-hearted wife could, from choice, remain away from her rightful post. When, at the expiration of a fortnight from the day of the attack, the physician declared his patient feebly, but surely convalescent, his young friend had decided, to his entire satisfaction, that things were best as they were. Mr. Hunt had made a most judicious selection from the female portion of his family, and what need of more nurses when this one was so efficient and willing? He caught himself hoping that the fussy dame he had met in society would not abridge her summer's recreation on account of an ailing husband. He [22] had designed going to Saratoga himself, for ten days or two weeks; but he was very well. It was difficult to get away from business, and this affair of Mr. Hunt's enlisted his sympathies so deeply, that he could not resolve upon leaving him. If he had never before enjoyed the bliss that flows from a disinterested action, he tasted it now.

Mrs. Hunt was not kept in total ignorance of what was transpiring at home. Sarah had written, cautiously and hopefully, of her father's sickness and her recall; repeating Mr. Hunt's wish that his consort should not hurry back through mistaken solicitude for his health and comfort; and they were taken at their word. A week elapsed before an answer arrived—a lengthy missive, that had cost the writer more pains and time than the preparation for her annual "crush" generally did. She was an indifferent penman, and sadly out of practice; but there was much to be said, and "Lucy, of course, circumstanced as she was, could not spare time to be her scribe."

This significant phrase quickened Sarah's inborn curiosity; but there was nothing for the next three pages that fed or quieted it. They were filled with minute directions about housewifery—economical details, that would have served as capital illustrations of "Poor Richard's" maxims; injunctions, warnings, and receipts sufficient in quantity to last a young, frugally-disposed housekeeper for the remainder of her natural existence. It was a trial to this exemplary wife and mother, she confessed, to absent herself so long from her home duties; but circumstances had compelled her to stay at Saratoga. Of their nature, Sarah had already been informed in her sister's last letter.

"Which I cannot have received, then"—Sarah interrupted herself to say, as she read to her father: "I have not heard from Lucy in four weeks. I have thought hard of her for not writing."

> "But," concluded Mrs. Hunt, "matters looks well just now, and I know your father will aggree, when he heers all about our season's work, that our labor and Money has been a good investment. Take care of the keys yourself, Sarah. Be pruedent, keep a sharp Lookout on the cook, and don't negleck your poor father.
>
> "Your Affectionate mother,
>
> "E. Hunt."
>
> "P. S. Your kitchen Girl must have a Great deel of spair Time. Set her to work cleening the House, for you may expeckt us home in two weeks, or maybe Less.
>
> "E. H."

Lucy had slipped a note in the same envelope—a thin, satiny sheet, hardly larger than the little hand that had moved over its perfumed page. Her chirography was very running, very light, very ladylike, and, we need not say, very italical.

> "Mamma tells me, Sarah dear, that she has given you a hint of how matters are progressing between your humble servant and our particular friend, of whom I wrote in my last. The poor, dear woman flatters herself that it is all her work; but somebody else may have his own opinion, and I certainly have mine. I have had to caution her repeatedly, to prevent her from showing her delight too plainly to my 'Goldfinch,' as Vic. and I have dubbed him. Don't be in a hurry with your congratulations, ma chere. 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip;' and although the season is so near over, I may yet see some one whom I like better than His Highness. Vic. has a beau, too—a rich widower, less fascinating than my devoted; but a very agreeable man, without

encumbrance, and very much smitten. So we pair off nicely in our rides and promenades, and, entre nous, are quite the talk. You are a good little thing to nurse papa so sweetly—a great deal better than I am. I told my knight of this proof of your excellence the other day, and he said it was only what might have been expected from my sister! Don't you feel flattered? Poor fellow! Love is blind, you know.

"Love to papa. I am sorry he has been so unwell. I do not imagine that I shall have time to write again before we leave this paradise. We will telegraph you when to expect us. Perhaps I may have an escort home—some one who would like to have a private conference with my respected father. Nous verrons!

"Lovingly,

"Lucie."

Mr. Hunt twisted himself uneasily in his arm-chair as his daughter, by his desire, reluctantly read aloud the double letter. A shade of dissatisfaction and shame clouded his countenance when she finished, and he sighed heavily.

"I am glad they are still enjoying themselves," said Sarah, forcing a smile. "Lucy has secured a captive too, it appears—one whom she is likely to bring home at her chariot wheels."

"In my day daughters were in the habit of consulting their fathers before giving decided encouragement to any admirers, strangers especially," said Mr. Hunt, with displeasure. "In these times there are no parents! There is the 'old man' and 'the Governor,' who makes the money his children honor him by wasting, and the 'poor, dear woman,' who plays propriety in the belle's flirtations, and helps, or hinders, in snaring some booby 'Goldfinch.' It is a lying, cheating, hollow world! I have been sick of it for twenty years!"

"Father! my dear father," exclaimed Sarah, kneeling beside him, and winding her arms about his neck. "You misjudge your children, and their love for you!"

"I believe in you, child! I cannot understand how you have contrived to grow up so unlike your sister and your"—The recollection of the respect his daughter owed her mother, checked the word.

"You do not deal fairly with Lucy's character, father. She has one of the kindest hearts and most amiable dispositions in the world. I wish I had caused you as little anxiety as she has. Remember her obedience and my wilfulness; her gentleness and my obstinacy, and blush at your verdict, Sir Judge!"

She seated herself upon his foot-cushion and rested her chin upon his knee, looking archly up in his face. She was surprised and troubled at this degree of acrimony in one whose habitual manner was so placid, and his judgment so mild; but, for his sake, she was resolute not to show her feeling. He laid his hand caressingly upon her shoulder, and sank into a revery, profound, and seemingly not pleasant.

Sarah took advantage of his abstraction to remove the wrapper of a newspaper received by the same mail that had brought her letters. The operation was carefully performed, so as not to invite notice, and the envelope laid away in her work-box. She knew well who had traced the clear, bold superscription, and what initials composed the mysterious cipher in one corner of the cover; nor was this the only token of recollection she had from this source. The article marked in the number of the literary journal he had selected as the medium of correspondence, was an exquisite little poem from an author whose works Philip had read to her in the vine-covered porch at Shrewsbury. Slowly, longingly she perused it; gathering sweetness from every word, and fancying how his intonations would bring out beauties she could not of herself discover. Then she took out the wrapper again, and studied the postmark. On the former papers he had sent the stamp was illegible, but this was easily deciphered—"Albany."

"So near! He is returning homewards!" was the glad reflection that flooded her face with joy.

"Sarah!" said her father, abruptly. "Do you ever think of marriage?"

"Sir?" stammered the girl, confused beyond measure.

"I mean, have you imbibed your sister's ideas on this subject? the notions of ninety-nine hundredths of girls in your walk of life. Do you intend to seek a husband, boldly and unblushingly, in all public places? to degrade yourself by practising the arts they understand so well to catch an 'eligible' partner, who may repay your insincerity and mercenary views by insult and infidelity—at best by indifference! Child! you do not know the risk match-making mothers and husband-hunting daughters run; the terrible retribution that may be—that often is in store for such! I had rather see you and your sister dead, than the victims of that most hateful of heartless shows—a fashionable marriage! Poor Lucy! poor Lucy!"

"I hope you are distressing yourself without reason, sir. Mother is not the person to surrender her child to one whose character and respectability are not indisputable. Nor is Lucy sentimental. I do not fear her suffering very acutely from any cause."

"I grant that. You would be more to be pitied as an unloved or unloving wife, than she. I tremble for you sometimes, when I think of this chance. My daughter, when you marry, look beyond the outside show. Seek for moral worth and a true heart, instead of dollars and cents!"

"I will! I promise!" said Sarah, her amazement at his earnestness and choice of topics combining to shake her voice and constrain her smile. "But there is time enough for that, father dear. When

the man of heart and worth sues for my poor hand, I will refer him to you, and abide entirely by your decision."

"Mr. Hammond is downstairs," said the servant at the door. And Sarah, gathering up her papers, escaped from the room before he entered.

CHAPTER VII.

Mr. Hunt was able to resume his place in the bank several days before his wife returned. Uncle Nathan had brought Jeannie home as soon as her father could leave his room, and the boys had likewise been written for; so that the family reunion was apparently near at hand. [23]

Weak as he was, Mr. Hunt met his spouse and daughter at the depot, and the noise of their entrance in the lower hall first apprised Sarah of their arrival. To the bound of pleasurable excitement her heart gave at the certainty that they had come, succeeded a sigh at the termination of the free, yet busy life she had led of late—the probability that she would be compelled to resume her old habits of feeling and action. Driving back the selfish regret, she ran down to welcome the travellers.

"How well you're looking, Sarah!" said Mrs. Hunt, after kissing her. "I declare, if you was to arrange your hair different, and study dress a bit, you would come near being right down handsome."

"'Handsome is as handsome does!'" quoted Mr. Hunt, stoutly. "According to that rule, she is a beauty."

"Thank you, sir!" said Sarah, bowing low. And she tried to forget, in her sister's affectionate greeting, the chill and heart-sickness produced by her mother's business-like manner and compliment.

"Having disposed of one daughter, she means to work the other into merchantable shape!" was her cynical deduction from the dubious praise bestowed upon herself.

Mrs. Hunt pursued her way up the steps, examining and remarking upon everything she saw.

"Them stair-rods ain't so clean as they had ought to be, Sarah. I'm afraid your girls are careless, or shirks. When did you uncover the carpet?"

"Some time ago, mother, while father was sick. There were gentlemen calling constantly, and the cover looked shabby, I thought."

"It couldn't be helped, I s'pose; but the carpet is more worn than I expected to see it. With the heavy expenses that will be crowding on us this fall and winter, we can't afford to get any new things for the house."

Lucy, who preceded her sister, glanced back and laughed meaningly. And Sarah was very glad that her father had not overheard the observation, which confirmed her belief that the beauty's hand was disposed of without the form of consultation with her natural and legal guardian.

Dinner was announced by the time the traveling habiliments and dust were removed. Sarah had spared no pains to provide a bountiful and tasteful repast, at the risk of incurring her mother's reproof for her extravagant proclivities. But the dame was in high good-humor, and the youthful purveyor received but a single sentence of deprecation.

"I hope you have not been living as high as this all the time, Sarah!"

"No, ma'am. Father's wants and mine were very few. I foresaw that you would need substantial refreshment after your journey."

"You was very thoughtful. We both have good appetites, I guess. I know that I have."

"Mine will speak for itself," said Lucy.

"You have no idea how that girl has enjoyed everything since she has been away," observed Mrs. Hunt to her husband. "There was Vic. West, who took it into her head that she ought to look die-away and peaking, and refuse food, when her beau was by; but Lu., she just went right along and behaved natural, and I'm sure that somebody thought more of her for it." [24]

Mr. Hunt's face darkened for a moment; but he could not find fault with his eldest child on her first evening at home.

"So you have been quite a belle, Lucy," he said, pleasantly.

"Better than that, Mr. H.!" Mrs. Hunt checked her triumphant announcement as the butler re-entered the room. "I shouldn't wonder," she resumed, rather mysteriously, "if Lucy was disposed to settle down into a steady, sedate matron after her holiday."

"Don't deceive yourself with that hope!" laughed Lucy.

She was evidently pleased by these not over-delicate allusions to her love-affairs, and, like her mother, extremely complacent over the result of her recent campaign. Sarah felt that, were she in her place, she would shrink from this open jesting upon a sacred subject; still she had not expected that her sister would behave differently. Lucy's nature was gentle without being fine; affectionate but shallow. She would have had no difficulty in attaching herself to any man whom

her friends recommended as "a good match," provided he were pleasing in exterior, and her most devoted servitor.

The sisters had no opportunity of private converse until they adjourned to the parlor for the evening. Lucy was very beautiful in a blue silk, whose low corsage and short sleeves revealed her superb shoulders and rounded arms. Her complexion was a rich carmine, deepening or softening with every motion—one would have said, with every breath. Her blue eyes fairly danced in a sort of subdued glee, very charming and very becoming but altogether unlike the tender, dewy light of "Love's first young dream."

"How lovely you have grown, sister!" said Sarah, earnestly. "Oh, Lucy, I don't believe you rightly value the gift of beauty—as I would do if it were mine!"

"Nonsense!" The dimples, that made her smile so bewitching, broke her blushes into rosy waves as the conscious fair one turned her face towards the mirror. "I am pleased to hear that I am passable to-night. We may have visitors. A friend of ours has expressed a great desire to see me in my home—'in the bosom of my family.' Ahem!"

She smoothed out an imaginary wrinkle in her bodice, an excuse for tarrying longer before the glass.

"He came to town with you, then?" ventured Sarah.

Lucy nodded.

"And promised to call this evening?"

"Right again, my dear!"

She was graver now, for she had conceived the happy notion of appropriating to her own use a cluster of white roses and buds she discovered in the vase on the marble slab under the mirror. If anything could have enhanced the elegance of her figure and toilet, it was the coiffure she immediately set about arranging. The flowers were a present to Sarah from Lewis Hammond; but she thought little of him or of them, as Lucy laid them first on one, then on the other side of head, to try the effect.

"And you really care for him, sister?" came forth in such a timid, anxious tone, that Lucy burst into a fit of laughter.

"You dear little modest piece of romantic simplicity! One would suppose that you were popping the question yourself, from your behavior. Care for him? Why shouldn't I? I need not say 'yes' unless I do, need I?"

"But you take it so coolly! A betrothal is, to me, such a solemn thing."

"And to most other girls, perhaps. (There! if I only had a hair-pin. Don't rob yourself! thank you! Isn't that an improvement?) As I was saying, why should I pretend to be pensive and doleful, when I am as merry as a lark? or lovesick, when I have never lost a meal or an hour's sleep from the commencement of the courtship until now? That is not my style, Sarah. I am very practical in my views and feelings. Not that I don't play talking sentiment in our genuine lovescenes, and I really like unbounded devotion on the other side. It is decidedly pleasant to be adored. I was surprised to find how I enjoyed it."

"Oh, sister! sister!" Sarah leaned her forehead on the mantel, repelled and well-nigh disgusted by this heartless trifling—this avowed counterfeit—so abhorrent to her feelings. But Lucy was as much in earnest as she could be on such a theme. She went on, unheeding her sister's ejaculation.

"You must understand, of course, that we are not positively engaged. I gave him—Goldfinch—a good scolding for violating the rules of etiquette by addressing me while I was away from home; but it was just like him. He is as impulsive as he can live. To punish him I refused to answer him until after our return to New York, and his interview with father. He would have written to him on the spot, had I not forbidden him. He behaved so beautifully, that I consented to his taking charge of us to the city, and I suppose the rest must follow in good time. How melancholy your face is! Are you very much afflicted at the thought of losing me? Why, Sarah! my dear child, are those tears in your eyes? If she isn't crying in good earnest!"

And Lucy's musical laugh rolled through the rooms in her enjoyment of the joke. What else could it be to her, elate with her success in achieving the chief end of woman—the capture of a rich and handsome, in every respect an unexceptionable lover?

"Hist!" she said, raising her finger. "He has come! Your eyes are red! Run, and make yourself presentable!"

The door opening from the hall into the front parlor, swung on its hinges as Sarah gained the comparative obscurity of the third and rear room. A strong impulse of interest or curiosity there arrested her flight to enable her to get a glimpse of her destined brother-in-law. Lucy had not mentioned his proper name, since her earliest letter from Newport had eulogized a certain George Finch, a Bostonian, wealthy, and attentive to herself. Sarah's backward glance fell upon the visitor as he met his queenly bride-elect directly under the blazing chandelier.

It was Philip Benson!

Chained to the spot by weakness or horror, the looker-on stood motionless, while the suitor raised the lily fingers he held to his lips, and then led Lucy to a seat. His voice broke the spell. As the familiar cadences smote her ear, the sharp pain that ran through every fiber of her frame

awakened Sarah from her stupor.

How she gained her room she never knew; but she had sense enough left to direct her flight to this refuge—and, when within, to lock the door. Then she threw up her arms with a piteous, wailing cry, and fell across the bed, dead for the time to further woe.

Alone and painfully she struggled back to consciousness. Sitting upright, she stared wonderingly around her, unable to recollect what had stricken her down. The chamber was imperfectly lighted by the rays of the street lamp opposite, and with the recognition of objects within its narrow limits there crept back to her all that had preceded her retreat thither. For the next hour she sat still—her head bowed upon her knees, amid the wrecks of her dream world.

Dreary and loveless as had been most of her previous life, she had never endured anything like this, unless one miserable hour upon the Deal Beach, when Philip broke the tidings of his intended departure, were a slight foretaste of the agony, the utter despair, that claimed her now for its victim. Since then, she had been hopeful. His promise of a visit, the tokens of remembrance he had transmitted to her every week, had kept alive memory and expectation, and this was his coming! this the occasion she had pictured so fondly, painted with the brightest hues Love could borrow from imagination! She had heard again the voice that had haunted her dreams, from their parting until now—heard it in deeper, softer tones than it had ever taken in speech with her; heart-music which told that his seekings and yearnings for the one and only beloved were over. And was not her quest of years ended likewise? Truly, there are two senses in which every search, every combat may be said to be closed; one when the victor grasps his prize, or waves aloft his sword in the moment of triumph; the other, when, bleeding, maimed, or dying, the vanquished sinks to the earth without power to rise!

A tap at her door startled Sarah. She did not stir until it was repeated, and her father called her name. A stream of light from the hall fell upon her face as she admitted him.

"Daughter, what ails you?" was his exclamation.

"I am not very well, father."

"I should think not, indeed! Come in here and lie down!" He led her to the bed, and, lighting the gas in the chamber, came back to her and felt her pulse.

She knew what was the direction of his fears; but to correct his misapprehension was to subject herself to further questioning. Passively she received the pressure of his hand upon her head, the gentle stroking of the disordered hair; but when he stooped to kiss her, he felt that she trembled.

"Dear child! I shall never forgive myself if you have taken the fever from me!"

"I do not fear that, father. My head aches, and I am very tired. I have been so busy all day, you know."

"Yes, and for many other days. You are, without doubt, overworked. I hope this may prove to be all the matter with you. A night's rest may quite cure you."

"Yes sir," she answered, chokingly. "You will excuse me to ——, downstairs?"

"Certainly. Would you like to have your mother come up to you?"

"Oh, no, sir! Please tell her there is no need of it. I shall be better to-morrow."

"Your sister"—and he looked more serious, instead of smiling—"has a visitor. Her friend is an acquaintance of yours, also, it appears—the Mr. Benson whom you met at your aunt's in July." [25]

"Yes, sir. I know it."

"I understood you to say that Lucy had never said positively who her lover was; but this was not the name you told me of, as the person whom you imagined him to be."

"I was misled for a time myself, sir," replied the poor girl, pressing her temples between her palms.

"I see that I am tiring you. Forgive me! but it is so natural to consult you in everything. I must trouble you with some questions, which it is important should be answered to-night, before this gentleman and myself have any conversation. Is Mr. Benson a man whom you consider worthy of trust? Your mother represents him to be enormously wealthy—a reputation I had concluded he possessed, from Lucy's pet name for him. It is well that your sister has a prospect of marrying advantageously in this respect, for she would never be happy in an humble sphere; but antiquated people like myself regard other things as of greater consequence in concluding a bargain for a lifetime. Is your opinion of Mr. Benson favorable as to disposition, principles, and conduct?"

Sarah's head rested on the foot-board of her couch, in weariness or pain, as she rejoined: "I saw and heard nothing of him, during our intercourse in the country, that was not creditable. His uncle and aunt are very partial to him, and speak of his character in high terms. Their testimony ought to have weight with you, for they have known him from his boyhood up."

"It ought and does. I am relieved to hear all this! very much pleased!" said Mr. Hunt, enthusiastically. "I have all confidence in Nathan Benson's judgment and integrity. I hope his nephew is as sterling a man. Thus far," he continued, playfully, "I have learned but one thing to his discredit, and that is, having seen this one of my daughters, he could afterwards fall in love with the other."

"I am not beautiful and good like Lucy, father."

"Very dear and lovely in my eyes, my child! Again forgive me for having worried your poor head with my inquiries. I was unwilling to decide a matter where Lucy's happiness was involved, without obtaining your evidence in the case. A last good-night! and God bless you, my dearest, best daughter!"

Sarah held up her face for his kiss without attempting to speak. This burning ordeal, the harder to endure because unexpected, was over. She was as weak as a child with conflicting passions when she arose and endeavored to undress. After stooping several times to regain breath and strength, she was at last ready to creep into bed, there to lie until morning broke, sleepless and suffering.

Her sharpened senses could discern her father's and mother's voices in the sitting-room, in confidential talk—interrupted, by-and-by, by Lucy's pure, mellow tones, apparently conveying some message to the former. Its import was easily surmised, for his step was then heard in the hall and on the stairs, until he reached the parlor where Philip awaited him. Their conference did not occupy more than twenty minutes, which time Lucy spent with her mother—how gayly, Sarah [26]
could judge by the laugh that, again and again, reached her room. Mr. Hunt returned, spoke a few sentences in his calm, grave way, and the closing door was followed by a flutter of silk and fall of gliding footsteps, as Lucy went down to her now formally and fully betrothed husband.

"Husband!" Yes! it was even so! Henceforth the lives of the pair were to be as one in interest, in aims, in affection. Ere long, they would have no separate outward existence in the eyes of the world. Was his chosen love, then, in a truer and higher sense, his other self—the being sought so long and carefully? The pretty fiancee would have stretched her cerulean orbs in amazed wonder at the ridiculous doubt, and asked, in her matter-of-fact way, how the thing could have happened, if it had not been intended? Philip's indignant affirmative would have gained fervor from his exultant consciousness of possession—so novel and sweet. But one above stairs, taught sagacity by the depth of her grief, looked further into the future than did they, and read there a different reply.

She heard the clang of the front door as it shut after the young lover, and in the still midnight, the echoes, faint and fainter, of his retreating footsteps—the same free, light tread she used to hearken for in porch and hall of that riverside farm house; and as the remembrance came over her she turned her face to the wall, murmuring passionately: "Oh! if I could never, never see him again!"

This feeling, whether born of cowardice or desperation, was the ruling one, when her mother looked in upon her before breakfast, and expressed her concern at finding her still in bed.

"I am not well enough to get up, mother," Sarah said sincerely, and Mrs. Hunt, reading in the parched lips and bloodshot eyes proof of the justice of the fears her husband had expressed to her the preceding evening, resolved that the doctor should see her "before she was two hours older."

In vain Sarah entreated that this should not be done, and prophesied her recovery without his assistance. For once her parents were a unit in sentiment and action, and the physician was summoned to his second patient.

"All febrile symptoms were to some extent contagious," he affirmed; "and while Mr. Hunt's malady was not generally classed with such, it was very possible that his daughter had contracted an analogous affection, in her constant attendance upon him."

This decision Sarah dared not overthrow, much as she wished to do so, when she saw how it afflicted her father.

Undaunted by any fears of infection, Lucy repaired to her sister's chamber when she had despatched her breakfast.

"Isn't it too provoking that you should be sick just at this time?" she began, perching herself, school-girl fashion on the foot of the bed. "I really admired your staying upstairs last night; but I did not dream that you really were not well. I promise you that I made capital of your absence. I told Philip (how odd it sounds, doesn't it?) that you ran away when he rang the bell, because you had made a fright of yourself by crying over the prospect of my leaving you, and that I had no doubt that you had grieved yourself into a headache. He wanted to know forthwith if you objected to my marrying him; but I said 'No'; that you were charmed with the match, and preferred him to any other admirer I had ever had; but that we—you and I—were so devoted to one another, that it was acute agony to us to think of parting. About ten o'clock he asked to see father, and they soon settled affairs. When I went down again, he tried a little ring on my finger that he always wears, and it fitted nicely. So I knew what it meant when he put it back upon his own hand, and that with that for a measure he could not go wrong in getting the engagement ring. I do hope it will be a diamond. Vic. West declares that she would not accept anything else. I considered for a while whether I couldn't give him a delicate hint on the subject, but I did not see how I could manage it. And don't you think, while I was studying about this, he fancied I was sober over 'the irrevocable step I had taken,' and became miserable and eloquent at the suspicion! I wish I could remember all he said! It was more in your line than mine! But he is a good, sensible fellow, with all his romantic notions. He has a handsome fortune, independent of his father, left him by his grandfather, and we are to live in Georgia part of the year only, and travel every summer. Mother says his account of his prospects and so forth to father was very satisfactory, but she has not got at all the particulars yet. Father is so worried about your sickness that he cannot spare a thought for anything or anybody else. The light from that window hurts your eyes—doesn't it? I will let down the shade."

But Sarah lay with her hand protecting her eyes, when her sister resumed her position and narration.

"We are to be married in December. He begged hard for an earlier day, but I was sure that I could not be ready before then. As it is, we shall have to hurry when it comes to the dresses, for, in order to get the latest fashions, we must wait until the eleventh hour. Won't I 'astonish the natives' down South? I couldn't state this to Philip, you know; so I referred him to mother, who is to say, when he asks her, that her preference would be to keep me just as long as she possibly can. Entre nous, my dear, our good mamma has said truer things than this bit of sentiment—but n'importe! These embellishments are necessary to such transactions."

Miss West's friendship or curiosity could not endure longer suspense, and the intelligence that she was below checked the monologue.

"I will run up again whenever I can," promised Lucy, by way of compensation for her abrupt departure, "and keep up your spirits by telling you all that I can about our concerns. But Philip is to take me to ride this afternoon. I forbade him to come here before then, but I don't much think he can stay away. Don't be vexed if you don't see me again in some hours. Vic. and I are about to settle our trousseaux. If you believe me, we have never been able yet to decide upon the wedding dresses!"

And she vanished, warbling delicious roulades from a duet she had engaged to sing that evening with her betrothed. She showed herself upstairs again, when she was ready for her ride, and the carriage at the door—very fair, very bright, and very happy. She was exquisitely dressed, and called on her sister to admire her toilet and envy her her escort.

Sarah listened to the cheerful exchange of cautions and promises between her mother and Philip, at the door beneath her open window, and to the rolling wheels that bore them away.

Mrs. Hunt received none of her friends that day, being busy "getting things to rights"; and for a like reason she absented herself from her child's sickroom, content with sending up Jeannie, now and then, to inquire how she was getting on. In the abject loneliness that oppressed her, when the first violence of passions had spent itself, Sarah would have been relieved in some measure by the society of this pet sister, the sole object upon earth, besides her father, that had ever repaid her love with anything like equal attachment. But the child shrank, like most others of her age, from the quiet dark chamber of illness, and longed to follow her mother through the house, in her tour of observation and renovation. Sarah detected her restlessness and ill-concealed dislike of the confinement imposed upon her by compliance with her humble petition—

"Please, Jeannie, stay a little while with your poor sister!" And her sensitive spirit turned upon itself, as a final stroke of torture, the conviction that here, also, love and care had been wasted.

"Go, then!" she said, rather roughly, as Jeannie wavered, "and you need not come up again to-day. I know it is not pleasant for you to be here. Tell mother I want nothing but quiet."

"I have had a splendid drive!" said Lucy, rustling her many flounces into the door at dusk.

The figure upon the bed made no response by motion or word.

"I do believe she is asleep!" added the intruder, lowering her voice. "I suppose she is tired and needs rest." And she went out on tiptoe.

Sarah was awake a minute later, when her father came in to see her. She smiled at him, as he "hoped she was better," and asked whether she might not get up on the morrow. Mr. Hunt thought not. The doctor's opinion was that perfect repose might ward off the worse features of the disease. She had better keep to her bed for a couple of days yet, even should she feel well enough to be about. He sent up her dinner to her room with his own hands; and when she learned this, she strove to do some feeble justice to the viands, but without success.

Philip dined with the family that day by special appointment; and, shortly after his arrival, Lucy again presented herself in that small third-story bedroom.

"Choose! which hand will you take?" she cried, hiding both behind her.

Sarah would make no selection; and, after a little more trifling, the elder sister brought into sight two elegant bouquets, and laid them beside the invalid.

"This is Philip's present—'a fraternal remembrance,' he told me to say. Here is his card. Doesn't he write a lovely hand? The other is from your admirer, Mr. Hammond. What a sly puss you were to make such a catch as he is, without dropping us a hint! He is rather too sober for my notions; but he is getting rich fast, they say. He left those flowers at the door himself, and insisted upon [27] seeing father for a moment, to know exactly how you were. Cannot you hurry up somewhat, and let us have a double wedding? I showed the bouquet to Philip, and told him of your conquest, and he was as much pleased at your prospects as I was. Did you ever see such magnificent roses? your beau paid five dollars, at the lowest computation, for these flowers. I congratulate you upon these signs of liberality."

Sarah had heard only a portion of this speech. Her eyes were fixed upon the card her sister had put into her hand: "Will Miss Sarah accept this trifling token of regard from one who is her stanch friend, and hopes, in time, to have a nearer claim upon her esteem?"

"Very neatly turned, is it not?" said Lucy, satisfiedly. She had read it on her way upstairs. "What shall I say to him from you?"

"Thank him, and explain that I am not able to write a reply."

This meagre return of compliments assumed a tone both grateful and sisterly as Lucy rehearsed it to the donor of the fragrant offering. The barest phrase of civility came gracefully and meaningly from her tongue. Serene in mind and countenance, she seated herself at the piano, and, as Philip took his stand at her side, he wondered if the world held another couple more entirely adapted each to the peculiar soul-needs of the other, more perfectly happy in the knowledge of mutual affection. Like the generality of theorists, your student of human nature is prone to grievous error when he reduces his flawless system to practice.

In one respect, the two certainly harmonized well. Both loved music; both sang finely, and their voices accorded without a jarring note.

Mr. Hunt read the evening papers in Sarah's room; turning and folding them with great circumspection, lest their rattling might annoy her, and detract from her enjoyment of the music. How could he guess the infatuation that caused her to listen greedily to sounds, under whose potent spell feeling was writhing and brain reeling? In every pause between the songs there arose in her memory two lines of a poem read long ago, when or where she knew not:

> "Seek not to soothe that proud, forsaken heart
> With strains whose sweetness maddens as they fall!"

The performers had just completed a duet, in which each voice supported and developed, while blending with the other, when Lucy took up the prelude to a simpler lay; repeating it twice over with skilful variations, as if she were, meantime, carrying on a colloquy with her companion, that delayed the vocal part. This was ended by Philip's raising alone the burden of the plaintive German air Sarah remembered so truly—"The long, long, weary day."

As his voice, full and strong, with its indescribable and irresistible undercurrent of pathos—flowing out here into passionate melancholy—swelled and floated through the quiet house, Sarah sat upright.

"Father! father!" she whispered, huskily, "I cannot bear that! Shut the doors!—all of them, or I shall go mad!"

She was obeyed; Mr. Hunt hurrying down to the parlor to silence the lovers, with the representation that Sarah was too nervous to endure the excitement of music. For the remainder of the evening, a profound stillness pervaded the upper part of the mansion—a silence that, to Sarah, throbbed with the melody she had tried to hush; and look where she might, she gazed into that rainy, ghastly night—the pale, comfortless watcher, the shadowy type of her deeper, more blighting sorrow. [28]

CHAPTER VIII.

For three days Philip Benson lingered near his beautiful enslaver; on the fourth, he carried a sad, yet trustful heart upon his Southern journey. Sarah had not seen him once since the evening of his coming. Through Lucy, she received his adieux and wishes for her speedy recovery. On the next day but one she left her room, and appeared again in the family circle—now complete in all its parts.

In that short season of bodily prostration, the work of years had been wrought upon her inner life. Outwardly there was little alteration save that effected by physical weakness; but in her views of existence and character, of affections and motives, the doubter had become the skeptic; the dreamer the misanthrope. To the gentle and more womanly aspirations that had for a season supplanted the somewhat masculine tendencies of her mind and tastes had succeeded a stoicism, like the frozen calm of a winter's day, uniform as relentless. This was the surface that locked and concealed the lower depths she had sworn should be forever covered. Others could and did live without hearts. She could thrive as well upon the husks and Sodom apples of this world's goods as did they; holding as Life's chief good, complete and final subjugation of all genuine emotion, which, at the best, was but the rough ore—fit for nothing until purged, refined, and polished in its glitter. She found no other creed that suited her present desperate mood so well as the heartless code of the thorough worldling—the devotee to show, and fashion, and wealth.

Such was her mother, whose domestic virtues were extolled by all who knew her; such, behind her mask of tender grace and amiability, the sister who had won, by these factitious attractions, the heart for which Sarah would have perilled life, sacrificed ease and inclination, bowed her proud spirit to the estate of bond-servant to his every caprice, become the willing slave to his tyrannical behest. Yet Philip Benson was a professed judge of character; a man of sense, education, and experience, and, knowing both girls as he did, he had made his choice; set the stamp of his approval upon the shining, rather than the solid metal. The world, as its young would-be disciple believed she had at length learned, was made up of two classes; those who floated, and those who sank. To the latter she determined that she would not belong.

These and kindred thoughts were rife in her mind, and stirring up many a spring of gall within her bosom, one morning as she lay back in an armchair in the sitting-room, listening with secret scorn to the prattle of the pair of betrothed maidens—Lucy and her friend. Lucy's engagement ring was a diamond, or, rather, a modest cluster of these precious stones, whose extreme beauty did not strike the casual eye with the startling effect of Victoria's more showy gage d'amour. This

apparent difference in the value of the two was the source of many discussions and considerable heart-burning, disguised, of course, and threatened in time to produce a decided coolness between the attached wearers of the articles under debate.

On this particular day, Victoria, after some adroit skirmishing, brought out as a "poser" the fact that, to lay the question to rest without more ado, she had, since their last interview, been to Tiffany's, and had her ring valued. Lucy's face was all aglow as her soul-sister named the price of her treasure. She clapped her hands joyously.

"Isn't that the joke of the season, mother?"—as that personage entered. "Don't you think that Vic. was as cunning as we were? She carried her ring to Tiffany's yesterday, too. Wouldn't it have been too funny if we had met there? Mine came from there, they said, and it cost a cool fifty dollars more than yours did, dear!"

Victoria flashed hotly; but further controversy being useless and dangerous to her, she acquiesced with assumed carelessness in Lucy's proposal that, since both were suited, the rival brilliants should not be again referred to as a disputed matter. They accordingly turned to the safer and endless conferences upon the trousseaux, whose purchase must be commenced immediately.

Their incomplete lists were produced, compared, and lengthened—Mrs. Hunt suggesting and amending; Sarah surveying the busy group with the same intense disdain she had experienced throughout the conversation.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you! Margaret Hauton called on me yesterday!" exclaimed Victoria. "Did she come here, too?"

"Yes; but we were out. What did she say?" queried Lucy, breathlessly.

"Why, the stupid creature never alluded to my engagement; and when I mentioned yours, pretended not to have heard of it before. I took care she should not go away as ignorant on the subject as she had come, and—I know it was wicked in me, but she deserved it—all the time I was praising your Goldfinch, and telling how handsome and liberal he was, I sat looking at my new ring, slipping it up and down my finger, as if I were not thinking of it, but of the giver. She could not help seeing it, and, to save her life, she could not keep from changing countenance."

"Good!" said Lucy. "Do tell me how she is looking now?"

"Common enough! She had on that everlasting lilac silk, with the embroidered flounces, although the style is as old as the hills—and that black lace mantle, which, happening to be real, she never leaves off until near Christmas. But her hat! black and corn-color. Think of it! corn-color against her saffron skin. When I pretend to lead society, I hope to dress decently. But I had my revenge for her supercilious airs. Mr. Bond—George—called in the afternoon to take me to ride. I told you of the handsome span of fast horses he has been buying. Well! we concluded to try the Bloomingdale road, and just as we were sailing along, like the wind, whom should we overtake but my Lady Hauton, lounging her lazy way (she thinks it aristocratic!) on the back seat of her father's heavy, clumsy barouche—not a soul in it but her mother and herself. Didn't I bow graciously to her as we flew by! and again, as we met them creeping along, when we were coming back? I wouldn't have missed the chance of mortifying her for a thousand dollars."

Lucy laughed, with no sign of disapprobation at the coarse, vindictive spirit displayed in this petty triumph of a small soul.

"How many evening dresses have you put down on your paper, Vic.?"

"Half a dozen only. I will get others as I need them. The styles in these change so often that I do not care to have too many at a time."

"There you will have the advantage of me," said Lucy, ingenuously. "It will not be so easy a matter to replenish my stock of wearable dresses. I wish I had asked Philip about the Savannah stores. I wonder if he knows anything about them?"

"He ought to—being such a connoisseur in ladies' dress. I declare I have been absolutely afraid of him since I heard him say that he considered a lady's apparel a criterion of her character."

"He has exquisite taste!" said Lucy, with pardonable pride in her lover. "It is a positive pleasure to dress for him. He sees and appreciates everything that I could wish to have him notice. He has often described to me what I wore, and how I looked and acted the evening he fell in love. How little we can guess what is before us! I did not care to go to the hop that night, for Mr. Finch was to wait on me, and he was so stupid, you know, after we discovered that it was a mistake about his being rich. I think I see him now, with his red face and short neck! Oh, dear! the fun we had over that poor man! I told you—didn't I, Sarah—that we named him Bullfinch, because he looked so much like one? When Phil came we called him Goldfinch, and the two went by these names among us girls. The Bullfinch heard of it, and he was ridiculously angry! So I put on a white tarlatan, that one with the double jupe, you know, Vic., festooned with white moss rosebuds, and I had nothing but a tea-rose in my hair. I danced once with the Bullfinch—one of those solemn quadrilles that are only fit for grandmothers—and vowed to myself that I would not stand up again, except for a polka or the lancers. While I was sitting down by the window, saying 'Yes' and 'No,' when Bullfinch spoke, Mr. Newman introduced 'Mr. Benson' to 'Miss Hunt,' and the work was done!"

"No more waltzing, then!" was Victoria's slyly malicious sequel.

"I did not care so much for that as I thought I should!" replied easy-tempered Lucy. "You cannot

find a man who has not some drawback. Before I had a chance for another round, mother there managed to telegraph me that my fresh acquaintance was worth catching. She had gotten his whole story out of Mrs. Newman. He let me know pretty soon, that he had some queer scruples about fancy dances, and I thought it best to humor him for one evening, or until I should ascertain whether he was really 'taken' or not. I have never repented my self-denial, although I grant that it cost me a struggle to give up 'the german.'"

"George lets me waltz to my heart's content," said Victoria. "He is the very soul of indulgence. As [29]
to laces—I have not a thing fit to wear. I must get everything new. I am glad of it! I enjoy shopping for them. If I have a passion, it is for laces!"

A sneer curled Sarah's lips, and Victoria happening to glance that way, could not mistake its application, whatever she might surmise as to its origin.

"I suppose you despise us as a couple of lovesick girls, Sarah?" she said, with a simper designed to be sentimental, whereas it was spiteful instead.

"I think love the least dangerous of your complaints," was the rejoinder.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"She means that people do not die of love in these days," exclaimed Lucy, whose pleasure-loving nature always shuddered at the idea of altercation in her presence; her sensations, during the occasional sparrings of her sister and her friend, bearing a strong resemblance to those of an innocent white rabbit, into whose burrow a couple of belligerent hedgehogs have forced their way.

"You will understand us better one day, when your turn comes," said Victoria, with magnanimous condescension. "I shall remind you then of your good opinion of us."

"You may."

"I would give anything to have you engaged, just to see how you would behave. Would not you, Lucy?"

"Yes; if she were likely to do as well as we are doing. Philip says that you have many fine qualities, Sarah. He quite admires you."

The complacent betrothed had none but the most amiable intentions in making this patronizing speech; therefore, the angry blood that surged over her sister's face at hearing it would have been to her but the blush of gratified vanity, had not the sparkle of her eye and the contemptuous contortion of her mouth undeceived her.

"Indeed he did say so!" she hastened to repeat. "And he was in earnest! He said something else which I don't mind telling, now that he belongs to me fast and sure. He said that he sat up until twelve o'clock one night after you had been out boating deliberating whether he should be smitten with you or not. There!"

The color retreated as quickly as it had come. But for the consciousness of Victoria's malicious scrutiny, Sarah could not have summoned strength to utter a word.

"An equivocal compliment, I must say!" she retorted, sarcastically. "Your gallant Georgian's confessions must have been ample and minute indeed, if they comprised such distant approaches to love affairs as the one you honor me by mentioning. I do not think that I have ever heard of another case where a gentleman considered it necessary to enumerate to his fiancee, not merely the ladies he had loved, but those whom he had not!" She arose and left the room.

Poor Lucy, rebuffed and overwhelmed, caught her astonished breath with a sigh. "Can anybody tell me what I have done now to fret Sarah? She is so cross since she was sick!"

"And before, too!" mutely added Victoria's shrug and lifted eyebrows.

"We must bear with her, my dear!" said the prudent mother. "Her nerves are affected, the doctor [30]
says."

Victoria made random pencillings upon the important list—her thoughts in fast pursuit of a notion that had just struck her. She was neither witty nor intelligent; but she possessed some natural shrewdness and a great deal more acquired cunning. She detested Sarah Hunt, and the prospect of obtaining an engine that should humble her arrogant spirit was scarcely less tempting than her own chance of effecting an advantageous matrimonial settlement.

While she was engaged in defining her suspicion to herself, and concerting measures for gathering information with regard to it, Mrs. Hunt went out on some household errand, and Lucy was obliged to descend to the parlor to see callers.

"Don't go until I come back, Vic.. It is the Dunhams, and they never stay long," she said, at quitting her associate.

"Oh, I always make myself at home here, you know, my dear!" was the reply.

Jeannie was sitting on a cushion near the chair Sarah had occupied, dressing her doll.

"It won't fit!" she cried, fretfully, snatching off a velvet basque she had been endeavoring to adjust to the lay-figure.

"Bring it to me! I can fix it!" offered Victoria, winningly. "It's too tight just here, you see. I will rip open the seam and alter it. Who makes your dolly's clothes?"

She was well aware that but one member of the family ever had leisure to bestow upon such follies; but it suited her plan for Jeannie to introduce the name.

"Sister Sarah."

"This is a pretty basque. When did she make it?"

"Yesterday."

"Oh! I thought perhaps she did it while you were in the country, and that the doll had fattened as much as you did there."

Jeannie laughed heartily.

"You had a nice time there, I suppose?" pursued Victoria.

"I guess we did!" Her eyes danced at the recollection. "A splendid time! I wish we lived at Aunt Sarah's! There isn't room for me to move in this narrow house."

"Mr. Benson was there a day or two, was he not?"

"Yes, ma'am—a great many days! He took us all around the country in Uncle Nathan's carriage. I love him very dearly."

"Did you ever go sailing with him?"

"Every evening, when it was clear, in a pretty rowboat. He used to take his guitar along, and sing for us. He sings beautifully! Did you ever hear him?"

"Oh, yes! Did your sister always go boating with you?"

The spy, with all her hardihood, lowered her voice, and felt her face warm as she put this leading question.

"Yes, ma'am, always. Mr. Benson would not have gone without her, I guess."

"Why do you guess so?"

The little girl smiled knowingly. "Because—you won't tell, will you?"

"Why no! Of course I will not."

"Charley said it was a secret, and that I mustn't say anything to sister or Mr. Benson about it, for they would be angry."

"Who is Charley?"

"Don't you know? He is Aunt Sarah's son. He is deaf and dumb; but he showed me how to spell on my fingers. He is a nice boy"—

"Yes; but what was the secret?"

"He said that Mr. Benson—Cousin Phil I call him when I am talking to him—was sister's beau; and he would take me off with him when we went to drive or walk, because, you know, they might not like to have me hear what they were talking about. They used to talk, and talk, and talk! and sister had a great deal more to say, and looked prettier than she does at home. I will tell you something else, if you won't ever let anybody know it. I never told Aunt Sarah even, only Charley. Sister cried ever so long the night after Cousin Phil went away. She woke me up sobbing; but I made believe that I was asleep; and in the morning her pillow was right wet. Charley said that all ladies that he had read about in his books did so when their beaux left them."

"See here, my little lady!" said the dissembler, with a startling change of tone. "You are altogether mistaken—you and Charley both! Mr. Benson is going to marry your sister Lucy, and never was a beau of Sarah's. Be very careful not to talk about Charley's wicked story to your father, or mother, or sisters, for they would be very much displeased, and maybe punish you for repeating such fibs. Little girls ought never to hear or know anything about courting or beaux—it's naughty! I won't tell on you, if you will promise never to do so again. I am shocked at you! Now take your doll and go!"

The frightened child encountered Lucy at the door. Miss West had calculated her time to a minute. Her eyes swimming in tears, her features convulsed with the effort to keep back sob and outcry, Jeannie started up to her attic playroom. Sarah's door was ajar, and engaged as she was with thoughts of her own troubles and insults, she could not but remark the expression of her darling's face, in the momentary glimpse she had as it passed.

"Jeannie! come back!" she called.

The child hesitated, half way up the next flight. Sarah repeated the summons, and seeing that it was not obeyed, went up and took the rebel by the hand.

"What is the matter with you?"

A reddening and distortion of visage, and no reply. Her sister led her back to her chamber, shut the door, and put her arms around her.

"Tell me what ails you, dear!"

Jeannie fell upon her comforter's neck—the repressed torrent breaking through all restraint. "Oh, sister, I can't help crying! Miss Vic. West has been scolding me!"

"Scolding you! She! I will go down and speak to her this instant! How dared she?"

"No, no! please don't! She told me not to say anything about it."

"The contemptible coward!" said Sarah, between her teeth. "How came you to have anything to do with her?"

"Mother and sister Lucy went downstairs, and she said she would alter my doll's basque and—and—and"—a fresh burst of lamentation.

"There, that will do, pet! I see that she only made it worse!" soothed Sarah, believing that, in the unfinished state of dolly's wardrobe, she had discovered the root of the trouble. "Never mind, dear! I will set all that to rights directly. Now wipe your eyes, and let me tell you something. This afternoon father is to take me to ride, and you shall go, too. As for Miss Victoria, we will let her pass, and keep out of her way, hereafter."

Secretly, she was very angry—far more so than she was willing to have the child suspect. As the patient fingers repaired the effects of the original bad fit, and Miss West's meddling, Jeannie stood by, thankful and interested, yet ashamed to look her wronged sister in the eyes. Not that she had the remotest conception of the mischief that might grow out of her imprudent disclosures; but she had broken faith with Charley, been accused of tattling and indelicacy, and warned too stringently against repeating the offence to suffer her to relieve her conscience by a full confession to the being she most loved and honored.

At four o'clock Sarah and her charge were ready, according to Mr. Hunt's appointment. The carriage was likewise punctual; but from it stepped, not the parent of the expectant girls, but a younger and taller man—in short, Mr. Hunt's particular favorite—Lewis Hammond. Jeannie, who had stationed herself at an upper window to watch for her father's appearance, was still exclaiming over this disappointment, and wondering why "Mr. Hammond must call just now to keep sister at home," when the footman brought up a note to Sarah.

It was from Mr. Hunt, explaining the cause of his unlooked-for detention at the bank, and stating that Mr. Hammond, whom he had met earlier in the day, and acquainted with his design of giving his daughter this ride, happened to drop in, and seeing him engaged with business, had asked leave to officiate as his substitute in the proposed airing. He urged Sarah to take Jeannie along, and not hesitate to accept Mr. Hammond's polite attendance, adding, in phrase brief, but sincere, how lightly he should esteem his hour of extra labor, if he knew that she was not a sufferer by it.

Sarah passed the note to her mother, and drew her shawl about her shoulders.

"Of course you'll go!" said Mrs. Hunt, radiant with gratification. "It is perfectly proper, and Mr. Hammond is very kind, I'm sure."

She was hurrying towards the door to convey in person her thanks for his gallantry, when Sarah spoke firmly and very coolly:

"I will say whatever is necessary to Mr. Hammond, if you please, mother. I shall go because father wishes it, and for no other reason. Come, Jeannie!"

"Won't she be in your way?" asked Mrs. Hunt, awed, but not extinguished.

"No, madam."

Sarah suffered Mr. Hammond to place her in the carriage, and himself opposite to her; and keeping before her mind carefully the fact that he was her father's friend, perhaps the savior of his life, she unbent, as much as she could, from her distant, ungracious bearing, to sustain her part of the conversation. She must have been purblind not to see through her mother's wishes, and manoeuvres for their accomplishment; but to these views she was persuaded that Mr. Hammond was no party. She saw in him a sedate, rather reserved gentleman of thirty-two or [31] three, who had passed the heyday of youthful loves and joy; sensible and cultivated to an uncommon degree for a man of business—for such he emphatically was.

A poor boy in the beginning, he had fortunately attracted the regard of a thriving New York merchant, and retained that favor through the years that had elevated him from the lowest clerkship to a partnership in the now opulent firm. For probity and punctuality no man in the city had a higher reputation; but his virtues were of that quiet nature which, while they inevitably retain regard once won, are slow to gain admiration. To matrimonial speculators, as in financial circles, he was known as a "safe chance," and many a prudent mamma on his list of acquaintances would have rejoiced had he selected her daughter as mistress of his heart and fortune. Whether he was aware of this or not could not have been determined by his modest, but dignified deportment. He did not avoid company; went whither he was invited, and, when there, comported himself like a conscientious member of society, talking, dancing, or listening, with as due regard to law and order as he manifested in his daily business life. Fast girls called him "awfully matter-of-fact," and "terribly sensible"; fast youths of the other sex put him down among the "old fogies," and wondered what he did with his money. "Could it be possible that he saved it!" He was intimate nowhere except in the household of his whilom employer and present partner, whose daughters were all married and settled in houses of their own. If he had ever cared to look twice at the same lady, the watchful world had not yet laid hold of this marvellous departure from his fixed habits.

His intercourse with Mr. Hunt's family was, as we know, purely accidental in its commencement, and in its earlier stages might have been induced by humanity or friendship for the sick father. In Sarah's brain there had never arisen a suspicion of any ulterior motives in the pointed attentions directed of late to herself. Before Lucy's return, the care of her invalid parent and her day-dreams had engrossed heart and thought to an extent that precluded much inquiry into other

themes. Since that memorable night, inward torture had abstracted her mind still more from outward impressions.

This afternoon she talked calmly and indifferently to Mr. Hammond, without an idea that he made any greater effort to please her. To Jeannie she was tender beyond her usual showing, in remembrance of the wrong done the sensitive child in the forenoon. Mr. Hammond emulated her in kindness to the third member of their party; and in the course of their ride, raised himself unwittingly to the rank of rivalship with "Cousin Philip," her model gentleman.

Mr. Hunt came out to assist his daughter to alight, upon their return. There was a heartiness in his acknowledgment of his deputy's politeness, and invitation to enter the house and pass the evening with them, which Sarah had seldom heard him employ towards any visitor. Mr. Hammond may have remarked it likewise, for his declinature was evidently against his inclination, and coupled with a promise to call at an early day. His visits were not altogether so agreeable as formerly, for he was received in the spacious parlors on a footing with other callers, [32] and in the presence of several members of the family; still he came repeatedly, with pretext and without, until his sentiments and design were a secret to no one except their object.

Wrapped in the sad thoughts that isolated her from the rest of the world, even while she made a part of its show, Sarah omitted to mark many things that should have been significant signs of undercurrents, and tokens of important issues to her and those about her. Lucy had ceased to harp perpetually upon her lover's perfections and idolatrous flattery to herself, and while the wedding arrangements went vigorously forward, the disengaged sister was rarely annoyed by references to her taste and demands for her sympathy. There had never existed much congeniality between the two, and their common ground was now exceedingly narrow. Lucy was gentle and pleasant, peacefully egotistic as ever, and Sarah understood her too well to expect active affection or disinterestedness. The only part of her behavior to herself to which she took mental exception was a certain pitying forbearance, a compassionate leniency with respect to her faults and foibles, that had grown upon her of late. Once or twice the younger sister had become so restive under this gratuitous charity as to reply sharply to the whey-like speeches of the mild elder, and, without any appearance of wounded feeling, yet with not a word of apology or reason for so doing, Lucy had left the apartment, and never hinted at the circumstances afterwards.

Lucy was certainly the soul, the very cream of amiability. It was unaccountable to her admirers—and they included most of her associates—that Lewis Hammond, with his peculiar habits and tastes, should prefer that severe-looking, strong-minded Sarah. But, be it remembered, that he had learned this love under far different influences; in circumstances wholly unlike those in which he now beheld its object. His respect for unobtrusive intent and feeling; his longing for a home which should be the abode of sacred domestic virtues; and the sweet peace that had fled from the habitations frequented only by the frivolous, heartless, and vain—these found in the sick-room of the father, and the affectionate fidelity of the daughter, something so like the embodiment of his fancy of earthly happiness, that he accepted as a benignant fate the accident which had admitted him to the arcana of their private life. Sarah's temporary illness had taught him the meaning of his dreams, by seeming to peril the chances of their fulfilment; and from that hour he strove patiently and sedulously, as it was his habit, to seek all great ends for the acquisition of the heart whose depth he perhaps, of all who knew her, best understood.

The most impatient person of those directly or indirectly concerned in the progress of this wooing was Mrs. Hunt. Her husband, with unwonted firmness, had forbidden that anyone of the household should speak a word in raillery or otherwise to Sarah touching Mr. Hammond's intentions. "However earnestly I may desire his success," he said to his wife—"and there is no man living whom I would rather call 'son'—I would not influence her by the weight of a single syllable. Hers is the happiness or the misery of a life with her husband—whomsoever she may choose, and hers shall be the entire choice. If she can love and marry Lewis Hammond, I shall be gratified; if not, she shall never guess at my disappointment."

"La, Mr. H.! you are as foolish and sentimental as the girl herself! For my part, I ain't such a saint, and I do say, that if Sarah Hunt allows such a catch as this to slip through her fingers, she shall hear a piece of my mind!"

"I insist," said Mr. Hunt, with immovable resolution, "that Sarah shall be allowed to follow the guidance of her own will in this matter. It is not often that I interfere with your plans; but in this one instance I must be obeyed!"

With which astounding declaration of equal rights, if not of sovereignty, he left his consort to her reflections.

Ignorant of the delicate watchfulness maintained over her by this best of friends, Sarah walked on her beclouded way—without hope, without one anticipation of any future dissimilar to her present, until awakened with a shock by a formal declaration of love from Lewis Hammond.

CHAPTER IX.

It was at the close of an evening party which both the Hunts attended, and where Mr. Hammond's devotion was as marked as anything so modest could be, that Sarah felt him slip an envelope into her hand, as he put her into the carriage. Surprised as she was at the singularity of the occurrence, and disposed to take offence at the familiarity it implied, she had yet the

presence of mind to conceal the missive from Lucy, and talk about other things, until they were set down at home. In the privacy of her chamber, she broke the seal and read her first love letter.

It was a characteristic composition. If the strong hand had trembled above the lines, the clear, clerkly penmanship did not witness to the weakness. Nor was there anything in the subject matter that did not appear to Sarah as business-like and unimpassioned. It was a frank and manly avowal of attachment for her; a compliment implied, rather than broadly stated, to her virtues; the traits that had gained his esteem, then his love—a deprecatory sentence as to his ability to deserve the treasure he dared to ask—and then the question! in plain black and white, unequivocal to bluntness, simple and direct to curtness.

"As he would ask the price of a bale of goods!" burst forth Sarah, indignant, as she threw the paper on the floor, and buried her burning face in her hands.

"That there comes sometimes a glory to the Present, besides which the hues of Past and Future fade and are forgotten, I must and will believe. Such, it seems to me, must be the rapture of acknowledged and reciprocal affection!" This was an echo memory repeated to her soul. She saw again the gently gliding river, with its waves of crimson and gold; breathed the pure fragrance of the summer evening; floated on, towards the sunset, with the loved voice in her ear; the dawn of a strange and beautiful life, shedding blissful calm throughout her being.

And from this review, dangerous as it was for one fleeting instant sweet, she returned to the proposal that had amazed and angered her. Lewis' undemonstrative exterior had misled her, as it did most persons, in the estimate of his inner nature. Kind, she was compelled to confess that he was, in remembrance of his goodness to her father; his demeanor was always gentlemanly, and she had caught here and there rumors of his generosity to the needy that prevented a suspicion of sordidness. No doubt he was very well in his way, but he wanted to marry her! With the intensity of her fiery spirit, her will arose against the presumptuous request. It was the natural recoil of the woman who already loves, at the suggestion of a union with another than the man of her choice; the spontaneous outspeaking of a heart whose allegiance vows have been pledged and cannot be nullified. But she would not see this. Upon the unfortunate letter and its writer descended the storm of passionate repugnance aroused by its contents. With the reaction of excited feeling came tears—a plentiful shower that relaxed the overwrought nerves, until they were ready to receive the benediction of sleep.

Lewis had not asked a written or verbal reply.

> "I will call to take you to drive to-morrow afternoon," he wrote. "Should your decision upon the question I have proposed be favorable, your consent to accompany me in my ride will be understood as a signal that you have accepted my graver suit. If your conclusion is adverse to my hopes, you can signify the same to me in a letter, to be handed me when I ask for you. This course will spare us both embarrassment—perhaps pain. In any event, be assured that you will ever have a firm friend in, Yours truly,
>
> "Lewis Hammond."

Sarah's lip curled as she reperused this clause of the letter on the following morning.

"It is a comfort to know that I have not to answer for the sin of breaking my ardent suitor's heart!" she said, as she drew towards her the sheet upon which she was to indite her refusal. It was brief and courteous—freezing in its punctilious civility, and prepared without a pang, or a solitary misgiving that its reception would not be philosophically calm. Her design was to intrust it to the footman, to be delivered when Mr. Hammond called; and as the hour approached at which the expectant was to present himself, she took the note from the desk and started downstairs with it.

The sitting-room door was open, and, aware that Victoria West was in there with Lucy, Sarah trod very softly as she neared it. Her own name arrested her as she was going by. She stopped involuntarily.

"I thought Sarah a girl of better regulated mind," said Victoria, in a tone of censorious pity. "Of course she suffers! It is the inevitable consequence of an unrequited attachment. Such miserable folly, such unpardonable weakness brings its punishment with it. But my sympathies are all yours, my dearest. I only wish you were not so sensitive. You are not to blame for her blind mistake."

"I cannot help it!" said Lucy, plaintively. "It seems so sad that I should be made the means of depriving her of happiness. I wish I had never known that she was attached to poor Philip. I can't tell you how awkward I feel when any allusion is made in her hearing to the dear fellow, or to our [33] marriage."

"I meant it for the best, dear, in telling you of my discovery," replied Victoria, slightly hurt.

"I know that, my dear creature! And it is well that I should not be kept in the dark as to the state of her affections. I only hope that Philip never penetrated her secret. I should die of mortification for her if he were to find it out. It is a lamentable affair—and I am sure that he is not in fault. What did you say that you gave for that set of handkerchiefs you showed me yesterday?"

"The cheapest things you ever saw! I got them at Stewart's, and they averaged six dollars apiece! As to Mr. Benson, I trust, with you, that he is as unsuspecting as he seems; but he has remarkable discernment, you know. What I could not help seeing, before I had any other proof than her behavior, is not likely to have escaped him."

Half an hour later the twain were disturbed in their confidences by the sound of wheels stopping before the house, followed by a ring at the door. Victoria, ever on the alert, peeped, with feline caution and curiosity, around the edge of the curtain.

"What is going to happen? Look, Lucy! Mr. Hammond in a handsome light carriage, and driving a lovely pair of horses! I never thought to see him go in such style. How well he looks! Take care! he will see you!"

Both dodged as he glanced up at the upper windows; but resumed their lookout in time to see the light that was kindled in his face when Sarah emerged from the front door. He was at her side in a second, to lead her down the steps, and his manner in this movement, and in assisting her into the carriage, the more striking in one generally so self-contained and deliberate, inspired the pair of initiated observers with the same conviction. As the spirited horses disappeared into the avenue, the friends drew back from their loophole, and stared each other in the eyes, with the simultaneous exclamation—"They are engaged!"

They were engaged! Lewis felt it with a glad bound of the heart—but a minute before sickening in deadly suspense; felt, as he seated himself by her side, that the sorrows of a lonely and struggling youth, the years of manhood's isolation and unsatisfied longings, were swept from memory by this hour of abundant, unalloyed happiness.

And Sarah felt it! As her hand touched his, at their meeting upon the steps, a chill ran through her frame that told the consummation of the sacrifice which was to atone for past folly; to silence, and brand as a lying rumor, the fearful tale that bruited abroad the revelation of that weakness. In her mad horror at the knowledge of its discovery, she had rushed upon this alternative. Better an estate of honorable misery, than to live on, solitary, disgraced, condemned and pitied by her meanest foe! Now that the irreversible step was taken, she experienced no sharp regret, no wild impulse of retreat, but a gradual sinking of spirit into hopeless apathy.

Her veil concealed her dull eyes and stolid features, and to Lewis' happy mood there was nothing surprising or discouraging in her disposition to silence. With a tact for which she had not given [34]
him credit, and did not now value aright, he refrained from any direct reference to their altered relation until they were returning homeward. Then changing his tone of pleasant chat for one of deeper meaning, he said:

"I have dared to hope much—everything—from your consent to become my companion for this afternoon. Before I ventured to address you directly, I had a long and frank conversation with your father."

"What did he say?" asked Sarah, turning towards him for the first time.

"He referred me to you for my answer, which, he said, must be final and positive, since he would never attempt to influence your choice. In the event of an affirmative reply from you, he promised that his sanction should not be withheld."

Sarah was silent. She comprehended fully her father's warm interest in his friend's suit, which the speaker was too diffident to imply, and how this expression of his wishes set the seal upon her fate.

"We are poor and proud! Mr. Hammond is rich and seeks to marry me!" was her bitter thought. "It is a fine bargain in the eyes of both my parents. It would be high treason for me to dispute their will. Mr. Hammond has conceived the notion that I am a useful domestic character, a good housekeeper and nurse, and he is willing to bid liberally for my services. It is all arranged between them! Mine is a passive part, to copy Lucy's sweet, submissive ways for a season, for fear of frightening away the game, afterwards to attend to my business, while he looks after his. I have chosen my lot, and I will abide by it!"

"Have I your permission to call this evening and inform your father of my success—may I say of our engagement?" asked Lewis.

"It is best, I suppose, to call things by their right names," replied Sarah, in a cold voice, that was to him only coy. He smiled, and was about to speak, when she resumed: "Since we are virtually engaged"—she caught her breath as she brought out the word—"I see no reason why we should hesitate to announce it to those whose right it is to know it."

"Thank you! That was spoken like the noble, unaffected woman you are! Will you always be equally sincere with me—Sarah?" His accent trembled with excess of emotion in calling the name.

Is it, then, an easy lot that you have chosen, Sarah Hunt? You, whose pride and glory it was to be truthful, who spurned whatever assimilated in the least degree to deception, what think you of a life where a lie meets you on the threshold and must be accepted and perpetuated if you would preserve your name and position in his eyes and those of the world. "It is the way two-thirds of the married people live!" you were saying to yourself, just now. It may be so; but it is none the less a career of duplicity, perjury—crime!

"I will endeavor to please you!" she faltered, her face in a flame of shame and confusion.

And this was the hue that met Lewis' eye, as her veil was blown aside, in her descent to the pavement, a blush he interpreted to suit his own wishes. Mr. Hunt appeared in the doorway as she alighted, and read in Hammond's smile and joyous salutation all that he most desired to learn. When the door was closed upon the departing suitor, the father drew his best-beloved child to him, and kissed her, without a word of uttered blessing.

"It would break his heart were I to recede now!" thought Sarah, as she bore hers—heavy, hard—up to her room.

That evening was the proudest era of Mrs. Hunt's existence. Two daughters well engaged—unexceptionably paired off! What mother more blest than she? Where could be found other children so dutiful? other sons-in-law so acceptable? By breakfast time, next day, she had arranged everything—Sarah's trousseau, her house, and the double wedding.

Lucy expostulated here. "But, mother, this is the first of November."

"I know that, my dear; but the ceremony will not come off until Christmas, and much can be done in six weeks for your sister—your work is so forward. Then, again, 'tisn't as if Sarah couldn't get everything she needs right here, if she shouldn't have enough. It will be tremendously expensive—awful, in fact; but we must make sacrifices. We can live economical after you're married and gone, and save enough to meet the bills."

"If you please, madam, I prefer a plain outfit and no debts," said Sarah's most abrupt tones.

"If you please, my dear, I understand my affairs, and mean to do as I think proper," retorted the no less strong-willed mother.

Sarah was not cowed. "And as to the time you set, I cannot agree to it. I presume that in this matter I have some voice. I say six months instead of six weeks!"

"Very well, my love." Mrs. Hunt went on polishing a tumbler with her napkin. She always washed her silver and glass herself. "You must settle that with your father and Mr. Hammond. They are crazy for this plan. They were talking to me about it last night, and I told them that I would engage to have everything ready in time; but you must be consulted. I never saw your father more set upon anything. He said to me, private, that he did hope that you wouldn't raise any squeamish objections, and upset their arrangements."

Mrs. Hunt took up a handful of spoons as composedly as if she had never stretched her conscience in her life.

Sarah's head drooped upon the table. She was very, very miserable. In her morbid state of mind she did not dream of questioning the accuracy of her mother's assertion. That a marriageable single daughter was a burden to one parent, she knew but too well; that to this able financier the prospect of getting two out of the way, with the eclat of a double ceremony that should cost no more than Lucy's nuptials would have done, was a stupendous temptation, she also perceived. But that the father whom she so loved; whose sickbed she had tended so faithfully; whose lonely hours it was her province and delight to solace—that he should acquiesce—nay more, rejoice in this indelicate haste to get rid of her, was a cruel stab.

"Very well," she said, raising an ashy face. "Let it be as you say. The sooner it is over, the better."

This clause was unheeded by her mother and sister. Had they heard it, they might have understood it as little as they did the composure with which she joined in the work which was begun, without an hour's delay. In this trying juncture, Mrs. Hunt came out in all her strength. Her sewing machine (she was one of the earliest purchasers of these inestimable time, labor, and money savers) went night and day; she shopped largely and judiciously, giving orders to tradespeople with the air of a princess; "Jewed" her butcher; watched her pantry, and served up poorer dinners than ever. Jeannie's winter outfit was ingeniously contrived from her sister's cast-off wardrobe; Mr. Hunt's and the boys' shirts and socks were patched and darned until but a trifling quantity of the original material remained; and this pearl of mothers had her two-year-old cloak and last season's hat "done over" for this year's wear.

Foremost among the visitors to the Hunts, after this latest engagement was made public, was Mrs. Marlow, the wife of Mr. Hammond's benefactor and partner. Sarah was out when she called; so Mrs. Hunt received her, and discovering very soon that in spite of her husband's wealth and her splendid establishment, she was not, as Mrs. Hunt phrased it to her daughters, "one mite proud, and thought the world and all of Lewis"—the mother opened her heart to her so freely, with regard to the prospective weddings and her material anxieties, that Mrs. Marlow was emboldened to introduce a subject which had taken hold of her thoughts so soon as she heard from Mr. Hammond of his expected marriage.

She had a daughter, resident for the winter in Paris, whose taste in female attire was unquestionable, and her good-nature as praiseworthy. If Miss Sarah Hunt would prepare a memorandum of such articles as she would like to have selected in that emporium of fashion, she would promise, for her daughter, that they should be forwarded in time for "the occasion."

"Some friends of mine, now abroad, have kindly offered to bring me over any quantity of fine dresses with their baggage," said the complaisant old lady; "and, as I do not need their services for myself, I can smuggle in whatever your daughter may order. You would be surprised at the difference in prices here and there—to say nothing of the superior excellence and variety of the assortment from which one can choose. My friends will return early in December. Therefore, should you like this arrangement, I ought to have the list and write my letters to-morrow."

Energetic, fussy, snobbish Mrs. Hunt! She stood an inch taller in her shoes at the imagination of this climax to the glory of the dual ceremony. "Trousseau ordered directly from Paris!" She seemed already to hear the envious and admiring buzz of her set; saw herself the most blessed of women—her daughters the brides of the season. She would order for Lucy, also; for the longer the list the more importance would the future Mrs. Hammond acquire in the sight of her husband's friends. They could not know that it was not for her alone. Then, as Mrs. Marlow

intimated, it would be a saving. Here, like a cold shower-bath, came the agonizing query, "Where was the money to come from?" It would never do to run in debt to such people as the Marlows. If they were hard-pressed shopkeepers, who needed the money, it would be another thing. No! the cash in hand, or its representative, must accompany the memorandum.

Sarah was secretly pleased at this obstacle, for she despised the ostentation and extravagance going on in their hungry household. Strive as she did, with wicked pertinacity, to conform herself to the world's code, there was as yet too much of the ancient and better leaven left to permit more than an outward obedience to the dictates of customs so irrational and tyrannical. [35]

That very evening there arrived a letter that settled the question, and inflated Mrs. Hunt's collapsed spirits to an expansion hitherto unequalled. It was from Aunt Sarah to her namesake niece; a guileless, fervent expression of good wishes and unabated affection, and a request from "husband" and herself that she would accept the enclosure as a mark of that hopeful regard.

"Since our daughters died"—wrote this true and gentle mother—"we have always intended to give you just exactly what we would have done one of them, as a wedding present—as you were named for me, and I had nursed you before your mother ever did, and you seemed in some way to belong to us. But since you paid us a visit we have felt nearer to you than ever, and seeing that the Lord has prospered us in this world's goods, we have made up our minds to give you a double portion, dear, what both of our girls would have had, if it had pleased our Father to spare them to have homes of their own upon earth. Living is high in New York, but we have calculated that what we send will buy your wedding clothes and furnish your house."

The enclosed gift, to Sarah's astonishment, was a check upon a city bank for a thousand dollars!

"Was there ever such a child for luck?" exclaimed Mrs. Hunt, clapping her hands. "What a fortunate thing we sent you down there when we did! That was one of my plans, you remember, Mr. H. Really, Lucy, our little Sarah understands how to play her cards, after all. I never did you justice, my dear daughter. I ain't ashamed to confess it. This puts all straight, and is real handsome in sister Benson—more than I expected. Go to work right away upon your list, girls! We'll have to set up the best part of the night to get it ready. Ah, well! this comes of putting one's trust in Providence and going ahead!"

Sarah thought, with aching heart and moistened eyes, of Aunt Sarah's mind-pictures of the neat apparel and snug dwelling she deemed proper for a young couple just beginning housekeeping, and rebelled at this waste, this frivolous expenditure of her love-portion. Mr. Hunt sided with her, so far as to urge the propriety of her doing as she pleased with what was her exclusive property; but, as in a majority of former altercations, their arguments and powers of endurance were no match for the determination and mind of the real head of the family. With a sigh of pain, disgust, and despair, Mr. Hunt succumbed, and, deserted by her ally, Sarah contended but a short time longer ere she yielded up the cause of the combat to the indomitable victress.

CHAPTER X.

The bridal day came; frosty and clear, dazzlingly bright, by reason of the reflection from the snow, which lay deep and firm upon the ground. [36]

"What a delightful novelty this is, coming to a wedding in a sleigh!" lisped one of the triad of bridesmaids, who were to do double duty for the sisters. "How very gay it makes one to hear the bells outside! Have they come, Vic.?"

Victoria, whose marriage was but one week off, was, true to instinct and habit, on the lookout behind the friendly curtain.

She nodded. "Yes—both of them, but not together. What a magnificent sleigh that is of the Marlows! They brought Mr. Hammond. See the bridegrooms shake hands on the sidewalk! That looks so sweet and brotherly! They will be up here almost directly, I suppose."

The attendants immediately began to shake out their robes and stroke their white gloves. They were collected in the sitting-room so often mentioned, and the sisters were also present. In accordance with the ridiculous custom of very parvenu modern marriages, although the ceremony was to take place precisely at twelve o'clock, daylight was carefully excluded from the parlors below, gas made its sickly substitute, and the whole company was in full evening costume.

"Am I all right?" inquired Lucy, with a cautious wave of her flowing veil. "Look at me, Vic.!"

"You are perfect, my dearest!" replied the devoted parasite. "How I admire your beautiful self-possession! And as for you, Sarah, your calmness is wonderful! I fear that I should be terribly agitated"—blushing, and casting a meaning smile at Lucy.

Sarah's statuesque repose was broken by a ray of scorn from the eye, and a slight disdainful smile. Whatever were the feelings working beneath her marble mask, she was not reduced to the depth of wretchedness that would humble her to accept the insolent pity couched under the pretended praise. She vouchsafed no other reply; but remained standing a little apart from the rest; her gloved hands crossed carelessly before her; her gaze bent downwards; her whole posture that of one who neither waited, nor hoped, nor feared.

"Who would have thought that she could be made such an elegant-looking woman?" whispered one of the bridesmaids aside to another.

"She has actually a high-bred air! I never imagined it was in her. So much for a Parisian toilette!"

"I am so much afraid that I shall lose my color when we enter the room," said Lucy, surveying her pink cheeks in the mirror. "They say it is so trying to the nerves, and I am odious when I am pale."

"Never fear, my sweetest. It is more likely that the unavoidable excitement will improve your complexion. There they are!" returned Victoria, hurriedly, and—unconsciously, no doubt—the three attendants and one of the principals in the forthcoming transaction, "struck an attitude," as the sound of footsteps approached the door.

Lucy had only time for a whisper—a last injunction—to her faithful crony. "Remember to see that my veil and dress hang right when we get downstairs." And the masculine portion of the procession marched in in order.

Sarah did not look up. She bent her head as the formal exchange of salutations was executed, and yielded her hand to the person who took it in his warm pressure, and then transferred it to his arm. It was one of the freaks, thus denominated by her acquaintances, in which she had been indulged, that she desired to have her marriage ceremony precede her sister's. She assigned what Lucy at least considered a sufficient reason for this caprice.

"Nobody will care to look at me after you stand aside, Lucy. Keep the best wine until the last. My only chance of getting an approving glance lies in going in before you attract and fix the public gaze."

She had her way. A limited number of select friends were admitted to behold "the ceremony;" yet the parlors were comfortably filled, excepting in the magical semicircle described by an invisible line, in the center of which stood the clergyman in his robes.

Still dull and calm, Sarah went through the brief role that fell to her share. "Behaved charmingly," was the unanimous verdict of the beholders, and surprised other people, as well as the complimentary bridesmaid, by her thoroughbred air and Parisian toilette. Without the pause of a second, so perfect was the drill of the performers, the wedded pair stepped aside, and made way for the second happy couple. Lucy's solicitude on the score of her complexion was needless. As the solemn words were commenced, a rosy blush flickered up to its appointed resting-place—another and another—until, when Philip released her to the congratulatory throng, she was the most enchanting type of a radiant Hebe that poet ever sang, or painter burned to immortalize on canvas.

Philip stood beside her and sustained his portion of the hand-shaking and felicitations until the press diminished, then stepped hastily over to where Hammond and his bride were undergoing a similar martyrdom. Until this moment Sarah had not looked at, or spoken to him—had never met him face to face since their parting in the summer at Aunt Sarah's. Now, not aware who it was that approached her, she raised her eyes with the serious dignity with which she had received all other salutations, and met his downward gaze—full of warm and honest feeling.

"Sister!" he said, and in brotherly fondness he bent towards her, and left a kiss upon her mouth.

A hot glow, the lurid red of offended modesty or self-convicted guilt, overspread her face; the lips parted, quivered, and closed tightly, after an ineffectual effort to articulate; the room swam around her, and Mr. Hammond caught her just in time to save her from falling. It was Nature's vengeful reaction for the long and unnatural strain upon her energies. She did not faint entirely away, although several moments elapsed before she regained perfect consciousness of her situation and surrounding objects. She had been placed in an easy-chair; her head rested against her father's shoulder, and on the other side stood Lewis, almost as pale as herself, holding a glass of wine to her lips. Around her were grouped her mother, Lucy, and Philip. The guests had withdrawn politely to the background, and maintained a respectful silence.

"What have I betrayed?" was her first coherent reflection; and, with an instinctive perception of the quarter where such disclosures would do most harm, her eye turned with a sort of appealing terror to Lewis. His heart leaped at the movement, revealing, as he fancied it did, dependence upon his strength, recognition of his right to be with and nearest to her.

"You are better," he said, with a moved tenderness he could not and cared not to restrain.

The words, the manner, were an inexpressible relief to her fears, and trying to return his smile, she would have arisen but for her father's interposition.

"Sit still," he advised. "Mrs. Hunt, Lucy, Mr. Benson, will you entertain our friends? She will be all right in a little while, Mr. Hammond."

"Tableaux vivants!" said Lucy's soft, rich voice, as she advanced towards the reassured guests. "This is a part of the performance not set down in the programme. Quite theatrical, was it not?"

It is very possible that Philip Benson would not have regarded this as an apropos or refined witticism, had any one else been the speaker; but as the round, liquid tones rolled it forth, and her delicious laugh led off the instant revival of mirth and badinage, he marvelled at her consummate tact, her happy play of fancy (!), and returned devout thanks to the stars that had bestowed upon him this prodigy of grace, wit, and beauty. Sarah rallied speedily; and, contrary to the advice of her father and husband, maintained her post in the drawing-room during all the reception, which continued from half-past twelve to half-past two.

It was a gay and shifting scene—a sparkling, murmuring tide, that ebbed and flowed to and from the quartette who formed the attractive power. Silks, laces, velvets, furs, and diamonds; faces young, old, and middle-aged; handsome, fair, and homely; all decked in the same conventional holiday smile; bodies tall and short, executing every variety of bow and courtesy; voices sweet, sharp, and guttural, uttering the senseless formula of congratulation—these were Sarah's impressions of the tedious ceremonial. Restored to her rigid composure, she too bowed and spoke the word or sentence custom exacted—an emotionless automaton in seeming, while Lucy's matchless inflections lent interest and beauty to the like nothings, as she rehearsed them in her turn; and Philip Benson, having no solicitude for his bride's health or ability to endure the fatigue, was collected enough to compare the two, and, while exulting in his selection, to commiserate the proprietor of the colder and less gifted sister.

At last the trial was over; the hospitable mansion was closed; the parlors deserted; the preparation for travelling hurried through; and the daughters went forth from their girlhood's home. Philip had cordially invited Sarah and Lewis, by letter, to accompany Lucy and himself to Georgia; but Sarah would not hear of it, and Lewis, while he left the decision to her, was not sorry that she preferred to journey instead with him alone. It was too cold to go northward, and the Hammond's now proposed to proceed with the others as far as Baltimore, there to diverge upon a Western and Southern tour, which was to occupy three weeks, perhaps four.

CHAPTER XI.

During the month preceding his marriage, Lewis Hammond had spent much time and many [37]
thoughts in providing and furnishing a house for his wife. His coadjutor in this labor of love was not, as one might have expected, Mrs. Hunt, but his early friend, Mrs. Marlow. His omission of his future mother-in-law, in his committee of consultation, he explained to her by representing the number of duties already pressing upon her, and his unwillingness to add aught to their weight. But when both girls were married and gone, and the work of "getting to rights" was all over, this indefatigable woman paid Mrs. Marlow a visit, and offered her assistance in completing the arrangements for the young housekeepers.

"There is nothing for us to do," said Mrs. Marlow. "Lewis attended to the purchase of everything before leaving; and the orders are all in the hands of a competent upholsterer whom he has employed, as is also the key of the house. I offered to have the house-cleaning done, but Lewis refused to let me help him even in this. He is very methodical, and rather strict in some of his ideas. When the premises are pronounced ready for the occupancy of the future residents, you and I will play inspectors, and find as much fault as we can."

Mrs. Hunt went around by the house on her way home. It was new and handsome, a brown stone front, with stone balconies and balustrades; but three stories high, it was true, yet of ample width and pitch of ceiling, and—as she discovered by skirting the square—at least three rooms deep all the way up. The location was unobjectionable; not more than four blocks from the paternal residence, and in a wider street. On the whole, she had no fault to find, provided Mr. Hammond had furnished it in such style as she would have recommended. She had her fears lest his sober taste in other respects should extend to these matters, and hinted something of the kind to her husband.

"I have confidence in Mr. Hammond to believe that he will allow his wife every indulgence compatible with his means," was the reply.

Mr. Hunt did not deem it obligatory upon him to state that his son-in-law had conferred with him upon numerous questions pertaining to Sarah's likes and probable wishes; that he had examined and approved of the entire collection of furniture, etc., selected for her use. Why should he, how could he, without engendering in his wife's bosom the suspicion that he had accounted to him for Lewis' choice of the father as an adviser? namely, that the newly-made husband had gained a pretty correct estimate of this managing lady's character, her penny-wise and pound-foolish policy, and intended to inaugurate altogether a different one in his house.

Regardless of Mrs. Marlow's polite insinuation that their room was preferable to their company until all things should be in readiness for inspection, the ambitious mother made sundry visits to the premises while they were being fitted up, and delivered herself of divers suggestions and recommendations, which fell like sand on a rock upon the presiding man of business.

On the day appointed for the tourists' return, Mrs. Marlow's carriage drew up at Mr. Hunt's door, by appointment, to take the mistress of the house upon the proposed visit of criticism of her daughter's establishment. Mrs. Marlow was in a sunny mood, and indisposed to censure, as was [38]
evinced by ejaculations of pleasure at the general effect of each apartment as they entered, and praise of its component parts. Mrs. Hunt was not so undiscriminating. The millionaire's wife must not imagine that she was dazzled by any show of elegance, or that she was overjoyed at the prospect of her child's having so beautiful and commodious a home.

"The everlasting oak and green!" she uttered, as they reached the dining-room. "It is a pity Mr. Hammond did not select walnut and crimson instead! Green is very unbecoming to Sarah."

"Then we must impress upon her the importance of cultivating healthy roses in her cheeks, and wearing bright warm colors. This combination—green and oak—is pretty and serviceable, I think. The table is very neatly set, Mary," continued Mrs. Marlow, kindly, to the tidy serving-maid.

"Keep an eye on the silver, my good girl, until your mistress comes. Mrs. Hunt, shall we peep into the china closets before we go to the kitchen? I have taken the liberty, at Lewis' request, of offering to your daughter the service of a couple of my protegees, excellent servants, who lived for years with one of my own children—Mrs. Morland, now in Paris. They are honest, willing, and, I think, competent. The man-servant, if Lewis sees fit to keep one, he must procure himself."

The china, glass, and pantries were in capital order; the kitchen well stocked, light, and clean, and dinner over the fire.

"You will be punctual to the minute, Katy, please!" was the warning here. "Mr. Hammond is particular in the matter of time."

"And you will see that my daughter has a cup of clear, strong coffee!" ordered Mrs. Hunt, magisterially. "She is delicate, and accustomed to the very best of cookery." And, having demonstrated her importance and superior housewifery to the round-eyed cook, she swept out.

To an unprejudiced eye, the whole establishment was without a flaw; and, undisturbed by the captious objections of her companion in the survey, Mrs. Marlow saw and judged for herself, and carried home with her a most pleasing imagination of Lewis' gratification, and Sarah's delighted surprise with the scene that was to close their way of cold and weariness.

By Mr. Hammond's expressed desire to his father-in-law, there was no one except the domestics in the house when they arrived. As the carriage stopped, the listening maid opened the door, and a stream of radiance shot into the misty night across the wet pavement upon the two figures that stepped from the conveyance.

"In happy homes he sees the light." The mental quotation brought back to Sarah the vision of that lonely evening, ten months before, when she had moaned it in her dreary twilight musings at the window of her little room. "Dreary then, hopeless now!" and with this voiceless sigh, she crossed the threshold of her destined abode. With a kindly greeting to the servants in the hall; Lewis hurried his wife onward, past the parlor doors, into a library sitting-room, back of the show apartments, warm and bright, smiling a very home welcome.

Here he placed her in a deep cushioned chair, and, pressing her hands in his, kissed her, with a heartfelt—"May you be very happy in our home, dear wife!"

"Thank you!" she replied. "It is pleasant here, and you are too kind."

"That is impossible where you are concerned. Sit here, while I see to the trunks. When they are carried upstairs, you can go to your room. Throw off your hat and cloak."

He was very thoughtful of her comfort—too thoughtful, because his love made him watchful of her every look, word, and gesture. She was glad of the brief respite from this vigilance, that allowed her to bury her face in her hands and groan aloud. She had no heart to look around her cage. No doubt it was luxurious; the bars softly and richly lined; the various arrangements the best of their kind; still, it was nothing but a cage—a prison, from which death only could release her.

The trim maid came for her wrappings, and directly afterwards Lewis, to take her upstairs.

"Not a very elaborate toilet, dear," he said, as he left her for his dressing-room. "You will see no one this evening but our father and mother, and they will remember that you have been travelling all day."

When she was ready, it lacked still a quarter of an hour of dinner-time, and she acceded to Lewis' proposal that they should go over their dwelling. By his order, there were lights in every room. The graceful furniture, the well-contrasted hues of the soft carpets, the curtains and pictures showed to fine advantage. Every thing was in place, from cellar to attic; not a symptom of parsimony or cheapness in the whole; and all betokened, besides excellent judgment, such conformity to, or unison with her taste, that Sarah, with all her heaviness of heart, was pleased. She was touched too with gratitude or remorse; for, when they were back in the cozy sitting-room, she laid her hand timidly on that of her husband, and said, falteringly:

"I do not deserve that you should take so much pains to gratify me, Mr. Hammond."

Over Lewis' face there flushed one of the rare smiles that made him positively handsome while they lasted. He grasped the shrinking fingers firmly, and drew his wife close to his side.

"Shall I tell you how to repay me for all that I have done, or ever can do, to promote your ease and enjoyment?"

"If you please." But her heart sank, as she foresaw some demands upon a love that had never existed—a treasure that, to him, was sealed and empty; yet whose poverty she dared not avow.

"Call me 'Lewis,' now that we are at home, dear. I cannot realize that you are indeed all mine—that our lives are one and the same, while you continue that very proper 'Mr. Hammond.'"

"It comes more naturally to my tongue, and don't you think it more respectful than—than—the other?"

"I ask no such form of respect from you. I do not fear lest you should fail to 'honor and obey' me, you little paragon of duty! Believe me, dearest, I fully understand and reverence the modest reserve that has not yet ceased to be shyness, in the expression of your sentiments towards me. You are not demonstrative by nature. Neither am I. But since you are my other self, and there is no living being nearer to you than myself, ought we not to overcome this propensity to, or custom of, locking up our feelings in our own breasts? Let me begin by a confession of one uncomfortable

complaint, under which I have labored ever since our engagement. Do you know, darling, that I absolutely hunger—I cannot give any other name to the longing—I hunger and thirst to hear you say that you love me! Do you remember that you have never told me in so many words what you have given me other good reasons for believing? I need but one thing this evening to fill my cup with purest content. It is to have you say—openly, fearlessly, as my wife has a right to do—'Lewis, I love you!'"

"It need be a source of no unhappiness to be married to a man whom one does not love, provided he is kind and generous!" say match-makers and worldly-wise mothers. Perhaps not, after one's conscience is seared in callosity by perjuries, and her forehead grown bold as brass; but the neophyte in the laudable work of adaptation to such circumstances will trip in her words and color awkwardly while acquiring this enviable hardihood.

Sarah's head fell, and her face was stained with blushes. One wild impulse was to throw herself at the feet of him whom she had wronged so foully, and, confessing her mad, wicked deception upon his holiest feelings, pray him to send her away—to cast her adrift, and rid himself of a curse, while he freed her from the gentle, yet intolerable bondage of his love.

"Dinner is ready!" announced the servant. Sarah's senses returned, and with them self-control. With a strange smile, she glanced up at him—a look he did not understand, yet could not guess was born of anguish—and said, with a hesitation that seemed pretty and coquettish to him —"Lewis! do you hear? May it please your worship, I am very hungry!"

"Tease! I will have my revenge yet! See if I do not!"

Laughing lightly, she eluded his outstretched arm, and sprang past him into the hall leading to the dining-room. She assumed the seat at the table with a burlesque of dignity, and throughout the meal was more talkative and frolicsome than he had ever seen her before. So captivated was he by her lively discourse and bright looks, that he was sorry to hear the ring, proclaiming the coming of the expected visitors. The dessert had not been removed, and the girl was instructed to show them immediately into the dining-room.

A toast was drunk to the prosperity of the lately established household, and the gentlemen went off to the library.

"Always see to putting away your silver, Sarah!" counselled the mother. "And you had ought to get a common set of dinner and breakfast things. This china is too nice for every-day use. Of course, Mr. Hammond can afford to get more when this is broken; but it's a first-rate rule, child, as you'll find, to put your money where it will show most. That's the secret of my management. Mr. Hammond must give you an allowance for housekeeping and pin-money. Speak to him about it right away. Men are more liberal while the honeymoon lasts than they ever are afterwards. Strike while the iron is hot. You can't complain of your husband, so far. He has set you up very handsome. If I had been consulted about furnishing, I would have saved enough off of those third- [39]
story chambers and the kitchen to buy another pair of mirrors for your parlors. The mantel has a bare look. I noticed it directly I went in. To be sure, the Parisian ornaments are pretty and tasty, and expensive enough—dear knows! but they don't make much of a display."

"I do not like the fashion of lining walls with mirrors," said Sarah, in her old, short way; "and am satisfied with the house as it is. Shall we join the gentlemen?"

Nothing had ever showed her more plainly the degradation of her false position than the confident air her mother wore in making her coarse observations, and instructing her as to the method of managing her generous, confiding husband. It was the free-masonry of a mercenary wife, whose spouse would have been better represented to her mind by his money-bag than his own proper person, towards another of the same craft, who rated her lawful banker by corresponding rules.

"Will I then really grow to be like her and her associates?" Sarah questioned inly. "Will a fine house and its fixtures, will dress and equipage and pin-money so increase in importance as to fill this aching vacuum in my heart? Will a position in life, and the envy of my neighbors, make up to me for the loss of the love of which I used to dream, the happiness which the world owes me yet? Is this the coin in which it would redeem its promises?"

Mr. Hunt's mild features wore their happiest expression this evening. He arose at the ladies' entrance, and beckoned his daughter to a seat on the sofa beside him.

"You are a little travel-worn!" he said. "Your cheeks are not very ruddy."

"Did you ever see them when they were?" asked Sarah, playfully.

"She was always just that pale when she was a baby," said Mrs. Hunt, setting herself in the arm-chair proffered by her son-in-law. "Lucy stole all the roses from her." Sarah may have thought that other and more grievous thefts had succeeded this doubtful one, but she neither looked nor said this. "And that reminds me, Mr. H.! Did you bring Lucy's letter for Sarah to read?"

"I did." Mr. Hunt produced it. "Keep it, and read it at your leisure, Sarah."

"They are supremely happy, I suppose?" remarked Lewis, with the benevolent interest incident to his fellowship of feeling with them.

"For all the world like two turtle-doves!" Mrs. Hunt rejoined. "Their letters are a curiosity. It is 'Phil.' and 'Lucy' from one end to the other. I mean to save them to show them five years from now. Hot love is soon cool, and by-and-by they will settle down as sensible as any of the rest of us. You don't begin so, I see, Sarah, and I am pleased at it. Between me and you, it's two-thirds of

it humbug! There is Victoria West that was! She looks ready, in company, to eat up that lean monkey of a George Bond. I don't believe but she shows him the other side of the picture in private."

Sarah heard her father's suppressed sigh, and felt, without looking up, that her husband's eyes sought hers wistfully. The unobservant dame pursued her free and easy discourse. Mr. Hammond was "one of the family" now, and there was no more occasion for choice grammar or fine sentiments before him.

"Not that I blame Victoria for taking him. He was a good offer, and she wasn't much admired by [40]
the gentlemen—rich as Mr. West is. Mr. Bond is twenty-five years older than she is, and wears false teeth and a toupee; but I suppose she is willing to overlook trifles. She watches out for the main chance, and will help him take care of his money, as well as spend it. Vic. is a prudent girl."

"Lucy—Mrs. Benson—was at home when she wrote, was she not?" interrogated Mr. Hammond.

"Yes, at his father's. His mother keeps house, and Lucy has nothing to do but ride, visit, and entertain company. She says the house is crowded the whole time, and she has so many beaux that Philip stands no chance of speaking a word to her. She is perfectly happy."

Notwithstanding the various feelings of the listeners, none of them could resist this picture of a felicitous honeymoon, so naively spoken. Lewis' laugh cleared the vapors from his brow, and the pain at Sarah's heart did not hinder her from joining in.

"And the ousted bridegroom, perforce, seeks consolation in the society of his fair friends?" said Lewis. "If this is the way young married people show the love-sickness you complained of just now, Mrs. Hunt, I am content with our more staid ways—eh, Sarah?"

"Quiet ways suit me best," was the answer.

"'Still water runs deep,'" quoted Mrs. Hunt. "I used to worry over your stay-at-home habits and eternal study of books, Sarah; but I'm ready to say now that you was sensible to behave as you did, as it has turned out. I don't mean to flatter Mr. Hammond, but I'd ten times rather you had taken him than a dried-up widower like George Bond."

"Thank you!" bowed Lewis, desirous of diverting attention from Sarah's growing uneasiness beneath her mother's congratulations.

Mrs. Hunt held on her way. "I never had a fear lest Lucy shouldn't marry well. She was pretty and attractive, and knew too much about the world to throw herself away for the sake of love in a cottage. But now the danger is over, I will allow that I used to mistrust Sarah here sometimes. You was just queer enough to fall in love with some adventurer with a foreign name, and never a cent in his pocket—yes, and marry him, too, in spite of all that could be said and done to prevent it. I was forever in a 'feaze' about you; fancying that you was born to make an out-and-out love-match—the silliest thing a girl can do, in my opinion."

"You never dreamed of her 'taking up,' as the phrase is, with a humdrum individual like myself," said Lewis. "Nor, to be candid, did I, for a long time, Mrs. Hunt. Yet I cannot say that I regret her action, disadvantageous to herself though it was. I wrote to you of our visit to New Orleans, did I not, sir?" he continued to Mr. Hunt, inwardly a little disgusted by the frank revelations his mamma-in-law was making of her principles and plans.

The subject so interesting to most wedded people, so embarrassing to one of the present party, was not again introduced during the elder couple's stay. When Lewis returned to the library, after seeing them out, Sarah sat where he had left her, her hand shading her eyes—deep in thought, or overcome by weariness.

"You had better go up to your room, dear," said Lewis. "I wonder you are not worn out completely."

She arose to obey; walked as far as the door, then came back to him.

"It may appear strange to you that I should speak openly to such a suspicion; but I must beg you not to suppose for an instant that in my acceptance of your offer of marriage, I was actuated by mercenary motives. You look surprised"—she hurried on yet faster while her resolution lasted—"but I could not rest without doing myself this act of justice. Much that mother said to-night might—must have led you to this conclusion. I would not have you think worse of me than I deserve, and of this one act of baseness I am innocent."

"My precious little wife, how excited you are! and over what a nonsensical imagination! Suspect you—the noblest as well as the dearest of women—of selling yourself, body and soul, for money? Listen to my speech now, dear Sarah!"

He sat down and pulled her to his knee. "I esteem you, as I love you, above all the rest of your sex—above any other created mortal. I know you to be a pure, high-minded woman. When I part with this persuasion, may I part also with the life that doubt on this point would render wretched! Judge, then, whether it be possible for me to link this holy realization of womanhood with the thought of another character, which I will describe. I hold that she who enters the hallowed state of wedlock through motives of pecuniary interest, or ambition, or convenience—indeed, through any consideration save that of love, single and entire, for him to whom she pledges her vows, stands, in the sight of her Maker and the angels, on a level with the most abandoned outcast that pollutes the earth she treads. I shock you, I see; but on this subject I feel strongly. I have seen much, too much, of fashionable marriages formed for worldly aggrandizement—for riches; sometimes in pique at having lost a coveted lover. With my peculiar sentiments, I feel that I could

endure no heavier curse than to contract an alliance like any of these. I repeat it, I believe in Woman as God made her and intended she should live, if for no other reason than because I recollect my mother, boy as I was when she died; and because I know and have you, my true, blessed wife!"

CHAPTER XII.

A year and five months had passed away since the evening when Lewis Hammond held his conscience-stricken wife upon his knee, and told her—in fervid words that singularly belied his calm and even demeanor at other times—of his faith in and love for her, and his abhorrence of the sin she felt in her trembling soul that she had committed. Yet she had not the superhuman courage required to contradict a trust like this. There was no alternative but to keep up the weary, wicked mockery.

"But in all these months she must have learned to care for him!" cries Mrs. Common Sense. "There is nothing disagreeable about the man. He is not brilliant; yet he has intelligence and feeling, and is certainly attached to his wife. I have no doubt but that he indulges her in every reasonable request, and comports himself in all respects like an exemplary husband."

Granted, to each and every head of your description, my dear madam! But, for all that, his obdurate wife had not come to love him. I blush to say it; but while we are stripping hearts let us not be squeamish! There had been seasons, lasting sometimes for weeks, when her existence was a continual warfare between repugnance to him and her sense of duty; when she dreaded to hear his step in the hall, and shrank inwardly from his caress; watched and fought, until strength and mind were well-nigh gone. Mark me! I do not deny that this was as irrational as it was reprehensible; but I have never held up my poor Sarah as a model of reason or propriety. From the beginning, I have made her case a warning. The fates forbid that I should commend it to any as an example for imitation! A passionate, proud, reticent girl; a trusting, loving, deceived woman; a hopeless, desperate bride—whose heart lay like a pulseless stone in her breast at the most ardent love-words of her husband, and throbbed with wild, uncontrollable emotion at the fraternal tone and kiss of her lost and only love—I have no plea for her, save the words of Infinite compassion and Divine knowledge of human nature and human woe: "Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone at her!"

The highly respectable firm of which Mr. Hammond was the junior member, was adding, if not field to field, thousand to thousand, of the wherewithal for the purchase of fields, or, what was better still, city lots. Mrs. Lewis Hammond had set up her carriage about a year after her marriage; said equipage being a gift from her generous husband on the occasion of the first airing of the little "Baby Belle," as she was always called in the family. Not until subsequent events had endowed it with deeper and saddest interest did Sarah read Aldrich's beautiful poem bearing the above title. Lewis' mother's name was Isabella. Her grandchild received the same, which became "Belle" on the mother's tongue, and then, because it was natural to say "Baby" too, the pretty alliteration was adopted.

To a man of Lewis' domestic tastes the advent of this child was a source of the liveliest pleasure, and the tiny inmate of his household was another and a powerful tie, binding him to a home already dear. But to the mother's lonely life, so bare of real comfort or joy—haunted by memory and darkened by remorse—the precious gift came like a ray of Heaven's purest light, a strain of angel music, saying to care, "Sleep!" to hope, "Awake, the morning cometh!" Beneath the sunshine of so much love, the infant throve finely, and without being a greater prodigy than the nine hundred and ninety-nine miracles of beauty and sprightliness who, with it, composed the thousand "blessed babies" of the day, was still a pretty, engaging creature, whose gurgling laugh and communicative "coo" beguiled the mother's solitude and made cheerful the lately silent house.

It was late in the June afternoon, and arrayed in clean white frock, broad sash, and shoulder-knots of pink ribbon, the small lady sat on her mother's lap at the front window, awaiting the appearance of the husband and father. Sarah had altered much since her marriage; "improved [41]
wonderfully," said her acquaintances. There was still in her mien a touch of haughtiness; in her countenance the look that spoke profound thought and introspection. Still, when in repose, her brow had a cast of seriousness that bordered on melancholy; but over her features had passed a change like that wrought by the sculptor's last stroke to the statue. The mould was the same—the chiselling more clear and fine. Especially after the birth of her child was this refining process most apparent in its effects. There was a softness in her smile, a gentle sweetness in her voice, as she now talked to the babe, directing its attention to the window, lest the father's approach should be unnoticed, and he disappointed in his shout of welcome.

"How affected! gotten up for show!" sneered the childless Mrs. Bond, as she rolled by in her carriage, on her way to her handsome, cheerless home and its cross master.

"She has chosen her position well, at all events," rejoined her companion, a neighbor and gossip, who had taken Lucy's place in Victoria's confidence.

"Ridiculous!" She spat out the ejaculation from the overflowing of her spleen. "I could laugh at her airs, if they did not make me mad! One would think, to see her as she sits there, that she had decked herself and the child to please a man that she doted upon—like the good wives we read of

in novels."

"And why shouldn't she be fond of him? He is a good-hearted fellow, and lets her do pretty much as she pleases, I imagine, besides waiting on her like any lover. I often meet them riding out together. That is more than your husband or mine ever does, my dear."

"They go quite as often as we desire their company, I fancy. Mine does, I know. Perhaps if we had the reason for parading our conjugal devotion that Mrs. Hammond has, we might wheedle our lawful lords into taking a seat alongside of us once in a while. There's nothing like keeping up appearances, particularly if the reality is lacking. If Lewis Hammond knew some of the pretty stories I could tell him about Sarah's love-scrapes, he would not look so sublimely contented with his three-story paradise. The elegant clothes he piles upon that squaw of his are preposterous, and she carries them off as if she had dressed well all her days. I tell you, she never looked decent until she put on her wedding-dress. You have heard of the fainting-scene that took place that morning, I suppose? Old Mother Hunt said it was 'sensibility,' and 'nervous agitation;' the company laid it to the heat of the room; and I laughed in my sleeve, and said nothing. If that woman aggravates me much more, I will remind her of some passages in her experience she does not dream that I know."

"Do tell me what you mean? I am dying of curiosity! Did she flirt very hard before she was married?"

"She never had the chance. Lewis Hammond was her only offer."

"What was the matter, then?"

"I can't tell you now. It is too long a story. The next time she frets me, as she does whenever she crosses my path, maybe you will hear the romance. Shall I set you down at your door, or will you [42] enliven me by spending the evening with me? I do not expect other company, and George falls asleep over his newspaper as soon as he has despatched his dinner. Come in, and I will show you the loveliest sofa-pillow you ever beheld; a new pattern I have just finished."

"Thank you! I would accept the invitation with pleasure, but I have not been home since breakfast, and James makes such a fuss if he does not find me in the nursery, tending that whimpering baby, when he comes up at night, that it is as much as my life is worth to stay out after six o'clock. Anything for peace, you know; and since we wives are slaves, it is best to keep on the blind side of our masters."

The day had been warm down town, and as Lewis Hammond stepped from the stage at the corner nearest his house, he felt jaded and dispirited—a physical depression, augmented by a slight headache. A business question which he had talked over with Mr. Marlow, before leaving the store, contributed its weight of thoughtfulness, and he was not conscious how near he was to his dwelling until, aroused by a sharp tap upon the window-pane, he glanced up at the animated tableau framed by the sash—the smiling mother, and the babe leaping and laughing, and stretching its hands towards him.

"This is the sweetest refreshment a man can ask after his day of toil," he said, when, having kissed his wife and child, he took the latter in his arms. He was not addicted to complimentary speeches, and while his esteem and attachment for his chosen partner were even stronger than they had been in the heart of the month-old bridegroom, he was less apt to express them to her now than then. In one respect, and only one, his wedded life had brought him disappointment. Unreserved confidence and demonstrative affection on his side failed to draw forth similar exhibitions of feeling from Sarah. Kind, thoughtful, dutiful, scrupulously faithful to him and his interests in word, look, and deed, she ever was. Yet he saw that she was a changed being from the fond, impulsive daughter, whose ministry in her father's sick-room had won for her a husband's love. Her reception of his affectionate advances was passive—a reception merely, without apparent return. Never, and he had ceased now to ask it, had she once said to him the phrase he had craved to hear—"I love you!" Yet he would as soon have questioned the reality of his existence as that she did love him. He held inviolate his trust in the motive that had induced her to become his wife, and in this calm confidence he was fain to rest, in the absence of protestations that would have gladdened his soul, while they could hardly have strengthened his faith in her affection.

Few wives, however loving, have been more truly cherished than was Sarah, and of this she was partially aware. If she had remained ignorant of Lewis' sentiments and wishes with regard to herself, until the grieved and unrequited love had subsided into the dull aching that does not, like a green wound, create, by its very smart, a species of excitement that helps one bear the pain; had he glided gradually into the joyless routine of her life's duties, and abided his time of speaking until he had made himself necessary to her comfort and peace, he might have won a willing bride. But what omniscient spirit was there to instruct and caution him? He met and loved her, supposing her to be as free as himself; like an honest, upright man, he told that love, and, without a misgiving placed his honor and his happiness in her hands.

Sarah could not have told why she revolved all this in her unquiet mind as he sat near her, playing with their child; yet she did think of their strange sad history, and from the review arose a feeling of pity, sincere, almost tender for him, so worthy and so deceived. She remembered with abasement of spirit how often she had been ready to hate him as the instrument of her bondage; how wrathful words had arisen to her lips at the moment of his greatest kindness; how patiently he had borne her coldness; how unflagging was his care of and for her. Over the dark, turbulent gulf of the unforgotten past that sundered their hearts, she longed, as she had never done before, to call to him, and confessing her sin against Heaven and against him, to implore

pardon for the sake of the spotless babe that smiled into the father's face with its mother's eyes. Would he be merciful? Slowly and emphatically memory repeated in her ear his denunciation of the unloving wife, and courage died before the menaced curse.

"Fudge! Fiddlesticks! what frippery nonsense!" cry out, in a vehement storm of indignation, a bevy of the Common Sense connection. "Are we not staid and respectable matrons all? Do we not rear our daughters virtuously, and teach our sons to honor father as well as mother? Yet who of us troubles herself with raking in the cold ashes of her 'long ago' for the bones of some dead and gone love—a girlish folly of which she would be ashamed now? What cares Mr. Common Sense, among his day-books and ledgers, in his study or in his office, how many times his now correct helpmeet pledged eternal fidelity to other lovers before she put her last crop of wild oats into the ground, and settled for life with him? What if some of us, may be all, if driven hard, should admit that when we stood up before the minister we underwent certain qualms—call them pangs, if you like—at the thought of Tom This, or Harry That, or Dick The Other, who, if circumstances had permitted, we would have preferred should occupy the place of 'The man whom we actually held by the hand!' While men can choose their mates, and women can only take such as propose to them, these things will happen. After all, who is hurt? You aver that none of you are, mesdames, and we would not call your word in question. Ladies so conscientious must, of necessity, be veracious, even in love affairs."

"I am a thoughtless animal!" said Lewis at the dinner-table. "There is a letter from Lucy! Open it—don't mind me! I will crack your nuts for you while you read it."

There was a troubled look in Sarah's eye when she laid it down. "Lucy says they are certainly coming North this year—that we may look for them in a week from the date of this. This is rather sooner than mother expected them. Her housecleaning is late this season, in consequence of her rheumatic spell in May."

"Let them come straight here! What should prevent them? There is an abundance of room for them—baby, nurse, and all. It will be a grand arrangement!" said Lewis, heartily.

Sarah was backward in replying. "Father and mother may object. I would not wound them by interference with their guests."

"I will answer that mother will thank us to take care of them until her scrubbing and scalding are done. And Lucy would not be willing to risk her baby's health in a damp house."

"I will go and see mother to-morrow about it," concluded Sarah. She still appeared dubious as to the expediency of the proposed step, a thoughtfulness that did not wear away during the whole evening.

The Bensons had not visited New York the preceding year. They were detained at the South by a combination of causes, the principal of which was the long and fatal illness of Philip's mother. Lucy had written repeatedly of her intense desire to see her home once more, declaiming against the providences that had thwarted their projects, like an impatient, unreasonable child.

"Philip says it is not convenient for him to go just yet," said her letter to her sister, "and that our part of the country is as healthy as Saratoga itself; but I have vowed that I will not wait one day beyond the time I have set. It sets me wild to think of being in Broadway again—of visiting and shopping, and seeing you all. We have been so dull here since Mrs. Benson's death, and Philip is as solemn as a judge. One of his married sisters will stay with the old gentleman while we are away. O Sarah, I am sick of housekeeping and baby-nursing! It will do well enough for me when I need spectacles and a wig; but now, while I am young enough to enjoy life, it is insufferable!"

"Not very domestic, is she?" observed Lewis, folding up the letter, which Sarah had handed him. "Ah! it is not every man who has such a gem of a wife as I have! It appears to me that the married women of these days are not satisfied unless they have a string of beaux as long as that of a popular single belle. How is it, little one? Do you ever catch yourself wishing that your husband were not such an old-fashioned piece of constancy, and would give some other fellow a chance to say a pretty thing, when you are in company?"

"I do not complain," said Sarah, demurely.

"Not in words, perhaps; your patience is wonderful in everything. But how do you feel when you see your old neighbor, Mrs. Bond, waltzing every set with the gayest gallant in the ball-room, while your jailor does not like to have you 'polk' at all, and favors your dancing only with men whom he knows to be respectable?"

"I feel that Mr. Hammond is a sensible man, and careful of his wife's reputation, even in trifles, while Mr. Bond"—

"Go on! finish your sentence!"

"And his lady are a well-matched pair!"

Much as she disliked Victoria, and knowing that she was hated still by her, Sarah deemed it a necessary and common act of courtesy to her sister's friend to call and apprise her of Lucy's probable visit.

"It is not convenient for mother to receive them for a week yet, on account of certain household arrangements," she stated, in making known the object of her visit to her ancient enemy. "So you will find Lucy at our house, where her friends will be received as if they were my own." [43]

"You are very polite, I am sure!" replied Mrs. Bond, smothering her displeasure at Sarah's studied civility, and noting, with her quick, reptile perceptions, that she was to be tolerated as

she fancied Sarah would imply, merely as Lucy's early associate. "And the Bensons are to be with you! I shall call immediately upon their arrival. Poor, dear Lucy! I long to see her. She has had a vast deal of trouble since her marriage—has she not?"

"Except the death of her mother-in-law, she has had nothing to trouble her that I have heard of," answered Sarah, rising to go.

"My dear creature! what do you call the wear and tear of managing a husband, and a pack of unruly servants, and looking after a baby? And she was such a belle! I wonder if she is much broken!"

"Come and see!"

Mrs. Hammond was at the parlor door.

"I will—most assuredly! How do you like their being quartered upon you? What does that pattern husband of yours say to this?"

"Madam!" said Sarah, surprised and offended by the rude query.

"Oh! I don't mean that it would not be very delightful to you to have your sister with you; but there was a foolish rumor, about the time of your marriage, that you and Mr. Benson had some kind of a love-passage down in the country; and I thought that Mr. Hammond, with his particularly nice notions, might retain an unpleasant recollection of the story, which would prevent him from being on brotherly terms with his old rival. Men are terribly unreasonable mortals, and perfect Turks in jealousy! We cannot be too careful not to provoke their suspicions."

Not for the universe would Sarah have betrayed any feeling at this insolence, save a righteous and dignified resentment at its base insinuations; but the ungovernable blood streamed in crimson violence to her temples, and her voice shook when she would have held it firm.

"Mr. Hammond is not one to be influenced by malicious gossip, Mrs. Bond, if, indeed, the report you have taken the liberty of repeating was ever circulated except by its author. I cannot thank you for your warning, as I recognize no occasion for jealousy in my conduct or character. I am accountable for my actions to my conscience and my husband, and I release you from what you have assumed to be your duty of watching and criticising my personal affairs. Good-morning."

"I struck a sore spot! no doubt of that!" soliloquized Mrs. Bond, recalling Sarah's start of pain and blush at the indelicate allusion to Philip Benson. "That woman stirs up all the bile in my system if I talk two minutes with her. If there were half the material to work upon in that vain, weak Lucy, that there is in this sister, I would have my revenge. As for Lewis Hammond, he is a love-sick fool!"

Sarah's cheeks had not lost their flush, nor had her heart ceased its angry throbbings, when she reached home. In the solitude of her chamber, she summoned strength and resolution to ask herself the question, so long avoided, shunned, as she had imagined, in prudence, as she now began to fear, in dread of a truthful reply. [44]

When she married Lewis Hammond, she loved another. Fearful as was this sin, it would be yet more terrible were she now to discover a lurking fondness, an unconquered weakness for that other, in the heart of the trusted wife, the mother who, from that guilty bosom, nourished the little being that was, as yet, the embodiment of unsullied purity. It was a trying and a perilous task, to unfold deliberately, to pry searchingly into the record of that one short month that had held all the bloom and fragrance of her life's spring season; to linger over souvenirs and compare sensations—a painful and revolting process; but, alas! the revulsion was not at memories of that olden time; and as this appalling conviction dawned upon her, her heart died within her.

The nurse was arranging Baby Belle for the possible reception of her unknown aunt and uncle, that afternoon, when Mrs. Hammond came into the nursery, her face as pale and set as marble, and silently lifted the child from the girl's lap to her own. For one instant her cheek was laid against the velvet of the babe's; the ringlets of fair hair mingled with her dark locks, before she set about completing its unfinished toilette. With a nicety and care that would have seemed overstrained, had other than mother's hands been busied in the work, the stockings and slippers were fitted on the plump feet; the sunny curls rolled around the fingers of the tiring woman, and brushed back from the brow; the worked cambric robe lowered cautiously over the head, lest the effect of the coiffure should be marred; the sleeves looped up with bands of coral and gold, a necklace, belonging to the same set, clasped around the baby's white throat, and she was ready for survey.

"Now, Baby Belle and mamma will go down to meet papa!"

And with the little one still clinging to her neck, she met, in the lower hall, her husband ushering in Lucy and Philip Benson.

CHAPTER XIII.

Breakfast was kept back an hour next morning to await Lucy's tardy appearance. "She was sadly wearied with her journey," apologized Philip, and Sarah begged that she would keep her room and have her meals sent up to her—an hospitable offer, which Mr. Benson negatived.

Lucy did look tired and unrefreshed, and, to speak more plainly, very cross. Her hair, in its dryest

state of pale yellow, was combed straight back above her temples; her skin was sallow; her wrapper carelessly put on, and its dead white unrelieved by even a bow of ribbon at the throat. Involuntarily Lewis glanced from the uninviting picture to his household deity, in her neat breakfast-dress of gray silk faced with pink, her glossy hair and tranquil features, and said to himself, in secret triumph, "Which is now the beauty? None of your trumpery ornamental articles for me!"

Philip's eyes were as keen as his host's, and the probability is that he instituted a similar comparison, however well his pride succeeded in concealing the act and its result. Cutting short his wife's querulous plaints of the discomforts of travel, and the horrors of nervous sleeplessness, he opened a conversation with Mr. Hammond in the subdued, perfectly-managed tones Sarah remembered so well, selecting such topics as would interest a business man and a citizen of a commercial metropolis. Lucy pouted, and applied herself for consolation to her breakfast.

With a strange mingling of emotions, Sarah listened to the dialogue between the gentlemen. She was anxious that Lewis should acquit himself creditably. Brilliant, like Philip, he could never be; but in sterling sense, not many men were his superiors. She had never had cause to be ashamed of him; for one so unpretending and judicious was not liable to make himself ridiculous. Whence, then, the solicitude with which she hung upon his every word? her disappointment when he did not equal the ideal reply she had fashioned, as she heard the words that called it forth? Several times she joined in the conversation, invariably to corroborate Lewis' assertions, or to supply something he had omitted to state. Philip Benson was a student of human nature. Was his mind sufficiently abstracted from his domestic annoyances to divine the motive that Sarah herself only perceived afterwards in solitary self-examination? Not love of, or admiration for the intrinsic excellence of the man whose name she bore; not fear lest his modesty should lessen his merits in the eyes of others; but a selfish dread that his acute interlocutor, discerning in him nothing likely to attract or win the affection of a woman such as he knew her to be, might guess her true reason for marrying Mr. Hammond. The timorous progeny of one guilty secret can only be numbered by the minutes during which it is borne in the bosom. Like the fabled Lacedæmonian boy, Sarah carried the gnawing horror with a fortitude that looked like cheerfulness. Habit cannot lighten the weight of a clinging curse; but strength and hardness come in time, if the burdened one is not early crushed by his load.

The sisters spent most of the day in Lucy's room; the latter stretched upon the lounge, as she declared, "completely used up." Mrs. Hunt came around early in the forenoon, and into her sympathizing ears the spoiled child poured the story of her woes and wrongs; Sarah sitting by with a swelling, rebellious heart. With indecorous contempt for one of the most binding laws of married state—inviolable secrecy as to the faults of the other party to the momentous compact—mother and daughter compared notes upon their husbands, and criticised the class generally as the most wrong-headed, perverse, and dictatorial of all the necessary evils of society.

Mrs. Benson, the elder, and her pleasure-loving daughter-in-law had differed seriously several months before the death of the former. Philip, while espousing his wife's cause to the rest of his family, had, in private, taken her to task for what he considered objectionable in her conduct; her heads of offence being mainly extravagant love of gay company, and the gallant attentions of gentleman visitors; neglect of dress and all efforts to please, when there was no company by; and a decided indisposition to share in the household duties, which his mother's increasing feebleness made onerous to her.

"Ah, mother!" sighed the interesting complainant, raising herself to shake up her pillow, then sinking again upon it. "If girls only realized what is before them when they marry, few would be brave enough to change their condition. When I picture to myself what I was at home—a petted darling—never allowed to inconvenience myself when it could possibly be avoided; courted in society; free as air and light-hearted as a child; and then think of all that I have endured from the unkindness of strangers, and the—well—the want of sympathy in him for whom I had given up my dear old home and friends—I ask myself why I did not remain single!"

The prudent matchmaker shook her head. "Marriage is a lottery, they say, my dear; but I am very sure that single life is a blank. You had no fortune, and in the event of your father's death would have been almost destitute. I am sorry your father did not insist upon Mr. Benson's giving you your own establishment at once. I hope, now the old lady is out of the way, you will have things more according to your notions."

"Don't you believe that! As if there were not two sisters-in-law, living but four miles off, and driving over every other day to 'see how pa is.' That means, to see whether Lucy is letting things go to wreck and ruin. I understand their spiteful ways! Philip shuts his ears when I talk about them; but I am determined that I will not bear much more meddling!"

Decidedly, Lucy Benson married was a woeful declension from the seraphic spinster depicted in our earlier chapters; but, as in time past, so in time present and to come, the sparkling sugar, whose integrity and sweetness appeared indestructible, while it was kept dry and cool, if dampened, undergoes an acetous fermentation, and the delicate sweet-meat, exposed to the air at a high temperature, becomes speedily a frothing mass, evolving pungent gases. The pretty doll who anticipates, in the connubial state, one long fete-day of adoration received, and benign condescension dispensed, is as certain to awake from this dream as from any other, and upon the temper in which she sustains the disenchantment, depends a vast proportion of her future welfare and peace.

Lucy's behavior to her babe was a mixture of childish fondling and neglect. Fortunately, the little "Hunt's" special attendant was an elderly woman, long established as "Maumer" in the Benson

family, and her devotion to her charge prevented any present evil effects from his mother's incompetence or carelessness. Philip's pride in, and love for his boy were extreme. When he came in that evening, Sarah chanced to be in the nursery adjoining her chamber, watching and inciting the two babies to a game of romps. She held one on each knee, the nurses standing by in amused gratification.

"That is surely my little man's voice!" said Philip, as he and Lewis came up the stairs.

"Let me see!"—and Mr. Hammond peeped into the playroom. "Walk in!" he continued, throwing the door wide open. "Isn't there a pair of them?"

"And a nurse worthy of the twain!" returned Philip. He stooped to the invitation of the lifted arms, fluttering, as if the owner would fly to his embrace. "What do you say of him, aunty? Is he [45] not a passable boy?"

"More than passable! he is a noble-looking fellow. He resembles you, I think," said Sarah, quietly.

"Do you hear that, Hammond? Your wife pronounces me 'more than passable—a noble-looking fellow!' So much for an adroit hint. Is she given to flattery?"

"Not she!" returned Lewis, laughing. "She never said as much as that for my looks in all her life. I have one consolation, however; the less she says the more she means!" He went into the dressing-room, and Philip, still holding the child, seated himself by Sarah.

"How odd, yet how familiar it seems, to be with you once more, my good sister! What a succession of mischances has made us virtual strangers for many months past! I had almost despaired of ever holding friendly converse with you again. I wonder if your recollections of our visit to Aunt Sarah are as vivid as mine. Do you remember that last sad, yet dear day on the Deal Beach?"

Baby Belle was standing in her mother's lap, her soft, warm arms about her neck; and around the frail, sinking human heart invisible arms, as warm and close, were upholding and strengthening it in the moment of mortal weakness.

"Very distinctly. Many changes have come to us both since then."

"To me very many! I have grown older in heart than in years." Then, evidently fearing that she might otherwise interpret his meaning, he subjoined: "We have had a heavy bereavement in our household, you know. Your changes have all been happy ones. The enthusiastic, restless girl has ripened into the more sedate, yet more blessed wife and mother."

Press your sweet mouth to the convulsed lips, Baby Belle! Veil with your silky curls the tell-tale features, whose agitation would bewilder, if not betray! Philip was stroking the head of his boy, and did not see the uneasiness of his companion.

"Have you heard of Uncle Nathan's death?" she asked, clearing her throat.

He looked surprised at the inquiry. "Yes! Aunt Sarah wrote immediately to my father."

"Ah! I had forgotten that they were brothers. My memory is treacherous. Excuse me! I am wanted in the dining-room!"

Lewis met her just outside the door, and stopped her to bestow the evening kiss he had not cared to offer in Philip's presence.

"Why, you are as rosy as a peony!" he said, jestingly. "Has Benson been paying you compliments, in return for yours to him? I must look after you two, if you carry on at this rate."

With a look he had reason subsequently to recall, but which only pleased him at the time, she raised his hand to her lips—a look of humility, gratitude, and appeal, such as one might cast upon a slighted benefactor—and vanished.

A merry family party gather around the Hammond's generous table, that afternoon. All the Hunts were there—from the father down to Jeannie, who was fast shooting up into a tall girl, somewhat pert in manner, but lovable despite this, at times, unpleasant foible.

"Sister Lucy," she said, after an interval of silence, "Ellen West said, at school, to-day that you [46] were a great belle when you were a young lady; were you?"

"You must not ask me, Jeannie!" The old smile of conscious beauty stole into Lucy's cheeks.

"Was she, sister?" Jeannie referred the case to Sarah.

"Yes, my dear, she was very beautiful," replied the latter, simply.

"She isn't now—not so very handsome, I mean—no handsomer than you are, sister!"

"Jeannie! you forget yourself!" interposed Mrs. Hunt.

"Why, mamma, I did not intend to be rude! Only I thought that belles were always the prettiest ladies that could be found anywhere."

"By no means!" corrected Lewis, willing to help his wife's pet out of a scrape. "There are many descriptions of belles, Jeannie: handsome, rich, fast, and intellectual."

"And as papa was not rich, I suppose you were either fast or intellectual, sister Lucy!" persisted the child.

"I thought her pretty fast when I tried to catch her," said Philip.—"Mrs. Hunt, Mrs. Hammond, Mrs. Benson, have you ladies decided in the course of to-day's congress what watering-place is to be made the fashion by our clique next month?"

Mrs. Hunt replied that they inclined to Newport; principally on account of Lucy and the children, who would all be benefited by the bathing.

Lucy was sure that she should tire of Saratoga or the Catskills in a week, whereas she adored the ocean.

"What says Madame Discretion?" said Lewis, merrily, to his wife.

"Except that it would break up the family party, I had rather stay at home as long as it is prudent to keep the baby in town; then, if you could go with us, spend a month at some mountain farmhouse or seaside cottage," she answered.

"Hear! hear!" commanded Philip. "Behold a modern wedded dame who prefers seclusion with her liege lord to gayety without him! The age of miracles is returning!"

"Is the case, then, so anomalous?" retorted Sarah, the red spot in her cheek alone testifying to her embarrassment. "Are your Southern matrons all public characters?"

"I can answer that!" said Lucy. "They are slaves! housekeeping machines—nothing better!"

"How many more weak places are there in this crust of family chit-chat, I should like to be informed!" thought the annoyed and uninitiated Hammond. "Here goes for the spot where there is no danger of anybody's breaking in!" He spoke aloud. "A tempting proposal was made to me this morning. It is considered advisable for one of our firm to go abroad for a couple of months, perhaps longer, to divide his time among the principal manufacturing districts of England, Scotland, and France. Expenses paid by the firm, and the term of absence indefinitely prolonged, if the traveler wishes it. Mr. Marlow is tired of crossing the ocean, and presses me to accept the mission."

"What did you tell him?"

It was Sarah who spoke in a startled voice that drew general notice to her alarmed face. Her concern was a delicious tribute to her husband's self-love, if he possessed such a quality. At least he loved her well enough to be pleased at her manifest reluctance to have him leave her.

"I told him that I must ask my wife," said he in a meek tone, belied by the humorous twinkle in his eye, and loving half-smile about his mouth. "See what it is to be one under authority, Benson! A man dare not conclude an ordinary business transaction without the approval of the powers that be."

When Sarah accompanied her sister to her chamber that night, the passee belle put a direct question.

"Tell me, Sarah, are you as much in love with Mr. Hammond as you seem to be, or is it all put on for the benefit of outsiders?"

"I am not apt to do anything for the sake of mere show; nor do I care for the opinion of 'outsiders,' as you call them," rejoined Sarah, amazed at the cool audacity of the inquiry, and disposed to resent Lucy's confident expectation that she would avow the cheat, if such there were, in her deportment.

"You used to be shockingly independent, I know. What a ridiculously honest little puss you were! How you despised all our pretty arts and necessary affectations! How you hated our economical mother's second-best furniture and dinners! I don't believe Victoria West has ever forgiven you for the way in which you used to take to pieces what you styled our 'surface talk and surface life!' I thought, however, that you had discovered by this time, that one cannot live in the world without deceiving herself or other people; I prefer making fools to being one. Heigh-ho! this life is a very unsatisfactory business at the best. What a heavenly collar that is of yours! One thing I do wish, and that is—that my husband were half as fond of me, or as good to me, as Lewis is to you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

Lewis Hammond had thrown the whole weight of his influence in the family conclave into the Newport scale; and to this popular resort Sarah went, in July, in company with the Bensons, her mother and Jeannie, who was made one of the party at Lewis' request and expense. The generous fellow acted in conformity with conscience and judgment in this temporary exile of his treasures; and, consistent in his purpose of rendering it a pleasure excursion to his wife, he made very light of his prospects of lonely widowerhood, representing, instead, the benefit she and the babe would draw from the sea-breezes, and his enhanced enjoyment of his weekly visits, because they were so far apart. He went with them to the shore, at their general flitting, and spent two days; saw for himself that those whose comfort was nearest his heart were properly accommodated; privately feed chambermaid and waiter, with hints of future emolument to accrue to them from special regard to the wants of Mrs. Hammond and her infant, and returned to town with the unenviable consciousness of having left at least three-fourths of himself behind him.

A brisk rush of business beguiled him of the aching, hollow void for a few hours after he got back. Not even Baby Belle's accents could be heard amid that roar and whir. But at luncheon-time, while waiting for his order to be filled at a restaurant, the dreary, solitary void overtook him—a fit of unmistakable home-sickness, that yet caused him to recoil at the idea of entering the

deserted house uptown, when evening should oblige him to seek a lodging. How were Sarah and baby getting along without him? He was afraid that Lucy was not, in all respects, as congenial a companion as he could have wished his wife to have, and that Mrs. Hunt's undisguised worldliness, her foolish love of fashion and display, would often annoy and mortify her sensible and right-judging daughter. Benson was capital company, though—a gentleman every inch of him! and very friendly to Sarah. But for her reserved manners he would act the part of a real brother to her; in any case, he would be kind, and see that she wanted for nothing.

Then—shot into his head by some unseen and unaccountable machinery—there darted across his mind a fragment of a conversation he had overheard, at entering his parlor, the day before the Bensons left. Philip and Lucy were standing before a miniature painting of Sarah and her child, completed and brought home a short time previous. Although seemingly intent upon the picture, their conversation must have strayed far from the starting-point, for the first sentence that reached the unintentional listener was a tart, scornful speech from Lucy, that could by no stretch of the imagination be made to apply to her sister.

"If you admire her so much, why did you not marry her when you had the opportunity? She was willing enough!"

"Take care you do not make me regret that I did not do so!" was Philip's stern rejoinder as he turned from her.

The change of position showed him that Lewis was present, and for a second his inimitable self-possession wavered. Recovering himself, he reverted to the picture, and called upon his host to decide some disputed point in its artistic execution which he and Lucy were discussing.

"Poor fellow! he has learned that all is not gold that glitters!" mused Lewis to the newspaper he was pretending to read. "Lucy had a high reputation for amiability before she was Mrs. Benson. There is no touchstone like the wedding ring to bring out one's true qualities."

He sat with his back to the entrance of the saloon, and the table directly behind him was now taken possession of by three or four new arrivals—all gentlemen, and apparently on familiar terms with one another. They called for a bountiful lunch, including wine, and plunged into a lively, rather noisy talk. Lewis closed his ears, and applied himself in earnest to his paper. He started presently at a word he could have declared was his name. Restraining the impulse to look around and see who of the group was known to him, he yet could not help trying to determine this point by their voices. One, a thin falsetto, he fancied belonged to George Bond, who was no more of a favorite with him than was his better half with Sarah. Lewis regarded him as a conceited rattlepate, whose sole talent lay in the art of making money—whose glory was his purse. "Why should he be talking about me here? Nonsense; I was mistaken!" and another page of the newspaper was turned.

"When I leave my wife at Newport, or anywhere else, in the particular and brotherly care of one of her former flames, publish me as a crazy fool!" said the wiry voice again, almost in the reader's ear. [47]

"He doesn't know old stories as well as you do, perhaps," remarked some one.

"I should think not! When my wife pulls the wool over my eyes in that style, horsewhip me around town, and I won't cry 'Quarter!' Sister's husband or not, I'll be hanged if I would have him in my house for two weeks, and he is such a good-looking dog, too!"

He stopped, as if his neighbor had jogged him, as Lewis looked over his shoulder in the direction of the gossip. A dead and awkward silence ensued, ended at last by the pertinent observation that the "waiter was a long time bringing their lunch."

In a maze of angry doubt and incredulity as to the evidence of his senses and suspicions, Lewis finished his meal, and stalked out past the subdued and now voracious quartette, favoring them with a searching look as he went by, which they sustained with great meekness. All the afternoon a heavy load lay upon his heart, an indefinable dread he dared not analyze; a foreboding he would not face, yet could not dismiss.

"You are blue, Lewis," said Mr. Marlow, kindly, as they started uptown together. "This is the worst of having a wife and children; you miss them so terribly when they are away. But you will get used to it. Make up your mind at the eleventh hour to cross the water, and stay abroad three months. You will be surprised to find how easy your mind will become after a couple of weeks."

"I am satisfied, sir, without making personal trial of the matter, that men become inured to misery, which seemed in the beginning to be insupportable."

Mr. Marlow laughed, and they separated.

Lewis sighed as he looked up at the blinds of his house, shut fast and grim, and still more deeply as he admitted himself to the front hall, that echoed dismally the sound of the closing door. His next movement was to walk into the parlor, throw open a shutter, and let in the evening light upon the portraits of the dear absent ones. There he stood, scanning their faces—eyes and soul full of love and longing—until the mellow glow passed away and left them in darkness.

The comfortless evening repast was over, and he betook himself to the library, Sarah's favorite room, as it was also his. Her low easy-chair stood in its usual place opposite his at the center-table, but her workbasket was missing; likewise the book with its silver marker, that he was wont to see lying side by side with some volume he had selected for his own reading. But one lay there now, and there was an odd choking in his throat as he read the title on the back. He had expressed a wish for it in Sarah's hearing some days before, and her delicate forethought had left

it here as a solace and keepsake, one that should, while reminding him of her, yet charm away sad feelings in her absence. Even in the exterior of the gift, she had been regardful of his taste. The binding was solid and rich; no gaudy coloring or tawdry gilt; the thick smooth paper and clear type were a luxury to touch and sight. Lewis was no sentimentalist in the ordinary acceptation of the term, yet he kissed the name his wife had traced upon the fly-leaf ere he sat down to employ the evening as she by her gift tacitly requested him to do. But it was a useless [48] attempt. The book was not in fault, and he should have read it intently if only because she had bestowed it; still the hand that held it sank lower and lower, until it rested upon his knee, and the reader was the thinker instead.

The most prosaic of human beings have their seasons of reverie—pleasing or mournful, which are, unknown often to themselves, the poetry of their lives. Such was the drama Lewis Hammond was now rehearsing in his retrospective dreams.

The wan and weary mother, whom he remembered as always clothed in widow's weeds, and toiling in painful drudgery to maintain herself and her only boy; who had smiled and wept, rendered thanksgivings and uttered prayers for strength, alternately, as she heard Mr. Marlow's proposal to protect and help the lad through the world that had borne so hardly upon her; who had strained him to her bosom, and shed fast, hot tears of speechless anguish at their parting—a farewell that was never to be forgotten in any meeting on this side of eternity; this was the vision, hers the palladium of love, that had nerved him for the close wrestle with fortune, guarded him amid the burning ploughshares of temptation, carried him unscathed past the hundred mouths of hell, that gape upon the innocent and unwary in all large cities. Cold and unsusceptible as he was deemed in society, he kept unpolluted in his breast a fresh living stream of genuine romantic feeling, such as we are apt to think went out of fashion—aye, and out of being—with the belted knights of yore; wealth he had vowed never to squander, never reveal, until he should pour it, without one thought of self-reserve, upon his wife! He never hinted this to a living creature before the moment came for revealing it to the object of his choice. He was a "predestined old bachelor!" and "infidel to love and the sex," said and believed the gay and frivolous, and he let them talk. His ideal woman, his mother's representative and successor—the beauty and crown of his existence—was too sacred for the gaze and comment of indifferent worldlings. For her he labored and studied and lived; confident in a fatalistic belief that, at the right moment, the dream would become a reality—the phantasm leave her cloudy height for his arms.

Love so beautiful and intense as this, like snow in its purity, like fire in its fervor, cannot be won to full and eloquent utterance but by answering love—a sentiment identical in kind, if not equal in degree; and Sarah Hammond's estimate of her husband's affection was, in consequence of this want in herself, cruelly unjust in its coldness and poverty. His patience with her transient fits of gloom or waywardness in the early months of their married life; his noble forgetfulness of her faults, and grateful acknowledgment of her most trifling effort to please him; his unceasing care; his lavish bounty—all these she attributed too much to natural amiability and conscientious views of duty; too little to his warm regard for her personally. In this persuasion she had copied his conduct in externals so far as she could; and applauding observers adjudged the mock gem to be a fair and equitable equivalent for the rare pearl she had received.

Lest this digression, into which I have been inadvertently betrayed, should mislead any with the idea that I have some design of dignifying into a hero this respectable, but very commonplace personage, return we to him as he hears eleven o'clock rung out by the monitor on the mantel, and says to himself, "Baby Belle has been asleep these three hours, and mamma, caring nothing for beaux and ball-room, is preparing to follow her."

Beaux and ball-room! Pshaw! why should the nonsensical talk of that jackanapes, George Bond, come to his mind just then? The whole tenor of the remarks that succeeded the name that he imagined was his disproved that imagination. But who had left his wife at Newport in the care of a "good-looking" brother-in-law? who had been domesticated in the family of the deluded husband for a fortnight?

Pshaw again! What concern had he with that scandalous, doubtless slanderous tattle?

"Why did you not marry her when you had the opportunity? She was willing enough!"

Could Lucy have spoken thus of her sister? Sarah was barely acquainted with Philip Benson when Lucy wedded him, having met him but once prior to the wedding day at the house of her aunt in the country, from which place his own letter, penned by her father's sick-bed, recalled her. How far from his thoughts then was the rapid train of consequences that followed upon this preliminary act of their intercourse!

Did that scoundrel Bond say "Hammond"? It was not a common name, and came quite distinctly to his ears in the high, unpleasant key he so disliked. A flush of honest shame arose to his forehead at this uncontrollable straying of his ideas to a topic so disagreeable, and so often rejected by his mind.

"As if—even had I been the person insulted by his pity—I would believe one syllable he said of a woman as far above him in virtue and intellect, in everything good and lovable, as the heavens are above the earth! I would despise myself as much as I do him if I could lend my ear for an instant to so degrading a whisper! I wish I had faced him and demanded the whole tale; yet no! that would have been rash and absurd. Better as it is! By to-morrow I shall laugh at my ridiculous fancies!"

"Scratch! scratch! scratch!" The house was so still in the approaching midnight that the slight noise caused him a shock and quiver in the excited state of his nerves. The interruption was

something between a scrape and a rap, three times repeated, and proceeding, apparently, from the bookcase at his right. What could it be? He had never seen or heard of a mouse on the premises, nor did the sound much resemble the nibbling of that animal. Ashamed of the momentary thrill he had experienced, he remained still and collected, awaiting its repetition.

"Scratch! scratch! rap!" It was in the bookcase—in the lower part where were drawers shut in by solid doors. These he had never explored, but knew that his wife kept pamphlets and papers in them. He opened the outer doors cautiously, and listened again, until assured by the scratching that his search was in the right direction. There were three drawers—two deep, the third and upper shallow. This he drew out and examined. It contained writing-paper and envelopes, all in good order. Nor was there any sign of the intruder amongst the loose music and periodicals in the second. The lower one was locked—no doubt accidentally, for he had never seen Sarah lock up anything except jewels and money. Their servants were honest, and she had no cause to fear investigation on his part.

Feeling, rather than arguing thus, he removed the drawer above, leaving exposed the locked one, and thrust his hand down into it. It encountered the polished surface of a small box or case, which he was in the act of drawing through the aperture left by the second drawer, when something dark and swift ran over his hand and up his sleeve. With a violent start, he dashed the casket to the floor, and another energetic fling of his arm dislodged the mouse. His first care was to pursue and kill it; his next to examine into the damage it had indirectly produced. The box—ebony, lined with sandal-wood—had fallen with such force as to loosen the spring, and lay on its side wide open; its treasures strewed over the carpet. They were neither numerous, nor in themselves valuable. A bouquet of dried flowers, enveloped in silver paper, lay nearest Lewis' hand, as he knelt to pick up the scattered articles. The paper was tied about the stalks of the flowers with black ribbon, and to this was attached a card: "Will Miss Sarah accept this trifling token of regard from one who is her stanch friend, and hopes, in time, to have a nearer claim upon her esteem?"

The hand was familiar to the reader as Philip Benson's. Why should Sarah preserve this, while the many floral tokens of his love which she had received were flung away when withered like worthless weeds? The pang of jealousy was new—sharp as the death-wrench to the heart-strings, cruel as the grave! The card was without date, or he would have read, with a different apprehension of its meaning, the harmless clause—"And hopes in time to have a nearer claim upon her esteem." There was a time, then, when, as Lucy had taunted her husband, he might have married her sister! when Sarah loved him, and had reason to think herself beloved in return! What was this sable badge but the insignia of a bereaved heart, that mourned still in secret the faithlessness of her early love, or the adverse fate that had sundered him from her, and given him to another?

Crushing the frail, dead stems in his hand, he threw them back into the box, and took up a bit of dark gray wood, rough on one side—smoothed on the other into a rude tablet. "Philip Benson, Deal Beach, July 27th, 1856. Pensez a moi!" But ten days before he met her at the wharf in New York to take her to her sick father! but three months before she plighted her troth to him, promised to wed him, while in spirit she was still weeping tears of blood over the inconstant! for he did not forget that Philip's engagement to Lucy preceded his own to Sarah by eight or nine weeks. There were other relics in the box; a half-worn glove, retaining the shape of the manly hand it had inclosed—which, he learned afterwards, Philip had left in his chamber at the farm-house when he departed to seek gayer scenes; a white shell, upon whose rosy lining were scratched with the point of a knife the ominous initials, "P. B." and beneath them "S. B. H.," a [49] faded rosebud, and several printed slips, cut from the columns of newspapers. He unfolded but two of these.

One was an extract from Tennyson's "Maud"—the invitation to the garden. Breathlessly, by reason of the terrible stricture tightening around his heart, Lewis ran his eyes over the charming whimsical morceau. They rested upon and reviewed the last verse:

"She is coming—my own, my sweet!
  Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat;
  Were it earth in an earthy bed,

"My dust would hear her and beat;
  Had I laid for a century dead,
Would start and tremble under her feet,
  And blossom in purple and red."

He did not discriminate now between printed and written verses. These were love stanzas sent by another man to his wife, received and cherished by her, hidden away with a care that, in itself, bordered on criminality, for was not its object the deception of the injured husband? The most passionate autograph love-letter could hardly have stabbed him more keenly.

The other was Mrs. Browning's exquisite "Portrait."

And here the reader can have an explanation the tortured man could not obtain. With the acumen for which Cupid's votaries are proverbial, Philip Benson, then at the "summer heat" degree of his flame for the Saratoga belle, had recognized in this poem the most correct and beautiful description of his lady-love. Curiosity to see if the resemblance were apparent to other eyes, and a desire for sympathy tempted him to forward it to Sarah. She must perceive the likeness to her

divine sister, and surmise the sentiment that had induced him to send it. A little alteration in the opening stanza was requisite to make it a "perfect fit." Thus it was when the change was made:

"I will paint her as I see her:
---- times have the lilies blown
Since she looked upon the sun."

The poetess, guiltless of any intention to cater for the wants of grown-up lovers, had written "Ten" in the space made blank by Philip's gallantry and real ignorance of his charmer's age. For the rest, the "lily-clear face," the "forehead fair and saintly," the "trail of golden hair," the blue eyes, "like meek prayers before a shrine," the voice that

"Murmurs lowly
As a silver stream may run,
Which yet feels you feel the sun,"

were, we may safely assert, quite as much like poor Sarah, when he sent the poem, as they were now like the portrait he would—if put upon his oath—sketch of his unidealized Lucy.

It was not unnatural then, in Lewis Hammond, to overlook in his present state, these glaring discrepancies in the picture as applied by him. With a blanched and rigid countenance he put all the things back in the box, shut it, and restored it to its place. Then he knelt on the floor and hid his face in his wife's chair; and there struggled out into the still air of the desecrated [50]
hometemple, made sacred by his love and her abiding, deep sobs from the strong man's stricken heart—a grief as much more fearful than that of widowhood, as the desertion and dishonor of the loved one are worse than death.

CHAPTER XV.

It was the "grand hop" night at the headquarters of Newport fashion. Sarah, characteristically indifferent to gaieties "made to order," had determined not to appear below. The air of her room was fresh and pure, and a book, yet unread, lay under the lamp upon her table. Her sister and mother had withdrawn to dress, when Jeannie's curly head peeped in at Mrs. Hammond's door. Her features wore a most woe-begone expression.

"What has gone wrong, Jeannie?" inquired Sarah.

"Why, mamma says that I will be in her way if I go into the ball-room; and it will be so stupid to stay out the whole evening, while all the other girls can see the dancing and dresses, and hear the music. And sister Lucy says that children are 'bores' in company."

"A sad state of affairs, certainly! Perhaps I may persuade mother to let you go."

"Yes; but if she does, she will sit close against the wall with a lot of other fat old ladies, and they will talk over my head, and squeeze me almost to death, besides rumpling my dress; and I so want to wear my tucked pink grenadine, sister!"

"And you would like to have me to go down with you; is that it?"

Jeannie's eyes beamed delightedly. "Oh, if you only would!"

Sarah looked down into the eager face and saw, in anticipation, her own little Belle imploring some boon, as important to her, as easy to be granted by another as this, and consented with a kiss.

"Run away and bring your finery here! Mother is too busy to attend to you. Mary can dress you."

The order was obeyed with lightning speed; and Sarah, still holding in the excited child the foreshadowing of her darling's girlhood, superintended the toilet, while she made herself ready.

"What shall I wear, Jeannie?" she asked carelessly, holding open the door of her wardrobe.

"Oh, that lovely fawn-colored silk, please! the one with the black lace flounces! It is the prettiest color I ever saw; and I heard Mrs. Greyling tell another lady the night you wore it, when brother Lewis was here, you know, that it was one of the richest dresses in the room, modest as it looked, and that the flounce must have cost a penny!"

"Probably more!"

Sarah proceeded to array herself in the fortunate robe that had won the praises of the fashionably distinguished Mrs. Greyling. Her abundant dark hair was lighted by two coral sprigs, which formed the heads of her hair-pins, and, handkerchief and gloves in hand, she was taking a last survey of Jeannie's more brilliant costume, when there came a knock at the door.

"Mr. Benson!" said Mary, unclosing it.

"May I come in?" he asked.

The tidy Mary had removed all trace of the recent tiring operations from the apartment, which was a compound of parlor and dressing-room, a necessary adjunct to the small chamber and smaller nursery, leading out of it, at the side and rear.

"You may!" replied Sarah. "Here is an aspirant for ball-room honors, who awaits your approval."

"Mademoiselle, que vous etes charmante! I am penetrated with profound admiration!" exclaimed the teasing brother-in-law, raising his hands in true melodramatic style.

Jeannie laughed and blushed until her cheeks matched the grenadine.

"Mrs. Hunt told me that you had changed your mind, and intended to grace the festive scene with your presence," continued Philip, addressing Sarah. "She and Lucy are there, and the dancing has begun. I came to escort you and our fair debutante here—that is, unless some one else has offered his services and been accepted."

"That is not likely, since Mr. Hammond left us in your care. Do not your fourfold duties oppress you?"

"Not in the least. If all my charges were as chary of their calls upon me as you are, my time would hang heavily upon my hands. No one would imagine, from your reluctance to be waited upon, that you had been spoiled at home. If Mr. Hammond were here now, he would tell you to draw that shawl"—

"It is an opera cloak!" interrupted Jeannie.

"A ball-cloak to-night, then, is it not? I was saying that, although the night is not cool for sea air, you had better wrap that mantle about your chest and throat as we go out."

Just outside the door a waiter passed them with a note in his hand. He stopped, on seeing Philip.

"Mr. Benson! I was on my way to your rooms with this, sir."

Philip stepped back within the parlor to read it by the light. It was a line from a friend who had just arrived at another hotel notifying him of this fact. It required no reply, and, leaving it upon the table, he rejoined his companions.

"See mamma! Isn't it just as I said?" whispered Jeannie, as she established herself beside her sister in a comfortable corner that commanded a view of the spacious hall and its gay, restless sea of figures.

Sarah smiled at discovering her mother sandwiched between two portly dowagers; one in purple, the other in lavender silk; all three bobbing and waving in their earnest confabulations, in a style that presented a ludicrously marked resemblance to the gesticulations of a group of Muscovy ducks, on the margin of a mud-puddle, held by them in their capacity of a joint-stock company.

"I see that Lucy has taken the floor," observed Philip. "She will not thank me for any devoirs I could render her for the next three hours. If they get up anything so humble as quadrilles, may I ask the pleasure of your company for the set?"

"If you wish it—and my dress is not too grave in hue"—

"And too decorous in its make, you were about to add, I presume;" he finished the sentence bluntly. "It forms a refreshing contrast to the prevailing style around us."

Lucy here flitted into sight, and her very bare arms and shoulders pointed her husband's strictures. A stool, brought into the room for the use of some child or invalid looker-on of the festivities, now stood empty under Sarah's chair, and Philip, espying it, seized upon and drew it forth. When seated, his mouth was nearly on a level with Sarah's ear.

"This is pleasant!" he said. "We are quite as much isolated from the rest of mankind as if we were sitting among the heathery hillocks on Deal Beach. You do not love the visions of those tranquil sunny days as I do. You never allude to them voluntarily. Yet you have had less to convert your dreams into every-day actualities, tedious and prosaic, than I have. I stand in direful need of one of the old lectures, inculcating more charity, and less study of complex motives and biassed tendencies in the machine we call Man. Begin! I am at your mercy."

"I have forgotten how to deliver them. I am out of practice."

"That is not surprising. Your husband is behind the age he lives in—and so are you. You two would make Barnum's fortune, could he ever persuade the public of your idiosyncrasies."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look around and through this room, and you will understand one part of my meaning. Do you remark the preponderance of married over single belles? and that the most tenderly deferential cavaliers are husbands, and not dancing with their wives? I could point out to you three men, leaders of the ton in this extremely reputable, eminently moral assembly, who, it is whispered among the knowing ones, are married, and, having left their domestic associations for a season of recreation, boldly attach themselves to certain stylish young ladies here, and challenge observation, defy public censure, by their marked and increasing devotion. I meet them strolling along the beach in the morning; riding together in the afternoon; and when not engaged in this evening exhibition of toilet and muscle, you will find them pacing the moon or star-lit piazza, or, perchance, again sentimentalizing on the shore until the witching hour draws near."

"You surprise me!"

"You have no right to be surprised. You have the same thing continually before you in your city. Every fashionable hotel or boarding-house can supply you with such flirtations by the dozen. A married woman who declines the polite services of all gentlemen, except her husband and near relatives, is a prude, with false scruples of propriety and delicacy. Let her legal partner complain—he is cried out upon as a despot, and you can trust the sweet angel of an abused wife to elude

his vigilance—violence, she terms it—for the future, without altering her conduct in aught else. Do you see that pretty woman in blue—the one with the madonna-like face? Her tyrant is here but once a week—from Saturday until Monday—then hies back to the business he loves as well as she does her pleasure. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and the forenoon of Saturday, any mustachioed puppy may walk, talk, drive, and flirt with her—bask in the rays of those liquid orbs. When the rightful lord appears, she is demure as a nun, patient as a saint, [51] dutiful as Griselda, to him and him alone. Do you begin to understand why I congratulated you upon having a husband of the olden stamp? Why, I do from my heart felicitate my friend Hammond upon having gained, as a helpmeet, one of that nearly obsolete species—Woman!"

Sarah's embarrassment was painful and but indifferently concealed. She felt that it was barely excusable, in consideration of his fraternal relation to her, for Philip to speak so plainly of this social blemish; and altogether unpardonable, while he did not, or could not, prevent his wife's participation in the questionable gaieties he assailed so unsparingly. Reply she could not, without implicating Lucy in her reprobation, and he must perceive her difficulty. This was the trouble that lay uppermost. At her heart's core, the uneasy feeling she ever experienced in conversation with him; the stirring of the entombed love, of whose actual death she had horrible misgivings; the incongruous blending of past emotion with present duty, were now aggravated by the enforced acceptance of unmerited praise. Her woman's instinct, her experience as a wife, told her that the cause of the sinful recklessness, the contempt of the true spirit of the marriage tie, was not the fruit merely of the vanity and thirst for adulation, to which it was properly attributed. With the recollection of her own life, the education she had received at home, the hateful, yet even to her independent spirit, resistless decrees of society, there swelled up within her bosom something akin to Philip's bitter cynicism. Under this spur, she spoke.

"And from these signs of the times, you would argue an inherent degeneracy of womanhood—a radical change in its composition, such as some anatomists tell us has taken place in the structure of our bodies—our blood—our very teeth. A dentist, who filled a tooth for me the other day, imparted divers scientific items of information to me that may illustrate your position. 'Enamel, madam, is not what enamel was in the days of our ancestors!' he affirmed pathetically; 'the color, the very ingredients of the bone, the calcareous base of the teeth, differ sadly from the indestructible molars of fifty years ago.' At this passage of his jeremiade, he chanced to touch the nerve in the unhappy 'molar' he was excavating, and I am persuaded that I suffered as really as my grandmother would have done, had she sat in my place."

She paused, and beat time with her fingers on Jeannie's shoulder to the wild, varying waltz that swept the giddy crowd around the room in fast and flying circles.

"Your analogy asserts, then, that at heart women are alike in all ages?"

"Why not, as well as men?"

"Then why does not action remain the same, if that be true?"

"Because custom—fashion, if you prefer this name—an unaccountable, irresponsible power—owing its birth oftenest to accident or caprice, says, 'Do this!' and it is done! be it to perpetrate a cravat-bow, a marriage, or a murder!"

Another pause—in which music and dancers seemed sweeping on to sweet intoxication—so joyous in their abandon were the gushing strains; so swift the whirl of the living ring. The fingers [52] played lightly and rapidly on Jeannie's plump shoulder—then rested on a half-beat.

"Yes!" She was looking towards the crowd, but her eye was fixed, and her accents slow and grave. "Hearts live and hearts love, while time endures. The heart selects its mate in life's springtime, with judgment as untaught as that of the silly bird that asks no companion but the one the God of Nature has bestowed upon it. But you see not, my good brother"—she faced him, a smile wreathing her lip—a strange glitter in her eye—"see you not to what woeful disorders these untrained desires, this unsophisticated following out of unregulated affections would give rise? It would sap the foundations of caste; level all wholesome distinctions of society; consign the accomplished daughters of palatial halls—hoary with a semi-decade of years—to one-story cottages and a maid-of-all work; doom nice young men to the drudgery of business for the remainder of their wretched lives, to maintain wives whose dowries would not keep their lily-handed lords in French kids for a year; cover managing mammas with ignominy, and hasten ambitious papas to their costly vaults in—as Dickens has it—'some genteel place of interment.' Come what may of blasted hopes and wrecked hearts, the decencies of life must be observed. Every heart has its nerve—genuine, sensitive, sometimes vulgarly tenacious of life—but there are corrosives that will eat it out; fine, deadly wires, that can probe and torture and extract it. And when the troublesome thing is finally gotten rid of, there is an end to all obstacles to judicious courtships and eligible alliances!" She laughed scornfully, and Philip recoiled, without knowing why he did so, as he heard her.

"That is all very well, when the nature of the contract is understood on both sides," he said, gloomily. "I doubt, however, whether the beautiful economy of your system will be appreciated by those whose living hearts are bound to the bloodless plaster-casts you describe."

"These accidents will occur in spite of caution on the part of the best managers of suitable marriages. By far the larger proportion of the shocks inflicted upon polite circles arise from this very cause. Pygmalion grows weary of wooing his statue, and wants sympathy in his disappointment and loneliness."

The dance was ended. The fantastic variations of the waltz were exchanged for a noble march—

pealing through the heated rooms like a rush of the healthful sea-breeze. The spark died in Sarah's eye. Her voice took its habitual pitch.

"I have permitted myself to become excited, and, I am afraid, have said many things that I had no right to think—much less to utter. If my freedom has displeased you, I am sorry."

"The error—if error there were—was mine," rejoined Philip. "I led the conversation into the channel; you, after awhile, followed. I believe there is no danger of our misunderstanding each other."

"Darby and Joan! good children in the corner!" cried Lucy, flushed with exercise and radiant with good humor, as she promenaded past them leaning on the arm of a young West Pointer, a native Southerner and an acquaintance of Philip's. If his wife must flirt and frolic, he was watchful that she did not compromise him by association with doubtful characters. On several occasions, the advances of gay gentlemen, whose toilets were more nearly irreproachable than their reputations, had been checked by his cool and significant resumption of the husband's post beside the belle, and, if need existed, by the prompt withdrawal of the unwilling lady from the scene. The cadet laughed, and, convinced that she had said a witty thing, Lucy swam by.

"The common sense of our tropes, rodomontades, and allegories is this!" said Philip, biting his lip, and speaking in a hard tone. "The only safe ground in marriage is mutual, permanent affection. You meant to convey the idea that if each of these dressy matrons, humming around our ears, had a sincere, abiding love for her husband—and each of these gallant benedicts the right kind of regard for his wedded Beatrice, the vocation of us corner censors would be gone?"

"Well said, Mr. Interpreter!" she responded, in affected jest.

"This point settled, will you take my arm for a turn through the room before the next set is formed? They are talking of quadrilles. I shall claim your promise if a set is made up, unless you are not courageous enough to brave the public sneer by dancing with your brother. Come, Jeannie, and walk with us."

Two sets of quadrilles were arranged at different ends of the saloon. Philip led Sarah through one, with Lucy—who considered it a capital joke—and her partner vis-a-vis to them, Jeannie, meanwhile, remaining by her mother.

The summer nights were short; and, when the dance was over, Sarah intimated to her younger sister the propriety of retiring. Mrs. Hunt's head ached, and she esteemed the sacrifice comparatively light, therefore, that she, too, had to leave the revels and accompany the child to her chamber. Sarah's apartments were on the same floor, several doors further on. Having said "Good-night" to the others, she and Philip walked slowly along the piazza, light as day in the moonbeams, until they reached the outer room, the parlor.

"I hope you will experience no ill effects from your dissipation," said Philip, in playful irony. "In a lady of your staid habits, this disposition to gaiety is alarming. Absolutely eleven o'clock! What will Hammond say when he hears the story? Good-night! Don't let your conscience keep you awake!"

Sarah opened the door softly, that she might not startle the baby-sleeper in the inner room. The lamp was shining brightly, and by it sat—her husband!

CHAPTER XVI.

Lewis had entered his wife's room within fifteen minutes after she left it. He looked so ill and weary that the girl, Mary, gave a stifled scream of fright and surprise.

"Are you sick, sir?" she asked hastily, as he threw off his hat, and wiped his pale forehead. "Shall I tell Mrs. Hammond that you are here? She went down to the ball-room awhile ago."

"What did you say? No!" replied he, shortly.

His frown, rather than his tone, silenced her. He had picked up the envelope Philip had dropped on the table, and his face darkened still more. Too proud to question a servant of her mistress' actions and associates, he believed that he had gathered from this mute witness all that was needful to know. As a privileged habitue of the cosy boudoir he had been at such pain to procure and make fit for his wife's occupancy, another had sat here and read his evening mail, while awaiting her leisure; careless of appearances, since the deceived one would not be there to notice them, had tossed this note down with as much freedom as he would have done in his own apartment.

Through the open windows poured the distant strains of the band; and, seized by a sudden thought, he caught up his hat and strode out, along piazzas and through halls, to the entrance door of the ball saloon. As Sarah's ill-fortune ordained it, the piercing glance that ran over and beyond the crowd of spectators and dancers detected her at the instant of Philip's taking his lowly seat at her side. Jeannie's pink attire was concealed by the drapery of a lady, whose place in the set then forming was directly in front of her. Lewis saw but the two, virtually tete-a-tete; and, as he obtained fleeting glimpses of them through the shifting throng, marked Philip's energetic, yet confidential discourse, and the intentness with which she listened, until, warmed or excited by his theme, Sarah lifted her downcast eyes and spoke, with what feeling and effect

her auditor's varying expression showed.

The gazer stood there like a statue, unheeding the surprised and questioning looks cast by passers-by upon his traveling-dress, streaked with dust—his sad and settled visage, so unbefitting the scene within—while Philip made the tour of the room, with Sarah upon his arm, until they took their stations for the dance; he, courteous and attentive—she, smiling and happy, more beautiful in her husband's eyes than her blonde sister opposite; and he could stay no longer. If Mary had thought him sick and cross at his former entrance, she considered him savage now, for one who was ordinarily a kind and gentle master.

"You can go to your room!" he ordered, not advised. "I will sit up for Mrs. Hammond!"

"I have slept in the nursery, sir, while you were away."

"That cannot be to-night. I will find you some other place."

He had no intention that the anticipated conversation with his wife should be overheard.

"I can stay with a friend of mine, sir, only a few doors off."

"Very well!"

Quickly and quietly the nurse arranged the night-lamp and the child's food, that her mistress might have no trouble during her absence, and went out.

Baby Belle slumbered on, happily wandering through the guileless mazes of baby dreamland; one little arm, bared from the sleeve of her gown, thrown above her head—the hand of the other cradling her cheek. The father ventured to press a light kiss upon the red lips. In his desolation, he craved this trifling solace. The child's face was contorted by an expression of discomfort, and, still dreaming, she murmured, in her inarticulate language, some pettish expression of disgust.

"My very child shrinks from me! It is in the blood!" said the unhappy man, drawing back from the crib. [53]

If his resolution had waned at sight of the sleeper, it was fixed again when he returned to his chair in the outer room. He raised his head from his folded arms when he heard Philip and Sarah approaching, but did not otherwise alter his position. The low tone of their parting words—one soon learned by the sojourners in hotels and watering-places, where thin partitions and ventilators abound—was, to him, the cautiously repressed voice of affectionate good-nights. But one clause was distinct—"What will Hammond say, when he hears the story?" They jested thus of him, then. One of them, at least, should learn ere long what he would say.

"Lewis, you here!"

Sarah changed color with amazement and vague alarm—emotion that paralyzed her momentarily. Then, as she discerned the tokens of disorder in his dress and countenance, she hurried forward.

"What has brought you so unexpectedly? Are you sick? Has anything happened?"

He did not rise; and, resting her hand on his shoulder, she stooped for a kiss. But his stern gaze never moved from hers—anxious and inquiring—and his lips were like stone.

"Lewis, speak to me! If you have dreadful news to tell me, for pity's sake, do not keep me in suspense!"

"I have nothing to say that will be new to you," he said, without relaxing his hard, cold manner, "and not a great deal that ought to have been kept back from me when I wished to marry you, believing that you had a heart to give me with your hand."

As if struck in the face, Sarah sank back into a chair, speechless and trembling.

"Yes! had you been sincere with me then, grieved and disappointed as I would have felt, I would have respected you the more, and loved you none the less for the disclosure. But when, after a year and a half of married life, I learn that the woman I have loved and trusted with my whole soul—from whom I have never concealed a thought that it could interest her to know—has all the while been playing a false part—vowing at the altar to love me and me alone, when she secretly idolized another; bearing my name, living beneath my roof, sleeping in my bosom—yet thinking of, and caring for him, treasuring his keepsakes as the most precious of her possessions—is it strange that, when the tongue of a vulgar gossip proclaims my shame in my hearing, and other evidence proves what I thought was his vile slander to be true as gospel—is it strange, I say, that I am incensed at the deception practised upon me—at the infamous outrage of my dearest hopes—my most holy feelings?"

She threw herself at his feet, clasped his knees, and implored him, chokingly, to "forgive" her. "Oh! if you knew what I have suffered!"

"What you have suffered!" He folded his arms and looked sorrowfully down at her crouching figure. "Yes! you were not by nature coarse and unfeeling! The violence you have committed upon your heart and every principle of delicacy and truth must have cost you pain. Then you loved him!"

"Once! a long while ago!" said Sarah, hiding her face in her hands. [54]

"Take care!" There was no softness now in his tone. "Remember that I have seen you together day by day, and that glances and actions, unnoticed at the time in my stupid blindness, recur to me now with terrible meaning. For once, speak the true voice of feeling, and own what I know already, that all the love you ever had to give belongs still to your sister's husband!"

"I will speak the truth!" Sarah arose and stood before him—face livid and eyes burning. "I did love this man! I married you, partly to please my parents, partly because I found out that by some means my secret had fallen into unscrupulous hands, and I was mad with dread of its exposure! It seemed to me that no worse shame could come upon me than to have it trumpeted abroad that I had bestowed my love unsought, and was ready to die because it was slighted. I have learned since that it is far, far worse to live a lie—to despise myself! Oh! that I had died then!" She battled with the emotion that threatened to overwhelm her and went on. "Once bound to you, it has been my hourly endeavor to feel and act as became the faithful wife of a kind, noble man. If, sometimes, I have erred in thought—if my feelings have failed me in the moment of trial—yet, in word and deed, in look and gesture, I have been true to you. No one have I deceived more thoroughly than Philip Benson. He never suspected my unfortunate partiality for himself; he believes me still, what I would give worlds to become in truth, your loyal, loving wife! It is well that you know the truth at last. I do not ask you how you have obtained the outlines of a disgraceful story, that I have tried a thousand times to tell you, but was prevented by the fear of losing your favour forever. This is my poor defence—not against your charges, but in palliation of the sin of which they justly accuse me. I can say nothing more. Do with me as you will!"

"It is but just to myself that you should hear the circumstances which accidentally revealed this matter to me."

He narrated the scene at the restaurant, and the discovery of the evening. He evinced neither relenting nor sympathy in the recital. Her confession had extinguished the last ray of hope, cherished, though unacknowledged by himself, that she might extenuate her error or give a more favorable construction to the evidence against her. It was not singular that, in the reaction of disappointment, he was ready to believe that he had not heard all; to imagine that he could perceive throughout her statement a disposition to screen Philip, that was, in itself, a proof of disingenuousness, if not deliberate falsehood. She denied that he had ever been aware of her attachment or had reciprocated it. What meant then those words—"hopes in time to have a nearer claim?" What those impassioned verses? What the linking of their initials within the shell? the motto on the wooden tablet? While these subtle queries were insinuated into his soul by some mocking spirit, he concluded the history of the discovery of the casket.

"I have never opened it since the night before I was married," said Sarah, with no haste of self-justification. "I put it into the drawer the day after we went to our house. It has not been unlocked from that day to this."

"Why keep it at all, unless as a memento of one still dear to you?"

"I felt as if I had buried it. I said to myself: 'If the time ever comes when I can disinter these relics and show them to my husband, without a pang or fear, as mementoes of a dead and almost forgotten folly, he shall destroy them, and I shall have gained a victory that will insure my lifelong happiness.'"

"And that time has never arrived."

She would have spoken, but her tongue proved traitorous. She crimsoned and was silent.

Lewis smiled drearily. "You see that I know you better than you do yourself. It is well, as you have said, that I know all at last. I pity you! If I could, I would release you from your bondage. As it is, I will do all that I can for this end."

"Never!" cried Sarah, shuddering. "Have you forgotten our child?"

"I have not!" His voice shook for a second. "She is all that unites us now. For the sake of her future—her good name—an open separation ought to be avoided, if possible—if it be inevitable, your conduct must not be the ostensible cause. To quiet malicious tongues, you must remain here awhile longer under your mother's care. To accomplish the same end, I must appear once more in public, and on apparently friendly terms with—your brother-in-law. When your mother returns to the city, you had best go, too, and to your own house. Your brother Robert is now sixteen years old—steady and manly enough to act as your protector. Invite him to stay with you, and also Jeannie, if you find it lonely."

"What are you saying? Where will you be that you speak of my choosing another protector?"

"A very important one I have proved myself to be!" he returned, with the same sad smile. "I have not been able to shield you from invidious reports; still less to save you from yourself. I sail for Europe day after to-morrow."

"Lewis, you will not! If you ever loved me, do not desert me and our child now! I will submit to any punishment but this!" She clung anew to his knees as she poured out her prayer.

Not a month ago she had turned pale with fright at the suggestion of this voyage. It was sheer acting then! why not now?

"Objections are useless!" he said. "My arrangements are made. I have passed my word."

"But you will not leave me in anger! Say that you will forgive me! that you will return soon, and this miserable night be forgotten!"

"Shall I tell you when I will return?" He raised her head, and looked straight into her eyes. "When you write to me, and tell me that you have destroyed the love-tokens in that box; when you bid me come back for your sake—not for our child's! Until then, I shall believe that my presence would be irksome to you. It is necessary for our house to have a resident partner in England. It is my expectation to fill that place for some time to come; it shall be for you to say how long."

Bowed as Sarah's spirit was beneath the burst of the long-dreaded storm and her accusing conscience, her womanly pride revolted at this speech. She had humbled herself in the dust at the feet of a man whom she did not love; had borne meekly his reproaches; submitted dumbly to the degrading suspicions that far transcended her actual sin; but as the idea of her suing servilely for the love she had never yet valued; of him, indifferent and independent, awaiting afar off for her petition—hers, whom he had abandoned to the scornful sneers of the keen-witted hyenas of society; to the cross-examination of her distrustful relatives; the stings of remorse; left in one word to herself!—as this picture grew up clearly before her mind, the tide of feeling turned.

"You reject my prayers and despise my tears!" she said proudly. "You refuse to accept of my humiliation. Yet you do not doubt me, as you would have me believe that you do! Else you would not dare to trust me—the keeper of your honor and your child's fair name—out of your sight! I throw back the charge in your teeth, and tell you that your conduct gives it the lie! I have asked you—shame on me that I did!—to continue to me the shelter of your name and presence; to shield me, a helpless woman, more unhappy than guilty, from the ban of the world; and you deny me everything but a contemptible shadow of respectability, which the veriest fool can penetrate. I would not have you suppose that your generous confidence in my integrity"—she brought out the words with scathing contempt—"will deter me from sinking to the level you are pleased to assign me. If the native dignity of my womanhood, the principles I inherit from my father, my love for my innocent babe do not hold me back from ruin, be assured that the hope of winning your approval will not. To you I make no pledges of reformation; I offer but one promise. If you choose to remain abroad until I, in spirit, kiss your feet, and pray you to receive a love such as most men are glad to win by assiduity of attention, and every pleasing art—which you would force into being by wilful and revengeful absence—you will never see your native land again until the grass grows upon my grave!"

She paused for breath, and continued more slowly. "While your child lives, and I remain her guardian, I will use your means for her maintenance—will reside in your house. If she dies, or you take her from me, I will not owe you my support for a single day more!"

Lewis grew pallid to his lips; but he, too, was proud, and his stubborn will was called into bold exercise.

"Very well! It is in your choice to accede to my propositions, or not. A share in all that I have is yours; not only during the child's life, but as long as you live. Before I leave America, I shall deposit for you in your father's bank a sum which, I hope, you will find sufficient to maintain you in comfort. Your father will be my executor in this matter. I shall not confide to him the peculiar circumstances of my departure, leaving you at liberty to act in this respect, as in everything else, according to the dictates of your will and pleasure. At the end of a certain term of years specified by law, you can, if you wish, procure a divorce; on the ground of my wilful and continued desertion of you; in which case, the provision for your support will remain unchanged. As to the [55] child—the mother's is the strongest claim. I shall never take her from you. Do not let me keep you up longer. It is late!"

With a silent inclination of the head, she withdrew, and he cast himself upon the sofa, there to lie during the few hours of the night that were yet unspent.

He had arisen, and was standing at the window when Sarah entered in the morning. But for the dark shadows under the eyes, and the tight-drawn look about the mouth, she appeared as usual; and her "Good-morning," if cold, was yet polite.

"I imagine," she said, as the gong clashed out its second call, "that you wish me to accompany you to breakfast, and to preserve my ordinary manner towards you when others are by. Am I right?"

"You are. This is all I ask. The effort will not be a tedious one. I leave here at noon."

Arm in arm they directed their steps towards the great dining-hall—to the view of the spectator as comfortable and happy a pair as any that pursued that route on that summer morning. Together they sat down at table, and Mr. Hammond ordered "his lady's" breakfast with his own. Mrs. Hunt bustled in shortly after they were seated, full of wonderment at having heard from Sarah's maid of her master's unexpected arrival; while Jeannie gave his hand a squeeze as hearty as was the welcome in her smiling face. The Bensons were always late. So much the better. There were more people present to observe the cordial meeting between the brothers-in-law, made the more conspicuous by Philip's surprise. The genuineness of his good spirits, his easy, unembarrassed manner, was the best veil that could have been devised for Sarah's constraint and Lewis' counterfeit composure.

It did not escape Philip's eye that Sarah ate nothing, and spoke only to avoid the appearance of singularity; and he believed that he had discovered the origin of her trouble when Lewis communicated his purpose of foreign travel. When the burst of surprise subsided, the latter tried successfully to represent his plan as a business necessity. Lucy, who never saw an inch beyond her nose—morally and mentally speaking—except when her intuitions were quickened by self-love, was the questioner most to be dreaded.

"Why don't you go with him?" she inquired of her sister. "He should not stir one step without me, if I were in your place. Only think! you might spend six months in Paris!"

"How would Baby Belle relish a sea voyage!" returned Sarah.

"Nonsense! How supremely silly! One would suppose that she was the only member of the family

whose comfort was to be consulted. Rather than expose her to the possibility of inconvenience, you will deprive yourself of profit and pleasure, and be separated from your husband for nobody knows how long. This shows how much these model married people really care for one another. When put to the test they are no better than we poor sinners, whom everybody calls flirts. Phil, are those muffins warm? This one of mine has grown cold while I was talking."

"How are the horses, Benson?" inquired Lewis. "Have they been exercised regularly?"

"Yes, and are in capital order. You could have left us no more acceptable reminder of yourself than those same fine bays." [56]

"If you have no other engagement, suppose we have them up before the light carriage after breakfast, and take a short drive."

"Agreed, with all my heart! unless Mrs. Hammond quarrels with me for robbing her of a portion of your last morning with her."

"She will forgive you!" Lewis rejoined, to spare her the effort of reply.

From her window Sarah saw them whirl off along the beach in sight of the hundreds of spectators on the sands and about the hotels, and recognized the ingenuity of this scheme for proclaiming the amicable feeling between the two.

"But one more scene, and the hateful mockery is over!" thought the wife, as she heard her husband's step outside the door on his return.

She snatched a paper from the table, and seemed absorbed in its contents, not looking up at his entrance. Lewis made several turns through the room, sighed heavily, and once paused, as if about to address her, but changed his mind.

Then sounded from without the fresh, gurgling laugh of a child, and the nurse came in with the baby—rosy and bright—from her morning walk on the shore. She almost sprang from Mary's hold at sight of her father, and dismissing the woman with a word, he took his darling into his arms and sat down behind his wife. Inflexibly sullen, Sarah tried not to listen, as she would not see them; but she heard every sound: the child's soft coo of satisfaction as she nestled in the father's bosom; the many kisses he imprinted upon her pure face and mouth with what agony Sarah well knew—the irregular respiration, sometimes repressed, until its breaking forth was like sobs; and the proud, miserable heart confessed reluctantly that, in one respect, his share of their divided lot was heavier than hers. She was not to witness his final resignation of his idol. Under color of summoning Mary, he carried the infant from the room, and came back without her.

"It is time for me to go now, Sarah!"

His voice was calm, and its firmness destroyed what slender encouragement she might have drawn from the scene with his child, to hope for some modification of his resolution.

"Will you write to me, at regular intervals, to give me news of Belle?"

"Certainly, if such is your wish."

"And yourself? you will be careful of your health, will you not? And if I can ever serve you in any way, you will let me know?"

"It is not likely that you can; thank you."

There was a silence of some moments. Sarah stood playing with the tassel of her morning robe, pale and composed.

"Sarah!" Lewis took her hand. "We have both been hasty, both violent! Unfeeling as you think me, and as I may have seemed in this affair, believe me that it almost kills me to part from you so coldly. It is not like me to retract a determination, but if you will say now what you did last night —'Do not go!' I will stay, and be as good a husband to you as I can. Shall we not forgive, and try to forget?"

The demon of resentful pride was not so easily exorcised. At a breath of repentance—a suggestion of compromise, the fell legion rallied an impregnable phalanx. She was frozen, relentless; her eyes, black and haughty, met his with an answer her tongue could not have framed in words.

"I have nothing to say!"

"'Nothing!' The ocean must then separate us for years—it may be forever!"

"It was your choice. I will not reverse it."

"Not if you knew that if you let me go I would never return?"

"Not if I knew that you would never return!"

Without another word, without a farewell look, or the hand-grasp mere strangers exchange, he left her there—the stony monument of her ill-directed life and affections; the victim of a worldly mother and a backbiting tongue!

CHAPTER XVII.

"How gay Mrs. Hammond has grown lately!" said Mrs. Greyling, the fashionable critic of the —— House drawing-room. "Do you see that she is actually waltzing to-night? She moves well, too! That pearl-colored moire antique is handsome, and must have cost every cent of nine dollars a yard. She is partial to heavy silks, it seems. It gives an air of sameness to her dress; otherwise she shows very tolerable taste."

"I have heard it said that she was a regular dowdy before she was married," observed Mrs. Parton, who was also on the "committee of censure"—a self-appointed organization, which found ample employment in this crowded nest of pleasure-seekers. "Her husband is perpetually making her presents, and she dresses to please him."

"Humph! I distrust these pattern couples! 'My husband doesn't approve of my doing this—won't hear of my acting so!' are phrases easily learned, and sound so fine that one soon falls into the habit of using them. What a flirt Mrs. Benson is! That is the fifth young man she has danced with this evening. I pity her husband and baby!"

"He does not look inconsolable! I tell you what my notion is: he may love his wife—of course he does—but he admires her sister more. See how he watches her! Mrs. Tomes told me that she was standing near him the first time Mrs. Hammond waltzed, and that he seemed real worried. When the set was through, she came to look for a seat, and he got one for her. As she took it, he said something to her which Mrs. Tomes could not hear, but she laughed out in his face as saucy as could be, and said: 'Oh, I am learning when I am in Rome to do as Romans do! Doesn't my elder sister set the example?'"

"He could say nothing then," said Mrs. Greyling. "Those girls played their cards well. The Hunts have very little, if anything, besides the father's salary, and the family was very obscure."

Mrs. Greyling's paternal progenitor was an opulent soap-boiler, who was not ashamed, during her childhood, to drive an unsavory cart from one kitchen door to another. But he counted his thousands now by the hundred, and his children ranked, as a consequence, among the "upper ten."

She continued her charitable remarks: "Somehow the old lady contrived to keep up the appearance of wealth, and married both daughters off before their second season. Mr. Benson is reputed to be rich; but for that matter these Southern planters are all said to be rolling in money. Mr. Hammond is certainly making money. Mr. Greyling says he is a splendid business man."

"He sailed for Europe a week ago, you know."

"Yes; and since then madame has been the belle of the ball. The old story—'When the cat is away, the mice will play.'"

"Sarah," said Philip, an hour later, "will you walk on the balcony with me? You are heated, and the air is balmy as Georgian breezes. It will do you good."

"Are you going to scold me?" she asked, archly, before she would take his arm.

"No. I have no right to do it if I had the disposition."

There was no moon; but the sky was strewed thickly with stars, and the white foam of the surf caught and held tremulously the sparkles from the bright watchers above. Philip did not appear disposed to converse, and Sarah waited for him to begin. Meanwhile, they strolled on and on, until the murmur of the ocean was louder than the music of the saloon band. The sea moaned to the stars, as it had done to the sunless July heavens on that day so memorable in the history of one of the pair—the day of shipwreck stories and a real shipwreck—none the less disastrous, that the treasures and their loss were hidden from all but the bereaved one.

To many it is appointed to lead two lives; to think and feel as well as to act a double part; to separate, as inexorably as human will can decree, past hopes and joys—past sorrows, and, if practicable, past memories from the thoughts and emotions of the to-day in which they exist. Thousands keep up the barrier until death ends the need of watchfulness and labor; the coffin-lid covers the faithful mask that has smiled so patiently and so long above an aching heart. Yet dammed up passion is a dangerous thing. If hearts were so constituted that they could be drained like pestilential marshes, the flood conducted off in harmless and straight channels, then, indeed, might hypocrisy rejoice, and sleek decorum sit down at ease. As it is, genteel propriety and refined reticence are perpetually endangered by the unforeseen swell of some intermittent spring, or the thawing of some ice-bound stream, that is liable to overleap or tear away the dike—ingulfing in an instant the elaborate structures years of toil have cheaply purchased.

Such was the moment when, withdrawing her hand from Philip's arm, Sarah struck suddenly—fiercely—upon her breast, and cried: "Oh! why cannot I die and end this misery!"

"Sarah!"

"I say I can bear it no longer! Others do not suffer thus! If they do, they die, or lose their reason. I will not endure it, I tell you!"

"Sister!"

"Do not call me by that name, Philip Benson! You know better!"

She leaned forward on the balcony railing, her eyes fixed on the sea. Her deep, hurried breathing [57]
was like the pant of some worried animal, gathering strength, and, with it, courage for renewed conflict. To her last words the mysterious plaint of the sea lent meaning. Philip, too, remembered that barren shore, the tumbling breakers, the solitary sea-bird's labored flight landward. Was this

his work? It was but a flicker of truth—dashed out the next second by a blow of indignant will.

"You may forbid me to address you by this title, Sarah; but you cannot hinder me from sympathizing with you in your sorrow, and trying to befriend you. If my companionship is unwelcome, allow me to conduct you to your room. I cannot leave you alone here, where there is continual passing."

"You are right. Regard for appearances is the one thing needful," she said, mockingly. "I must be a dull scholar if I have not learned that I am sane again now—fit to associate with other sane people. If you please, we will go to the ball-room instead of upstairs. I am not a candidate for solitary confinement yet!"

"Mrs. Hammond, I heard a gentleman inquiring anxiously for you just now!" called out a lady, in passing. "He said that you promised to dance with him."

"I did. Thank you for reminding me. A little faster, my good brother!"

She hurried him into the saloon, where they were met immediately by her would-be partner. Philip, bewildered and uneasy, watched her through the evolutions of the dance. She talked rapidly and animatedly, keeping her cavalier in a broad smile, and confirming her lately won reputation of a wit. Her eyes shone; her color was high; she was "really handsome"—as the "censure committee" had occasion to remember at a later day, when it was spoken of in a very different tone from that employed by a member of the distinguished sisterhood in addressing Mrs. Hunt on this night.

"You are a fortunate mother, my dear madam, to have two such brilliant daughters. They eclipse the girls entirely."

"I have nothing to complain of in my children, ma'am. I done—I did my best by them, and they have repaid me a thousandfold."

"Now, I am ready!" said Sarah, to her brother-in-law. "I release you, Mr. Burley!" waving her hand to her late attendant as a princess might to a courtier.

Vexed and disturbed by her unsettled manner and queer freaks, Philip gave her his arm, and conducted her through the throng.

"Lewis has had fair winds, and must now be nearing the end of his voyage," he remarked, as they sauntered along the piazza.

"Ah! he is on the sea to-night! How strange! I had not thought of that!"

"I see nothing wonderful in the idea, as he has not had time to cross the Atlantic since he left these shores," returned Philip, dryly. "The oddest thing I can think of at present is yourself, Sarah!"

"I am aware of that, Philip. Do not speak harshly to me! You may be sorry for it some day."

They were at her door. Her softened manner moved him, and as she offered her hand, he took it with fraternal warmth.

"Forgive me, if I was rough! I have not understood you this evening."

"It is not likely that you ever will. Time was—but it is folly to allude to that now! Think of me as kindly as you can—will you? You have wounded me sometimes, but never knowingly. I cannot say that of many others with whom I have had dealings. Good-night." [58]

The little parlor was still. Mrs. Hammond never kept her maid up to assist in her disrobing, if she intended remaining out until a late hour. Nurse and child were quiet in the adjacent nursery. Closing the door of communication, Sarah stripped her hair and arms of their ornaments; took off her diamond pin, then her rings, and laid them away in her jewelry case; divested herself of her rich dress, and drew from her wardrobe a plain, dark wrapper, which she put on. Next she sat down at her writing-desk, selected a sheet of paper, and wrote a single line—when a thought struck her, and she stopped. A momentary irresolution ended in her tearing off a strip containing what she had penned, and holding it in the flame of the lamp until it was consumed. "Best not! best not!" she muttered. "Doubt may bring comfort to the one or two who will need it. Let them doubt! Save appearances if you can, my poor mother would say." A smile of unutterable scorn glimmered over her face. She pushed away the desk and walked to the window.

From the distant ball-room the throbbing waves of music still rolled past on the summer air, and blent with them was the solemn undertone of the surf. Did men call its mighty voice a monotone? To her it was eloquent of many and awful things—not frightful. What was there of terror in thoughts of rest, endless sleep, rocked for ages by the rising and falling tide, hushed into dreamless repose by the music of the billows? No more of a vain and wearisome life; no more baffled aspirations and crushed affections; no more disheartening attempts to find and reach the right—to follow in the steep, rugged path of duty, and shun the easy, alluring way to which heart and memory were ever pointing; no more of stern rebuke and sneering taunt; no more galled pride and outraged womanhood; no more lying gayety, smiles, and repartee, when the spirit was writhing in impotent agony, longing to shriek out its intensity of woe! Only sleep, rest, peace!

"Sleep! rest peace!" She gasped the words feverishly, as they seemed to come to her on the breeze. Might she not seek these now! now! Not yet! The grounds, the beach were still populous with groups of strollers. She would be seen—perhaps recognized—probably frustrated in her purpose. Leaning her head against the casement, she sat there an hour—not debating, still less wavering in her resolve, only waiting until flight would be safe—and thinking! thinking! thinking!

until her brain whirled.

A thwarted, warped, disjointed existence had hers been from its beginning. Denied food suitable for the mental and spiritual need; denied sympathy, air, and expression of suffering; under the slow torture of this starvation, every avenue to goodness and liberty hedged up, and, for the future, temptation, repudiation, loneliness, perhaps a sullied name—who could dispute her right to try release by one brief pang she alone could feel? Who would miss her? Not the world that flattered her wealth and wit, her laces, silks, and diamonds; not the mother and sister who worshipped the gilded Juggernaut "Society;" not he who was that night sleeping soundly on the same sea that would embosom her in her sweeter, deeper slumber. Shocked he might be at an event so unexpected and uncommon. His next sensation would be a relief at his deliverance from a burden, at his freedom to come and go as he liked—no longer banished by her obstinacy and his own. He had loved her as most other men do their wives—a bond too weak to bear a heavy blow at their self-love. She had sinned beyond forgiveness in his eyes.

Of Philip she thought with a mingling of tenderness and resentment. His unthinking gallantry had been the root of her sorest trouble; but it was unthinking, not wilful wrong. Nor was she the only sufferer. His heart was well-nigh as hungry as hers. Within the past week she had seen this more clearly than ever before, and he had felt it! Lucy's narrow mind, her insipidity, her inordinate vanity, her selfish idolatry of pleasures that wearied him; her disrelish for intellectual and domestic enjoyments, displayed in its most objectionable form, in her indifference to his company, and her neglect of her child—these were working out their legitimate result in his alienation from her, and attraction towards the once slighted sister, whose large heart and mental gifts he now valued at their true worth. To repel him, as much as to drown her cares, Sarah had plunged into the vortex she had heretofore avoided. She had heard that there was temporary solace in this species of dissipation. The cup was, for her, sparkless and bitter, from surface to dregs.

She was saving him with herself by this final step! He would realize this truth, in the throe that would shake his soul when he found she was gone; perhaps, even in that anguished hour, would bless her for having showed to him, while she drove him back from, the abyss they were together approaching. It was no idle vaunt she had made to Lewis, that the principles inherited from her father would save her from overt sin. Thus, thus would she flee the temptation, when the heart had left the will to battle unaided.

Her father! the gray old man who was toiling through this summer's heat, in his deserted home, as he had through so many summers gone! he who had never given her an impatient or angry word—whose pride and joy she still was! The stroke would be severe upon him. Yet he would not refuse comfort. There were still left to him his boys—fine, manly fellows; Jeannie and his baby grandchild—his lost daughter's gift. Tears rushed into the hot, wild eyes with this last image, but she would not let them flow.

"Is it not better that I should leave her now, when the parting will give her no pain, when one little week will blot out my memory entirely from her mind, than to wait until she can recollect and miss me?"

The music had ceased. The revellers had dropped away faster than they had collected, when once the movement was made to retire. The murmur of the deep was the only sound abroad; the stars were the only sentinels. Sarah arose, threw a shawl over her head, and cautiously unlocked the door. A strong rush of air blew it from her hold, and as she caught it, to draw it after her, she trod upon some object lying on the floor. Mechanically she stooped to pick it up. It was an infant's shoe, a dainty little gaiter, that peeped, during the day, from beneath Baby Belle's white skirt. To Sarah's touch it seemed that the lining still retained the warmth of the child's foot.

Never, oh, never, was the patter of those baby feet to make glad music for the mother's ear! Others must guide and sustain her trial steps; others smooth her daily path; others direct the inexperience of the girl in the perilous passes where that mother had fallen and perished!

"Oh, may I not bless her before I leave her forever?" she cried to stern Resolution. And Conscience rejoined, with meaning severity: "Is it you who would breathe a blessing above her purity?"

"Suffer me, then, to take the farewell look I dared not grant myself before!"

And while Resolution faltered at the impassioned appeal, she opened the nursery door and stole to the side of the crib. The night-lamp shed a feeble halo over the table whereon it stood. The rest of the room was in darkness. Mary's light bedstead was close to the crib. Was hers that hard, short breathing, that sent a start and chill through the hearer? A touch to the lamp threw a blaze of light over nurse and child. A sharp cry rang through the chamber.

"Mary, Mary! get up!"

The girl sprang to the floor before she comprehended the meaning of the alarm. Mrs. Hammond had sunk into a chair beside the crib, from which she had snatched her infant. Baby Belle's head was strained back; her hands clenched; her limbs stiffened in a death-like spasm. The eyes were rolled out of sight under the lids; and the four little teeth—her "most precious pearls," the fond mother had called them—were hard-locked within the purple lips.

Terrified as she was, Mary had the presence of mind to run for assistance. Mrs. Hunt and a physician were soon on the spot, and every appliance of the healing art that promised relief to the sufferer was used, but with partial effect. Sarah saw nothing but the child; heard nothing but the doctor's calm orders.

"You do not try to help her!" she said, impatiently, as a convulsion, more fearful than any that had preceded it, seized the delicate frame.

"I could not do more, were it my own child, madam!"

He was an elderly man, whose charity for fashionable mothers was very scant, and, having seen Mrs. Hammond in the ball-room the evening before, he was not prepared for the solicitude she manifested.

"You had better let the nurse take her!" he said, more gently, as Sarah, with difficulty, held down the struggling hands that might do hurt to the head and face.

"No! I will have no one touch her but myself!"

The morning broke, the day heightened into noon, and the paroxysms only abated in violence as the babe's strength declined. Steadfast to her word, the mother had not once resigned her. She had herself immersed her in the warm baths, applied the poultices, and administered the medicines prescribed. Mrs. Hunt was compassionate and active; Mary sorrowful, and prompt with whatever service she could perform; Lucy frightened and idle. [59]

Philip, who had often been in the outer room to make inquiries and offer aid, if any were required of him, was told, just before sunset, that he could go into the chamber. Mrs. Hunt invited him, and the information she added gave to his countenance a look of heartfelt sadness as he followed her. Sarah sat in the middle of the room, so altered that he could scarcely credit the fact of her identity with the being he had parted from the previous night. Her eyes were sunken, her features sharpened, and her complexion had the dead, grayish hue of an old woman's. In her arms lay the babe, and, as she crouched over it, her mien of defiant protection suggested to him the idea of a savage animal guarding her young. He could not say whether or not she was aware of his presence, until he knelt by the dying child and called it by name.

"Baby Belle, do you know Uncle Philip?"

The dark eyes, soft still through the gathering film, moved slightly, and Sarah said—

"Speak to her again!"

"Will Baby Belle come to uncle?"

This time there was no sign of consciousness. The wee hands clasped in the mother's grew colder and colder, and the breath fluttered slowly through the parted lips. The end was near, and Philip's pitying accent expressed his sense of this.

"Give her to me, dear Sarah! It is not right for you to keep her longer."

"She is mine!"

The glare that came to her eye with the three words revealed a desperation that would have done battle with the King of Terrors, had he appeared in visible shape to claim his victim.

More faintly, slowly, trembled the life over the sweet mouth, and the hands, like waxen shapes, lay pulseless in the mother's clasp; while through the silent room flowed the dirge of the sea. Shaken by the freshening breeze of evening, the shutters of the western window swung ajar, letting in a golden ray upon mother and child, and along that path of light the untarnished soul of Baby Belle was borne by its waiting angel—home!

CHAPTER XVIII.

Aunt Sarah sat in the wide porch at the back of her house, knitting in hand. It was a still, but not oppressive August afternoon. There was not a ruffle on the bright surface of the river, and the long meadow grass was as smoothly spread out in the yellow sunshine. From the poultry-yard on the left arose a pleasant murmur, and now and then a stray hen tiptoed around the end of the house, singing idly as she rambled. Charley lay on the green mound—his old reading-room—with a book before him, and to him Aunt Sarah's motherly eyes turned most frequently. Those kindly orbs were dimmer than they were two summers ago, and the gentle face was a thought more pensive. A glance into the sitting-room window, from where she sat, would have showed one Uncle Nathan's empty arm-chair in the chimney corner, and above it were suspended his cane and broad-brimmed hat, just as he had put them off when he took his departure for a country where neither shelter nor staff is needed. Aunt Sarah's cap had a widow's border now; and in her [60] faithful heart there was a sadder void than the death of her children had created—loving parent though she was—and yet more plentiful springs of sympathy for others bereaved and suffering.

Her rocking-chair was set near the entrance of the hall that bisected the dwelling; and the front and back doors being open, she had a fair view of the public road, whenever she chose to look up the lane. The Shrewsbury stage met the boat at four o'clock, or soon after; and hearing a rumbling along the highway, which she knew presaged its transit through this end of the village, the old lady leaned forward to catch a glimpse of the trunks upon the roof; this being all she could distinguish with certainty above the fence.

"Why, it is stopping here!" she ejaculated, getting up to obtain a better look. "Who upon earth can it be?"

The coach rolled on, and the passenger for the farm-house came through the gate and down the

lane. She was dressed in black, wore a crape veil, and carried a small hand-trunk. With a hospitable instinct, Aunt Sarah advanced to the front porch to meet her, still entirely in the dark as to who it could be.

"She has a different look from any of the neighbors; and there's nobody in York that would be likely to come to see me, except Betsy's people, and it can't be either of her girls!"

At this stage of her cogitations, the visitant reached the step on which the hostess stood, and put away the long veil from a face so worn and seamed with grief, so hollow-eyed and old, that the good aunt screamed outright in her distressed astonishment—

"Sarah, dear child! can this be you?"

"What I am now, Aunt Sarah. May I come in and stay with you a little while?"

"Stay with me, poor darling! As long as you like, and welcome! Come right in; you don't look fit to stand!"

She was not; for, now that the necessity for exertion was removed, she was faint and trembling. Aunt Sarah helped her upstairs to the room she had occupied at her former visit, undressed her, and put her to bed. Sarah submitted like a child, too much exhausted to resist being made an invalid of, or to offer any explanation of her singular apparition. She had not slept an hour at a time for many nights; yet when she had drunk a cup of tea, and tried to eat a bit of toast her aunt prepared and brought up to her, she fell into a profound slumber, which lasted until long after sunrise on the following morning. Unclosing her eyes then, they rested upon the dear face, shaded by the widow's cap, that watched at her bedside. A shadowy phantom of a smile flitted over her features at the recognition.

"It was not a dream, then?" she said languidly. "But I have dreamed of you often, of late—every night in which I have had any sleep. Aunt Sarah, I must tell you why I came to you!"

"Not now, dear," Aunt Sarah hastened to say, seeing the wild stare and the cloud return to her countenance. "Wait until you are stronger. I will bring up your breakfast, and when you have eaten it, you may try to dress, if you like. There will be time enough for your story, by-and-by. Charley is in a great fidget to see you."

Sarah submitted to the delay; but it was plain that she was not satisfied with it, and that her mind would be easier when once the tale was told. Aunt Sarah hindered her no longer a time than sufficed for her to take the much needed refreshment, to bathe and dress, and to see and exchange a few sentences with Charley, who supported her down to the sitting-room. There, resting among the pillows of the lounge, Aunt Sarah beside her, with the ubiquitous knitting-work in hand, lest too close observation should confuse her niece, the stricken one unfolded the whole of her sad history.

No more affecting proof could have been given of her prostrated mind and will than this unreserved recital. The secret she had sold conscience and liberty to preserve, she communicated now without a blush. Here—where she had formed the intimacy that had shadowed so darkly her after days—she detailed every step of the wrong course to which this weakness was a key; went over all—the stormy parting with her husband; her conviction of the mutual peril she and Philip were tempting in their daily communion; her resolve of self-destruction—as circumstantially as if she were relating the biography of another.

Aunt Sarah, horrified and pitiful by turns, struggled with indifferent success to maintain equal composure, and against growing doubts of the narrator's sanity. It was a striking and instructive contrast: the world-weary woman returning for consolation and advice to the simple-minded matron, to whom the artificial existence she now heard depicted—its gilded vices and giddy round of vanities; its trials and temptations—were a wonderful, a monstrous tale, as foreign to her sphere of principles and feelings as if they had transpired in another world. But when Sarah came to speak of her child, her manner changed, her voice was hoarse and uneven, and over the careworn visage there went such alterations of fierceness and heart-breaking sorrow that the listening mother, upon whose soul the shadow of her own children's graves still lay long and dark, could hear no more in silence.

"My poor girl!" she cried, falling on her knees, and throwing her arms around the reclining figure. "Dear child! Our Father in heaven pity and comfort you! There is no help in man for such trouble as yours!"

Sarah had not shed a tear in the course of her story. She said afterwards that she had not wept since they took her dead baby from her clasp; but at this burst of unfeigned sympathy, this gush of pure love and compassion, the burning rock was cleft, and a blessed flood streamed from it. For some minutes they wept together without restraint, and when the more quiet grief of the elder mourner was repressed, the other still clung, sobbing to her bosom.

Aunt Sarah held and soothed her as she would have done a sorrowful child; stroking away the hair from her forehead, drying and kissing the tear-stained cheeks, with many an epithet of fond reassurance.

"Let me finish! There is very little more!" resumed Sarah, keeping her aunt's hand fast in both of hers. "We went back to the city, and the next day we laid her in Greenwood. We stayed at father's —I would not return to the house that used to be mine. Father was very kind, and mother meant to be; but she tormented me with suggestions and consultations about my black clothes. Lucy was pining to get back to Newport. She said it was hot and dull in New York. Philip wanted to comfort me, but I shunned him, and I think he was hurt by my conduct; but it was best, was it

not, Aunt Sarah?"

"Certainly, dear!"

"I had often imagined myself lonely before; but I never dreamed of such a horror of desolation as filled my soul during the two days that I remained there, after all was over. Twenty times each night I would start from a feverish doze, thinking that I heard my baby cry or moan as she did in the intervals of those awful convulsions; and then would come in upon me, as if I had never felt it until then, the truth that I could never see her again, and that my wicked, wicked intention of deserting her had brought this judgment upon me. I could not stay there, Aunt Sarah! I heard other voices besides my child's in the air, and saw strange, grinning faces in the darkness. But the worst was to see that, to every one but me, the world was the same that it had ever been. Father looked grave when I was in his sight; but the children could laugh and talk as if nothing had happened, and I have seen mother and Lucy chattering merrily in the room with the dressmaker over my new dresses, while they were criticizing the crape trimmings. And I had buried my last earthly hope in my baby's grave! Then I remembered you, and how you had talked to me of your lost children, and how you had assured me of a home in your heart and house whenever I chose to claim it, and I believed in you, Aunt Sarah! There are not many whom I do trust; but I was sure you never said what you did not mean. I would not tell them that I was coming for I feared they would prevent me. I slipped out of the house when none of them were at home, and went to the nearest hack-stand, where I got into a carriage and drove down to the boat."

"My dear, did you leave no letter to let them know where you had gone?"

"No, ma'am. I was afraid they would come or send for me, and I cannot go back."

"But your father—your mother! Did you not think how distressed they would be when they missed you? And your reputation? What will be said when it's known that you have left your father's house, and no one knows where you are? You are very weak and tired, dear; but you must sit up, right away, and write a note home. Tell them that I will take care of you as long as you like to stay with me, but don't lose a minute! You may be in time for the afternoon boat."

Sarah obeyed; and the careful old lady hurried Charley off to the boat, with directions to place the billet in the hands of the captain, who was a personal friend, and could be relied upon to post it directly he reached the city.

Mr. Hunt replied without delay. Sarah's absence had given rise to the most harrowing conjectures, made plausible by her extreme melancholy and fitful behavior since her infant's death. The police had been privately notified of her disappearance, and cautiously worded advertisements inserted in the papers. He regretted to add that Mr. Marlow, who, as Mr. [61] Hammond's nearest friend, was informed of the distressing occurrence, had thought proper to communicate the intelligence to Mr. H. before Sarah's note arrived, and the steamer bearing the letter had sailed. Mr. Hunt expressed himself as entirely willing that his daughter should remain in her present retreat until her health of mind and body was re-established, but did not conceal his disapprobation of the manner of her leaving home.

Aunt Sarah looked concerned as she read this epistle, which her niece had passed over to her.

"I am sorry for your husband, my dear. This affliction, coming so close upon the other, will be a dreadful blow. It is a pity they did not wait awhile, until they knew something of your whereabouts, before writing to him.

"I am more sorry that the news must be contradicted," was the reply. "As we are now situated, the certainty of my death would be a relief to him. This was my reflection that night"—She left the sentence unfinished.

"My dear!" Aunt Sarah removed her spectacles, and surveyed her niece with her kind, serious eyes. "Have you made up your mind to live separate from your husband for the rest of your life?"

"What else should I do, aunt? He will never come back unless I promise to love him, and that cannot be."

"That doesn't alter the fact of your duty, as I look at it. You ought to make him an offer to do right, at any rate. It would have been easier and pleasanter to live with him, if you had felt for him as a woman should for the man she marries; but you are married to him, and in the sight of the Lord you ought to cleave to him, and him only. That is a solemn covenant, dear—'for richer, for poorer; for better, for worse!' 'Those whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder!' It doesn't excuse people, who take these vows upon them when the right spirit is wanting, that they never thought how awful the engagement was. Their obligations are just the same, whether they love or not."

"The responsibility does not rest with me. I performed my duty while we were together. The separation was his act, and he must abide the consequences. I have erred greatly, Aunt Sarah; but ever since the night of our rupture, my conscience has been easy with respect to Mr. Hammond. I confessed that I had misled him, and begged his pardon. Could I do more?"

"Put the case to yourself, child! Do not be angry if I speak out my mind, and use against you some things you have told me. When you saw that Philip was growing to like you better and better, and that you felt nearer to him every day, why did you determine to die sooner than to have things go on so?"

"Because it would have been a crime for us to love each other—infamous treachery to my sister, to his wife, for us to name the word between us."

"And how would Lucy have felt, if you had come to an understanding and spoken out the true feeling of your hearts?"

"Hers is a careless, indolent nature, but this insult would have aroused her. She would never have forgiven him or me, had she suspected a warmer sentiment on either side than that of friendship."

"But an honorable, affectionate man like your husband, who thought his wife the most precious thing in the world, was to forget his disappointment, overlook your lack of love and truth towards him, only because you allowed that he had found out your real feelings at last, and all the excuse you could give was that you could not help them! You were the one in fault all the way through, from the day you engaged to marry him, up to the minute when you would not say the word he begged from you to keep him at home. It is right that all the advance should come from you." [62]

High-spirited as Sarah was, she was not angered by this plain-speaking. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend;" and she felt that she had but this one. Aunt Sarah studied her thoughtful countenance before she renewed the argument.

"I am an old-fashioned woman, dear—born and bred in the country, where, thank God! I have spent all my life. But I've been thinking about your story of the way people act and feel up there in York, and maybe in all other great, fine, money-making cities, and my notion is just this. I look back of their pushing and straining after riches, and show, and worldly vanities; every man for himself, and the one that climbs highest, forgetting as soon as he gets there that he was ever any lower, and ready to kick over anybody that tries to get alongside of him; and I see that they have lost sight of the second great commandment—'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' Then I look back of this too, and I see where the greatest sin is, and—dear, bear with me! I see where you have gone furthest astray. Here's a passage I was reading this morning that tells the whole story." She raised the Bible from the table, and laid it upon Sarah's lap, pointing as she did so to these words enclosed in brackets:

"Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips. In the day thou shalt make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish; but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and desperate sorrow!"

Mrs. Hunt would have regarded as an insult any expressed doubt of her religious principles and practice. She had a desirable pew in the fashionable church which was nearest her residence, and, stormy Sabbaths excepted, it was generally full at morning service. When her children were presentable as to looks, very young babies being seldom pretty, they were offered in fine lawn and Valenciennes at the font for the rite of baptism; and not a confirmation had passed since her daughters were grown, that she did not fancy how interesting they would look, kneeling before the surpliced bishop, heads gracefully bowed, and the regards of the whole congregation fixed upon them. Sarah never could be brought to the performance of the commonest act of public worship, unless it was to rise with the rest, when a standing posture was prescribed by the prayer-book; and she shocked her mother by declaring that she only did this because she was tired of sitting! Lucy's serene grace of devoutness was beautiful, if not edifying to behold. Those who occupied adjacent pews involuntarily suppressed their responses as her mellow tones repeated, with melancholy sweetness—"Have mercy upon us, miserable sinners!" And as the melting cadences entranced their ears, the lovely penitent was speculating upon the probable cost of Miss Hauton's Parisian hat, or coveting Mrs. Beau Monde's sable cloak.

If Sarah had even heard of regeneration, it was as a technical phrase of the church articles and christening service. Of its practical meaning, its inward application, its absolute necessity to the safety of the soul, she had as vague a conception as a Parsee or New Zealand cannibal would have formed. She had read the Bible in connection with rhetorical lectures, and admired it as a noble specimen of Oriental literature. What other associations could she have with it? A handsome copy of the Holy Scriptures, surmounted by a book of common prayer, lay on a stand in Mrs. Hunt's third and rear parlor, and was dusted when a like attention was paid to the other ornaments of tables and etageres. An Oxford edition, russet antique, formed one of the wedding-gifts of each of the sisters, and in due time was laid in pious pomp on its purple pillow in the library corner. It was hardly strange, then, that the quotation, so apposite to the case in point, should fail to impress her very strongly. Aunt Sarah had gone out, deeming solitary reflection the best means of enforcing the lesson she had tried to inculcate, and, after re-reading the two verses, without further appropriation of their meaning, Sarah turned leaf after leaf of the volume, catching here and there a sentence of the large print, so grateful to the failing sight of her who was its daily student.

"David said unto his servants—'Is the child dead?' And they said, 'He is dead!'"

The smitten chord in the mother's heart sent out a ring of pain, and her listless hand paused upon the open page. It is a simple story—the royal parent's unavailing wrestle with the Chastener, the dread end of his suspense, and the affliction, made manifest in the calm resignation, the sanctified trust of the mourner. But when received as Sarah read it, with the vision of a similar death-scene intermixing itself with its unadorned details, the fresh blood still welling from the wound made by the tearing away of a portion of one's own life, every line is fraught with truth and pathos.

"Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me!"

"Go to her! Oh, if I could! My baby! my baby!"

To the low, sad cry succeeded a season of yearning and of tears. It was an echo of the wail of the heathen mother who, centuries ago, having seen her babes slain before her eyes, cried aloud, in unselfish agony, as the sword, reeking with their blood, was plunged into her own bosom—"Oh, my children! where are ye?"

Sleep on, in thy lowly bed upon the hillside, sweet Baby Belle! Like the pale buds that are fading with thee in thy narrow resting-place, thy mission on earth is accomplished. Joy, young freed spirit, if, stealing through the melodies of heaven, there comes to thee the whisper of that mother's call! Fair lamb! the love that folded thee in the Shepherd's arms designed likewise, in recalling thee, to lure the wandering parent home!

CHAPTER XIX.

> "My Dear Lewis: Before you receive this letter, you will have had the explanation of my disappearance from New York. A merciful Providence directed me, in my partial derangement, to this peaceful retreat. Here I have found rest for body and soul—peace such as the world could never give the heart, even were it not bowed down by a sorrow like mine. Not that I forget past errors; nor that the review does not humble me in the dust. I confess, with shame and bitterness of spirit, my wasted years, my unsanctified affections, my evil passions. But for the assurance of the Father's pardon, the Saviour's loving pity, the black catalogue would strike me dead with horror and anguish. It is a fearful thing to be made to see one's self as she is; to scan in terrified solicitude the record of a life, and find there nothing better than pride, misanthropy, falsehood, hatred of men—rebellion against God. It is a sweet experience to taste, however tremblingly, the consolations of the Friend who invites the weary and heavy-laden to draw near and learn of Him. In His strength—not in that feebleness I once called power—have I resolved to lead a new life. Of the causes which have contributed to produce this change, we will speak more at length when we meet.
>
> "'When we meet!' Lewis, will you, can you forget your manifold wrongs and come back to me? I do not plead, now, 'for the sake of our child.' Her sinless soul henceforth can know no pain or woe. God saw that I was not worthy of her, and He took her. In the earlier weeks of my selfish mourning, I had no thought of your bereavement. Latterly, I have longed to comfort you, for I know that your heart is riven by this stroke. She was your joy, as she was my angel of peace. Her loss is our common sorrow. Shall it not draw us together? Yet, as I have said, our estrangement cannot now affect her. Thoughtless of evil, she passed away. Had she lived, the Omniscient only knows what grief and mortification might have darkened her pathway. Nor do I desire a reconciliation as a shield from the world's sneer or ban. I hold its applause and its censure alike cheaply. In prosperity, its favors were painted, tasteless fruit; in adversity, it would have fed my starving heart with husks. But for my sake—by the thought of my late and sore repentance; by the remorse that must gnaw my spirit, when I remember your noble trust in me, your unswerving fidelity, your generous love and my base requital of it all; by the sorrow that never leaves me by day or by night—forgive me, and return to the home we have both forsaken! I will serve you very faithfully, my husband! I have gained other and higher views of the marriage relation within a short time past. However presumptuously I may have assumed its responsibilities, however unworthily I performed its duties in former days, I would enter upon our re-engagement with a solemn sense of what I owe to you and to Him who united us. You must have despised me at our parting, and since. Perhaps you have come to think of me with dislike as well as contempt. I will bear this—grievous though the burden will be—as a part of my righteous punishment. I will never murmur—never, even in thought, accuse you of unjust harshness, if you will grant me the opportunity to make what amends I can for all you have lost and suffered through my fault."

Sarah was still far from strong; and wearied as much by the intensity of her feelings as by the manual effort of writing, she laid the pen down, and leaned back in the cushioned chair. Her table stood in the parlor beneath the window overlooking the river. The room was prim and clean, as of yore, with its straight lines of chairs; its shining specks of mirrors; the grim black profiles above the mantel, and the green boughs in the fireplace. The outer scene was in its general features, that which the girl had surveyed, with pleased surprise, the July evening of her arrival here two years ago.

Only two years! The sufferings and life-lessons of twenty had been crowded into that brief space. The meadows were growing sere, as if scorching winds had swept over them, and the stream reflected truthfully, yet, one could have fancied, sadly, the changing foliage fringing its borders. [63] But the sky, with its tender blue and its fleecy clouds, ever shifting, yet ever retaining their likeness to one another—the river's smooth, steady flow, were the same; fit emblems both of them of counsels which are mercy and truth through all their workings; of love that abideth forever!

The train of thought was replete with refreshing to the spirit that was striving, in prayer and watchfulness, to adhere to the right, to accept, with meek submission, all that her cup yet held of pungent or nauseous lees. There was no affectation in the humble tone of her letter. She would

not begin it until she had mastered the stubborn remnant of her native pride. It should be nothing to her that her husband had wilfully separated himself from her, and refused her overtures of reconcilement. If this was unkindness it was all she could reproach him with in the course of time they had spent together. He had been a true friend, an honorable protector, and dimly still, but more justly than ever before, she perceived that into his love for her there had entered none of the merely prudential considerations, the cool calculations, wherewith she used to account for his choice of herself as a helpmeet. Where, in the world's heartless circles, could she point out another wife as much indulged, as much honored in public and in private, as she once was by him? Mournfully, if not lovingly, she dwelt upon the countless evidences of his cordial fulfillment, in letter and in spirit, of his part of their mutual engagement, with something of the sinking heart the alchemist may have felt when, after he had, by a mechanical and habitual fling of his arm, tossed the eagerly-sought philosopher's stone into the sea as a worthless pebble, he discovered that the divining steel he held had been changed to gold by its touch.

To whom of us has not an experience similar to this come? It may be that the eyes which once besought affection with dumb and disregarded eloquence are closed and rayless for all future time; the lips that told, with modest frankness, how dear we were to hearts we cared not then to win, are now but silent dust. Or, perchance, grieved by indifference, repelled by unkindness, those hearts have sought and found in other loves solace for the pain we, in our blindness inflicted. It matters little whether they be dead to all the world, or only to us. In either case, the longing and despair of our lonely lives are rendered the more unendurable from the flash of tardy truth that shows us, side by side with our actual poverty of heart riches, the tranquil beauty of the pictured "might have been."

Aunt Sarah had gone on a visit to a neighbor; the hired girl was in the distant wash-house; and Charley considered it his duty to linger within easy reach of his cousin, should she need him for any purpose. To guard her from all chance of intrusion, he stationed himself on the front porch steps, with his book on his knee. For an hour he read on uninterruptedly; then, glancing up as he turned a leaf, he saw a gentleman coming down the gravel walk. He looked thin and anxious, and his restless eye wandered from door to windows, as in expectation of seeing some one beside the boy. With a ready apprehension of his infirmity, only to be accounted for by some prior knowledge of the person he saluted, he took from his pocket a card, which he presented before he shook hands with the silent host. Charley's intelligent face was one beam of pleasure as he read, and his warm grasp showed his sympathy in the happiness he fancied was in store for his cousin. Inviting the guest by a gesture to follow him, he went softly to the parlor-door, tapped lightly—too lightly, indeed, to attract the notice of the musing occupant of the room, then drew back the bolt, admitted the stranger, and delicately withdrew.

Sarah heard the door open and Charley's retreating footsteps, and, supposing that he had peeped in to see that she was comfortable and wanted for nothing, she did not look around. The intruder stood still one step within the room, as if unable to advance or speak. The languid attitude of the figure before him, so unlike the self-poise and quiet energy of her former deportment, her black dress, even the wasted hands dropped so wearily upon her lap, told of the storm that had passed [64] over her, the utter revolution in her life and nature. A struggling sigh he could not repress broke from the gazer's breast, and Sarah turned hastily towards him. She did not swoon, as he feared she would. A thrill, like an electric shock, shook her from head to foot; a wild inquiry looked from her eyes; a question or the reality of the appearance, succeeding so closely to—did it grow out of her revery?

Lewis put this imagination to flight.

"Sarah!" he said, pressing in his the hands she extended mutely. "They told me you were lost, and I hurried home to find you. I could not wait for your permission to come to you, when I learned in New York that I had a living wife! The loss of the child was heavy enough; but this"—He could say no more.

"I am thankful! I am glad that you are here!" A faint, beautiful smile shone over her wan features. "And our baby, Lewis! We must remember that she is an angel now!"

CHAPTER XX.

To no one except Aunt Sarah were the facts of the estrangement and reconciliation of her relatives ever revealed, and within her faithful bosom the secret was hidden as securely as in a tomb.

Great was the chagrin of gossips, male and female, when it was known that Mrs. Hammond's strange flight from her father's house, which had leaked out nobody knew how, and been variously construed into an elopement, a freak of derangement, and a deliberate intention of suicide, according to the degrees of charity possessed by the theorists, was a very innocent and unromantic journey to the country home of her favorite aunt and godmother, a lady of ample fortune and benevolent heart, who would, in all probability, make her namesake her heiress. Under her care, and for the benefit of the seclusion so congenial to one in her affliction, and the salt air so necessary for the restoration of her impaired health, Mrs. Hammond had remained until her husband's return from abroad.

Mrs. Hunt had told Mrs. A., who had told Mrs. B., who repeated it to Mrs. C., how he had not

stopped in New York an hour after he stepped ashore from the "Adriatic." He hurried to the bank, and ascertained from Mr. Hunt that his wife was with her aunt, and that a boat which would land him near Shrewsbury was to leave in fifteen minutes. So he drove down post-haste, and jumped on board of her after the plank had been drawn and the wheels began to move. There never was a more devoted husband or a more attached pair, Mrs. Hunt affirmed.

"More than she could say for that flirting Mrs. Benson and her other half," agreed A., B. and C., unanimously.

"Her conduct at Newport was scandalous, and would have been outrageous if he had not watched her like a lynx!" said Mrs. Beau Monde, who had never been able to secure one-half as many admirers as had Lucy, and hated her as honestly as if they were a couple of Biddies pulling caps for Patrick or Murphy.

"I don't see why he should have felt jealous, I am sure. He wasn't dying of love for her! That could be seen with half an eye. They say he loved Mrs. Hammond before he addressed her sister, and married this one out of spite," rejoined Mrs. Townes, who had made beaux yeux at the distingue Southerner for three whole evenings, and won only the most indifferent glances in requital.

"Mrs. Hammond behaved very prudently!" pronounced Mrs. Greyling, "and dressed very well. I suppose Mr. Hammond brought her some elegant things from abroad. Pity she is in mourning, and must dress plainly at present! If I were in her place—as it was only a baby—I would not wear black more than six months, unless it was very becoming."

"She has become very religious, you know," said Mrs. Parton.

"Indeed! People are apt to, I think, when there has been death in the family," concluded Mrs. Greyling, pensively. "I remember, when my poor sister died, I used to look forward to church and Sunday with real pleasure. I could not go anywhere on week-days, you know, although there were piles of tickets lying in my card-receiver, and we had just taken a box at the opera that very winter! I declare, I should have lost the run of the fashions entirely, and forgotten people's faces, if I had not gone to church. I dare say, too, that she finds some comfort in religion—poor woman! if what the preachers and good books tell us be true."

Had Sarah found comfort?

Look we, for reply, to the chastened lustre of the eye, where once burned restless fires, like the sunward gaze of the imprisoned eagle; to the holy serenity struggling through and finally dispelling the clouds of memory and regret that, at times, would roll in between her soul and the bright, sustaining hope upon which Faith would have its regards forever fixed; to her daily life, sanctified by prayer, beneficent in good works, and by its unostentatious loveliness winning others, first to admire, then to imitate; to the wifely submission and loving kindness of her bearing to her husband, her grateful estimate of the affection he lavished upon her, the deep, true tenderness growing up in her heart for this fond and noble companion; look we, lastly, to the snowy marble guarding that tiny mound in Greenwood, where the mother once believed that hope and joy were buried to know no awakening.

"BABY BELLE,"
infant daughter of
LEWIS AND SARAH HAMMOND.
She went home
July 16, 1858, aged 8 months.
"Is it well with thee? Is it well with thy husband?
Is it well with the child?"
And she answered, "It is well!"

[THE END.]

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE:

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