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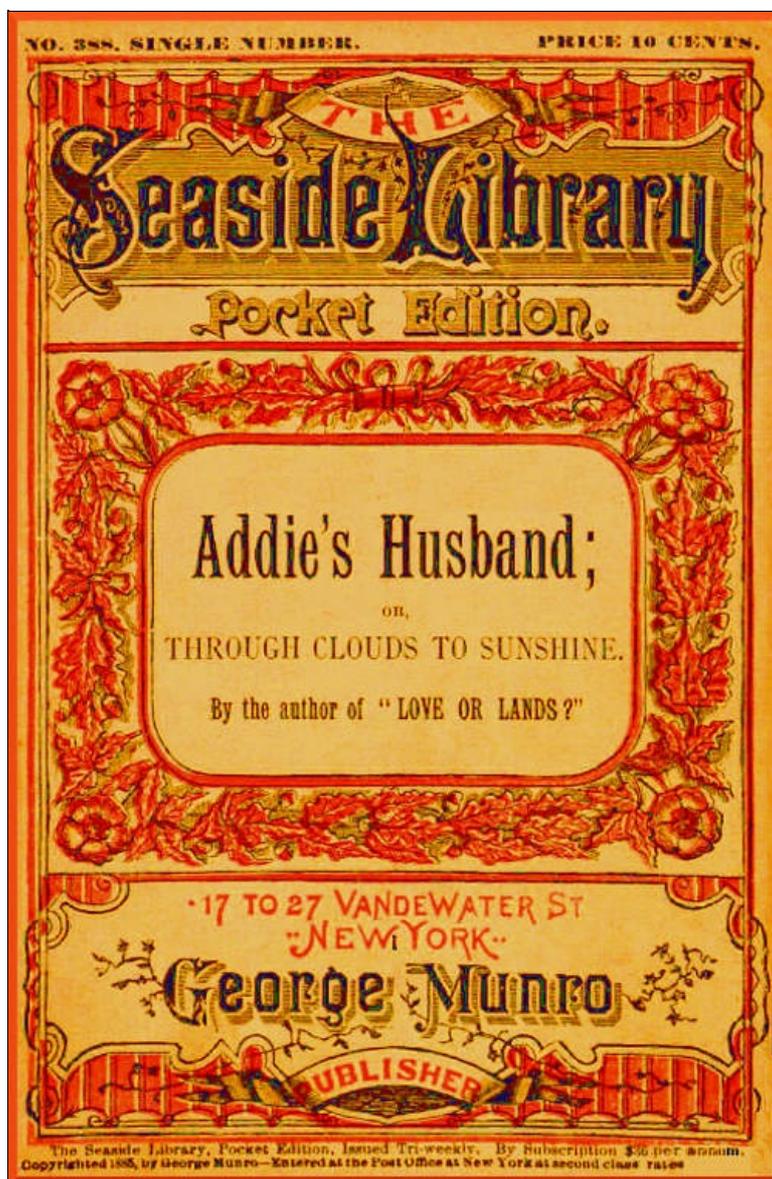
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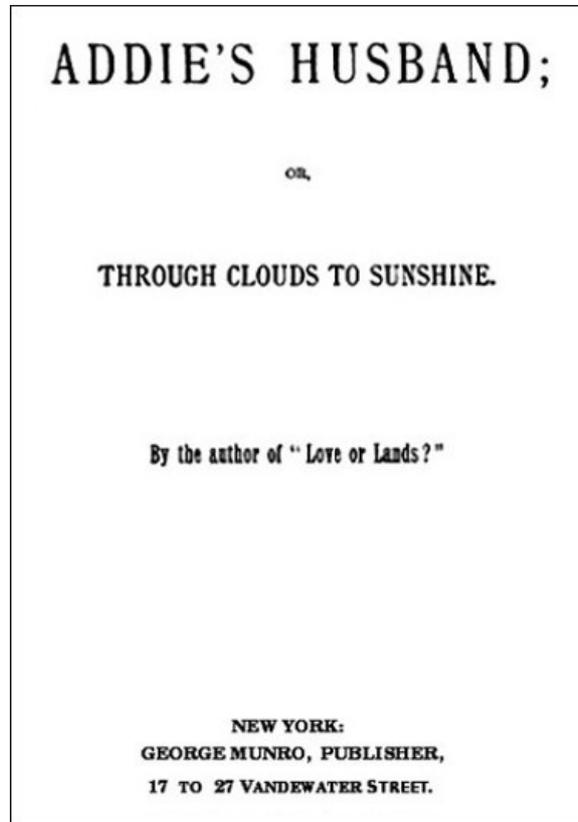
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ADDIE'S HUSBAND.

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CHAPTER I.

"SOLDIER, sailor, tinker, tailor, policeman, plowboy, gentleman—' Adelaide Lefroy, lift your lovely head, my dear; you're to marry a gentleman."

Miss Adelaide, who is absorbed in the enjoyment of a ruddy ribstone pippin, turns her blooming freckled face to the speaker, and answers pleasantly, though a little indistinctly—

"I'm to marry a gentleman, brother Hal? Well, I guess I've no particular objection! Whenever he comes, he will find me ready to do him homage, and no mistake! Can't you tell me more about him? 'A gentleman' is rather vague. Is he to be rich, poor, or something between? Am I to share his gentility in a Belgravian mansion or a suburban villa?"

"The oracle does not say. I can't tell you any more, Addie. I've come nearer the point with the others, though. Pauline is to be a soldier's bride, Goggles a policeman's!"

"Don't you believe him, Addie!" burst in Goggles, a pale delicate-looking child of twelve, with large protruding eyes and a painfully inquiring turn of mind. "He cheated horribly; he ran the policeman in before the tailor the second time, and left out the sailor."

"I didn't, miss—I did it quite fairly. You had four chances; you got the tinker once and the policeman three times. You're to marry a bobby—there's no hope for you!"

"I won't, I won't, I won't!" she retorts passionately, angry tears welling into her big, foolish eyes. "I won't marry a policeman, Hal! I'd rather die an old maid ten times over."

"First catch your policeman, my dear," chimes in Pauline, languidly waving aside a swarm of gnats dancing round her beautiful dusky head. "You'll not find many of that ilk sneaking round our larder, I can tell you!"

"I don't care whether I do or not. I won't marry a—"

"That will do, Lottie; we have had quite enough of this nonsense," interposes Addie, suddenly and unexpectedly assuming the tones of a reproving elder sister. "You came out here to study, and I don't think either you or Pauline has read that French exercise once, though you promised Aunt Jo you would have it off by heart for her this afternoon. Give me the book; I'll hear you. Translate 'I am hungry; give me some cheese.'"

"*Je suis faim; donnez-moi du—du—*"

"No; wrong to begin with. It is *J'ai faim*, 'I have hunger.'"

"'I have hunger!'" grumbles Lottie. "That just shows what a useless humbugging language French is! Fancy any one but an idiot saying, 'I have hunger,' instead of—"

"Don't talk so much. 'Have you my brother's penknife?'"

"*Avez-vous mon frère's plume-couteau?*"

Miss Lefroy tosses back the tattered Ahn in speechless disgust.

"Never mind, Goggles; I'll give you a sentence to translate," whispers Hal teasingly. "Listen! *Esker le policeman est en amour—eh?* That's better than anything in an old Ahn or Ollendorff, isn't it? *Esker le poli—*"

"Hal, do leave your sister alone, and attend to your own task. I don't believe you have got that wretched sum right yet, though you have been at it all the morning."

"And such a toothsome sum too!" says Pauline, leaning forward and reading aloud the problem inscribed on the top of the cracked greasy slate in Aunt Jo's straggling old fashioned writing—

"Uncle Dick gave little Jemmy five shillings as a Christmas-box. He went to a pastry-cook's, and bought seven mince-pies at twopence halfpenny each, a box of chocolate, nine oranges at one shilling and sixpence per dozen; he gave tenpence to a poor boy, and had four-pence left. What was the price of the chocolate?"

"It's a rotten old sum—that's what it is!" says Hal trenchantly. "What's the sense of annoying a fellow with mince-pies and things when he hasn't the faintest chance of getting outside one for—"

"Hal, don't be vulgar!"

"Besides, you can change the pies into potatoes or rhubarb-powders if you like," puts in Goggles spitefully, "and work the sum all the same. I'll tell auntie you did nothing but draw the dogs all the morning."

"Yah! Tell-tale tit, your tongue shall be split!"

"Why did you say I'd marry a—"

"Charlotte, hold your tongue at once!"

There is a ring of authority in Miss Lefroy's fresh voice that insures silence.

Pauline throws herself back upon the mossy sward, yawning heavily; Addie weaves herself a wreath of feathery grasses and tinted autumn-leaves, then picks a milky-petaled flower, which she stealthily and cautiously begins to fray.

"Soldier, sailor, tinker, tailor, policeman, plowboy, gentleman—' Again! How very strange! There seems a fate in it! I wish I could find out more, though. I can't bring it to 'soldier'—heigh-ho!"

It is a still slumberous noon in early October: a mellow sun trickles through "th' umbrageous multitude of leaves," which still linger, vivid-hued, on the stately timber that shelters Nutsgrove, the family residence of the pauper Lefroys.

Nutsgrove is a low rambling brick manor-house, built in the time of the Tudors, surrounded by a stone terrace leading to a vast parterre, which, in the days of their opulence, the Lefroys were wont to maintain, vied in beauty and architectural display with the famous gardens of Nonsuch, in the reign of Henry VIII., sung by Spenser, but which now, alas, was a ragged wilderness, covered with overgrown distorted shrubs, giant weeds, ruinous summer-houses, timeworn statues, and slimy pools, in which once splashed fairy-mouthed fountains.

"So pure and shiny that the silver floode
Through every channel one might running see"

to the bottom,

"All paved beneath with jasper shining light."

Beyond this acreage of desolation is the orchard, protected by crumbling walls, creeping into the famous nut-grove, the uncultured beauty of which the noisome hands of neglect and decay have not touched.

As the nut-grove was in the days of Tristran le Froi, when he established himself on Saxon soil, so it is now—a green-canopied retreat, carpeted with moss and fringed with fern; it is the chosen home of every woodlark, blackbird, thrush, and squirrel of taste in the shire—the nursery, school-room, El Dorado of the five young Lefroys, children of Colonel Robert Lefroy, commonly known as "Robert the Devil" in the days of his reckless youth and unhonored prime, a gentleman who bade his family and his native land goodnight in rather hurried fashion about three years before.

"There goes Bob! I wonder did he get the ferret out of old Rogers?" exclaims Hal, breaking a drowsy silence. "I wish he'd come and tell us."

But the heir of the house of Lefroy, heedless of appealing cry and inviting whistle, stalks homeward steadily, a rank cigarette hanging from his beardless lips, a pair of bull-pups clinging to his heels. He is a tall shapely lad of eighteen, with a handsome gypsy face and eyes like his sister Pauline's—large, dark, full of haughty fire.

"How nasty of him not to come!" grumbles the younger brother. "I wonder what has put his back up? Perhaps old Rogers turned crusty, and wouldn't lend the ferret. Shouldn't wonder, because —"

"The gong, the gong at last!" cries Pauline, springing to her feet. "I didn't know I was so hungry until its welcome music smote my ears. Come along, family."

They need no second bidding. In two minutes the grove is free from their boisterous presence, and they are flying across the lawn, their mongrel but beloved kennel barking, yelping, and scampering enthusiastically around, making the autumn noon hideous.

"What's for dinner?"

"Rabbits!"

"Rabbits! Ye gods—again! Why, this is the fourth day this week that we've fared on their delectable flesh!" cries Robert, striding into the dining-room in grim disgust.

"At this rate we'll soon clear Higgins's warren for him!" chimes in Hal.

"Aunt Jo, let me say grace to-day, will you?"

"Certainly, my dear," Aunt Jo responds, somewhat surprised at the request. She is a mild, sheep faced old gentlewoman, with weary eyes that within the last two years have rained tears almost daily.

Pauline folds her slim sunburnt hands, bows her head, and murmurs reverently—

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"Of rabbits young, of rabbits old,
Of rabbits hot, of rabbits cold,
Of rabbits tender, rabbits tough,
We thank thee, Lord, we've had enough!"

"Amen!" respond the family, in full lugubrious choir.

"I wonder if I shall know the flavor of butcher's meat if I ever taste it again?" says Robert presently, with exaggerated exertion hacking a cumbrous limb that covers his cracked plate—a plate which a china-collector would have treasured in a cabinet.

"You certainly won't taste butcher's meat again until the butcher's bill is paid," answers Aunt Jo sharply. "Thirteen pounds eleven and sixpence—so he sent me word when Sarah tried to get a mutton-chop for Lottie the day she was so ill. Until his bill is paid, he won't trust us with another pound of flesh; that was the message he sent to me—to me—Josephine Darcy! Oh that I should live to receive such a message from a tradesman! What would my dear uncle the bishop have felt if he could have heard it?"

"But he can't hear it, auntie dear," says Lottie, consolingly. "He's dead, you know."

"Not dead, but gone before," reproves Miss Darcy, burying her face in her handkerchief.

"Water-works again!" groans Robert, *sotto voce*. "Use the plug, some one."

Addie obeys the elegant order by slipping her arm round the old lady's neck.

"There, there, dear; don't take on so. You fret too much about us; you'll make yourself ill in the end. Cheer up, auntie dear, cheer—"

"Cheer up!" she interrupts, in a wailing voice. "Oh, child, it is easy for you to talk in that light way! Cheer up, when poverty is at the door, starvation staring us in the face! Cheer up, when I look at you five neglected, deserted children, growing up half fed, wholly uneducated, clothed as badly as the poorest laborer on the vast estates your grandfather owned—you my poor dead sister's children! Oh, Addie, Addie, you talk and feel like a child—a child of the summer, who has not the sense, the power to feel the chill breath of coming winter! How can you know? How can you understand? You heard your brothers and your sisters here grumbling and railing at me not five minutes ago because I had not legs of mutton and ribs of beef to feed you with, grumbling because this is the fourth time in one week you have had to dine off rabbit. Well"—with a sudden burst of anguish—"do you know, if Steve Higgins, devoted retainer that he is, had not the kindness, the forethought to supply us, as he has been doing for the last month, with the surplus of his warren, you'd have had to dine off bread and vegetables altogether? For not a scrap of solid food will they supply us with in Nutsford until my wretched dividends are due, and that is four months off yet. Oh, Addie dear, don't try to talk to me; I can bear up no longer! Sorrows have come to me too late in life. I—I can bear up no longer!"

Her voice dies away in hysterical sobs. By this time the family are grouped round the afflicted lady; even Robert's hard young arm encircles her heaving shoulder. He joins as vehemently as

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any in the sympathizing chorus.

"There, there; don't, auntie dear. Heaven will help us, you'll see!"

"Every cloud has a silver lining, every thorn-bush a blossom."

"Something is sure to turn up, never fear."

"And we shouldn't mind a bit if you wouldn't take on so and fret so dreadfully."

"Don't heed our grumbings; they're only noise. We'd just as soon have rabbit as anything else—wouldn't you, boys, wouldn't you? There, auntie, you hear them. Boys must grumble at something; it wouldn't be natural if they didn't."

"Oh, auntie, auntie, can't you believe us? We're quite, quite happy as we are. As long as we are all together, as long as we have the dear old place to live in, what does anything else matter? We're quite happy. We never want to change or go away, or wear grand clothes, talk French, or thump the piano like other common people. We don't—we don't indeed! If you would only leave off fretting, we'd leave off grumbling, and be all as happy as the day is long."

Somewhat cheered by this unanimous appeal, Miss Darcy wipes her eyes, though still protesting.

"I know that, I know that; as long as you're allowed to wander at your own sweet will, lie on haystacks, rifle birds' nests, strip the apple and cherry trees, hunt rats and rabbits, and, above all, do no lessons, and make no attempt to improve your minds in any way, you will be happy. But the question is, How long will these doubtful means of happiness be left to you? Acre after acre, farm after farm, has slipped from the family within the last thirty years. You have now but nominal possession of the house, garden, orchard, and part of the grove—only nominal possession, remember, for the place is mortgaged to the last farthing; the very pictures on the wall, the chairs you sit on, the china in the pantry, are all security for borrowed money. And—and, children"—impressively—"it is best for you to know the worst. If—if your—your father should cease to pay the interest on this money, why, his creditors could seize on this place and turn you out homeless on the roadside at an hour's notice!"

There is a deep silence; then comes a protesting outburst. Robert's dark face flushes wrathfully as he exclaims—

"But—but, Aunt Jo, he—he will—he must pay the interest, and give me a chance of reclaiming my birthright. He—he couldn't be so—so bad as to let that lapse under the circumstances."

"Circumstances may be too strong for him."

"In any case," says Pauline hopefully, "the creditors couldn't be so heartless, so devoid of all feelings of humanity as to turn us out like that; they must wait until some of us are dead, or married, or something. Where could we go?"

"Your father's creditors are Jews, Pauline; they are not famed for humanity or forbearance. However, as you say, children, it is best to look at the bright side of things, and trust in the mercy of Heaven."

"And in the mercy of a Jew too!" chimes in Addie.

"Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions— [10]
fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same summer and winter, as a Christian is? If you prick him, does he not bleed? If you tickle him, does he not laugh? If you poison him, does he not—"

"Bravo, Addie—bravo; well done!"

"That was tall spouting, and no mistake! Where did you pick it all up?"

"That's Shakespeare," Addie answers, lifting her rosy pale face proudly—"it is from the 'Merchant of Venice;' I read the whole play through yesterday, and enjoyed it greatly."

"You imagined you did, my dear."

"Nothing of the kind, Robert; I found it most interesting."

"Don't tell me, Addie," says Pauline, with a tantalizing laugh, "that you found it as interesting as 'The Children of the Abbey,' 'The Castle of Otranto,' or 'The Heir of Redcliffe,' for I won't believe you."

"The styles are quite distinct; you could not possibly compare them," Addie retorts more grandly still. "I am going up to the grove now to read 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.' I believe it's beautiful."

"Don't you think, my dear niece, you had better mend that hole in your stocking, just above the heel, first?" interposes Miss Darcy gently. "It has been in that yawning condition for the last two days; and, to say the least of it, it scarcely looks ladylike."

"I noticed it when I was dressing," assents Addie, placidly, "but quite forgot about it afterward. Who'll lend me a thimble and a needle and some cotton?"

CHAPTER II.

"THREE hundred years, isn't it, Addie, since the Lefroys first settled at Nutsgrrove?"

"Three hundred years," repeats Addie automatically. "Since the year of the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, A.D., 1572, when Tristran le Froi, Sieur de Beaulieu, fled from his patrimonial estates in Anjou to England, where he settled at Nutsgrrove, and married, in 1574, Adelaide Marion, daughter and heiress of Sir Robert Tisdale of Flockton, by whom he had issue, three sons and two daughters—Stephen, Robert, Tristran, who—"

"Three hundred years!" repeats Robert, with fierce bitterness, a lurid light gleaming in his eyes. "What right had he to treat me like that? He got it from his father, who got it from his, and so on backward from son to father for generations. Why should I be made to suffer for his iniquity? Why should I lose what he inherited in solemn trust for his son or next of kin? It is infamous, it is monstrous! I suppose it would be wrong to wish that one's own father—"

"Oh, hush, Robert—hush!"

Addie's hand is placed over the boy's quivering mouth; he is silenced.

Eight months have gone by, and the great evil foreseen by poor Aunt Jo has come to pass.

Colonel Lefroy, out of reach of remonstrance or appeal, has let the old home of his forefathers pass out of his hands and his son's forever. The Jews have seized on the estate, evicted its nominal possessors, sold by public auction the goods and chattels, the pictures, china, plate, moldy tapestries, tattered carpets, curtains, scratched and time stained Chippendale; even the worthless relics of their nursery-days the homeless wretched children have not been allowed to take with them. The house and immediately surrounding land, after some brisk competition, has been purchased by Tom Armstrong, the great manufacturer, owner of some half-dozen of the most unsavory chimneys in Kelvick, which at times, when the wind is blowing due south, carry their noxious effluvia over the dewy acres of Nutsgrrove and the surrounding estates, and most unpleasantly tickle the noses of aristocratic county proprietors, who have nothing in common with the busy plebeian heart of commerce and inventive industry throbbing in the very center of their pastures. [11]

And now Tom Armstrong of Kelvick, a man of the people, who has risen from the lowest rung of the social ladder, is master of Nutsgrrove. And the dark-eyed, blue-blooded Lefroys stand, some two months after his installation, leaning against a five-barred gate in an upland meadow, gazing mournfully, and, oh! how bitterly down on the beloved home they have lost forever!

"Three hundred years," repeats Robert, with a dreary laugh. "Well, at any rate, it will take some time to wash the stains of our tenancy out of the old house, to remove all traces of our footsteps from the well-worn paths! By Jove, the wretched snob is at work already! Yes, look at his people hacking away at the flower-beds, ripping up the avenue, hammering away at the venerable walls! It's—it's enough to make one's blood boil in one's veins! He might at least have had the decency to wait until we had gone. I'd like to kick him from here to Kelvick."

"I don't think he'd let you, Bob," says matter-of-fact Hal. "He's a bigger man than you."

"Yes, but a plowman can't fight a gentleman; they're out of it in the first round. Look at the way I polished off the butcher's boy the day he insulted you—and he's twice my weight. I shouldn't be afraid to tackle Armstrong if I only had the chance, and souse him in one of his vile vitriol-tanks, too. That would stop his hacking and hammering until I was at least out of hearing."

"But, Bob," interposed Lottie, awed by her brother's lordly threats, "you're mistaken. That man on the ladder by the west wall is not hammering or hacking anything; he's only trying to clean the big lobby window outside the housekeeper's room, which, I heard Aunt Jo say one day, hasn't been cleaned since the year poor mamma died, when I was a wee baby. It's so hard to reach, and doesn't open; and—and, Bob, you can hardly blame Mr. Armstrong for weeding those beds, for there were more dandelions and nettles in them last year than stocks or mignonette."

"You mark my words," continues Robert, with lowering impressiveness, heedless of his sister's explanation; "should any of us Lefroys stand in this meadow, say, this time five years, we shall not recognize the face of our old home. All its beloved landmarks will be swept away; the flickering foliage of the grove will have disappeared to make way for stunted shrubs, starveling pines, and prim Portuguese laurels: the ivied walls, the mossy stonework, the straggling wealth of creeper, will have been carted away to display the gaudy rawness of modern landscape-gardening; the little river gurgling through the tangled fern and scented thorn-bushes will be treated like the canal of a people's park; the whole place will reek of vitriol, of chemical manures and commercial improvements. So say good-by to Nutsgrrove while you may, for you will never see it again—never again!" [12]

"Oh, Robert, Robert, do you think it will be as bad as that?" cries Addie, turning her soft gray eyes to his wrathful face in wistful appeal.

"Of course I do! What chance has it of escaping moneyed Vandalism? If even a gentleman had bought it, no matter how poor—But what quarter can one expect from the hands of an illiterate vitriol-monger, a low-bred upstart, like that Armstrong?"

"Do you know, I think you are exaggerating his defects a little, Bob?" says Addie, languidly. "He's a plain kind of man certainly, both in manner and appearance; but—but he would not give me the idea of being exactly ill-bred. He does not talk very loud or drop his 'h's,' for instance."

"No, that's just it. I'd respect him far more if he did; it's the painful veneer, the vague, nameless vulgarity of the man that repels me so, that gives me the idea of his being perpetually on the watch in case an 'h' might slip from him unawares. If he were an honest horny-handed son of toil,

not ashamed of his shop or his origin, not ashamed to talk of his 'orse and 'is 'ouse like Higgins and Joe Smith, I should not dislike him so much; but he's not that style of man—he belongs to the breed of the pompous upstart, the sort of man stocked with long caddish words that no gentleman uses, the man to call a house a domicile, a horse a quadruped, a trench an excavation, and so on. Talk of the—There goes the beggar, quadruped and all! I dare say he fancies himself a type of the genuine country squire. Ugh! Down, Hal—down, Goggles; he'd spot you in a moment! I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of thinking we'd look at him."

They descend from the gate and stand together, the five abreast, taking their farewell look, with swelling hearts, at the home where they have spent their happy careless youth in sheltered union. They are not a demonstrative family, the Lefroys—not given to moments of "gushing" or caressing; they quarrel frequently among themselves, coming of a hot-blooded race; yet, they are deeply attached to one another, having shared all the joys and sorrows of each others' lives, having no interests, no sympathies outside their immediate circle; and the thought of coming separation weighs heavily on their young hearts, as heavily as the pall of death.

"Well, we'd best make tracks," says Robert, turning away, his hands shading his eyes, "we'll not forget the 29th of May—your birthday, Hal, old chap. Last year, you remember we had tea in the grove, and old Sarah baked us a stunning cake; this year we have made our last pilgrimage together. Next year I wonder where we shall be? Scattered as far and as wide as the graves of a household, I fear."

At this point Addie, the most hot tempered but the most tender-hearted member of the family, breaks down, and flinging her arms round her brother's neck, sobs out piteously— [13]

"O, Bob, Bob, my own darling boy, I—I can't bear it—I can't bear to have you go away over that cruel cold sea! I shall never sleep at night thinking of you. Don't go away, don't go away; let's all stick together and—and—go—die—somewhere—together! Oh, Bob, Bob, my darling, my darling!"

There is another general break-down; they all cling one to another, Hal and Lottie howling dismally, Robert's haughty eyes swimming too in tears, until the sound of voices in a neighboring field forces them to compose themselves, and they walk slowly across the upland meadow, at the furthest corner of which they separate, the boys, at the urgent invitation of their terriers, making for a rat-haunted ditch in the neighborhood, the girls strolling toward Nutsford through the northern end of the grove.

Miss Lefroy stalks on moodily in front, Lottie, still battling with her emotion, clinging to her firm young arm. Pauline walks behind alone, full of bitter thought, her straight brows painfully puckered. On the morrow a new, strange life is to begin for her, one that she knows will be eminently distasteful; her free young spirit is to be "cribbed, cabined, confined," in the narrow path of conventionality at last, and the prospect dismays her. Look as far ahead as she can, she can see no break in the gathering gloom—can see only that at seventeen the summer of her life is over and the long winter about to begin. Hope tells her no flattering tale; she does not know that in herself she holds the key of a triumphant liberty, of a future of sunlight, of glory, of all that is sweet too, and coveted by womanhood. Pauline does not know that she is beautiful, does not feel the shadow of her coming power, or guess that the lithe willowy grace of her straight young form, the glorious black of her eyes, the pure glow of her brunette skin, the chiseled outline of her small features, will purchase for her goods and pleasures of which her careless innocent girlhood has never dreamed. No lover has whispered in her ear "the music of his honey vows," and the cracked, fly-stained mirrors at Nutsgrove have told her nothing; and so she is sad and sorrow-laden, and the burden of dependence and uncongenial companionship looming before her seems to her almost more than she can bear.

In silence they pass out of the green gloom of the grove, where "fair enjeweled May" has touched with balmy breath each tiny bud, each tender leaf,

"Half pranked with spring, with summer half embrowned."

Under a scented hawthorn-hedge, skirting the main road that leads into the High Street of Nutsford, the Misses Lefroy pause for a moment to adjust the sylvan vagaries of their toilet.

Addie pulls a long limp plume of hartstongue and branch of "woodbine faintly streaked with red" from the battered leaf of her straw hat, which she pitches lightly over her straggling locks, then gives her pelerine a hasty unmeaning twitch that carries the center hook from the right to the left shoulder, and feels perfectly satisfied with her appearance. Pauline steps in front of her sister, with a request to stand on a troublesome bramble caught in her skirt. Addie without hesitation puts forth a patched unlovely boot, and the other moves forward with a brisk jerk, leaving not only the incumbrance well behind, but also a flounce of muddy lining hanging below her skirt; and thus the descendants of the Sieur de Beaulieu saunter down the High Street, with heads erect, callous, haughtily indifferent to public opinion, looking as if the whole county belonged to them.

"Look, mother—look at those poor Lefroys!" cried Miss Ethel Challice, the banker's daughter, as she drives past in her elegantly appointed C-spring landau, perfectly gloved, veiled, and shod. "Aren't they awful? Not a pair of gloves among them! And their boots—elastic sides—what my maid wouldn't wear! Patched at the toes, too! You would never say they were ladies, would you?"

"Poor children! They have no mother, you know, darling, and a bad, bad father."

"Oh, yes, I know! But he was such a handsome, attractive man! Don't you remember, mother, at Ascot, three years ago, when he asked us to lunch on his drag, and introduced me to Lord [14]

Squanderford, how fascinating we all thought him?"

Mrs. Challice shrugs her portly shoulders.

"Fascinating, but thoroughly unprincipled, my dear. I do pity his poor children. What will become of them, thrown destitute on the world? Well, I have nothing for which to blame myself. I tried to do my best for them; but—whether it was from want of manner or through senseless pride I can not tell—Miss Lefroy did not respond to my attempted civility, and the last day I called—about a year ago—I saw the whole family flying from the house across the wilderness like a crowd of scared savages, when the carriage stopped at the hall door."

"Oh, it was all want of manners, of course, mother dear! That poor girl would not know how to receive a visitor or enter a drawing-room. She has never been in any society, you know. All the county people have left off calling on them too; they treated them just in the same way that they treated you. They're perfect savages!"

"The second girl promises to be rather good-looking."

"Do you think so? She's too gypsified for my taste—looks as if she would be in keeping at a country fair, with a tambourine and a scarlet cap."

"She's a remarkably good-looking girl—that's what she is," Mr. Percy Challice puts in, with a knowing smile—"steps out like a thoroughbred, she does. 'Twould be well for you, my dear sister, if you had her action on the pavement."

"So I could have, if I wore boots and skirts like hers," retorts Miss Ethel sullenly.

"Then I'd strongly advise you, my dear, to get the address of her milliner and bootmaker at once."

CHAPTER III.

[15]

"I SAY, Pauline, is that Miss Rossitor going in at No. 3? It's just like what I remember of her dear old-maidish figure. I know she was expected home this month."

"Poor old Rossitor!" laughs Pauline. "Do you remember, Addie, the long mornings she used to spend trying to make Bob and you understand the difference between latitude and longitude?"

"I remember," answers Addie, with a sigh, "that she was wonderfully patient and painstaking with us, and I wish now with all my heart that I had profited more by her teaching. Pauline, I think I'll just run in and see if it is she. You and Lottie can return and let auntie know where I am."

Miss Rossitor, a neat bright-eyed little woman of thirty-five, daughter of a deceased clergyman, had, some three years before, undertaken the education of Colonel Lefroy's neglected children, spending three or four hours every morning in their dilapidated school-room. She had become much attached to her unruly pupils, and it was with sincere regret that she had to give them up and go abroad as resident governess in a French family, being very poor herself, and finding it impossible to get her quarterly applications for salary attended to by the gallant but ever-absent colonel.

"You old dear!" cries Addie, kissing the little lady vehemently. "It is you, really! I'm so glad to see you again! When did you arrive? How did you manage to get leave?"

"I arrived last night; mother did not expect me for another week. I managed to get leave, because, most fortunately—I mean unfortunately—well, well"—with a beaming smile—"we won't try to qualify the circumstance—at any rate, one of my pupils had a bad attack of rheumatic fever, and was ordered to some German baths for a couple of months, and, as the family have accompanied her, I got leave for the time being. Now let me have a look at you, my dear Addie. Well, to be sure, what an immense girl you have grown! But your face has not changed much. And all the others—the boys—I suppose they have shot up too? Three years do make a difference, do they not?"

"Rather!" cries poor Addie, lugubriously plunging at once into the subject of her woes. "It has made an immense difference to us. Oh, Miss Rossitor, you left us three years ago the happiest, the most contented and united family under the sun—you return, to find us the most miserable, destitute outcasts in England! Oh, oh!"

"There, there, child; don't give way so, don't, dear! Tell me all your troubles, Addie; it may lighten them for you. I don't know anything about you clearly: mother has not had time to tell me yet; we've had visitors all the morning."

"There—there is little to tell. About two months ago we were turned out of Nuts Grove. Every article of furniture was sold by auction—even—*even* mother's wedding-presents—and the place was bought by Tom Armstrong, the great vitriol and chemical manure man of Kelvick. That's the whole story."

"But your—your father, child! What of him? Surely he did not allow—"

[16]

"He—he—did nothing. He mortgaged every stick to the place, and did not even pay the interest on the money raised."

"And, Addie, where is he now?"

"I don't know," she answers drearily—"in America somewhere, I believe; he disappeared nearly three years ago. He backed the wrong horse for the Derby, just ran down here for half an hour, burned some papers in his study, kissed us all round, and went away. We never heard from him afterward—at least, not directly."

"But surely he can not have deserted you altogether—have left you five children totally unprovided for?"

"He left us with a capital of four pounds fifteen between us—four pounds fifteen—not a penny more! And we have had nothing from him since; and yet the Scripture tells us to honor our parents!"

"Hush, child—hush! We must not question the commands of Holy Writ. Why, if it comes to that, women are ordered to love, honor, and obey their husbands; and, oh, my dear, my dear," continues the little woman, the corkscrew ringlets of her frisette nodding with impressive emphasis, "if you could only have seen or heard the men some women are called upon to honor—to honor, mind you—why, you—"

"Ah, but that is different, quite different! A woman has the power of choosing her husband; if she selects the wrong man, there is no one to blame but herself. But a child can't choose its own father; if it could, you may be sure poor Bob wouldn't have selected one who would rob him of his patrimony and cast him penniless on the world without even the resource of education."

"Come, Addie dear, are you not too severe on your father? He has had many temptations, has been unfortunate in his speculations; but, when he knows the state you are in, you may be sure he will make an effort to help you—probably send for you all and give you a home in the new world."

Addie does not reply at once; a sudden wave of color floods her soft face, and she says hurriedly —

"After all, why shouldn't I tell you? I—I dare say you will hear it from some one else; I—I suppose half the county knows it."

"Knows what, dear?"

"That our father has abandoned us altogether—that he has other family-ties we—we knew nothing of—"

"Addie, my dear, what are you talking of?"

"He did not leave England alone, Miss Rossitor," she answers excitedly; "he asked none of us to go with him, but he took two other children we had never heard of, and a—a wife. I believe she was an actress at a London theater—"

"My dear child," interrupts Miss Rossitor, much flurried and shocked, "where did you hear all this? Who told you? Do the others know?"

"No; I did not tell them—I don't mean to do so. I heard it all one day accidentally. Aunt Jo and Lady Crawford were discussing it; they did not know I was behind the curtain. My dress was all torn, and I didn't want Lady Crawford to see me, so I hid there, and—and was obliged to hear it all."

Poor Addie's crimson face sinks upon her outstretched arm; for a time she sobs bitterly, refusing to be comforted. However, a cup of tea has a somewhat soothing effect, and after a time she resumes her tale of desolation:

[17]

"When he went, poor Aunt Josephine came to take care of us—you know she was our mother's eldest sister, a maiden lady who lived with a widowed childless niece in a pretty little house at Leamington, where everything was peace and quietness and neatness—three things Aunt Jo loves better than anything else on earth; nevertheless she stayed on with us ever since, and has supported us on her annuity of eighty pounds a year."

"Supported six of you on eighty pounds a year! I can't believe that, Addie!"

"And yet it is true. We did not have dinners *à la Russe*, you understand, nor did we get our frocks from Paris, and the boys had to give up their schooling; but we managed to rub along somehow, and were happy enough, all except poor aunt, who has never enjoyed a peaceful hour since she left Leamington. We had the house, you know, and the garden, which was stocked with fruit and vegetables; there was an old cow too, and a few hens, who laid us an egg occasionally. Oh, we didn't mind—we got along famously! But now—now Heaven only knows what is to become of us!"

"My poor, poor child," exclaims Miss Rossitor, with tears in her voice, "this is too sad! Something must be done. You have some other relatives to help you? Where are you staying now?"

"I'll tell you all about it. When we left Nutsgrove, two months ago, we took up our quarters at Sallymount Farm, belonging to Steve Higgins, who was a stable-boy in grandfather's time, and who married our old nurse Ellen Daly. She had some spare rooms, and she asked us to use them while we looked about us and decided what was to be done. We began by sending round the hat, as Bob calls it, to all our kith and kin. You know in the old days we seemed to have a lot of prosperous relatives; I remember, when I was a small child, a whole band of cousins stopping at Nutsgrove for the Kelvick races, with their maids and valets. And so we thought, for the sake of the family name, they would help us; but—but somehow the hat failed to reach them; they seemed to have moved on, to have vanished into space—they weren't to be found, in fact."

"But there is Mrs. Beecher of Greystones, your father's half-sister. She couldn't possibly overlook

you."

"No, she couldn't well, living within twenty miles and having no children of her own. She and the admiral came over and reviewed us *en masse*, and, I believe, were nervously indisposed for days afterward—the admiral had to swallow half a bottle of sherry before he recovered from the shock of our combined comeliness. They stayed an hour, and said as many disagreeable and insulting things during that time as we had ever heard in our lives before. However, the upshot of their visit was that Aunt Selina offered to send away her companion, Miss McToadie, and take Pauline in her place. Aunt Jo closed with her at once, not giving poor Polly a voice in her fate; and so she is to go over to Greystones the day after to-morrow. Poor, poor Polly!"

"Well at any rate, she is sure of a home. The Beechers will eventually adopt her; and they are very rich people. You should not pity her, Addie; it would be very injudicious," says Miss Rossitor sagely. [18]

"Oh, I didn't to her face! Adversity is teaching me wisdom, I can tell you. After that, Robert was put up in the market, and found wanting in capacity for commercial or professional pursuits, so an old relative with an interest in shipping got him a berth on board a vessel going to China with a cargo of salt. The most horrid line in the whole mercantile service, poor Bob says; and the worst of it is he won't get a penny of salary for nearly three years, and he'll have to work like a galley-slave all the time. Fine opening, is it not? But beggars can not be choosers, you would say. Well, Miss Rossitor, that is all our relatives have done for us so far, except that dear Aunt Jo—Heaven bless her!—has adopted, or, at least, will try to adopt Lottie, and take her back to Leamington when we break up. There is some talk too of getting Hal into a third-rate endowed school near London. Judge Lefroy, a cousin out in India, promises to pay ten pounds a year toward it if two other members of the family subscribe the same sum. But we've had no other advances; and so Hal's affairs are *in statu quo* at present; in other words, he's a pensioner on the poor aunt who has taken Lottie."

"And you, my dear, have you any prospect for yourself?"

"I? Miss Rossitor, I am—don't laugh, please—trying to get a situation as governess to some very small and ignorant children. You remember of old my list of accomplishments? Well, I haven't swelled their quantity or quality since. I can't run a clean scale up the piano yet; I don't know the difference between latitude and longitude; compound proportion is as great a mystery to me as ever; and yet three times last week I offered my services to the public in the columns of the 'Daily News,' 'Daily Telegraph,' and the 'Kelvick Gazette,' and received only one answer. It was from a lady who would give me a home, but no salary—which would not do, as I must at least have a few shillings to buy shoes and stockings, *et cætera*."

"Only one answer! That was unfortunate. You can not have worded your advertisement attractively enough, dear."

"Oh, yes, I did! Bob composed it in strict orthodox fashion. Unfortunately there were lots of other governesses advertising, and no one seeming to want them; but there was a great run on cooks and barmaids and housemaids. I don't know what is to become of me, for I can not and I will not live on poor auntie—that I'm determined! I'd—I'd rather scrub kitchen floors, or pick potatoes in the field like a laborer's daughter!" cries the girl passionately, her cheeks flushing.

"Addie," says Miss Rossitor slowly, hesitatingly, "I think I know of a situation that might suit you, if you really wish—"

"You do? Oh, you dear, you dear! Tell me quickly where it is."

"It's so wretched I'm almost ashamed to mention it; but you seem so anxious, dear," says Miss Rossitor deprecatingly. "A friend of mine is there at present; but she is leaving this week to better herself, as indeed she might easily do. No, no, Addie dear, I won't tell you about it—it's too miserable, too mean—" [19]

"Oh, Miss Rossitor, dear friend, don't refuse to help me! I am not what I was; all my stupid pride is gone; work is all I crave. Oh, can't you feel for me, can't you understand me?" she pleads vehemently.

Miss Rossitor gently kisses the pleading upturned face, and then answers gravely—

"That will do, child; I will hesitate no longer. The family I allude to are retired Birmingham tradespeople, not particularly refined, I fear, in their habits or surroundings. They have four children ranging in age from five to twelve—one boy and three girls; these you would have to educate, and you would have to be with them all day, take them for walks, help the nurse to dress them in the mornings, even, I believe, occasionally to mend their clothes. Your salary for all this would be twenty-two pounds a year—think of that—twenty-two pounds a year!"

"Will you give me their address?" is all Addie says.

"I will write for you myself, dear child, if you wish it. You can at least make a trial; but I warn you that the life of a nursery-governess in an underbred household cramped probably in a suburban villa is very different from what you—"

"I know, I know; but I am prepared to bear anything. What does anything matter now that we are all separated and have lost our beloved home for ever? Oh, Miss Rossitor"—springing to her feet and pacing up and down the room with clinched hands—"that is the thought that stings, that paralyzes hope, that deadens energy—to think that it is gone from us for ever! Sometimes I feel that, if Heaven had made me a man, it would not have been so."

"What would you have done, Addie?"

"I would have thrown myself into the fight, and have struggled undaunted against any odds—against hardship and disappointment and failure—until I had won it all back, until I had ousted the upstart who supplanted us. If he, an illiterate tradesman, friendless, alone, without money, without education, without help of any kind, succeeded in amassing a large fortune, succeeded in becoming master-mariner on the great tide of industry in his native town, why should not I, with such a heart-moving aim in view—I, with the blood of heroes running in my veins—do so likewise? But what is the use of talking? What can a woman do, tied down, hampered, checked on every side by the superstition of ages? Oh, it is too stifling, too exasperating! Sometimes I wish I had never been born. What good am I? What place have I in the world? What—"

"You will find your use in the place Heaven gives you, my dear, if you only put your trust in Providence. Tell me, Addie, something about this prosperous upstart, Armstrong of Kelvick. Have you met him? What sort of man is he?"

"Oh, a very ordinary style of man indeed! There's nothing remarkable about him in one way or another. He seemed quiet and heavy, I thought; I didn't notice him very particularly. He came two or three times to the farm to talk over some business matters with auntie."

"Then you did not find him oppressively vulgar, did you?"

"No, not oppressively so; but I'm no judge of manners, you know, having so little to boast of myself; Bob and Polly, however, who understand these things, say that he is an out-and-out cad, that his every movement betrays him, and that no one but a person utterly devoid of delicacy and good taste would have sent us a present of flowers and vegetables out of our own garden as he did." [20]

"He sent you flowers and vegetables! How was that?"

"Yes, to Aunt Jo. The last time he called she asked him, when he was leaving, how the peas were doing this year down near the currant-bushes—for you know our garden was supposed to produce the finest peas in the county; and that evening he sent her up a basket of flowers and vegetables, and a couple of quarts of gooseberries, enough to make a glorious 'fool;' but Robert pitched the whole lot out of the window indignantly, and when auntie sent the young Higgineses to pick them up again, he went out and kicked them all round. He's awfully proud, you know, dear Robert; I remember you used to call him 'Robert the Magnificent.'"

"Yes; I have seldom met a young gentleman of his years who had such a high opinion of himself and his social dignity."

"He has just the same opinion now. I sometimes tell him he ought to have been born a sultan. And to think of him swabbing decks and tarring ropes—oh, dear!"

"The chances are that Mr. Armstrong sent you the flowers and vegetables only in a spirit of harmless kindness," says Miss Rossitor musingly.

"I dare say. People of that sort don't understand our feelings. Bob said that, had we given him the slightest encouragement, he'd have probably asked us to dinner. Well, I must be going now. Thank you sincerely for your much-needed kindness, dear friend. You'll let me know my fate as soon as possible, won't you? And may I sometimes come down to you in the morning for a practice? They haven't a piano at the farm. I've been reading up my French for the last week. *Bonsoir, bonne amie, bonsoir!*"

CHAPTER IV.

"ADDIE, where are you going?"

"Only up to the grove for a good long morning's study, auntie; don't wait for dinner for me if I'm not back at three. I have some bread and apple in my satchel."

"Why can't you study quietly in the house, like any other sensible girl?" says Aunt Jo querulously. "I never saw such children as you all are; you'd live like squirrels if you were allowed. People may say what they like about the grand Carolingian dynasty of the Lefroys; it's my firm belief they're the descendants of Bedouins or gypsies—nothing else!"

"I couldn't study in the farm this morning, auntie dear," answers Addie, laughing; "there is such a heavy smell of cabbage-water and soap-suds all over the place; and then the baby, poor little dear, is teething, and not a very soothing companion. Will you tell Bob where I'm going, if he asks for me?"

It is a fortnight since Miss Lefroy confided her troubles to her old governess, and the first break in the family has taken place. Pauline is safely established at Greystones, and in ten days more Addie is to enter on her new duties as nursery-governess to the family of Mrs. Augustus Moggeridge Philpot, of Burlington Villa, Birmingham. That estimable lady, having been fascinated by Miss Rossitor's recommendation of her candidate, has accepted Addie's services without inconvenient questioning, and she is now busy storing her mind with knowledge, [21]

unencouraged by advice or assistance from her more experienced friend, who has gone to the seaside with her mother.

Addie stretches herself at full length on the scented sward, and honestly tries to occupy her powerful intellect solely with the dry pages of Noel and Chapsal, tries to banish the fleeting fancies of the summer hour and all the worries and sorrows crowding her life so heavily, tries—hardest task of all—to forget for the moment that this is her beloved Robert's last week on shore, that three days more will see him sailing down Channel with his sloppy cargo into the thundering Biscay waves.

"Adjectives ending in *x* form their feminine in *se*—as, *heureux, heureuse; jaloux, jalouse*. But there are many exceptions to this rule—such as *doux, douce; roux, rousse; faux, fausse*.' Oh, dear me, what a language French is for exceptions! Poor Goggles was about right in her grumblings; it's a miserable language when you come to look into it," sighs Addie wearily. "I've had enough of it for one morning. I think I'll have a tussle now with the Tudors and those bothering Wars of the Roses. I wonder how long it will be before the Moggeridge Philpots—what an awful mouthful!—find me out! Not very long, I fear; and, after that, the Deluge!"

The drowsy hours creep by; Noel and Chapsal, Ince and Mangnall lie unheeded on the turf; crowds of ants, wood-lice, and earwigs are exploring their dry surfaces; Addie, her soft rosy cheek resting on a mossy bank, is fast asleep, dreaming that she is home again, helping old Sally to make gooseberry-jam in the big tiled kitchen, when an adventurous beetle, scampering sturdily across her nose, awakens her. She rises, yawning heavily, collects her property, and sets forth to refresh herself with a look at Nutsgrove. But the trees are too luxuriant in foliage; she walks up and down and stands on tiptoe without getting a glimpse of its brickwork. Near the high-road she comes to a stalwart tempting-looking oak, with giant blanches outstretched, inviting her into their waving shelter, promising her a delicious peep into the green dell they overhang. She climbs nimbly, firmly clutching her Mangnall, rests for a minute clinging to the trunk, and then, advancing cautiously out, balances herself most luxuriously on the swaying branch, an arm of which supports her back and shoulders in most obliging fashion.

"This is jolly, and no mistake!" she laughs delightedly, nibbling a wrinkled sapless apple. "If the aunt could see me now, there would be some sense in calling me a squirrel. How sweet and still the old place looks! Not a soul about hacking or hammering at anything to-day. I am in luck. Now to work steadily and conscientiously. 'For what was ancient Babylon famed?' Let me see—let me see. Oh, yes, I know! For its hanging gardens, lofty walls, and the luxurious effeminacy of its inhabitants. Hanging gardens! How funny! I wonder if they were as nice as mine! I wonder if ever a poor Babylonian girl came up and swung in one to have a peep at her dear lost home that she never—never—"

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A sudden heavy swaying movement, an angry, cracking sound, and the next second, with a sounding thud, Miss Lefroy and her book are deposited side by side on the turf beneath.

"I think—I think I have broken something—something besides the branch," pants Addie, half-stunned with pain—"my—my ankle I suppose. Oh, oh, it is awful! I—I never felt anything like it before. Oh, what shall I do? I feel so queer—so faint—so—so—"

A cold perspiration breaks over her quivering face, she swerves from side to side, and then her head falls forward helplessly on the ground, on a line with her crippled foot.

How long she lies thus she does not know; but, after a time, she is dimly conscious of a man's arm raising her head, and forcing some strong spirit through her lips, which, after reviving her for a moment, sends her into a pleasant painless dream, from which she at last awakens to find herself lying on a soft couch, her foot firmly bandaged, a pile of cushions supporting her head, and a picture of a Dutch fishing-scene which hung between the drawing room windows at Nutsgrove facing her. She can not be mistaken; there is the same "soapsuddy" sea, the same fat grimy boat all over on one side, the same lovely gamboge sunset behind the distant pier, the same massive molded frame, only well dusted and regilt.

She glances round and quickly recognizes other friends of her childhood—an old Chippendale cupboard, a Louis Quatorze table, a tapestried screen, and a pair of large Dresden vases.

"Why, it is Nutsgrove! I am in the drawing-room!" she cries, rubbing her startled eyes. "The chairs, the carpet, the curtains, are different; but the room—the room is the same. What does it mean? Who brought me here?"

A buxom housekeeper who has been bandaging her foot answers at once,

"The master, Mr. Armstrong, brought you here, miss, in his dog-cart about twenty minutes ago. He saw you lying in a dead faint under a tree in the grove as he was driving home from Kelvick. I hope you feel better now; I bathed your foot in hot water according to his directions, and the swelling went down a good deal. The doctor will be here in a minute. Ah, here he is already!"

Dr. Newton, after a hurried inspection, says that the ankle is only slightly sprained, bandages it up again, orders an embrocation to be applied twice a day, and then speeds off to a dying patient.

"You are looking much better, Miss Lefroy; are you quite free from pain now?"

Addie turns with a start and finds the new master of Nutsgrove standing behind her.

He is a tall heavily-built man of about thirty-eight, keen-eyed, rugged-featured, with a dark strong face, the lower part of which is entirely concealed by a tawny brown beard hanging low on his broad chest. A decidedly powerful looking plebeian is Tom Armstrong of Kelvick.

"Thank you—almost," she answers, a little flurried by his massive incongruous appearance in that well-known room. "I feel quite restored now; and I have to thank you, Mr. Armstrong, very much for your prompt and kindly rescue."

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"Pray don't mention it, Miss Lefroy; I was only too glad to have been of assistance to you. You quite startled me at first, you looked so still and white lying on the ground."

"I wish he'd sit down, or move away, or do something," thinks Addie impatiently; "he's so big, he oppresses me and spoils the room." Aloud she says, with a slightly nervous laugh, "I fell from the tree, you know, and broke your lovely branch. It was so—so funny! I had just been reading about the hanging gardens of—of—what's its name?"

"Babylon."

"Yes, Babylon—when down I came with such a thud! I suppose I must have fainted then, or something, though I can't understand how I did such a silly thing; it's the first time in my life it ever happened."

"You must have had a very heavy fall."

"Oh, but I've had much worse falls than that! I've come through trap doors in lofts no end of times. I crashed through a glass-house once and cut myself horribly. I've been bitten by dogs, had my hands squeezed in doors and wedged in machinery—all sorts of accidents, in fact—and I certainly never fainted after them. I'm sure I don't know what the boys will say when they hear of it." She stops suddenly, with an air of startled dignity, seeing the ghost of a smile hover round her host's bearded mouth. "But I am detaining you, Mr. Armstrong; pray—"

"You are not indeed, Miss Lefroy," he answers easily. "I am free from business in the afternoon. Would you not like me to send a message to your aunt to let her know where you are, as the doctor thinks it advisable that you should rest here for an hour before moving again?"

"It is not necessary, thank you. I told her I should probably not return until the evening, so she won't be uneasy. I'm very sorry to have to trespass so long on your hospitality," she says stiffly.

He waves aside the apology without comment.

"You must have found it very strange to awake and discover yourself in this room, Miss Lefroy. Did you know where you were at once?"

"Yes, and—no. It was such a surprise, I could not tell whether I was asleep or awake at first," she answers more naturally. "You—you have not changed the room so much, Mr. Armstrong; the tone of the paintings, of the carpet and curtains, is much as it was, and you have many of the old things too. That's mother's old screen by the fireplace, just as it always stood. She worked it when she was a girl at school. But that corner over there by the second window is quite different—where that *jardinière* stands, I mean. That used to be my special little parlor. I kept my old work-box there, papier-mâché desk, and two little padded baskets for Andrew Jackson and the Widow Malone."

"For whom?"

"My dog and cat; we had one each. I gave Andrew to Mr. Rossitor, but the poor Widow disappeared two days before the—the—auction, and I have never seen her since."

There is a short uncomfortable pause.

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"You—you were fond of your old home, were you not, Miss Lefroy?" he asks presently.

The girl's gray eyes flash angrily, her cheeks deepen to a dusky glow; she answers not a word. He looks at her seriously, a little sadly, in no whit abashed by the eloquent rebuke of her silence. She glances at the clock and half rises.

"I—I really must be going now, Mr. Armstrong; my aunt will be getting uneasy, and my foot feels much better."

"Won't you at least wait to take a cup of tea, Miss Lefroy? The carriage is not round yet—let me persuade you."

She hesitates; her eyes fall on the tea-tray that is being brought that minute into the room, bearing most appetizing fare—a pile of hot-buttered toast, a jug of delicious cream, home-made plum-cake, a few dishes of fresh fruit resting on cool green leaves.

The servant lays his burden on a side-table, preparing to officiate, when he is interrupted by a shrill cry from Miss Lefroy.

"Our old Crown Derby set! Our dear old set! Oh, have you got it—have you really got it? Mr. Armstrong, Mr. Armstrong, let me pour out the tea; do—just for this once! I always did it—always since I was seven years old—and I never broke anything. Let me—do!"

Mr. Armstrong laughs outright at this impulsive appeal, at the eager, childish face and outstretched hands. He motions to the butler to bring the table to Miss Lefroy's couch. Blushing somewhat at the effect of her outburst, and heedless of medical advice, she struggles into an upright position and softly caresses the delicate surface of the sugar-basin.

"There was a chip on the lip of the cream-jug. Yes, it's there still. Hal did it when he was a baby. I see you've had a handle put on to this cup. How neatly it is done!" sighs Addie, discontentedly acknowledging to herself that even during his short tenancy the bachelor-master of Nutsgrove has made some marked efforts to remove the stains, rents, seams of their untidy reckless childhood, to purify his orderly household from all trace of their damaging footprints, as Bob said

he would. What wonderful penetration, what knowledge of the world the dear boy had! Yes, all would come to pass as he had prophesied; a few years more and she would not know the old home again. This was her last glimpse, her farewell view; that handle to the cup was the beginning of the end, the key-note to the reign of paint, of varnish, of vandalic renovation and commercial "improvements" that were to wreck the home she loved.

But Addie does not linger long over these somber forebodings, for the urn is hissing at her elbow, and duty and instinct claim her undivided attention for the moment. In virtue of her twelve years' office she has arrived at a pitch of perfection in the art of tea-making which commands the family respect. Before the tea-pot she reigns supreme; no one ever questions her authority or presumes to criticize the quality of her brew, and her sarcastic information in reply to a request for a fourth cup—"Certainly; as long as there's water there's tea"—is always received in meek silence, from fear lest she, being a hot-tempered and oftentimes hopelessly huffy young person, might throw up office and leave the family at the mercy of either Pauline or Aunt Jo, both of whom have been tried and found dismally wanting during her temporary illnesses. She knows to a grain the quantity of sugar each member requires, to a drop the cream; she knows who likes "mustard," whose nerves and tender years exact "wash," who requires a sensible and palatable "go between."

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Therefore, Addie unable to throw aside the patronizing attitude of years, more or less overcome by the beloved familiarity of her surroundings, rattles the enemy's rich-toned crockery with the same freedom and brisk importance as if she were handling Ellen Higgins's coarse "chaney" in the farm parlor.

"Do you take cream and sugar, Mr. Armstrong?"

"Cream and sugar," he repeats stupidly, as if half asleep—"cream and sugar? How? Where?"

"Where?" Addie answers, a touch of elder-sisterly impatience in her voice. "Where? In your tea, of course!"

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure. How dull I am! Yes, both, please."

This is the first time in his thirty-eight years of life that a lady has presided at Tom Armstrong's tea-board, and the strangeness of the circumstance has for the moment paralyzed his attention. He has had a motherless, sisterless, almost homeless childhood; no woman's gentle influence and refining contact have smoothed the rugged upward path that he has been climbing for more than a quarter of a century. In his springtide, when men's fancies are apt to "lightly turn to thoughts of love," he was too absorbed in prosaic business and ambitious dreams of wealth and power to have time for sweethearting like most young fellows of his age and position. He has never strolled down country lanes on soft Sabbath morns, his arm encircling the plump waist of some apple-cheeked Mary Jane or Susan Ann; he has never picnicked with her under scented hawthorn-hedges, or drunk tea with her, seasoned with shrimps and radishes, at rustic inns or in beer-tainted summer-houses. So to him the unusual position is unmarred by even shadow-clouds of dead joys and by-gone pleasures. Addie's fresh flower face awakes no ghost of fevered memory to taunt him with the sweets of lost youth.

"Here is your tea, Mr. Armstrong; you must tell me if it is right. I don't know your tastes yet."

"It is delicious," he answers slowly, while a sudden thought strikes his musing brain, flooding it with a stream of sunshine—a thought he has never entertained before. What a pleasant thing it would be to have a woman, a young, fresh-faced, gray-eyed woman like Miss Lefroy, to sit by his fireside every night and hand him his tea, just as she does that moment, with that quaint inimitable little air of business-like patronage, of half-matronly, half-childish, yet wholly graceful self-possession! Yes; how very pleasant it would be! He has a house now, a rapidly-growing estate—he has a position of unimpeached respectability, if not of aristocratic quality—he has a clear future, a clean past, a goodly name at his banker's—why should he not take a wife to himself at last, and create ties to dispel the gloom of coming age—a wife just like Addie Lefroy—who would grace his hearth as she does, who would refine and enliven with her graceful youth the atmosphere of the heavily-draped room, which already he has begun to find so still and wearisome after the bustling life outside his den at the factory in Kelvick?

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A wife just like Addie Lefroy—not one whit more elegant, more beautiful, more fascinating, but just as she is—soft-faced, irregular-featured, simple-mannered, gentle-voiced, yet with a suggestion of hot-breathed, breezy youth about her every movement, her every gesture. Yes; if ever he marries, it will be some one like her, very like her—her exact counterpart, in fact; and where is he to find that? That is the question. Rapidly, while he sips his tea, he runs his eye, as he would down a stiff column of figures, over the many eligible young ladies whose acquaintance he owns in his native town; but none of them suits his prejudiced eye. One is too handsome, another too tall, another too fashionable, another too affected—all of them are everything that is not Addie Lefroy. Addie Lefroy, Addie Lefroy! Softly he repeats her name again and again, as if the words themselves tickle his palate and season his tea pleasantly, fragrantly. Addie Lefroy! How the name suits her! It has a sort of liquid, swinging sound. If ever she changes it, will she get another to suit her as well? For instance, Addie—Addie—Arm—

With a start he "pulls himself together," and swallows a big lump of cake that he loathes, which he hopes will act as a sort of break in the dangerous current of his imagination.

Meanwhile Miss Addie, quite unconscious of the agreeable turmoil that her presence is awaking in the breast of her massive middle-aged host, sips her tea and munches cake in blissful unconcern.

"I suppose," she muses, with a little ruefulness, "if the boys and Polly knew, they would think it awfully mean of me, feeding on the enemy like this; but—but—I really can not help it—I'm half famished. Perhaps, if they hadn't eaten anything from seven A.M. until five P.M. but half a moldy apple, they wouldn't be so particular. I don't know about Bob, though; I think his pride would stomach a longer fast than that. I don't believe any strait of body would induce him to eat a crumb under this roof now—and yet Mr. Armstrong hasn't behaved so badly. I might have been lying in the wood but for him. Oh, dear, how horrible! I've actually cleared the whole plate of toast alone! I—I hope he won't notice; I'll shove the dish behind the urn. Yes; he can't see it there. How did I do it? I never felt myself eating. That cake is delicious too—better than any of Sally's. I feel so much better now; I suppose it must have been hunger that helped me to go off in that ridiculous fashion in the grove."

Her head sinks back pleasantly on the soft cushions; she looks out on the sunny lawn and the timbered wealth she knows so well. Both the windows are wide open, and a faint evening breeze brings to her couch a breath of mignonette from a parterre outside, which her mother laid out with her own hands when she came to Nutsgrove, a happy bride, twenty-two years before. A thrush that has yearly built his nest in the heart of the gloire de Dijon, the shining leaves of which are fluttering against the casement, bursts into song. Addie closes her eyes, and she is at home once more, living over again the sweet spring evenings of her blissful neglected youth. Armstrong of Kelvick and his trim purified apartments vanish into space; the notched and rickety chairs are back again, the threadbare carpet with its sprays of dim ghostly terns, the dusky curtains. Her work-box is standing in its old place, she hears Pauline's light footsteps flying down the stairs, the boys are calling the dogs

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"With wild halloo and brutal noise"

away to "marshy joys" in the grove, and old Sally is hunting the chickens out of the kitchen with a peculiar hooting noise that no throat but her own can produce.

"Miss Lefroy, you have not answered my question yet. You were very fond of Nutsgrove, were you not?"

She starts up, an angry crimson dyeing her face, to find her host leaning forward, his keen hazel eyes fixed intently on hers. She answers vehemently, passionately—

"No, I did not answer you, because I thought it was a senseless question; but I will answer you now, if you insist. Were we fond of Nutsgrove? We were—we were—we were! Will that satisfy you? What else had we to be fond of? We had no father, no mother, no friends, no outside amusements or pleasures, and we wanted nothing—nothing but to be left here together. We were content—oh, yes! Even—even when Polly and I began to grow up, we never longed to go away to London or Paris, to fashionable places, or balls and parties, like other girls; and the boys—they never asked to go to school or foreign parts, never wanted to see the world, like other boys. The woods, the river, the gardens, the dear old farm-yard, gave us all we wanted the whole year round—summer, winter, autumn, spring. Fond of Nutsgrove? Ah, we were! We loved every blade of grass, every mossy stone, every clump of earth; every flower and every leaf of the trees was dearer to us than they can be to you if you live here half a century. Now you are answered, Mr. Armstrong, and very rudely and impertinently too; but—but I could not help myself. I—I am very hot-tempered, and you should not have persisted when you saw—when you saw—"

"I know, I know," he interrupts earnestly; "but, believe me, Miss Lefroy, I did not persist out of idle curiosity or for the purpose of giving you wanton pain. Will you bear with me yet a little longer, and permit me to ask you another question, which—which may appear to you even more impertinent than the first? I have a purpose—an extenuating purpose in both. You are leaving this house very soon, are you not, to become a governess—a nursery-governess if I have heard aright—in a family of inferior position, and at a salary so mean as to exclude the idea of helping your family, who are—are almost completely unprovided for, thrown on the world without any visible means of support? Is my information correct?"

"Your information is perfectly correct, Mr. Armstrong," Addie retorts, springing to her feet, her eyes blazing; "but I fail to see your object in forcing me to discuss such—"

With a gesture he silences her, motioning her back to her seat almost impatiently.

"A moment more, if you please; then I shall have done. On your own admission, therefore, I may conclude that your future prospects, both personally and collectively, are not, to put it mildly, in a flourishing condition, and that at present you see no glimmer of improvement, no chance of reprieve from a life of servile drudgery, for which you feel yourself totally unfitted, first of all from a strong distaste to teaching, and secondly from the unconventional nature of your early life and education."

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She is too amazed to resent even by a gesture this extraordinary speech. After a slight pause, he resumes, in the same low mechanical voice, with a faint tinge of color in his swarthy cheek:

"Therefore, I presume to ask you, Miss Lefroy, if in these circumstances you would deem it any improvement to your condition to—to—marry me and live out your life at Nutsgrove?"

She looks at him with eyes wide open, staring stupidly, and blank white face.

"To—to marry you? I—I don't understand. Are you joking, Mr. Armstrong?"

"No, Miss Lefroy, I am not joking; on the contrary, I am very much in earnest. Men mostly are, I believe, when they ask a woman to be their wife."

"You ask me to—to be your wife?"

"Yes, I most assuredly do. If you consent, I will settle this place on you unreservedly, so that, whatever happens to me, nobody will be able to oust you from it again. Nutsgrove will belong to you, you alone, as virtually as it belonged to your grandfather sixty years ago, before an acre was mortgaged. Will you marry me, Miss Lefroy? Is the bribe sufficient?" he asks sharply.

But poor Addie has no power to answer; she sits gazing into the frowning, flushed face of her suitor with the same blank expression, without a tinge of shyness, hesitation, or embarrassment in her attitude, or flicker of color in her cheek. Armstrong feels as if he would like to shake her.

"She looks at me as if I were not human, as if I were some strange animal escaped from a menagerie. She's a woman, I'm a man; why should I not ask her to marry me?" he thinks. "Well," he says aloud, with an irritation he strives in vain to repress, "have you understood my question, Miss Lefroy? Must I repeat it? No? Then will you kindly put me out of pain—that is the correct term, I believe—as soon as you can?"

"Oh!" pants Addie, waving her hands nervously, as if pushing him from her. "Can't you give me a moment to breathe—to feel—to understand?"

"Certainly, if you wish it."

He walks to the window, steps out, and paces up and down the terrace, smoking furiously.

Addie, left to herself, heaves a great sigh of relief, then glances languidly round the room, and tries to realize her situation, to understand that she can be mistress of the old place again, that she need never yawn the dreary hours away in the Moggeridge school-room, need never darn alien socks, help to tub peevish babies, never bow her haughty young head to the yoke of uncongenial servitude, but spend her days by the familiar fireside, rambling through the leafy grove and mellow orchards, her own, her very own forever. A flood of sunshine bathes the park in flickering glory; every leaf trembling with the pulse of coming summer, every bird singing in the budding grove, every gurgling ripple of the stream that feeds the marshy pond behind the park, seems to whisper to the girl's troubled heart words of welcome and entreaty, seems to sing in gladsome chorus, "Come back, Addie, come back, come back; we miss you sorely!" At that moment a shadow falls across her path, the song of the birds dies into a wordless twitter, the glory of the evening fades, as the burly, massive form of the vitriol-manufacturer stands between her and the sunset.

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"To live with him alone here!" she thinks, with a shudder, while the hot blood dyes her face and neck. "Oh, I couldn't—I couldn't! He would spoil everything; he would take the beauty, the poetry out of everything I love. I couldn't—I couldn't! Nobody would expect it of me. The bribe is big, but not sufficient—not sufficient, unless—unless—Oh, I wish I knew what to do—what to say to him! If he would let me be his gover— I mean his housekeeper, his dairy-maid—anything—anything but his—his—wife! Oh, dear, dear, what put it into his head? What made him think of such a thing? He never even looked at me when he came to the farm; and now he wants to marry me. He is a strange man; when he turns to me with that stern straight look in his eyes, I feel—I feel as if I didn't belong to myself, as if I had no power over my life. Ellen Higgins says that he always gets everything he wants, that every one gives in to him sooner or later in Kelvick—nice prospect for me! And the flowers told me last autumn that I was to marry a gentleman—a gentleman they told me over and over again—a gentleman!"

CHAPTER V.

A QUARTER of an hour later Mr. Armstrong re-enters the room, and stands with still impenetrable face before his guest.

"You—you have given me good measure," she says, rather hysterically. "I have been trying to think, to understand it all thoroughly."

"Yes?"

"It is very kind, very thoughtful of you to make such a suggestion, to—to offer to give me back what I—I value so dearly and believed forever out of my reach; and, you—you understand, I would not have spoken as freely as I did—"

"I understand perfectly. Do you accept or reject my offer then?"

"Oh, dear, dear, how point-blank you are!" she answers flutteringly. "I—I do neither yet. Of course it is a great bribe, a great temptation; but—but—"

"But what? Do not be afraid of me, Miss Lefroy. Please tell me unreservedly what is on your mind. I am not a very sensitive plant, I assure you."

"I will then. I dare say it would be better always to come to the point as you do," she says, with a weak laugh. "But women never can, you know; they must flutter round corners and by-ways a little at first—'tis their nature to, Bob says. What I mean is that, dearly as I love the old place for itself, it—it was more the surroundings, it was being all together—we five—that—that made it what it was to me. I know, I feel sure it would—would never be the same, never be the old home to me, if I were living in it all alone and they outside struggling in the world. I'm afraid," continues Addie, her fingers nervously crimping the ragged flounces of her cotton dress, "that I

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don't express myself very—very clearly; but I think you—you will understand what I mean."

"Yes I understand what you mean, Miss Lefroy," he returns slowly, meditatively, and then relapses into silence, which she does not break. "Perfectly, young lady, perfectly!" he echoes to himself grimly enough. "You mean me to understand that, if I marry you, I must also marry your entire family circle—the tall, dark-eyed sister, the small sickly one, the two cubs of brothers, the hysterically-disposed maiden aunt, who would do duly as mother-in-law—the whole interesting group—just a round half dozen. Hum! Rather a formidable number, Tom, my man, wherewith to plunge into the doubtful sea of matrimony—as a maiden venture too—you who have hitherto steered so clear of petticoats, who never until now felt any attractions in their refining rustle! To start with a family of six—six useless dependent pauper aristocrats, who would probably consider you the favored party in being allowed the honor of feeding, housing, clothing, educating them—By Jove, 'twould be a position to make a stouter-hearted man than I am quail! I'd better hedge a bit while there is yet time, pause on the brink of—what? Ten to one, on the brink of a gulf of irreparable folly!"

He looks stealthily at the origin of his troublous irresolution, at the shabby gray-eyed girl whom half an hour before he had no more idea of marrying than he had of marrying his cook, whose presence he has barely noticed during the few times he has found himself in her company. "Is the game worth the candle?" he asks himself for the twentieth time in impatient iteration. She is no beauty, this Addie Lefroy. Her features are not the least bit regular; her skin, though pure and fresh, is thickly freckled; her figure, willowy and rounded enough, is not the type of figure Madame Armine of Kelvick would love to adorn. Then she has no accomplishments, scarcely any education, no money, no connection, save her nightmare of a family; and—most damning fact of all—she does not like him personally. He, Tom Armstrong of Kelvick, is repugnant to her—that he can see clearly enough. Therefore is he not making an ass of himself—an unmitigated ass? A man of his years and experience to introduce on the impulse of a moment an element into his hitherto self-sufficing contented life that may bring with it infinite discord, life-long annoyance! Is there sense or meaning in his vague intangible longing to possess that callous undisciplined child who almost shrinks from his touch, just because she has sat in his drawing-room as if she were at home there, and has handed him a cup of tea gracefully? What is her fascination, her attraction? Not her beauty, certainly, for she is not half as good-looking as other girls he knows—as Miss Ethel Challice, for instance—no, certainly not!

He turns aside and unsuccessfully tries to recall to his mind's eye the vision of that young lady as he sat by her side on the night before in her father's elegant drawing-room. How handsome, how graceful she looked in her shimmering silk, roses clustering in her golden hair! How sweetly and kindly she smiled on him when he went to help her at the tea-table! Why did he not fall in love with her, or have the sense to invite her to come up to Nuts Grove and pour him out a cup of tea from that magical exasperating pot? It might have done the business for him just as well; and how infinitely more suitable and sensible it would have been in every way! She—Miss Challice—would have been just the wife for him, eligible all round—a handsome accomplished young woman, six years nearer his age than the other, with eighteen thousand pounds dowry and no incumbrance—a young woman who would have sat at the head of his table, ruled his house, and reared his children, with comfort and pleasant smooth-working skill.

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"I think she might have said 'Yes' had I asked her," he muses ruefully. "Now that I come to think of it, she always seemed pleased to see me; and her parents are continually asking me up to their place. But I never even thought of it, never noticed—If I had—well, well, if I had, she wouldn't have stared at me as if I had just escaped from a lunatic asylum or the Zoölogical Gardens. No, I think not; her pretty eyes would have drooped a little, her cheeks have flushed ever so faintly, no matter which way her answer would have gone. And she has such lovely hair, too—though I remember a brute at the club said it was dyed, one night. I don't believe it a bit, not a bit! How stupid, how exasperating of me never to have noticed how handsome and attractive—yes, really attractive, by Jove!—Challice's daughter is—his only daughter too! And now—now—"

He turns from the window to take another covert look.

Miss Lefroy has left her couch and is kneeling on the carpet, a gaunt, green-eyed, grimy-coated cat clasped to her breast, over which she is cooing with the rapturous joy of a mother over a downy-pated infant whom she has lost and unexpectedly recovered.

"It's the Widow, Mr. Armstrong," she explains, with dewy upturned eyes. "My own dear, darling, long-lost Widow, whom I thought never to see again! She must have heard my voice through the open window; she came flying in straight to my arms five minutes ago. Oh, you don't know what a cat she is! We've had her nine years, and she's had about eighty-seven kittens. Hal kept an account; and the rats and the mice she has killed—no one could keep an account of them—could they, my darling, could they?"

"She seems glad to see you again—hungrily glad," says Armstrong, stroking her dusty fur; "and she is giving you a demonstrative welcome, and no mistake! I wonder if anything or any one in the world would be as glad to see me after a few months' absence?"

"Why, of course, Mr. Armstrong, your brothers and sisters—and other relatives would!"

"I have no brothers and sisters, or other relatives—at least, no near ones," he answers a little wistfully.

"Dear, how lonely you must feel!"—looking at him with compassionate eyes.

"Miss Lefroy," he says quickly, swallowing a lump in his throat, "With regard to the difficulty we

were discussing a few minutes ago, I wish you to understand that, in case you—you—should decide on accepting my offer, I—should quite sympathize with your family feeling in the matter, and sincerely hope you would be able to induce your sisters to come and live with you here—in fact, to look on Nuts Grove as their home as long as they liked."

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"Oh!"

"As regards your brothers, the case is different. You see, my chi—I mean, Miss Lefroy, I am much older than you or they, and I am satisfied I should only be doing them an irreparable injustice if I asked them to continue to live the life they have hitherto led here. Men must go out into the world, fight their way, and learn the value of independence and success—must earn the birthright of self-respect to transmit to those who come after them. I know it will be a harder struggle for them than for others brought up differently; but I should be always by to give them an encouraging hand and help them with my advice and experience; and then, when their occupation allowed it, they could always come here for a holiday—in fact, continue to look upon the old place as their head-quarters until they built up separate homes and shaped interests for themselves, as most men do sooner or later."

"You are very kind—you are very kind," she answers breathlessly.

"You have said that before."

"I know; but what else can I say?"

"Say that you will marry me."

"Oh, I think I will soon—not just yet—not just yet! Will you give me a few hours more—until to-morrow—to think and talk it over with the others?"

"I will give you until to-morrow morning."

"Thank you—you are very kind. There is a brougham at the door—for me, isn't it? I must be going now"—with a great sigh of relief.

"But can you walk?"

"Oh, yes, with a little help, quite easily."

"Here is my stick—not a Rotten Row crutch, you see—lean on it well on one side, and on my arm on the other—so."

At the threshold of the door she pauses to rest a moment and take one backward glance at the beloved flower-scented room, at the dainty table all awry, at the Widow Malone, her raptures exhausted, sipping a saucer of cream on the spotless carpet.

"Oh, what a mess I have made of your beautiful tidy room!" she cries in childish dismay. "It is easily seen a Lefroy has been in possession. It's quite disgraceful—the cushions all upside down, the antimacassars crumpled, saucers on the floor, and an old bow from my polonaise, with two crooked hairpins, stuck in the arm of the sofa. I must get them, let me go."

"No," he says, laughing; "leave the room exactly as it is, and consider your property confiscated, Miss Lefroy."

With an impulse that she can not control, she looks up into his face and says quickly, with a puzzled frown—

"What made you do it? What put it into your head?"

"What put what into my head?"

"Oh, you know what I mean! What made you ask me to marry you?"

Here is a splendid opportunity for the orthodox declaration as yet unuttered in this strange courtship; but Armstrong takes no advantage thereof, he answers lightly enough, with smiling, careless face—

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"What made me? I hardly know myself as yet. A variety of intangible emotions that I must analyze at my leisure."

"Pity, compassion?" she suggests softly.

"For whom?"

"For—for your neighbor."

He shakes his head.

"No, they were not the chief ingredients certainly. I doubt if they had anything to say to it."

"A feeling of wider philanthropy perhaps, more in the Don Quixote line?"

"No, Miss Lefroy. It is of no use; you can not thus lay light finger on the crotchets of man's 'most sovereign reason;' do not try."

"Well, I—I don't mind much, so long as you don't think I—I was trying to—"

She stops, blushing furiously.

"Trying to what?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"I'll not let you leave the room until you finish that sentence," he says decisively.

"You are a tyrant! Trying—trying to catch you—there! Oh, why will you make me say such things?"

"Trying to catch me!" he exclaims vehemently. "Good gracious, child! how could I imagine such a thing?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure!" she answers, floundering helplessly under the half-amused, half-bitter expression of his dark face. "They say all men are conceited, no matter what they're like, and—and Ellen Higgins says that—that a great many of the Kelvick girls had their eyes on you, but that—that Miss Challice made—made the running too hot for—Oh, what am I saying—what am I saying? Mr. Armstrong, don't mind me; I'm a light-headed fool—a regular fool! Bob always said I hadn't an ounce of ballast, and I haven't—I haven't! Let me go, let me go!"

"If I let you go like this, how do I know I shall ever get you back again?"

"You said you would give me until to-morrow to decide—you know you did."

"I repent of my promise, then. I'd rather know now, if you please."

"But I can't decide in such a hurry. You, as a business man, ought to know it's ill-judged to rush at decisions in such—"

"I'm not in my office now, and don't feel at all like a business man; it's of no use appealing to me as such, Miss Lefroy. Listen, while I tell you a crisp anecdote that may help to throw light on the crotchets of my character."

"It's very late. I must go; auntie will be—"

"One soft spring day I was sitting in a room alone with a young lady—"

Addie stops unconsciously, interested in spite of herself.

"A young lady whom I knew very slightly, and in whom I had hitherto taken not the faintest interest." [34]

"Yes?"

"Until she happened to hand me a cup of tea—"

"Oh!"

"And the fancy suddenly struck me that I should like to marry that girl; and, before I had finished my cup, my mind was made up—I determined she should be my wife. That's all."

"That's all, is it?" says Addie, drawing a long breath. "I—I don't like your story much. You were determined, were you? And do you always get what you determine on?"

"I don't want to boast; but I've been rather lucky up to the present."

"And, if the thing—the person is determined the other way, what then?"

"What then? You know every Britisher has a bit of the bull in him, and enjoys his fight, and you have heard also that flowers out of reach—nearly out of reach—smell the sweetest."

"Oh, there speaks the man all over! You've one touch of nature with my boys, at any rate, Mr. Armstrong—anything well out of reach has the most attraction for them. Bob always gathers his fruit from the ridge of the wall, and Hal would climb the tallest elm in the grove to rob a nest, and yet never lay hand on that of the thrush that builds every year in the gloire de Dijon under the window."

"Well, my limbs are not as supple as they were twenty years ago. I wonder shall I have to climb very high for the nest I want?"

Addie looks down and makes no reply.

They have now reached the brougham, into which he assists her carefully, placing his stout ash by her side.

"Better keep it for a day or two, Miss Lefroy—you may find it serviceable; and remember the doctor's instruction."

He busies himself for a few moments propping up her foot with shawls and cushions, and then, as the horse is about to start, says in a low voice, looking up in her face entreatingly—

"I would try to make you happy."

"You are very kind," says poor Addie for the fourth and last time that day; and then the horse plunges forward, and she is off.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT will they say? What will they do?" thinks Addie, with shuddering presentiment as she is being driven along the high-road to Nutsford. "And how can I tell them about it? Oh, the worst part of all is before me now! How can I tell them about it—how can I tell them? If I only knew how they'd take it—could only guess! But I can't—I can't! Aunt Jo will be pleased, I think. She will say it's an intervention of Providence, the turning of the tide, perhaps; but Aunt Jo is old, and can't feel like the young—and then of course she's not a Lefroy. That's the great point—she's not

a Lefroy. Perhaps Bob will never speak to me again for letting him say so much to me as he did; perhaps Pauline will disown me too, if she hears Bob is so proud, so resentful, so tetchy about the family prestige! It may be an awful blow to him, poor darling—and he going away, too, full of sorrow and trouble already! Wouldn't it be better if I said nothing at all about it until he had left? But then—then—I've got only until to-morrow, and I've promised an answer. Oh, dear! oh, dear! what am I to do? Why did I go clambering up into that wretched tree, like the shameful tomboy that I am? Why didn't I study quietly at home as the aunt suggested—why, why? Good gracious, the farm already! How that horse flies! Perhaps they'll guess, they'll suspect something, when they see me in his brougham? And Hal is so vulgar, so exasperating when he begins to chaff, and Lottie asks such dreadful, dreadful questions!"

She peers forth anxiously before venturing to descend, and, to her great relief, sees that so far the coast is clear. Neither of the boys is about. Hal is not at his usual noonday pastime of shying stones at the pump, or worrying the donkey in the stubble-field. Bob is not, as is his wont, leaning against the hay-rick, smoking away in sullen gloom his last hours on shore. She hobbles up the little garden path and pushes open the farm-house door.

A dismal wailing sound issues from the stuffy, low-roofed parlor to the right, sacred to the family gentility.

"Oh, dear, dear, the aunt is at it again—worse than ever!" thinks Addie ruefully. "She's an awful spendthrift in tears, poor soul! At the rate she has been weeping for the last three months, she really must cry herself dry soon!"

At that moment the door opens, and the old lady half stumbles out, looking so utterly limp and woe-begone that her niece's heart sinks with the fear of some fresh disaster.

"Oh, what is it, aunt? Has—has anything else happened? The boys?"

"My dear, my dear, we'd best give it up—throw up our hands and have done with the struggle at once; it's of no use, of no use! I can hold out no longer."

"Oh, what has happened? Tell me—tell me!"

"Pauline is home again. She came back half an hour ago."

"Pauline back!" echoes Addie, aghast. "Wouldn't they—wouldn't they keep her?"

"She ran away from them."

After a moment's pause, Addie enters, and sees the young culprit, with crimson cheeks and streaming eyes, standing in the center of the room, the boys glaring at her in furious bitterness.

"Pauline!"

"Yes, that's my name; and here I am," the young lady answers, in a shrill taunting voice. "What have you to say to me, Adelaide? I've just been receiving the greetings of my brothers and aunt, and am ready to receive yours now. Open fire, my dear; I'm prepared for any charge. Don't be afraid."

But Addie says nothing—simply sinks into a chair, feeling that the waters are closing round her on every side.

"Oh, Addie, Addie!" exclaims Pauline, disarmed by her mute dejection, "don't be too hard on me, for I couldn't help it—oh, I couldn't help it! You don't know, you can't conceive what a life I've led since I left you—it was unbearable!"

"You've had good food to eat, a soft bed to lie on, warm walls to shelter you, servants to wait on you," says Robert, with a fierce sneer, "which is more than the rest of us have in prospect—more than I shall enjoy for many a long day, Heaven knows!"

"More than I shall have in the charity-school they're trying to get me into," adds Hal, moodily.

"More than your sister will have as a nursery governess in a grocer's family," says Aunt Jo, with dreary emphasis.

"No, no, it isn't—it isn't!" bursts in Pauline passionately. "I'd rather be cabin-boy on board a coal-berge, I'd rather starve at a charity-school, I'd rather teach all the young grocers in England, I'd rather be—be maid-of-all-work in a—a lunatic asylum than go on living with Aunt Selina. Oh, you don't know what it was—what I had to put up with! The very first evening I arrived she began nag, nag, nagging at me, and she has kept it up ever since; her voice is dinning in my ears even now; it haunted me every night in my sleep. Nothing I did, nothing I said, was right. I was clumsy, awkward, uncouth, boisterous, stupid. I could not enter a room, move a chair, or lift a book without making her shiver and the admiral swear. I knew nothing, I could do nothing, not even read the 'Naval Intelligence' without stumbling at every second word. Five times running," continues the girl, with quivering lip, "she has made me walk across the room, shut and open the door, her own maid watching me, until—until I felt inclined to slam it with a force to bring her warm walls about her wretched head. You don't know what it was!"

Nobody makes reply. She looks round at the sullen averted faces, and then bursts out again—

"I wish I hadn't come back to you—you hard-hearted, unfeeling, cruel—I wish—I wish I had thrown myself into the lake at the back of the park, as I ran out one night to do in my anger and pain. But I didn't, because—because I thought of you all and how sorry you'd be. I wish I had now; it would have been better."

Robert shrugs his shoulders and flings a half-consumed cigarette into the grate.

"Better!" he repeats, with a callous laugh. "I won't gainsay you, Polly. I think it would be better still if we made a family-party of the dive—just plunge in in silence together, we five Lefroys. It could be done poetically enough even in the old mill-pond behind the grove. You girls could twine lilies in your hair, Ophelia-wise, and afterward we would haunt the old place, five cold slimy ghosts, and drive the vitriol-man back to the smoke whence he sprung."

"Bob, Bob, don't say such dreadful things! You frighten the life out of me!" screams Lottie, clinging to her aunt.

"Bob, you're a—a wretch, and I wish I was dead!" cries Pauline, flinging herself across the table in a storm of sobs.

Then Addie rises and speaks for the first time, her arm around her sister's heaving shoulders.

"Don't fret, Polly, don't fret. Never mind them; you'll live at Nutsgrove with me. I'll give you a home, dear."

"Addie!"

"I'm quite serious, Pauline—I mean what I say."

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Adelaide's voice is very steady and grave, and there is a tone in it that arrests the stormy attention of the family.

"Mr. Armstrong asked me this afternoon to marry him."

"Eh? What did you say?"

"Kindly repeat that statement, Addie, will you?"

She looks into her brother's startled face, and complies with mechanical firmness, as if she were saying a lesson.

"Mr. Armstrong of Kelvick asked me this afternoon to marry him. I fell from a tree and hurt my foot in the grove, and he found me there, and drove me on to the house, where he asked me to marry him. He said that, if I would, he'd settle Nutsgrove on me altogether, that I might have the girls to live with me always, and that he'd help on you boys as well as he could in the world."

"And what did you say?" comes in trembling eager chorus.

"I said nothing particular—neither 'Yes' nor 'No.' I said I wanted time to consider and consult with you all."

"Thank Heaven, thank Heaven!" Miss Darcy's quivering voice breaks the silence as she half staggers with arms outstretched toward her niece. "And I had begun to doubt—to question Providence! I am rebuked now—I am rebuked now. Addie, my dearest, you have made me a happy old woman to-night!"

"I knew you would be pleased—would wish me to—to accept him," says Addie softly, a little impressed by her heartfelt emotion; "it was the others I felt doubtful about—whose opinion I wanted."

She looks round at the flushed faces of her brothers and sisters; but, of the four, three, though evidently eager to give their opinions, are afraid to open their mouths until "Robert the Magnificent," the recognized head of the family, arbiter of its ethics and manners, has first given tongue.

He walks round slowly from the fireplace, lays his hand heavily upon his sister's shoulder, and then says, in a tone crisp, terse, Napoleonic—

"Marry him! Shut your eyes, my girl, and swallow him as if he were a pill."

"Oh, Robert, I—I couldn't do that! One could swallow anything but a husband. A husband is always there; he can't be swallowed."

"Yes, he can. You don't understand those things, child. After the first gulp, you won't notice him; one husband is much the same as another, after a bit. It's his surroundings, not his personality, that will affect your life and your happiness; and they are good—the best of their kind."

"Oh, Bob, Bob, I never thought you would take it like this!" breaks in Addie, half crying.

"Addie, child, my first thought is your welfare; all selfish emotions, all inward stings must subside before that consideration. You'll not get another chance like this; and we Lefroys must e'en bow our haughty heads and swim with the tide. We're not prepared to pull against it; we should only sink in the struggle. Marry him, Addie, my dear. It will be as I have said, a bit of a wretch at first, but you'll soon get over it, and you will always have your family to fall back upon. We shall be always there, never you fear, to stand by you—to brush him up for you, to—"

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"Oh, yes, yes," bursts in an eager impassioned chorus, "we'll stand by you, Addie, darling!"

"We'll brush him up for you!"

"We'll tone him down; you'll see—you'll see!"

"Marry him—marry him, dear! Never mind his vulgarity."

"Never mind the vitriol or the chemical ma—"

"Or the grocer's van, or anything. You'll have us and the old place back again. What does anything else signify? Marry him, marry him, Addie!"

Poor Addie, overwhelmed by the vigor and unanimity of the verdict against her, so different from

what she has expected, turns from one to another, and then whimpers pathetically—

"It's all very fine you talking like that; but—but, if you were in my place, how would you feel? I don't believe you'd marry him, Pauline, not for all—"

"Wouldn't I, just?" breaks in Pauline stoutly. "Why, I'd marry him if he were three times as old and as plain and as common as he is! Marry him? Why I'd marry an Irish invincible, I'd marry the hangman himself, in the circumstances! His age is another score in your favor, Addie; he's a man pretty well on in life, I should say."

"Only thirty-seven," she puts in moodily.

"Well, thirty-seven is a good age—nearly double your own, child; and a man like him, who has had such a hard life of it, who has been scraping up sixpences since he was four years old, is sure to break up early—he can't stand the strain much after his prime. The chances are ten to one you'll be a free woman before you're thirty. Think of that, my dear!"

"Oh, yes, think of that, Addie! Think of yourself as a lovely—well, not exactly lovely, but extremely nice young widow, with lots of money, living at Nutsgrove, and we all around you, happy as the day is long! Oh, wouldn't it be too awfully lovely!"

Addie shakes her head, wipes her eyes slowly, and tries to smile. Pauline kisses her wet cheek coaxingly, Robert pats her plump shoulder. There is a moment's soothing silence, broken by Lottie, who has also crept up to her side, asking in an eager whisper—

"Addie, tell us what he said—what he did. Is he awfully in love, like Guy was in the 'Heir of Redcliffe,' you know? Did he try to—"

"Lottie, Lottie," Addie answers angrily, with flaming cheeks, "what silly, what absurd questions you do ask! I never met a child like you."

"I don't see how I am so idiotic," she rejoins aggrievedly. "Why should Mr. Armstrong want to marry you unless he were in love with you, I'd like to know?"

"Why?" repeats Robert loftily. "I think the reason ought to be patent even to your immature comprehension, Lottie."

Addie looks at him with an expression of sudden interest.

"Bob, do you know I'm afraid I'm quite as dull as Lottie—for—for—I don't see his reason for wishing to marry me. What is it?"

"He is marrying you for your position, of course. What other reason could he have?"

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"My position? Oh!"

"Yes, your position. He has money, he has lands, he wishes to found a family and sink the manufacturer in the squire; therefore, like all of his class, he looks about him for a wife who will bring breeding, ancestry, position as a dowry, the only means by which he can creep into county society. His eye naturally falls on you, the eldest daughter of the House of Lefroy; he seeks to reinstate you as mistress of your forefathers' acres. And what follows this move? Why, without an effort on his part, without one introductory cringe, the gates of county society are swung open to him through you, and his end effected. By Jove, now that I come to think of it, it's a jolly smart move on his part! I didn't give him credit for such clear-sightedness; he's a sharp fellow, and no mistake. Good thing for you, Addie—you'll have me at hand to look after your settlements. I'll keep a sharp eye on him!"

"So that is his reason, his motive!" thinks Addie, with contemptuous bitterness. "Of course it is a much more likely solution than—than that airy nonsense about the cup of tea. I wonder how a man, a big middle-aged man like him can be so full of littleness, of meanness, and—and—hypocrisy!"

"Yes," resumes Bob, with cynical fluency, "that is his little game; and his next move will be to gently push the family cognomen from behind the scenes and bring our identity to the fore. He'll begin after a year or two by tacking 'Lefroy' on to 'Armstrong;' you'll be 'Mrs. Lefroy Armstrong of Nutsgrove,' my dear; then a hyphen will be smuggled in; after that you'll become 'Mrs. Armstrong-Lefroy of Nutsgrove;' and, by Jove, before your son and heir reaches maturity probably, he'll be as clean a Lefroy, at least in name, as would have been his poor disinherited uncle but for the irony of fate. You must call him 'Robert,' after me, Addie."

But this generous speech has not the soothing effect intended, for Addie, with red, angry face, starts to her feet and shakes off her clinging family passionately.

"How do you know I shall ever marry him at all? I never said I would; and I'm sure I won't now—I'm sure I won't. I might have done so before—before, when I didn't understand; but, now that you have shown me what he is, I won't be the staff to prop his mean snobbishness. Let him get pedigree and breeding somewhere else; he shall not buy them from me, big as his price is!"

Dismay appalls the family at this unexpected turn of affairs; the unfortunate orator and elucidator stands staring with open mouth, not able to produce a protesting sound. Aunt Jo it is who briskly and successfully comes to the rescue. She has taken no part in the discussion, but has sat at the window apart in a soothing daydream, her heart singing a canticle of joy that the days of her bondage are at last closing in—sat, living through in happy prospective the coming year, established once more in her neat, comfortable little house, where the day worked itself out from sunrise to sunset with the soothing regularity of clock-work, where the voice of insulting tradesmen never penetrated, where all was peace, neatness, comfortable economy, and

respectability.

"Robert, Pauline, Henry," she cries sharply, roused by Addie's disastrous wrath, "what are you tormenting the poor child about, talking of things you do not in the least understand? Don't you see that she is perfectly worn out with exhaustion and excitement and the pain of her foot. Come to bed, child, come to bed; you're not in a state to be up. I'll make you a nice hot drink that will send you to sleep at once. Here's your stick. What a grand one it is! Where did you get it? From Mr. Armstrong? Well, it's like himself, strong, reliable, and stout-limbed." [40]

CHAPTER VII.

"How does your ankle feel this morning?"

"Better—much better, thank you. In a day or two it will be quite strong again."

Miss Lefroy is seated in a moldy old summer-house at a corner of the farm-house garden, shelling a dish of peas, little Emma Higgins, her landlady's youngest but two, helping her with zealous dirty fingers. Unable any longer to bear the horsehair hardness of the parlor sofa and the stuffiness of the house, she has escaped hither, heedless of her aunt's protestations.

Mr. Armstrong stands leaning against the rotting woodwork, supporting a starved clematis-stalk, making the whole building creak and quiver with the weight of his brawny shoulders.

"Mr. Armstrong, spare us!" laughs Addie nervously. "We're two such miserable little specimens of the Philistine, Emmy and I—we're scarcely worth destruction."

"I don't know about that. If measles or croup had carried off Delilah when she was as young and harmless-looking as you, Miss Lefroy, why, Samson might have died in his bed. May I enter? There are no scissors on the premises?"

"No; your beard is quite safe; you may enter if you like."

"I went to the farm first, and your aunt directed me here," he says, taking a seat beside her on the stone slab.

"I got tired of the house—it was so close. The smell of the laborers' dinner toward midday is very strong everywhere; it flavors even the sweetbrier outside the parlor window; so I came here."

"Yes, it was a good move."

A silence follows; Addie wildly racks her brain for a sensible remark, but finds not one. He, resting his arm on the table, for some moments contentedly watches the movement of her slim brown fingers.

"Miss Lefroy, you are throwing the pods into the dish and the peas on the ground. Is that—"

"So I am, so I am!" she answers petulantly. "But I can't do anything when I'm—I'm watched like—that. Mr. Armstrong"—with sudden desperate bluntness—"you have come for your answer, have you not? Well, I have consulted them all, and they think it ought to be 'Yes.'"

"Then you will marry me, Miss Lefroy?"

"I suppose so."

He takes her unresisting hand and holds it in a strong cool clasp, while every nerve in her body tingles with the impulse to snatch it rudely from him; but she resists it, and merely says, panting a little— [41]

"I must go in now with the peas."

"Oh, not yet! There is time enough surely!"

"No; they are wanted for early dinner, and take a great deal of boiling."

"Where's little Emmy? Gone off! Then I will take them in myself and bring you out some cushions and footstools; your ankle is not at all properly supported. I wonder your brothers or sisters did not look after you better!"

As soon as he disappears Addie hobbles out eagerly, and looks around. Spying Lottie prowling among the gooseberry bushes she hails her imperatively.

"Lottie, come here at once! Where are the others?"

"Mooning about. Auntie gave orders that no one, on any account, was to disturb you and Mr. Armstrong in the summer-house. She said I was not even to peep through the cabbage-plot at the back. I wonder why? Is it because he may want to kiss you?"

"Go and tell them all, all—to come to the arbor at once, and to stay with me the whole time that Mr. Armstrong is here; do you hear? Tell them—tell aunt, too—that, if they don't, I'll send him about his business as sure as my name's Addie Lefroy! Go quickly, miss; I'm in earnest. Let them come back before him now, or else—"

Lottie obeys, duly impressed by her sister's determined manner, and, when the happy suitor returns, laden with footstools and cushions, prepared for a long morning's *tête-à-tête* with his love, he finds the rickety bower in possession of the whole family, who linger by him all the morning, favoring him with their views, and opinions of things in general, favoring him also with

diffuse reminiscences of personal biography, and systematically intercepting the faintest exchange of word, or even look, with his sweet-voiced betrothed.

He bears it with tolerable patience for an hour or so, and then relapses into moody taciturnity, thus leaving the burden of entertainment on the able shoulders of "Robert the Magnificent," who fancies that the brilliancy and aristocratic flavor of his conversation are creating a most favorable, in fact, overpowering effect on his plebeian guest, little deeming, honest lad, that the said guest at the time is inwardly voting his future brother-in-law one of the most insufferably flippant young prigs and bores it has ever been his misfortune to meet. At last, unable to stand it any more he takes an irritated turn round the garden, where he is immediately joined by the two younger Lefroys.

"Are you fond of gooseberries, Mr. Armstrong?" begins Lottie, whose voice has not had fair play in the arbor. "Would you like me to pick you some?—though they are wretched in this garden—little sour hard balls scarcely worth picking."

"They're splendid up at Nutsgrove," he answers eagerly, struck with a happy thought—"splendid, large, soft, sweet, and yellow. Suppose you all trot up there now—Robert, Pauline, Hal, and you, and have a good morning's feed—eh?"

"Oh, it would be delicious! You'd come with us, too, wouldn't you?"

[42]

"Well—ah, no; I would remain with your sister and aunt—keep them company until you come back."

"Would you? Oh, dear, then we can't go."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because Addie made us all promise faithfully, while you were away with the peas, that we would remain and help her to entertain you whenever you came, and never to leave her. She has no conversational powers, she says; but Rob and Polly have a lot—haven't they? And they have promised, so have Hal and I too. It's an awful pity, isn't, it? I—I wish you'd come with us; I know Addie wouldn't mind a bit. She's very hot-tempered, you know—worse than any of us—but awfully good-natured, and not a scrap huffy, like Bob and Poll."

Armstrong takes no notice of the suggestion, but walks straight back to the arbor and bids the attached family farewell.

They stand in a group watching his tall massive figure stalking down the path.

"How big he looks in this bit of a garden—regularly dwarfs the old shrubs into plants!"

"Yes, he's what Sally would call a fine figure of a man. Well, Addie, you'll have quantity, if you don't have qua—"

"I say, Addie," bursts in Bob, excitedly, "did you ask him about my ship?"

"No, Robert, of course not."

"You didn't? And yet you know I have to sail on Saturday, and leave here to-morrow afternoon. Quick, quick; run and ask him about it now!"

"What am I to ask him?"

"What? Why, hang it, there's a question! Ask him if I may write and throw up the whole thing, of course."

"Oh, Bob, Bob," cries the poor little maid, coloring and shrinking. "I—I couldn't ask him yet; I couldn't begin so soon—the very first day!"

"What?" cries Bob, with angry bitterness. "Then you'll actually let me sail in the beastly rotten old tub to-morrow, and live the life of a water-rat for the next six months—perhaps never see me again—rather than say one word that would save me? Oh, I never heard of such confounded selfishness in all my life! I never imagined that any one calling herself a sister could behave so!"

"Oh, Addie, Addie, don't be so hard, so selfish!"

"Don't send away poor Bob like that. Go after him—go after him, quick!"

"But my foot—my foot—I can scarcely walk! I should never catch him now," she pleads.

"Yes, you could—here's your stick; he has stopped to light his cigar at the gate. Go!"

Thus urged, she limps painfully after him, calling his name, but he does not hear her, and the distance between them increases. She is about to give up the pursuit in despair, when he stops a second time to caress a tawny mongrel that has wriggled itself fawningly between his legs; then her voice is borne to him on the light summer breeze. He turns and advances quickly to meet her, with a glad smile and outstretched hands.

[43]

"Have you come to say good-by to me, Addie?"

"Yes—no—yes," she answers breathlessly, unconsciously clinging to him to steady her shaking knees. "It's—it's—about Robert. Need he—must he join his ship on Saturday?"

He looks thoroughly bewildered.

"Need he join what ship—where? I don't understand."

"Oh, don't you remember? I told you about it yesterday—such a dreadful service—no salary—articles for three years—cargo of salt to China!"

"Yes, yes, to be sure; I remember. He does not care for his appointment. Tell him he may write to cancel it at once; I'll make it right at head-quarters for him; and then we must find him a more suitable berth on shore."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! How very kind you are!"

She is about to move away; but he lays his hand on her shoulder.

"Wait a moment; you're not half rested. You—you will try to like me a little, won't you, Addie?"

"Oh, yes!" she answers fervently, her shining eyes looking straight into his. "I will begin at once, and try as hard as ever I can to like you, Mr. Armstrong; you are so very kind!"

With a laugh that is half a sigh his hands drop and he turns away.

"I'm a fool, a fool—a blind, besotted fool!" he says to himself a little later. "I wish I could throw it all up; I wish I had the strength of mind. It won't do—it won't do! I shall live to reap in remorse and sorrow what I've sown in doubt and weakness—something tells me I shall. Well, well, so be it, so be it! I must go through with it now to the end, come what may."

Addie somewhat sulkily imparts the good news to her family, and then goes up to her room, locks the door, and lifts from the bottom of her trunk her cracked old papier-mâché desk, from which she takes a photograph wrapped in tissue paper, with the remains of a gloire de Dijon rose that was nipped from the parent-stem one soft June night three years before and fastened near her throat by warm boyish fingers—cousinly, not brotherly fingers. She scatters its loose stained petals out of the window, and then takes a long look at the picture of her soldier-cousin, Edward Lefroy, who spent a month at Nuts Grove the last time the colonel visited his home.

It is a bright laughing young face, fair and unbearded, as different in form, color, and expression from the face of her present lover as it possibly can be. The difference seems to strike the girl with painful reality, for tears fall from her downcast eye and drop upon the smiling features.

"Oh, Ted, Ted, did you mean anything on that day when you were rushing away? It was all so quick, so hurried, when the order came for you to rejoin, that I had not time to think, to understand. Did you mean anything in that hot farewell whisper, 'Good-by, good-by, little woman; we're as poor as a pair of church-mice now, but, should I come back for you one day with a lac of rupees, you'll be ready for me, won't you, Addie darling?' That was three years ago, Ted, three years ago—and never a word from you since! I'm a goose to think of you now—I know I am; something tells me you've whispered the same to half a score of girls since; but, Teddy, if you did mean anything, come back for me now, before it's too late, before it's too late!"

[44]

"Addie, Addie, dinner is up, and there's a batter-pudding! Come down quick!"

"Coming!" she shouts; and then, carefully wiping the precious cardboard, she opens the well-thumbed family album. "I needn't destroy you, poor Ted; but you must leave my old desk now, and spend the rest of your days with the family"—placing him opposite to a simpering crinolined relative leaning against a pillar, with a basket of flowers in her hand. "Good-by, good-by, dear boy; I've watered your grave for the last time! And now for batter-pudding and a breaking heart!" she adds, with a light, half-contemptuous, half-wistful laugh, as she runs down-stairs.

The next morning, when Miss Lefroy appears at breakfast, she finds the parlor heavy with the breath of roses; eagerly she inhales their delightful fragrance.

"Aren't they lovely?" cries Lottie. "Did you ever see such a basketful? They are all for you, Addie, with 'T. A.'s compliments.' And look at the dishes of cherries and strawberries! Bob has been at them already—has polished off a couple of pounds. If you don't be quick, you'll not have any left. Fall to, Addie, fall to!"

But Addie turns away her head, and declares that she does not care for fruit so early in the day; and presently she even finds fault with the flowers—they are too much for the small close room—they give her a headache. She goes forth to the clover field opening out from the yard, and stretches herself at full length on the fresh sward to while away the long morning hours, her idle mind no longer troubled by the irregularities of French grammar, or the habits and manners of ancient Babylonia.

"Addie, Mr. Armstrong is in the parlor with Aunt Jo. Will you go in to him, or are we to bring him out here?"

"I'll go in to him; you're all there, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. Don't you fear; we're all there, and we mean to stop."

"All right then; I'll follow you in presently," says Addie; and then, after a minute or two, she moves toward the house, muttering to herself as she does so, "'Soldier, sailor, tinker, tailor, policeman, plowboy, gentleman—' Oh, you wretches, you mocking little wretches, you shameful little fibbers, can you not tell me the truth even now? I'm to marry a gentleman still, am I? Oh,

Ted, Ted, does it mean that you are coming across the sea to me—now—now, at the eleventh hour? I wish I knew!"

Mr. Armstrong does not stay long this afternoon, having business of importance at Kelvick. He waits to drink a cup of tea poured out by his love's nimble hands; and so, during a lucky moment, while the family are engaged in a light skirmish, he manages to slip unperceived a hoop of diamonds on her unwilling finger, and then he takes his leave. [45]

After this they are not troubled very much with his society. About two or three times a week he looks in for half an hour to enjoy a peep at his future wife, whom he always finds enshrined in a circle of her devoted family, a circle which, after the first unsuccessful attempt, he does not try to rout. Miss Darcy is the only member with whom he is able to enjoy the favor of an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*; and one morning toward the end of June, after being closeted with her for a couple of hours, it is decided to their mutual satisfaction that the sooner Miss Lefroy becomes Mrs. Armstrong the better for herself and all those interested in her.

This conclusion is delicately conveyed to the young person, who has not a tangible objection to raise, not a single plea to urge for delay, particularly as Aunt Jo skillfully cuts the ground from under her feet by complaints of her failing health and her longing for the restoring air of Leamington, which would be sure to set her up again at once, she feels.

Addie's marriage is settled to take place during the second week in August, a little over two months from the day of her betrothal; and the reign of bustle begins by an immediate migration from the undignified shelter of Sallymount Farm to Laburnum Lodge, just outside Nutsford, the residence of Mrs. Doctor Macartney, who has gone to the seaside for a couple of months with her family, and who was quite ready, for a smart pecuniary consideration, to let her neatly appointed house even to the reckless Lefroys for the time being.

Addie hotly opposed the change at first, but, as usual, was overruled by the family, backed by Aunt Jo.

"We can't afford it—you know we can't!" she pleaded earnestly. "You told me not a fortnight ago that you had only seven pounds ten to finish the quarter; therefore how can we afford to take Laburnum Lodge, Aunt Jo?"

"We must manage it somehow, child," Miss Darcy answered, with a slight blush. "Don't trouble your head about it any more, for the thing must be done. It would be too unseemly to have you married from Steve Higgins's farm, your sisters and brothers quite agree with me; and—and—Mr. Armstrong wishes it besides—so there is nothing more to be said about it."

It was the same with her *trousseau*. In vain she protested, objected, revolted, against each article of attire added daily to her miserable wardrobe—against dresses, bonnets, mantles, against shoes, gloves, umbrellas, underclothes; it was all of no use. Aunt Jo and Pauline went on ordering and suggesting just as if she had not spoken. It seemed to the pained, bewildered girl that she was in the hands of every tradesman and tradeswoman in the town of Kelvick, and, after a couple of hours' shamefaced agony, she used to escape from Madame Armine's smooth wily fingers and approving exclamations in a state of impatient revolt that strangely puzzled that experienced lady. "Oh, it is unbearable," she would cry, "to be lodged, fed, clothed by him thus—unbearable to think that every pound of meat that comes to the table is paid for by him, as well as the dress, the stockings, the shoes, the gloves I shall wear standing beside him at the altar! It is unbearable to think he is paying for me before I am purchased! How can they stand it, all of them? How can Robert, whom I thought so haughty, so proud, so sensitive, take it as he does? They must know—of course they must know—and yet don't seem to mind." [46]

At other times a mad impulse would urge her to take up the finery that was fast filling the house, and fling it at Mr. Armstrong's feet, refusing to be further suffocated by his benefits; but luckily the opportunity failed for the uncomfortable feat, as Armstrong was called away on business of importance to the North of England just a fortnight before his wedding-day, and did not reappear at Laburnum Lodge until all her boxes were safely corded and standing in a row in the hall, labeled in Robert's round schoolboy hand—"Mrs. Armstrong, Charing Cross, London."

CHAPTER VIII.

IT is just a week before the wedding-morning. Aunt Jo and Pauline are discussing the bill of fare for the breakfast; Addie is lying on a sofa by the open window, languidly reading the newspaper.

"You have quite made up your mind then, Addie?" asks the elder lady. "You won't have any one at the ceremony but just our immediate circle—not even your Aunt and Uncle Beecher?"

"Quite!" answers Addie sharply. "I'll have no one but you and the boys, Polly and Lottie—not another soul. I'll be married in my traveling-dress, not in the white *broché* at all; and no one is to be let into the church. The doors are to be locked when we have entered."

"It will be a Quakerish kind of festival, certainly," says Pauline regretfully. "If ever I get married, I'll make a little more noise than that. And I suppose Mr. Armstrong will have none of his friends

or relatives either?"

"No."

"Heigh-ho! I think you might have let some one in, just to temper the chill of the first family breaking-up—Teddy Lefroy, for instance. How he'd stir us up! And I'm sure he'd come, if you'd ask him, Addie."

The newspaper drops from her hands; she turns quickly, with flushed cheeks.

"Teddy Lefroy? What do you mean, Polly? How could I ask him? He's in India."

"No, he isn't; he came home about a month ago for a year at the depot. I heard it when I was at Aunt Selina's, but forgot to tell you until now."

"Where is he—in England?"

"No, somewhere in Ireland, near Kilkenny. I forget the name of the place."

"I wonder," says Addie, after a short pause, "if he has heard of my intended marriage?"

"Can't say, I'm sure," answers Pauline, carelessly. "Oh, yes, though, I should think the chances are that he has, for there was a pretty brisk correspondence going on between him and the admiral while I was at Greystones! You know he's the old gentleman's godson; and I suspect Master Teddy had been dipping pretty freely and asking assistance, to judge by the expression of the godpapa's benign countenance while reading his letters. Poor Teddy, he's a regular Lefroy in that way; his purse was a perfect sieve. Do you remember, Addie, the presents he used to bring us from Kelvick—the blue silk handkerchief he brought you, which Hal upset the pot of blackberry jam over? How mad you were, to be sure! How you did pinch and cuff the poor child until the tears ran down his face! It seems but yesterday. Dear Ted, how bright and bonny he was, to be sure! I wish he'd come and see us while you are away, Addie; and I wish you were not going in for such a tremendous honeymoon—a whole month! How shall we get on without you, love? Oh, dear, I hope you'll miss us awfully! I hope Mr. Armstrong will get tired of you, and send you home to us before the time is half gone."

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Every morning and evening for the rest of that eventful week Addie, with straining eyes and quickly-beating heart, watches the postman; but he never brings her what she wants, never brings her a line of congratulation, renunciation, reproach, or regret from the neighborhood of Kilkenny.

Her wedding-morning comes cloudless and sunny. She is married uneventfully, with the quivering rays from the stained-glass windows erected to the memory of René, Comte le Froi, and his wife Clothilde, A.D. 1562, bathing her pale emotionless face in purpling golden light. And then she signs her maiden name—Adelaide Josephine Lefroy—for the last time on earth.

The breakfast is tearless, but a little strained, remarkable only for an able and grandiloquent speech from Robert, which is however somewhat marred at the close by the arrival of a costume from Madame Armine at the eleventh hour, which entails the reopening of trunks and much excitement and fuss.

Miss Darcy follows the bride up to her room, where she finds her gazing blankly out of the window alone. She steals behind her and puts her arms round her neck.

"Heaven bless you, my child, and give you every joy, every happiness in the new life that lies before you!"

"Thank you, auntie darling; thank you also for your goodness to me, and for all you have ever done and suffered for me and mine. I think I never felt it, never understood it, until now," she adds, breaking down a little at last. "But I'll never forget—never! You have been the dearest, the truest friend we have ever had, and one day you will meet with your reward."

"Not truer, my dear," Miss Darcy answers gravely, "than the friend, generous, strong, and unselfish, into whose hands Heaven put you but a few hours ago. You have a good husband, Addie, a truly good husband, my dear—one whom you can respect, honor, and obey all the days of your life. I am leaving you in his hands without a shadow of doubt, a twinge of apprehension. He may not have the outward polish, the surface-attraction of those born in the purple; but he is nevertheless a gentleman at heart—a gentleman in the true sense of the word, liberal, large-minded, incapable of a mean or ignoble act or thought. You feel that you believe me, don't you, dear, don't you?" she repeats, peering anxiously into the girl's wistful weary face.

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"Yes—oh, yes!" Addie answers in a whisper. "I think I do, auntie, I think I do."

For during the last month the theory of Mr. Armstrong's motive in matrimony so unluckily broached by the keen-sighted Robert, and which had awakened her active contempt, daily lost hold of her mind. She had but little opportunity of studying his character, or even of ascertaining the bent of his sympathies and tastes: nevertheless she was forced to acknowledge to herself that, low-born as he undoubtedly was, Armstrong of Kelvick was not a snob, that, though he respected rank and its many attributes of power, he did not love a lord with the servile fondness of the British tradesman, and that the end and aim of his existence were not to have the gates of county society flung open to him—nor was that the motive which had urged him to marry her.

"I could not tell you before, dear," resumes Aunt Jo softly, drawing her niece to a chair beside her—"but now that you are a wife it is different—what your husband has done for you and yours. I can not even now tell you how delicate, how unobtrusively generous, he has been in all his dealings with our unfortunate affairs."

"I know, I know—at least I half guessed it all."

"I had a long conversation with him last night, Addie, after you had all gone to bed, and he then told me the arrangements he had made for the children's futures. Will you listen to them now, or would you rather hear of them from him?"

"From you, from you!"

"Well, to begin with Robert. He is taking him into his own office to learn the elements of business; and, though I dare say the dear boy will be more of a hinderance than assistance there at present, yet he is giving him a fair salary to start with, and is establishing him in the household of his head-clerk, a most respectable married man, where he will have all the comforts of home. Hal he is sending to Dr. Jellett's at St. Anne's, the best school in the county; and the girls, who are to live with you, are to have the advantages of first-class governesses and masters from Kelvick. And that is not all, Addie. See this piece of crumpled paper he thrust into my hands when he was going. It is a check for four hundred pounds—half of it to defray little debts and personal expenses I've been put to in our late stress, and to help me to start comfortably in my old home; the other half, Addie, to pay off old bills that we Lefroys have owed in the place for years—bills of your heartless father's, child—to coach-builders, wine-merchants, tobacconists, and others, of which he must have heard. And, oh, Addie, if you had seen how shamefaced and confused he was when he was trying to explain what he meant, you'd have thought he was the guilty party, not that other who—who broke my poor sister's heart before she was thirty, and abandoned you for a —"

Addie moved away quickly, and pressed her hot cheek to the cool pane of the window, and a sudden light breaks over her clouded sky, showing her a purpose, an aim with which she can ennoble and sweeten the years of coming life, make it of value to herself and to others.

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"I will be a good wife to him," she whispers warmly. "I will try to pay him back the debt we owe him. I will brighten his home, and make it a happy one for him; I will never let him regret the day he married me and mine; I will be gentle, loving, companionable, always striving to please; I will curb my awful temper, put a check on my impetuous tongue. He will never guess, never suspect that I am not perfectly happy and contented, never know that I don't care for him as I might have cared for another—another not half as good, as noble, as generous, or as true as he is. Oh, why can't I—why can't I? How perverse and hard-hearted I am! But it won't matter; he'll never know—never! He'll never see me without a smile on my lips and cheerfulness in my eyes. I'll be a good wife to you, Tom, I will! Oh, help me, dear Heaven!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE honeymoon is a fortnight old.

Mrs. Armstrong, in a pale silk of grayish blue, with ruffles of creamy lace at throat and wrists, and sparkling diamonds in her pretty pink ears, is languidly toying with a bunch of muscatel grapes, listening to the grateful splash of the waves breaking on the pebbly shore below.

The room in which she sits is a charming one, delicately yet luxuriously furnished, bright with hothouse flowers, with big French windows opening on to a canopied balcony overhanging the restless waters of St. George's Channel. Her husband is leaning back in his chair, sipping his post-prandial claret in blissful enjoyment.

"Headache all gone, Addie?" he asks, breaking a pleasant drowsy silence.

She turns her smiling face to him with a slight start.

"Headache? Had I a headache, Tom? Oh, I remember! That was this morning—ages ago—after bathing! Fancy your remembering all that time!"

"Well, I hope I am not such a callous wretch as to forget my wife's ailments, even after the long 'ages' of a summer morning."

"That is a real pretty speech, as Miss Tucker, on the flat below us, would say. I'll treasure it in my memory, Tom, and recall it to you, say, this day five years."

"You'll find it in tune, my dear. I'm not afraid."

She shakes her head doubtfully.

"Impossible! Even though your spirit was willing, the boys would have corrupted you long before. Fancy Bob or Hal inquiring after a headache six hours old! Listen to the music; how sweet it sounds!"

"Like a turn on the pier, dear?"

She assents gladly, and trips off to array herself, returning almost at once with a chip-hat and light lace-scarf thrown round her shoulders.

"Addie, you're not going out in that flimsy garment at this hour of the night—quite a sharp wind rising too! Go and put on something warmer."

"But I'm quite warm, Tom. Why, I have been out in the bitterest east wind, with snow on the ground and with a bad sore throat, not more heavily clad than this!"

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"Well, my dear, that is an experience you may boast of, but which you will not practically repeat. Go, like a good girl, and put on that white woolly thing I saw in your wardrobe this morning."

She complies sweetly, but when out of sight, petulantly pulls the wrap from its shell, muttering—

"Well, I hope this will satisfy him. Why it's first cousin to a blanket! I shall be suffocated. Oh, dear!"

They sally forth and stroll slowly through the fashionable crowd, Addie's feet keeping time to a swinging gavotte, while she furtively eyes some dozen couples whose demeanor and gay attire incline her to suspect that they are in the same interesting position as herself and Tom.

After a time they leave the crowd and walk to the end of the pier, which they have all to themselves. They clamber over the moonlit rocks and stand arm in arm looking across the rippling waters, the music reaching them mellowed by distance into divinely soothing harmony.

It is an hour, a moment to put poetry into the breasts of the Smallweed family.

Armstrong feels its influence. He bends his dark face over his wife's, and asks sentimentally—

"Are you happy, Addie?"

"Oh, yes—yes!" she whispers back, with sparkling eyes. "Why should I not be? You are so very k _"

He blocks the sentence with a kiss.

"You need not have been in such a hurry," she laughs. "How do you know I was going to say that, after all? There are lots of other adjectives beginning with a 'k,' besides 'kind.' Let me see —'kantankerous,' for instance—"

"Hem! When I was at school, 'cantankerous' began with a 'c,' Mistress Addie."

"Oh, dear! I won't try repartee again, no matter how grievous the assault. Tom, what a valuable governess you robbed the Moggeridges of! You owe them compensation, sir."

A faint breeze brings to them a few bars of one of the sweetest, saddest love-songs ever written. Addie's voice drops; she says, scarcely above her breath—

"And you, Tom—are you happy too?"

"Happier, dear, than I ever thought I could be, even in my wildest dreams of matrimonial bliss. I've had you only a fortnight, little wife, and yet I don't know how I did without you during all the past years, or what life would be to me if you went from me now."

"I have no immediate intention of going," she remarks, rubbing her soft cheek against his coat-sleeve.

"No, you're bound for life now, thank Heaven!" he says fervently. "And, when I think of the many times I have been within an ace of losing you, child, of throwing the whole thing up and letting you go, I rejoice in possessing the gift of pig-headedness, and—"

"You were within an ace of giving me up! When, Tom? I never knew."

"Scores of times. I thought I could not make you happy, or myself either. I shrunk from the risk." [51]

"Why? What risk?"

"We were so different, you see, Addie—there was such a gulf between us, not only of years, but of experience, of habit, of thought and mode of life. My past had been so rough, so lonely, so self-sufficing. And then—then, you did not like me, Addie; I saw that plainly enough. You used to shrink if I tried to come near you; and the way you hedged yourself in with those blessed boys was disconcerting, to say the least of it."

"I saw you did not like it," she says, with a low laugh.

"Not like it! By Jove, if you could have guessed the many times my fingers have itched to close on the shapely throat of that brother of yours, my dear, you would—"

"Poor Bob!"—a little anxiously. "You must not bear him ill-will, Tom; he's off his guard now. You see, I did not understand you then—did not know how to talk to you; you looked so big—so out of my world. But now it is all different." Then, after a short pause—"And so you think I can make you happy, husband—you don't regret it? You won't find us too much for you at Nutsgrrove? For we're—we're not a comfortable family to live with, Tom! Oh, indeed we're not! Poor Aunt Jo had an awful time of it with us, and the Beechers found Pauline very trying at Greystones. Then I have a shocking temper; and Lottie, poor child, is dreadful when her questioning mood is on. Now don't be ridiculous, Tom, for I'm quite serious."

"I like Lottie," he says, smiling; "she's persevering, to be sure, but quite without guile. Pauline I think I can put up with too. Your temper, sweetheart, may be a bit of a trial; but fortunately I've a broad back, and a constitution, physical and mental, of granite."

"You'll want it, I suspect. But tell me, Tom, something about your early life. Had you no father or mother that you remember?"

"No; my mother died when I was an infant, and my father left me on the parish and went to America."

"How very strange—both our fathers behaving in much the same way! I think fathers are rather a mistake in families, Tom."

He laughs.

"So I began life unembarrassed by family connections—a—a—foundling, in fact—you don't mind, do you, Addie? And for the thirty-seven years of my life I've lived alone, entirely for myself—worked for myself, struggled for myself, dreamed for myself, built castles in the air to be inhabited by myself alone. A despicable state of existence, wasn't it? I blush when I look back on it now."

"You were not unhappy?"

"No, because I did not know any better. I could not go back to it now; you have broken the charm of egotism and sordid ambition. Oh, sweetheart, you cannot imagine how strange and refreshing it is to shake off the monotony of self at last, to be absorbed in another night and day, to forget one's separate existence, to feel that life before one will be full to overflowing of goodly promise, unfading blossom! It is like stepping back from the blightful shade of a late autumn night into the glory of a fresh spring morning. Ah, you cannot follow me there, little one! You have not been [52] baptized in selfishness as I have been; and, though you like me well enough not to shrink from the future which is to me a vista of undimmed sunshine, yet I am not to you what you are to me, Addie; I doubt sorely if I can ever be."

"Hush!" she says, quickly, with a shudder she cannot repress, "It is no good discussing such matters now. You cannot expect me to follow you in your pretty simile, because I am only passing from spring into summer, and so I do not know what autumn may be like—it will come in time. You like my youth, don't you? You would not have me older? I am young in years, in experience, and in feeling. I cannot help that. I do not know much; but I know that I like you, Tom. I know that; I know too that you are good and stanch and true—ah, twice too good for me!" she adds, with a dry sob that startles him and makes him drift into a more cheerful channel as quickly as he can, into which she follows him with evident relief.

"And so, Tom," she asks, presently, "you have no relatives that you know of, except that old Mrs. Murphy who sent me that lovely patchwork quilt as a wedding present? And she is—"

"Only a third or fourth cousin on my mother's side."

"And have you lived all your life at Kelvick?"

"No, dear. I have been half over the world, knocking about east and west since I was twelve years old."

"Fancy that! I never knew. Your life must have been an interesting one."

"Hardly. It was not exactly commonplace; but it certainly wasn't picturesque in any of its phases. I went to Australia when I was quite a lad—worked my way before the mast, and made a little money out there. I came home, and the demon of invention got hold of me. I conceived some wondrous piece of agricultural mechanism which was to make my name and my fortune, over which I spent every farthing I had scraped together. Well, it proved to be a mere worthless abortion, and the discovery was a smart blow to my conceit and my energy. I lost heart for a time, went to the States, where I joined the Confederate Army, fought for two years—it was the time of the struggle for emancipation—and, when it was over, I steered further west, to California, where I did fairly at mining."

"Why, you have been a Jack-of-all-trades, Tom—sailor, soldier, inventor, miner, manufacturer—what else?"

"That's the whole list. I found at last that liquid-manufacturing paid the best; so I stuck to it. Vitriol gave me my decisive lift. Now, Addie, I will not allow that disdainful little sniff, for vitriol lies very close to my bosom just now. Vitriol bought me Nuts Grove, and Nuts Grove bought me you, and you bought—"

"Armstrong of Kelvick, is that you in the flesh? What can have tempted you into the giddy haunts of fashion, so far from your savory chimney-pots, my dear fellow?"

"Like the man in the Scriptures, 'I married a wife.' Addie"—to his wife, who stands rather shyly in the background—"let me introduce you to my friend, Mr. Henderson."

They leave the pier and walk to the hotel, remaining for a few minutes talking under the porch; then the two men return to the pier for a smoke. Addie watches them disappear, hatching a little moonlit scamper on her own account to a solitary part of the shore, where she can plunge her free hands and hot face into the rippling water. Alas, woman proposes, but man disposes! She has just cleared the last step of the terrace, when she meets her husband face to face. [53]

"Addie, I just ran back to see that you did not remain standing in that draught. Where are you going, child?"—and in an accent of intense surprise.

"Oh, nowhere in particular—at least, only to the edge of the sea for a moment!" she answers, a little hurriedly.

"To the shore at eleven o'clock at night, alone! You must have lost your senses, my dear. You must learn to understand that things of that sort cannot be done, and particularly in a place of this kind. Go up to your room at once, please, or you will grieve me very much."

For an instant she stands irresolute, trying to repress a wild instinct of rebellion, for there is a ring of authority in his voice which stirs the haughty Lefroy blood.

"I do not see what harm there is; I have been out at all hours of the night at home, and nobody said anything," she persists sullenly.

"It is of no use," he says almost sternly—at least it sounds so to her—"drawing parallels between your past life and your present; they are meaningless. If you wish to return to the shore, I will accompany you, and tell my friend not to wait for me."

"It is not necessary," she answers, in a low voice. "I am going in."

He follows her a few steps and lays his heavy hand on her shoulder.

"Addie darling, forgive me; I do not make allowance for your youth and the habits of your past life, and—and—I'm so accustomed to be obeyed, to command inferiors, that I—I forgot I was speaking to a lady, to one dearer to me than my life. Forgive me, sweetheart, forgive me!"

"Yes—oh, yes!" she says, slowly withdrawing herself from his detaining hand.

She walks listlessly up the stairs, stands panting heavily in her flower-scented room, looking to right and left with the quick, restless movement of an animal newly caged. She takes off her hat and cumbrous wrapping, removes the diamonds from her ears, the heavy gold bands from her fingers, and throws them from her; her arms drop to her sides. She remains thus, erect, motionless, rigid, for nearly half an hour, fighting against the sultry storm that sways her young soul; then she sinks quivering into a chair by the table, her head falls on her outstretched hands, and her passion finds vent in a storm of sobs and wild complaints.

At last she is alone; the long *tête-à-tête* is broken. A stranger's voice had broken the spell; she can be herself again—can wake Addie Lefroy from her maiden grave for a few short moments, and bid her live and suffer; she can throw the suffocating mask aside, let the hot tears rain from her weary eyes; the quick word, petulant, peevish, fall from her quivering lips—can be herself again, can seek to find the problem of her troubled life, can ask herself if it was a lie, a fraud, a base sequence of hypocrisy, or a glorious martyrdom, an heroic act of self-sacrifice. But nothing answers her, the problem remains unsolved, all before her is blurred with passion, misty with thunderous clouds that veil the transient gleams of a sunshine sweet and tender which she has dimly felt struggling to reach her path during the most trying fortnight of her life. But they do not touch her now; black night shrouds her everywhere.

[54]

"He is too good, too generous, too kind, too—too fond of me!" she wails, not conscious that her grief has found articulate sound. "His care, his affection, his watchfulness stifle me. I am not accustomed to them. It is like being transplanted to a hothouse after living all one's life on the top of a breezy hill. I feel I cannot breathe—that is it; I want breath, I want air. Only a fortnight, only a fortnight, and it must go on—I must keep it up to the end! Oh, it is too much—too much! I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it; it will kill me!"

Her voice sinks into a dry sob; there is a faint sound in the room, as if a door was being softly closed, a sound which rouses her with a start from her absorbed passion. She looks up quickly, and glances at the closed door leading into her husband's dressing-room. A horrible suspicion flashes across her mind, changing the heat of her blood to an icy chill. She passes noiselessly into the dressing-room; but there is no one there.

"An unnecessary alarm, a trick of the imagination!" she breathes with a sigh of relief.

The distraction has the effect of quieting her excited nerves, soothing the storm of her mind. She wipes her eyes briskly, tidies her hair, replaces her wedding-ring.

"I have been a fool! I wonder what set me off like that so suddenly! Such a strange feeling it was—as if I were choking; but I think it has done me good. I feel quite cool, light, and refreshed now, ready for a cup of tea."

She passes into her bedroom to replace her hat and wrap; then, drawing aside the blind, she peers out of the window, which is in the front of the hotel, facing the station.

"What a lovely night! No wonder one is tempted to remain out. Still he ought to be soon in now; it's past eleven some time, and I should like a cup—Oh, great Heaven!"

With a cry she falls back from the window, cowering, for at that moment forth from the gloom of the porch underneath, his brave head hanging low on his breast, her husband moves into the moonlight, where he stands motionless for a moment, then lifts his arms with a weary, bewildered gesture, and stumbles forward heavily toward the sleeping sea.

She knows that her sacrifice has been in vain, that she has blighted the prime of him who has enriched her and hers with his best, who has loved her more than his own life.

CHAPTER X.

WITH bursting brain, stunned with unanalyzed pain and bewilderment, as yet but half comprehending the wild words he has unwittingly heard, Armstrong strides blindly onward, trying to fly, to escape from the fever of his heart, from the sound of the wailing childish voice that has tolled the death-knell of his peace.

[55]

He does not care, does not know whither he goes, for the path before him is misty and blurred in the gleaming moonlight, his eyes are dim with fury and anguish. He rolls heavily against an old seaman tottering home from the public-house, and with an oath closes on him; they struggle for a moment, until Armstrong, staggering backward, loses his footing, and falls from the elevated edge of the esplanade to the soft sand skirting the sea, some ten feet below. The physical shock

sobers him; he remains where he has fallen, crouching on the shore, his haggard face buried in his hands. Presently he bursts into a low discordant laugh and homely disjointed soliloquy:

"Tom Armstrong, Tom Armstrong, my man, you've made a mess of it at last! It has been pretty plain sailing with you all your life; but now you must take in your canvas, for you've come to grief at last—you've come to grief—to grief—to grief! Oh, fool—fool—fool that I have been! Pip-headed idiot, I deserve my fate!"

And then he falls into silence again, and goes over, day by day, hour by hour, the short sunny spell of his one love-dream. Every look, every word, every smile, every kiss he lives through again with the lurid lamp of truth and disillusion hanging overhead. A fierce brute-like passion seizes him, he springs to his feet with flaming eyes and distorted face.

"Confusion seize her for a hypocrite," he shouts—"a consummate, lying hypocrite! How dare she blind me as she has done? How dare she debase me in my own eyes, and make my life unbearable? What had I done to her, the jade? Only loved her—only loved her better than my life! Oh, how can such women be? Have they no soul, no heart, no conscience? How could she look me in the face with those clear pure eyes, black perjury lodging in her breast all the time, as she has done every day since I married her? How she has lied to me—how she has lied with her lips, with her eyes, with her smile, with every motion of her body, morning, noon, and night! Confusion seize her!"

He dashes on again for miles and miles along the sleeping coast, muttering and gasping, trying to stanch the gaping wound of his love and pride, until the fading moonlight meets the rosy glow of dawn and dies in her embrace; and then, at last thoroughly worn out, he sinks again to rest, his face white and set, the storm of his passion stilled forever, all wrath and bitterness gone from his breast, only pity, remorse, and infinite melancholy dwellers therein. Reason has reasserted her sway, and many dark things are light to him now.

The problem which Addie weakly tried to solve some hours before is clear as day to him she has wronged, and he pities her as sincerely as he pities himself.

"Poor little soul!" he thinks drearily. "Heaven help her, how she must have suffered! And what pluck she must have! Poor little Addie! What chance had she against us all—against my brutish obstinacy and desire, against her greedy, selfish kindred, her miserable surroundings—what chance had she? Not one to stand by her, to save her from me—not even the memory of a lover, I feel sure—not even that! And I called her a hypocrite, a liar, instead of a martyr, a heroine! I have wished her ill because she made her sacrifice without a murmur, nobly, unselfishly; because she sought to build my happiness on the wreck of her own; because she smiled in my face when her heart was perhaps breaking! Oh, forgive me, forgive me, dear; and Heaven teach me how to deal with you gently, unselfishly, tenderly to the end!"

[56]

He sits for a full hour without moving, buried in deep thought, mapping out his life and hers, which, alas, is still bound to his till death! And then he rises, undresses, takes a plunge off the rock against which he has been leaning, swims out half a mile to sea, returns, and, much refreshed and quite composed, dresses and walks back to the town, from which he has wandered many miles due west.

He finds his wife, who has evidently not been to bed all night, in her sitting-room, with pale wan face and eyes strained with tears and frightened watching.

"Oh, here you are!" she sobs hysterically, when he enters at last. "Where have you been? I thought you were never coming home again. You—you should not have frightened me so!"

"I am sorry I frightened you, Addie," he says gently. "I walked on to Sandyfort last night, had a swim there, and then came back; the morning was so lovely, I couldn't take to the train. Why did you sit up? That was wrong."

She makes no reply, but presently creeps up to him and lays her hand on his shoulder, stammering out—

"You—you came to the door of the dressing-room? You—you heard me last night?"

He assents mutely.

"Then, Tom," she cries, clinging to him feverishly, "you must forget every word I said; they meant nothing—nothing! I don't know what came over me. I was not myself; I think I was mad. You—you —"

"Don't, dear, don't," he says, with a still cold gentleness, putting her from him; "it is of no use. You can never deceive me again, Addie—never! Give up the effort; it would be only useless pain to me and to you."

"I can not—I can not!" she answers, with a quiver in her voice; for something in his face, in his tone, chills her to the heart and tells her, even more powerfully than his words have done, that he will never believe her again; that smiles or tears, protest or prayer, will fall on his ear in vain meaningless sound. "I can not," she repeats, "because you are mistaken. You must—oh, you must listen to me! I tell you it is not fair to judge; I was not myself at the moment, I was—"

"You were not the 'self' who sacrificed your youth and your liberty so loyally to me at the moment. No; you had cast your chains aside and were inhaling a breath of freedom—unhallowed freedom, you poor little bird," he says with dreary sadness—"and I scared you, Addie. You must let your wings grow again, you must go back to your careless happy maidenhood, get clear of the shadow I brought on your path."

"I can not do that—I can not do that; it is too late now!"

"You can, you can," he says. "Youth has strong recuperative power; you will be the same again, Addie, soon. It will all come back; the boys will bring it, the old home, the old associations will bring it to you. This short time of trial will fade from your memory; like a thunderous cloud, it will pass from your sky; you will find, behind, the clear light of spring. Believe me, it will be so."

She comes over to him, slowly, hesitatingly, and, dropping upon her knees by his side, seizes his hands.

"Don't, Tom; don't talk like that! What is the use? You married me, and nothing can divide us now. I am your wife, and I don't want anything back but your faith in me."

"That you can never recover—at least not in the sense you mean," he says, freeing his hands gently from her detaining clasp and walking away from her side. "Do not ask it, please."

"No," she answers, in a low voice, "I will not again."

She rises slowly to her feet, and stands looking blankly out on the sunny waves. "I will not again," she thinks bitterly, "because anything I have to give is of no value to him now; even if I had the love of Juliet to give—which I haven't nor ever could have for any man—even if I had that, he would not care for it now. I have killed that feeling in him; I can read it in the weary bitterness of his face. His fancy for me was sudden, violent, unaccountable even to himself, and it has died a death as sudden as was its birth—a few wild unmeaning words, and it is no more. So much for man's constancy! It is well for me that I did not love him, that he was not the husband of my choice, or this might have been a bitterer, crueler day than it is. Poor Ariadne! I wonder did she make much of a fuss when she was left on the rock, and for how long did she feel it before the other man—I forget his name—came up and rescued her—eh? Were you speaking?"—aloud, sharply.

"Yes, Addie: I want to know if you will discuss this matter sensibly with me, and help me to arrive at the most satisfactory arrangement for our future lives."

"Certainly, if you wish it; I am quite ready. Had we not better take seats? You must be tired after your long walk."

Her tone is as steady and as matter-of-fact as his own; they sit at the table facing each other.

"We must begin by accepting the fact—"

"That you have had no breakfast as yet. Am I right?"

"Breakfast?" he repeats absently. "Yes, no—I—I don't remember. No; now that I come to think, I have had none as yet."

"Will you allow me to ring and order some for you now?"

"Thank you, you are very kind."

When the servant has retired, he resumes quietly—

"By accepting the fact boldly and clearly that we have made a mistake, you and I, in casting our lots together—You follow me?"

She nods, without speaking.

"But, having done so, it is our duty to look our position steadily, cheerfully, even, if possible, hopefully in the face, and without useless repining or mutual recrimination. We are husband and wife still, in name at least, in the eyes of the law and the world at large, and nothing but death can free us from that self-imposed bondage." [58]

"Nothing," she echoes absently.

"Nothing but a contingency which is not likely to occur, and which therefore I need not discuss with you. The question which now must occupy us is how to make our future lives as bearable as we can in the circumstances. If you wish it, we can manage to live apart without much—"

"No no," she breaks in vehemently, "not that—not that! If you mean that I am to live at Nutsgrrove without you, I will consent to no such arrangement. I will never return there without you; you can not move me in that."

"I do not wish to do so. The plan I would propose is that you and I return there together, as we had originally intended, and, for a couple of years at least, keep up before the world in general, and your brothers and sisters in particular"—here he winces for the first time—"the semblance, the form of union. Do you feel equal to such an undertaking? Would it be too much for you?"

"No," she answers, almost cheerfully; "it would not. I could do my part easily."

"Yes," he says, with a melancholy smile, "I suppose you could. You—you are a capital actress, Addie."

She flushes quickly.

"Not as good as you think—oh, Tom, not as good—"

But he goes on, heedless of the interruption—

"The task will not be so difficult as it may appear to you now. Life at Nutsgrrove will be very different from what it has been here. I, of course, shall be away at my business all day, and shall have many interests to occupy me which will not touch your life. You will have the boys and the girls to look after, your household affairs, and, I suppose, social engagements which will fill your

days pleasantly, I hope. Then it is decided we return together? You have no other plan you would like better to suggest?"

"No; let us go home," she says, shortly.

"So be it. We agree to take up the burden of our separate existences as bravely and as cheerfully as we can, having one tie in common—the secret of our mistake to hide between us. At the same time, if you think it necessary or advisable to confide in your brother Robert and your sister Pauline, I will raise no objection. You have never had, I heard you say one day, any secret from them as yet."

"No; I don't think I have—at least, not of any importance," she interrupts hurriedly; "but—but I would rather have this now. I would rather—oh, much rather they did not even suspect!"

"I think you are right. I think, after mature deliberation, that the more jealously we guard our unfortunate secret—for a time at least—the better it will be. For you must know, my dear, that in cases of this kind—in fact, in almost all cases of family disagreements and domestic ruptures—no matter how much the man be in fault—and he is generally the leading culprit—the burden of blame of trouble, of disgrace even, always falls heaviest on the weakest shoulders. And you are very young yet, Addie, and you have not many friends; that is why I have taken it upon myself to advise you as I have done, to advise you to bear for the present the shelter of my name and protection." [59]

"How good you are—how very good!"

"Hush! You know nothing of me—nothing. Do not criticise, but help me to render you justice, to repair the wrong I have done you in my—"

"Wrong—wrong? What wrong have you done me?" she asks wildly.

"You are unnerved and excited from want of food and of rest. Here comes breakfast at last. Afterward you must go and lie down and have a good sleep; you look as if you wanted it badly."

In constrained silence they finish their meal; then he rises wearily.

"I am going down to the club for an hour or two, and then I shall have a few letters to write. I hope to see you quite refreshed by dinner-time. Ugh, how dark and cold the morning has become, hasn't it? Coming along, I noticed the storm-warning up at the coastguard station. I'm afraid we're in for bad weather."

"Yes; it looks like a change."

"Would you like to be moving, Addie? Have you had enough of the sea? We've had a pleasant fortnight here, and splendid weather for the season. If you'd like to begin moving slowly homeward, I'm quite ready."

"Very well; let us move before the storm then."

"I'll write to-day to Nutsgrove to prepare them for our arrival at the end of the week."

"Thank you. That will be very nice."

He walks slowly to the door, hesitates for a moment, then returns to where she sits toying with her spoon.

"You—you bear me no ill-will, Addie? We—we are friends still, are we not?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so—whatever you like!" she answers coldly. "You have taken upon yourself the definition of our relationship; let us be friends certainly, if you think it judicious."

He looks at her for a moment with frowning brow, then says shortly—

"That is all I have to say. We understand each other, I think, at last."

"Do we?"

"And this subject need never be reopened between us; do you hear me, Addie?"—a little sternly, for she is humming the refrain of a flippant little song that the band had played on the night before. "I wish the discussion of this subject not to be renewed. I have said all I want to say, and I have heard all I want to hear from you. Until this day twelvemonth I refuse to listen to another word on the subject; on that day we can compare notes and give each other suggestions for the improvement of our programme of life. Are you listening? Do you hear me?"

"Oh, yes, I hear you! Good-morning!"

Later on in the day Addie sits on the rocks where she stood on the night before muffled in her woolly wrap, her life almost as free from restraint and vexatious watchfulness as if she still bore her maiden name. Yes, her days are her own again in all that minor detail of movement that makes the sum of existence; she can cast aside every cumbersome article of her *trousseau*, take off her hat, her cloak, even her shoes and stockings, and paddle in the cool waves, unheeded, unadmonished. But, such is the inconsistency of woman's nature, with the power of this freedom for which she has so lately panted, all desire to exercise it has passed away; she sits very still and subdued, wrapped up in her cloak, shivering a little, her gray eyes fixed in troubled perplexity on the tumbling waters. [60]

"Yes," she thinks, with a dreary sigh, "I suppose he is right; there is no use in crying over spilled

milk; it is better to accept the inevitable, and make the best of it. Fretting and worrying won't mend matters for him or for me. And, after all, have I not the best things in life left to me still—my own darling brothers and sisters and the home I love? They ought to be enough, surely, surely! Oh, yes, yes, I will do as he wishes! I will put the past from me, forget it, and enjoy the good things left to me. Is it my fault? I never meant to hurt or harm him—Heaven knows that—he knows it too—therefore why can't I be happy by and by? Oh, I must, I must"—with a burst of protesting passion—"and I will!" Then after a long wistful pause—"If I were not so heavily weighted! If I had any hope of paying him back, of lightening the debt! But I have none—none! I got my chance. I've had my day, and lost it—lost it forever!"

CHAPTER XI.

So Mrs. Armstrong's honeymoon is cut short. Four days later she is again driving up the well-worn avenue of Nutsgrove.

It is a lovely afternoon, and, as Addie peers out of the window, a great gladness fills her heart, for every flower seems to bow its head to her in fragrant welcome, and standing on the doorstep are Pauline and Lottie waving their handkerchiefs, surrounded by half a dozen dogs giving joyous tongue, while the Widow, at a discreet distance inside the porch, is purring melodiously.

"How lovely it all looks!" she cries, hugging the girls rapturously. "How jolly it is to get home again! It seems ages and ages since I left you all. Oh, Tom"—turning to her husband, who is trying to silence the dogs—"don't stop them! They're only telling me how glad they are to have me back—their bark is music."

"You look a little tired," says Pauline, critically.

"We've been traveling since eleven. Oh, how I should like a—"

"Cup of tea. Addie, Addie, I see you retain your old habits!" laughs Pauline. "Come inside; it's all ready in the drawing-room."

"You thoughtful child! Well, Polly, I think this is as near heaven to me as any spot on earth could be," she says a little tremulously, sinking upon the sofa beside the tray. "No let me, dear; I'm not too tired for that. Where's Tom? Where's my husband?"

"Oh, he has disappeared, as any well-behaved husband would in the circumstances! I see you have him in training already, Addie."

"But he might like a cup of tea; he has not had anything since breakfast."

"He'll have a glass of wine or something in the dining-room," Pauline declares lightly. "Don't bother about him, now, but tell us about everything. You've had a real good time of it, haven't you, Addie?"

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"It was very nice," she answers, with cautious guardedness—"weather lovely, delicious bathing in the morning, drives in the afternoon, and then the band on the pier at night. I think I told you all about it in my letters."

"Addie," asks Lottie, her great staring eyes fixed on her sister's uneasy face, "what's a honeymoon like? Is it very nice? Do you think I shall enjoy my honeymoon?"

"Oh, Lottie, how can I tell. It depends."

"Depends entirely whether you spend it with Mr. Right, I should say, my dear," puts in Pauline.

"With Mr. Right? I don't understand. Who is Mr. Right, Pauline? I don't know him."

"Well, I suppose Mr. Right is not Mr. Wrong, Lottie. That's all I can tell you about him at present."

"Oh, I see, I see! What a good way of putting it! Addie, is your husband Mr. Ri—"

"Lottie, if you ask me another question until I have finished my tea, a certain brown-paper parcel at the bottom of my trunk addressed to you will go to-morrow to the Children's Hospital at Kelvick," answers Addie desperately.

Lottie's voice is not heard for twenty minutes.

"Now is your time, girls, to tell me everything about every one," Addie says presently, her spirits reviving—"dear Aunt Jo, and the boys?"

"All flourishing. I had a letter this morning from Aunt Jo, inclosing her grandmother's—Lady Susan Something's—famous recipe for catchup promised to you as a wedding-dower, Addie. And Hal likes his school, for a wonder, immensely; he is full of football, and cricket, and the rest of it. It seems to me that the paths to knowledge are made as flowery as possible at Dr. Jellett's."

"And Bob, dear Bob?"

"Oh, Bob's coming on too! But he has to begin at the beginning, you know!"

"Of course, naturally; he couldn't be expected to turn out at once a full-blown clerk."

"No," allows Pauline, with a light laugh, "he couldn't. He is learning to write now—not a soul in the office could read his drafts at first—and after that he'll have to turn his attention to spelling,

and then, I believe, to the multiplication table."

"Oh, dear," exclaims Addie, very much taken aback, "is it as bad as that? I'm afraid he'll be rather a nuisance in the office than otherwise."

"Yes, I expect so, for the present. But he'll tell you all about it himself on Sunday."

"Is he coming on Sunday?"—eagerly.

"Of course! Why, you seem to forget that Kelvick is only seven miles off and they shut up shop—I mean, the office closes early on Saturday. I expect we shall have him over here every week—won't it be jolly, Addie?—and Hal too."

"And Hal too?"

"Yes. Jellett's boys are free to return to the bosom of their families, if they like, from Saturday to Monday; and I believe Mr. Armstrong wrote himself to tell him to be sure to come and welcome you home. Didn't he tell you?" [62]

"No."

"Then he meant it as a surprise, I suppose."

"And—and, Addie," puts in Lottie, cautiously recovering voice, "Sunday is my birthday, you know, and I'm going to ask Mr. Armstrong if we may all have tea in the woods as usual. Do you think he'll let us? He is not a strict Sunday-man, is he, Addie? I hope not."

"Sabbatarian, you mean. I don't know. You can tap his theology yourself, Lottie."

"I will the moment he comes in. I'm not a bit afraid of him, Addie. I don't think he's at all the bugbear the boys used to make him out long ago. Don't you remember, before you were mar—"

"Come along, come along," cries Pauline, springing to her feet, "and see everything! Your room has been done up beautifully, Addie, and there are new carpets everywhere. And who d'ye think you have got for your housekeeper, my dear? Why, old Sally herself!"

"Old Sally—mother's old nurse?"

"The same. It seems Aunt Jo recommended her to your husband's patronage on the score of her serf-like fidelity to the family and her many other virtues, her bargaining powers, *et cætera*; and so he appointed her housekeeper. She was in the hall when you came in; but you didn't notice her; and no wonder—I doubt if you'll recognize her even after introduction—she's so grand in her black silk dress and lace cap, with manners, my dear, quite *en suite*. You can see she means to live up to the tone of your restored establishment, Addie. You could never imagine her skirmishing at the back-door now, with abusive butchers and bakers, or trying to wheedle a pound of tea out of the grocer—oh, no!"

"Addie, Addie, look at the new piano; isn't it grand? 'Annie Laurie,' even without the variations, sounds lovely on it, and when you put down the pedal it's quite like a band."

"Oh, don't bother about the piano, Goggles—plenty of time to see that. Come out and look at your ponies, Addie—such a delightful pair!—and the phaeton to match. Oh, won't it be grand, us three bowling along in it all over the country! The groom says they go at such a pace. Come on, come on; you look half asleep, Addie! What's the matter?"

"Joy," answers Addie, with rather a shrill laugh—"joy tempered by a touch of indigestion. How can I swallow all these good things at a gulp? Let me dispose of the piano before I attack the ponies and old Sally in *poult de soie*. Give me breathing-time, sisters, I pray you."

Saturday brings the boys, boisterous and jubilant. The five young people spend the balmy September noon poking about all the haunts of the past, paying pilgrimages to the shrine of their childish pleasures and mishaps, hunting up scraps of personal property, moldy relics in outhouses and farm-sheds; and Addie, all the troubles of her short matronhood laid aside, in a plain unflounced skirt—the simplest in her *trousseau*—thickly booted, trips by their side and enters into all their pleasures with a heart, for the time being, as light as their own. [63]

It is after six o'clock when they return, stained, dusty, disheveled, to prepare for dinner and a decorous greeting of their host.

"I say, Addie," asked Bob incidentally, "isn't it time your skipper was due? Does he stick to the shop all Saturday too?"

"I don't know," she answers, suddenly, sobered by this the first allusion to her absent lord. "This is the first Saturday I've spent here since—since I was married. But he always comes home on other days at six; he ought to be in now. Ah, here is a note from him on the table! I—I wonder what's it about?"

She reads it through quietly, and then says, in a low voice—

"Mr. Armstrong is not returning to dinner this evening. He has business detaining him in Kelvick."

"Not coming back this evening! Good man, good man!"

"More power to you, Tom!"

"Hurrah!" shout the boys in a breath.

Addie colors to the roots of her hair, and walks away slowly without a word.

"You shouldn't, boys," interposes Pauline, with a sage nod of her tumbled head. "Remember, she is his wife now, and may not like your—your expressing yourselves so freely."

"Oh, stuff, Polly! She does not mind a bit—why should she? She'll be one of ourselves to the end of the chapter. I don't see a bit of change in her."

"Don't you?" retorts Pauline. "Well, I do—a great change; and you'll agree with me before long, I think."

"You mean to insinuate that she'd take Armstrong's part against us? Not she! Addie's grit to the backbone."

"Time will reveal who is right."

"There goes the first dinner-bell!" shouts Lottie, rising. "I hope you're in splendid appetite, boys, because we've famous dinners now, I can tell you—regular young dinner-parties every day—soup, entries, joints, such sweets, and such desert!"

"My!" exclaims Hal, smacking his lips and rubbing the middle of his waistcoat vulgarly. "'Times is changed,' as the dogs'-meat man said."

Meantime Addie, with lowering face and trembling hands, was divesting herself of her soiled dress, pained and indignant.

"I won't stand it—I won't! The house is his, not ours; and, if he won't enjoy his own home, we must clear out of it—that's all. Business indeed! I don't believe a word of it; he hadn't more business in Kelvick after hours than I had. He just remained there shut up in that dingy parlor all alone because he thought we should be happier without him—because he felt he'd be in the way in his own house, one too many at his own dinner-table. It's simply carrying things too far, and I won't stand it. I'll tell him so to-morrow, whether he snubs me or not. He can't silence me for a year, he'll find—I'll tell him so to-morrow."

But the morrow does not bring Mr. Armstrong to Nutsgrove. After a long drowsy morning spent shut up in the family-pew, Addie proclaims herself invalided with a racking headache, and unable to take part in the celebration of her sister's birthday. So the family, among whom sympathy with the sick and afflicted is not a distinguishing trait, after vaguely suggesting tea, soda-water, eau-de-Cologne, and the rest, depart grove-ward with a goodly hamper, leaving her alone on a couch in the drawing-room window, limp and feverish with pain.

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It is dark before they return in boisterous spirits, full of their adventures, and with countenances smeared with blackberry-juice.

"Oh, Hal, I wish you would not shout so!" pleads Addie. "If you could feel how your voice goes through my head!"

"Beg pardon, I'm sure, Addie; I quite forgot all about your head—at least I thought it was all right by this," Hal answers, in a voice that plainly says, "What a fuss to make about a bit of a headache!"

"Perhaps it would be better for you to go to bed, Addie," Pauline suggests briskly.

So Addie retires and sits by her open window, with wide dry eyes and burning cheeks.

"How selfish they are!" she mutters petulantly. "They never even asked if I was better. Oh, they have fallen off somehow—all of them! They're not quite the same—there's something changed. I—I wonder is the change in them, or in me, or in both? I wish I knew. The last time I had a headache it was so different—so different! I remember it was on the day after that long drive in the sun to the Lover's Leap; and, when I came home, he had the room all darkened, and my head bandaged with a handkerchief steeped in iced eau-de-Cologne, and the band stopped in the hotel garden all the afternoon, and—and everything I could want by my side. And I never even thanked you, Tom; I don't think I felt grateful. What a wretch I was—what a wretch!"

CHAPTER XII.

MR. ARMSTRONG does not return home until after office-hours on Monday. His wife, hearing him in the hall, hurries out to meet him as he is about to enter the room, and stands with her back against the door, blocking the way. She looks up into his face and begins impetuously before she has time to lose courage.

"Where have you been? Why did you not return home on Saturday? What do you mean by—"

"Did you not receive my note?" he asks in surprise. "I wrote explaining to you the cause of my absence. Was not my note delivered?"

She feels her courage oozing out, and makes a desperate rally.

"What if I refused to accept your explanation—to believe in your excuses?"

He shrugs his shoulders faintly.

"I have no remedy to suggest; I think the reason given was a credible and acceptable one. Business detained me until it was too late to return, and the next day I rode over to Crokestown to see my cousin, Ellen Murphy, and she made me remain to dinner. I can not improve that statement of affairs, I fear, so will not try. Your sisters are in the drawing-room. Will you not let me enter, my dear?"

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She draws back, and follows in, mute and cowed.

"Well," he says pleasantly, "let me hear how my precious household got on in my absence. The boys came over of course? That's right. I am sure you enjoyed yourselves all together famously; yesterday was such a lovely day, too!"

"I didn't," says Addie shortly, "for I had a villainous headache all day."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Then you did not celebrate Lottie's birthday in the grove, as you had intended?"

"Oh, yes! They all went and enjoyed themselves very much, I believe. I stayed at home, my head was too bad."

Armstrong making no reply, the subject drops.

After dinner, Pauline, who has left her tennis-racket lying on the grass, runs out to fetch it, and is immediately followed by her younger sister, who begins eagerly—

"Oh, Polly, did you hear her about the tea in the grove and that stupid old headache, making such a ridiculous fuss? You were right about her, after all, you see. I must say I never could have believed Addie would become such a tell-tale! Perhaps, now that we're gone, she'll tell a lot more—tell that we treated her unkindly, made her head worse with the noise. Perhaps Mr. Armstrong will never let the dear boys come here again. Oh, Polly, let us go back and stop her telling more!"

"No, it is not necessary; she's not telling any more. I don't fancy," continues Miss Pauline, in a tone more of musing analysis than for the information of her eager companion, "that Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong have quite as much to say to each other when they're alone as when we're keeping them company."

"No, Polly? Why? What makes you think that?"

"Several things make me think it," Pauline replies, shaking her head. "Addie has not seen fit to confide any of her secrets to me, though in the old days we never had a thought apart; but, all the same, she can't take me in—can't bandage my eyes as easily as that. No, no, my young lady, no!"

"I should think not indeed," says Lottie, with wily emphasis. "If she tries to deceive you, Poll, she'll find she's mistaken—pretty soon, I fancy. And so you think, Poll, you think—"

"I think," resumes Pauline, swallowing the bait, "that all is not quite on the square between Addie and her vitriol husband."

"But, Polly, they seem so attached to each other. How do you make that out? They are always anxious to please each other. He gives her everything she can possibly want, and she never contradicts him, or answers him sharply, or loses her temper, or anything."

"That's just where the main hitch is, you little simpleton! Don't you see they're much too polite, too ceremonious, too anxious, as you put it, to please each other to be a happy couple? Don't you see that their attitude of studied care, of smiling deference, is just assumed to hide something they don't want the world to see?"

"How sharp you are, Polly! How did you guess all that?"

"Instinct, I suppose—I have no experience to go by. And instinct tells me that it argues an extremely unwholesome state of domestic affairs to see a husband as polite, as courteously attentive to his wife, as Tom is to Addie."

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"Yes, yes; you are right; he is very polite to her."

"He is treacherously so—smolderingly so, if there is such a word. To see that man walk across the room to relieve her of her cup, stand up to open the door for her when she passes out, hand her cushions, footstools, newspapers, in the way he does, with that sort of heavy mechanical gallantry, is simply unnatural, unwholesome, volcanic. Something will come of it sooner or later, mark my words, Charlotte Lefroy!"

Charlotte draws a quick excited breath, and clutches the sibyl's slim young arm.

"Oh, Pauline, it's like a picture out of a novel! Go on, go on! Something will come of it—eh?"

"For instance, now, you, in your ignorance and childish inexperience, imagine that Addie is at this moment pouring all her grievances into the marital ear, cooing perhaps at his feet, like the honeymoon pairs in 'Punch,' telling him how brutally we and the boys behaved to her while he was away."

"Yes, yes; say I imagine all that. Now what do you imagine, Pauline?"

"I imagine quite the contrary. We can easily see who is right by peeping through the Venetian blinds into the drawing-room. I don't think the shutters are closed yet."

The two girls step lightly back and peep. They see Addie seated at her end of the table, cracking

nuts, with absorbed downcast face, a little red with the exertion, and Mr. Armstrong, at his end of the table, sipping his wine silently, apparently occupied with manufacturing thoughts, the evening edition of the "Kelvick Mercury" resting on his knee.

"There," hisses Pauline triumphantly—"there! Did I not tell you? There's the attentive, courteous husband, returning after a three-days' absence to the bosom of his family! There's a picture after Hogarth for you with a vengeance, and they not a month married yet! Oh, fie!"

"Pauline, Pauline, how clever you are!" breathes Lottie ecstatically. "I wish I could see things like you."

"Well, Lottie, that's a picture I'd rather not see anyhow. It inspires me with no feeling of elation, I can tell you; on the contrary—"

"But, Pauline, I heard you say twenty times that Addie's marriage was not like any one else's, that she could not be expected to care for Mr. Armstrong as if he were one of her own class, young and a gentleman, and all that, you know!"

"I know. The marriage was one of convenience on his side—of necessity almost on hers; but, all the same, it's rather too soon for them to have found out their mistake—rather too soon. I suppose it's all Addie's fault. She's so awfully hot-blooded and impulsive. Bob and I are the only two with heads in any way steady on our shoulders. What a little fool she will be if she quarrels with her bread-and-butter before the honeymoon is out—such good bread-and-butter too!"

"And you think she may, seriously?"

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"I don't know. I can't tell. I'm almost afraid to turn my thoughts to the third volume"—with a quick impatient sigh. "I hope it will not end as it did with the Greenes of Green Park. If it does that will be a precious bad look-out, Lottchen, for you, for me, and for the boys—precious bad!"

"The Greenes of Green Park—the people in that pew near us in church, who used to be near us—the tall good-looking man with the glasses, and the pretty lady with the golden hair? Oh, I know! Tell me about them, Polly; how did they end?"

"Sir James Hannen," says Polly shortly; "that's how they ended. And nobody knew anything, even suspected anything, until the very last. They were the model couple of the whole country. Grandison Greene he used to be called, though his real name was Adolphus; but he was named Grandison, after a very courteous old swell in some book or other, on account of the fascinating elegance of his manners to the world at large and to his wife in particular. You never saw anything like their picturesque devotion to each other; they seemed to walk through matrimony in a sort of courtly minuet; and I've heard Lady Crawford tell auntie that it would just bring tears to your eyes to see that man shawl his wife in the cloak-room after a concert or dance. And this, my dear, went on for years and years, until one morning Mrs. Greene ran home to her mamma—she was a Miss Pakenham of Clare Abbey—and said she couldn't stand it any longer. And then it all came out in the Courts, for she refused to return to him, and he sued her publicly to make her do so, for a restitution of something or other—I forget the legal way of putting it. Any way, it came out that they simply loathed each other, and that Grandison had led the unfortunate woman the life of a fiend behind the scenes."

"Oh, Pauline, how truly thrilling!"

"It came out that, when he was wrapping her up so tenderly before every one, he used to pinch her poor arm until she was ready to scream with pain, but daren't; that he used to stealthily crunch her poor little foot when he was bending lovingly over her or bowing her out of the room; that he used to run pins into her flesh when he was adjusting a flower or knot of ribbons on her shoulder. You never heard such revelations. Aunt Jo hid all the papers at the time; but Bob and I found them, and read everything. He was a regular Bluebeard; and the very first evening I saw Armstrong offer his arm to Addie to bring her in to dinner, and the sort of shy shivery way she took it, made me think on the instant of Grandison Greene and his—"

"Polly, Polly," breaks in Lottie excitedly, "do you think Mr. Armstrong and Addie have come to that? Do you think he runs pins into her, pinches her when we're not looking? Oh"—after a pause, with a burst of relief—"I don't believe it! Because, if he did, she'd pinch him back; I know she would. She is not like Mrs. Greene; she has a spirit of her own, has Addie. She'd pinch him back just as hard, and then we should find out."

"Lottie, don't argue like a fool! I never said Armstrong ill-used her actively, never said he was a born brute like Adolphus Greene, though he is not the style of a man I should care to call husband. I give him his due, and honestly believe he would not touch a hair of her head unkindly, no matter what provocation he got. No; what I mean is that they have simply found out that they are utterly unsuited to each other—had a bit of difference, perhaps. I dare say he taxed her with marrying him for his money, and she answered back something of the kind; and the upshot was, they determined to hide their discovery from every one, even from us, which was a vain and foolish resolve so far as I am concerned."

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"I should like to know, I should like to find out," murmurs Lottie fervently. "I'll watch them closely, I'll ask Addie questions when she's off her guard, I'll—"

"Lottie," cries Pauline sharply, facing her sister, "if you attempt to do anything of that kind, if you ever by word, look, or act, betray what I have so foolishly confided to you, you will rue the day to the end of your life! Do you hear me? You don't know what mischief you'll do. You are an unfortunate child at the best of times, Lottie; you seldom come into a room without making some one uncomfortable with your luckless remarks and questions."

"I don't mean to make them uncomfortable," she answers tearfully.

"I don't say you do; but the effect is the same. And, in this case, if you thrust yourself into the fray, you will simply ruin us all."

"Oh, how, Pauline?"

"You will just spring the mine on which our present prosperity flourishes, and bring us to the wall again. We're very well off just at present. Though it is not necessary to proclaim the fact from the house-tops—Bob may grumble as he likes about the desecrating breath of vitriol and all that—I maintain—and am not ashamed to do so—that the new state of affairs suits my constitution and my tastes better than the old. It is far pleasanter to be well fed, well clothed, well housed, than not; pleasanter any day to partake of stalled ox than a dish of herbs; to lie on patent spring beds than on mattresses teased in the reign of James the First; pleasanter to tread the earth in satin shoes than in cobblers' clogs. To bring the case nearer to your heart and understanding, Goggles, it is pleasanter to nibble plum-cake than dry bread, isn't it?"

"It is—it is," murmurs the little maid pathetically. "Who's—"

"'A denigin' of it?' Not I, indeed! Very well, then; as we both agree on that point, let us combine to agree on the other, which is more important—namely, to do everything to keep our position among the flesh-pots, which is anything but a stronghold, I greatly fear, just at present. Do you agree?"

"I do—I do!"

"Then let me impress on you, my child, a piece of advice which you will find invaluable, not only at this crisis, but at many another of your life. Never interfere between man and wife; let them keep their secrets, hide their troubles, fight their battles unmolested, unobserved. Do not seem to see, feel, or understand what is going on. Be deaf, dumb, blind to all that does not concern your immediate person, or else you may just find yourself in Queer Street, before you know where you are."

"Queer Street? Where is that, Pauline? I never heard of it."

"Queer Street is not a nice street to live in, my dear. Almost every town has a street of that name. Queer Street in your case would probably mean Miss Swishtale's Collegiate Academy for Young Ladies, Minerva House, Kelvick, where the little Douglasses were sent to school by their step-mother, you know. You wouldn't like to be there?"

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"No—oh, no!"

"Then keep my advice in your heart."

CHAPTER XIII.

CERTAINLY Miss Pauline Lefroy is right. Life at Nutsgrove under the new *régime*, so far as creature-comforts go, is a vast improvement on the old. Its contrast was at first too great to be entirely satisfactory to the nerves of Colonel Lefroy's unsophisticated daughters; but this feeling soon wore away, and they dropped naturally and contentedly into the reign of order and methodical respectability inaugurated by Mr. Armstrong's well-trained servants. They learned to answer to the chime of bell and gong, to enter a room quietly, and, above all, to dress, as ladies are supposed to dress, neatly and becomingly. The dogs followed the example of their mistresses, and no longer dragged their muddy paws across fresh carpets and waxed boards, or rested their dusty bodies on the drawing-room couches.

"How changed it all is!" thinks Addie. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm myself at all, if I haven't been changed with the carpets and curtains."

With a sort of rueful satisfaction, of struggling content, she looks at herself, at the elegant young person in rustling *broché* which the swivel pier-glasses so importunately reflect whenever she crosses her luxurious bedroom. Can she be the same light-hearted girl who stood in a ragged cotton dress and patched boots but a short year ago before a cracked fly-stained old mirror?

"In those days," she thinks, with a laugh, "why, the prospect of a new dress would keep me awake for a week! And now!—now that I have as many as I like, now that I could have a *ruche* of bank-notes at the bottom of each skirt if I wished—I don't seem to care about it or anything else in particular. I suppose it is always the way. They say a confectioner feels as little inclination to eat one of the buns crowding his counter as an apothecary to swallow a box of his pills. It's a pity that possession should bring satiety so soon. I have all I once longed for in plenteous measure, and yet I want something else—something else I once had and did not value in the least. How foolish of me to want it now, just because it's out of my reach! I suppose that's the reason—because it's out of my reach. Oh, why can't I take the good things in my way like Pauline and the others? Pauline! What a wonderful girl she is, and how little I knew her before! I thought she would be a regular whirlwind in this model establishment, would be always kicking over the traces; on the contrary, she has toned down quicker than any of us, though indeed, for the matter of that, we've behaved as a family very creditably on the whole—we, a flock of hungry sheep turned suddenly from a region of bare sun-dried rocks into a rich clover-valley. Yes, we have behaved well; we have not betrayed our jubilation in uncouth gambols or childish caperings, and

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credit is due to us, I think. I suppose it's the race-horse strain, as Bob calls it, that has supported us under the ordeal—the race horse strain, the Bourbon blood, the Lefroy breeding," she goes on, a little impatiently. "I wish Bob did not talk quite so much about them. I know we come of a good old stock—we're descended from Charlemagne's sister, and all that; but I do think he makes too much of it. Not that Tom minds it a bit, but I fancy sometimes that he laughs at Bob—yes, I feel sure of it—and despises him a little too for his incapacity and what he, I suppose, calls 'bragging.' And yet how handsome Bob is, how noble-looking even! What an air of *grand monarque* there is about his lightest movement! For all that, I suppose some people would call him 'a conceited young prig.' I wonder would there be any truth in it if they did? Oh, dear, I feel awfully at sea lately about things, everything getting topsy-turvy, and no one to set me straight—no one!"

The master of Nutsgrove intrudes but very little on the lives of his womenfolk. Every morning at nine o'clock, after a hasty preoccupied breakfast, he either drives or rides to Kelvick, scarcely ever returning before the dinner-hour, when he always appears, clothed in broadcloth and courtesy, to lead his sister-in-law in to dinner; after which he generally bears them company for an hour or so in the drawing-room, occasionally taking a hand at *bésique* or go-bang, sometimes standing by the piano like a gentleman at an evening party, turning over music and expressing polite satisfaction at the extremely mild entertainment, both vocal and instrumental, provided by Addie and Pauline; though the former has a sweet little voice enough, but perfectly untrained and husky from want of use. After ten o'clock, when he retires to his study for a couple of hours' reading, they see him no more until the morning.

The hours of his absence between breakfast and dinner are pleasantly filled, the mornings being devoted to study, under the superintendence of an experienced finishing-governess, who keeps Pauline and Lottie hard at work until twelve; after which, three times a week, masters for music and drawing, from whom Mrs. Armstrong also condescends to take lessons, attend from Kelvick.

The afternoons are spent in driving or riding, in returning or receiving calls; for the county people, who had by degrees dropped the neglected children of Colonel Lefroy, are suddenly and unanimously inspired with feelings of civility toward the wife of the wealthy manufacturer, and day after day the trim well-weeded avenue is marked with the track of some county equipage *en route* for Nutsgrove, a state of things which affords much satisfaction to Pauline and her elder brother.

"By Jove, Addie," exclaims that young gentleman one Saturday afternoon, while turning over the contents of her card-tray, "you are in the swim, and no mistake—Lady Crawford, Mr. and the Misses Pelham-Browne, General Hawksley, Sir Alfred and Lady Portrann, the Dean of St. Margaret's, and Mrs. Vavasour, the Dowager Countess of Deenmore and—do my eyes deceive me?—no—Admiral and Mrs. Beecher of the Abbey, Greystones. I'll trouble you for a half-glass of sherry, Goggles. Thanks. I feel reasonably convalescent now. Admiral and Mrs. Beecher of the Abbey, Greystones! After that, I feel equal to anything!"

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"We weren't at home on the day they called," laughs Pauline. "I was so sorry, for I meant to have faced them gallantly."

"Well, Addie, well," exclaims Robert triumphantly, "wasn't I a good prophet? Didn't I tell you how it would be? Didn't I tell you you'd open the gates for him and give him the run of the county—eh? I expect he's precious glad now he didn't let you slip through his fingers, Addie!"

"He doesn't care a straw," she answers contemptuously—"I know he doesn't. He wouldn't care if he had the run of twenty counties unless he liked the people personally—unless they were clever, or amusing, or took an interest in his affairs."

"Stuff, Addie, stuff; you don't know what you are talking about. Armstrong is just as pleased as Punch that the neighbors are looking you up. I saw it in his face at once. Why else did he give up three afternoons in the last fortnight to return those calls with Pauline and you, I should like to know?"

"He did that because it would not have been the thing for me, a bride, to return the first time without my—my husband; it would have been bad form, but it bored him awfully—I saw it did," she persists; "and he did not care for the people either. He was awfully disgusted with Lady Crawford—at the way she talked and the questions she asked me. He said afterward that he would not allow his wife to be patronized by such a meddlesome ill-bred woman as that."

Robert flushes angrily.

"That's because he does not understand. People of his class are always hunting up affronts, imagining they're being snubbed and patronized, when nothing of the kind is intended. I am perfectly certain that Lady Crawford meant only to act kindly in offering advice to you, a young girl unaccustomed to the etiquette of matronhood, without a mother to put you in the way of doing things."

"No," declares Addie, "she meant nothing of the kind. The way she looked at me through her gold-rimmed glasses, turned me round, commented on my dress, my appearance, my appointments altogether, and then informed me calmly that she thought I should do, was, to say the least of it, extremely impertinent and underbred; and I quite agree with my husband in the matter."

Robert and Pauline exchange a rapid glance: there is a storm-signal in the latter's eyes. So Robert wisely lets the matter drop, and busies himself with the card-basket.

"By the bye, Addie," he resumes, half an hour later, when the "breeze" has passed, "about this contemplated return of your husband to Parliament at the next election—I hope you will use your

influence to make him fall in with the views of the electors; they are most anxious he should stand—"

"My husband returned for Parliament!" she interrupts quickly. "I—I did not know, have not heard anything about it. They want him to stand for Kelvick?"

"Yes, when old Hubbard retires at the end of the next session; he's been past his work for years. Fancy Armstrong not telling you anything about it! Why, every one is—" [72]

"He does not talk much of his business affairs at home. I suppose he does not think they would interest me," she says hastily.

"Well, but this is not business exactly; and let me tell you, Addie, it's a subject in which you ought to take an interest. The position of the wife of a member of Parliament is always one to command respect, though it is a great pity Armstrong should go to the wrong shop for his politics. However, I suppose, having risen from the ranks, he could scarcely at the eleventh hour go over to Toryism—"

"Because he married a Lefroy? Well, scarcely! And I'd rather not ask him to do so, if that is what you mean, Robert," says Addie, with a slight sneer, which she finds it difficult at times to repress when discussing her husband with Robert. Then, after a pause—"Fancy his going into Parliament! I never thought he had any inclination for a political career."

"Oh, but, my dear," says Robert, with lofty indulgence, "you must not judge Armstrong by what you see of him here! He's not the sort of man to shine in society, not a carpet-ornament by any means; but he's just the man to prose away in the House by the hour anent artisans' rights and working-men's wrongs, and the rest of it! Why, he's one of the tallest talkers at mechanics' institute meeting, union *soirées*, corporate gatherings in Kelvick! You should just hear him in the chair! Why, he has a flow of steady municipal oratory that would simply surprise you! I must smuggle you into the gallery some evening, Addie, and you can hear your lord spout."

"And me too, Bob," pleads Lottie, who is listening most attentively. "I should like to hear Tom in the chair too; I'm sure he has very little to say in any of our chairs. Polly and I have to do all the talk of an evening; he's generally as quiet as a mouse. And, as for toning him down, polishing him up—you remember, Bob, what you said we should have to do when he married Addie? Why, I really don't see there's any need for it all! Tom is quite as polite and as well behaved as any one else who comes here."

"Lottie, Lottie, what are you talking about?" breaks in Bob, his face reddening unpleasantly. "I never said anything of the kind!"

"But Bob, you did—you know you did—and so did Polly, too; but you forget. You said we should have to teach him how to enter a room, to sit at table, eat his dinner, and behave like a gentleman. You said he'd put his knife in his mouth instead of his fork, drink his soup like an alderman, sop up his gravy with bread, and so on. And he does nothing of the kind; he just eats his dinner like you, or me, or any one. I watched him carefully from the very first night. Polly, Polly, you're kicking my shins! Oh, oh! What's the matter? What have I—"

"The matter!" cried Polly, in a low angry voice. "The matter is that I strongly suspect you'll end the year at Miss Swishtale's; and I sincerely hope it may be so."

"Oh, Polly, I'm so sorry!" whines Lottie, looking at her eldest sister walking away quickly with very bright cheeks and a sparkle in her eyes as of unshed tears. "But I never can remember she's married to him; they're not a bit like husband and wife—you know they're not—and she's always Addie Lefroy to me." [73]

"Then let me once more impress on you the fact that she's not Addie Lefroy, and never will be again," says Pauline, with impressive impatience. "And you, Bob, ought to be more guarded in what you say, and not criticise her husband as freely as you do. I can see she does not like it."

Addie walks slowly down the hall, seeing her husband—the door of his study standing ajar—writing at his desk. She pauses for a moment, moves on hesitatingly, and then hurries forward and knocks briskly.

"It is you! Pray come in, Addie," he said politely, rising to meet her. "Won't you sit down?"

"No, I won't detain you; I see you are busy. I—I only came to tell you that Bob has just informed me that you have some idea of standing for Kelvick at the next election, and he—he seemed to think it strange I had heard nothing about it from you."

"But I have no denned idea of standing for Kelvick, and the election is many months off yet. I should certainly have spoken to you on the matter, had I begun to think seriously of it myself. It is not too late now. What are your views? Are you as anxious as your brother Robert that I should go in for senatorial honors?" Then, with a quick cold smile, seeing she does not answer—"Would you care for the mystic initials 'W. M. P.' after your name, my dear?"

"'W. M. P.'! What do they stand for?"

"'Wife of member of Parliament.' Haven't you read 'Our Mutual Friend'? No? Then you ought to do so; it's a capital book."

"If you went into Parliament," she says slowly, "you would have to spend a couple of months in

town, would you not—would have to tear yourself away from the bosom of your family for nearly a quarter of a year at a time? That would be a—a trial you ought to consider, I think."

"I will consider all the drawbacks and advantages of the position carefully, before I commit myself, you may be sure. I will not—"

"Do anything in a hurry again," she puts in quickly, her eyes smoldering. "You are right. It would be a mistake."

He takes not the slightest notice of the taunt; she, looking defiantly, wistfully into his strong swarthy face, lit up with that smile of genial indifference it always wears when by rare chance they find themselves alone together, acknowledges to herself with a pang that she is bruising herself in vain, that no movement of her restless, petulant little hand will move him from the position he has taken, that no frown, no laugh, no tear, no sigh, will soften the granite of his face or nature, or bring his life nearer to hers again.

"What is your programme for the afternoon?" he asks, in a tone of polite interest. "It is a pity not to avail yourselves of this pleasant weather, with bleak November within a week of our heels."

"We were thinking of riding over to Beeton Hall—Robert, Polly, and I—to see Mrs. Morgan's apiary, I think she called it; it ought to be amusing. I know I always enjoyed the monkey-house at the Zoo better than anything else." [74]

Armstrong's shield is lowered for a minute; he looks up into his wife's childish face with a smile that brings back to her the short warm fortnight by the sea, and makes her mutter to herself:

"How almost nice-looking he would be if he always smiled in that way! I suppose I must have said something startlingly idiotic to make him look natural all of a moment like that."

"Apiary?" he repeats. "Did you expect to see monkeys in Mrs. Morgan's apiary, Addie?"

"Apes?" she answers stoutly. "Of course we did—Polly, Robert, all of us. We expected to see monkeys, apes, chimpanzees, gorillas even; she said it was a splendid one. What are we to see, Tom?"

"Bees, Addie."

"Bees," she echoes blankly—"only bees! I do call that a 'sell,' and no mistake! Going to ride nine miles to see a lot of stupid old bees! Oh, won't the others be just mad! And Polly and I after stuffing our saddles with sugar and nuts and eau-de-Cologne—oh, dear!"

"I sympathize with you, my dear; and I think Robert might have remembered enough of his Latin to know that *apis* means 'bee.'"

"Such a long uninteresting ride too along the quarry road!" she grumbles. "I—I suppose you wouldn't be tempted to join our festive party, would you?"

"Unfortunately I have to return to Kelvick. I'm engaged to dine with Challice the banker."

"At his club?"

"No; at his private residence."

"Oh, I see! I suppose you'll have a very pleasant evening?"

"I hope so. By the bye, I think I'll remain at the factory all night. They generally keep it up rather late at the bank-house. Challice is an indefatigable whist-player."

"Miss Challice, is she a good player?"

"Very fair; she plays a steady hand."

"I—I suppose now she'd know that an apiary wasn't an ape-house?"

"I never had occasion to sound her knowledge in the matter; but I should say she would."

Addie draws a quick resentful breath, leans over her husband as he is placidly stamping his letters, and whispers in his ear:

"What a pity you didn't marry her, Tom, instead of me!"

With this parting shot she flies from the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong and Miss Lefroy. Lady Portrann at home Tuesday, the 16th of January, 10 P.M. Dancing."

"Addie, that means a ball, doesn't it? How delightful! You're going, of course?"

"I suppose so. Mr. Armstrong wishes it."

"And you'll wear your white *broché* and pearls. Oh, isn't it well for you?" groans Pauline wistfully. [75]
"Miss Lefroy—that's me, of course. It was nice of them to ask me, wasn't it, Addie?"

"Yes. I suppose they did not know you were still in the school-room, Polly."

"I'm past seventeen, and eldest daughter now that you're married and done for, Addie, and I do think it's hard lines keeping me down."

"If Mr. Armstrong wishes to give you the advantage of education, no matter how late, I think you ought to be extremely grateful to him, instead of grumbling as you continually do," says Mrs. Armstrong severely.

"You're so remarkably well educated yourself, Addie," retorts Pauline, "you can well afford to preach. Didn't you see how Tom stared the other night when you asked him which would take longest, to go to New York or Calcutta? I'm sure, if he keeps me in the school-room, he ought to keep you too. 'Lady Portrann at home, 10 P.M. Dancing.' How lovely it sounds! How I wish I could go, just to see what it would be like! I wouldn't dance, you know, Addie, or wear a silk dress, or anything in that way, but just sit in a corner and look on quietly; and—and don't you think, if you put it to your husband mildly like, that he might—might—"

"I think nothing in the matter, my dear," answers Addie decisively; "and I'll put nothing to my husband, mildly or otherwise; so it's of no use asking me."

"Don't then!"

"I won't."

The sisters glare at each other; then Addie moves away, humming a tune, and the vexed question is not alluded to again that day.

The next morning, when she is seated at her desk, composing her acceptance, Pauline bounces in with dancing eyes and leans over her.

"Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong have much pleasure in accepting—' It won't do—it won't do! You'll have to begin again, my dear, though this is the third sheet I see you've spoiled. Begin again, Addie, begin: I'll dictate to you—"

"Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong and Miss Lefroy have much pleasure in accepting Lady Portrann's kind invitation for Tuesday, the 16th proximo.' Yes, you may stare; but I'm going to the ball. Tom says I may, if I can get your consent; and I know I shall get that—you couldn't be such a—a—fiend, Addie, as to refuse when he has consented?"

"I suppose I couldn't," she answers meekly, attacking her fourth sheet. "If I did, you'd lead me such a life that—"

"I should, dear," admits Miss Lefroy briskly—"I certainly should. Now give me the note; I'll put it into the post-bag myself."

"Wait a moment, Polly! About your dress? As you don't mean to dance, I suppose one of your ordinary evening grenadines, with a little furbishing up, will do very well?"

"But, as I do happen to mean to dance if I'm asked, one of my ordinary evening grenadines won't do for the occasion at all."

"But I thought you said—"

"I said nothing to Tom, but just asked if I might go, and he answered 'Yes,' without conditions or qualifications of any kind. So I'll go now in regular *tenuë*." [76]

"Then you can have one of my *trousseau* dresses—that pretty blue silk, if you like; our figures are not very unlike, and a little altering—"

"Thanks, dear—you are very kind; but, as this is my first ball, I must appear in virgin white, and I could not exactly wear your wedding dress, could I?"

"I shall wear it myself."

"Exactly. So I think we had better order the carriage this morning, and we'll drive to Kelvick and interview Armine at once on the subject. I know what I'll have to a flounce—the exact copy of a dress described in the 'Queen' last week—it was worn at a Sandringham ball—all white satin and gauze with clustering bunches of white lilac and maiden-hair, and a corsage of that lovely pearl *passementerie*."

"Pearl *passementerie*, satin, gauze! Pauline, are you aware that those are about three of the most expensive materials you could hit upon? Where is the money to come from?"

"The money is here; don't trouble your head about that!" breaks in Pauline, triumphantly displaying a bundle of crisp notes. "He gave me it at once, and said besides that anything over and above was to be entered to your account at Madame Armine's. Now are you satisfied?"

"Satisfied!" she echoes passionately. "Satisfied! Oh, Polly, Polly, dear sister, I wish you wouldn't—wouldn't take money like that! And you know I have no account at Madame Armine's—you know I haven't!"

"Stuff!"

"Our hands are always outstretched—always; we give nothing and take everything. How can you bear it—how?"

"Oh, Addie, I have no patience with you! You talk of your husband as if he were a stranger, a complete outsider—as if we had no interest in him or he in us; it is a shame! I protest I understand him better than you. I saw at once that it was a pleasure to him to give me a dress; and I foresee too that it will give him pleasure to see me fashionably and becomingly got up on the 16th. I'm determined not to balk him. I think your feeling in the matter is both unnatural and absurd—absurd in the extreme!"

Miss Lefroy has her way, and that same afternoon is fingering gauzes, satins, and laces at

Madame Armine's. Her sister, seeing that it would be of no use venturing on delicate ground again, with a feeling of impotence to wrestle against her will in particular, and the tide of events in general, gives in with a weary sigh.

On the night of the 16th Armstrong is standing under the drawing-room chandelier, anxiously working his large bony hands into a pair of evening gloves of treacherous texture and about half a size too small for him, when his womenfolk rustle in, fully equipped for conquest.

"Do you like me, Tom?"

He looks down at his wife standing before him in the bridal finery which she refused to wear at the altar, her fair white shoulders shining through folds of delicate lace, a necklet of pearls—his wedding-gift—encircling her pretty throat, a bunch of pale pink roses loosely hanging from her rough brown hair.

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"How fair, how bright, how young you look, my love, my love!" he thinks, with a sort of hungry pain; while her gray eyes meet his with the strange expression they always wear now, half wistful, half defiant, and a little scared as well—an expression which he sometimes feels, with a pang of impotent remorse, that no act, or word, or wish of his can ever chase thence again, even if he labored as manfully as he is now doing to the end of his days.

"Do I like you," he repeats softly—"like you, Addie!" Then, with a quick return to his usual self-possessed, matter-of-fact manner—"Certainly, my dear; your dress is very nice indeed."

"Rapturous commendation!" she answers, with a light vexed laugh.

"Now, Addie, clear away; it is my turn, please. What have you to say to me, Mr. Armstrong?"

"You?" he cries, staggering back, and shading his eyes as if overcome by the vision. "Who are you, pray—the Queen of Sheba?—Cleopatra?"

"Miss Pauline Lefroy, at your service, exemplifying the old proverb of 'Fine feathers make fine birds.' Now, honestly, what do you think of my feathers, Tom?"

Pauline steps forward, giving her train a brisk twitch, and poses under the chandelier, her lithe stately figure draped in clouds of silky gauze, her masses of dusky hair piled high on her head, interwoven with chains of pearls, her lovely gypsy face sparkling with the glow of excitement and anticipated pleasure.

"Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of Night
As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear,"

quotes Armstrong dramatically. "Will that homage to your plumage do fair sister-in-law?"

"Yes, it sounds like Shakespeare or Milton. Shakespeare, is it? 'Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of Night like a—' What?"

"Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear."

"It is a fine idea, strongly put—better than being told flatly that I was nice, like a bit of well-fried beefsteak. And so you think I shall do?"

"By Jove, yes," thinks he, in startled admiration. "I rather think you will, Miss Polly! What a splendid specimen of womanhood you are, to be sure! Strange I never seemed to take in the power of your comeliness until to-night!"

He glances at the two sisters standing side by side—at the girl, lastly, who, in a ragged cotton dress, without even the ornament of ladylike neatness, without one word or smile of attractive intent, chained his senses in one luckless moment and robbed him of his peace forever. He shakes his head; it is of no use going over the old story again; the mischief is done, and there is an end of it.

"She is not beautiful, my little Addie, she is but a pallid spring-blossom beside the tropical coloring of her sister," he thinks bitterly. "Few men, I suppose, would waste a glance on her when they could feed on the other's beauty; and yet she is all I want—all. My life would be full if I had her. Oh, the irony of fate to think that what is by law my own, my very own, what no man covets, I can not grasp—to think that she, the delight of my eyes, the one love of my life, must live under the same roof with me, and yet be as far apart as if the poles sundered us! And we are drifting further day by day; we can not even be friends. I have more in common now with her sisters, even with her cub of a brother, than with her. A wall of constraint is rising hourly between us. We can not talk together five minutes without falling into an uncomfortable silence, or tripping over matter we had agreed to bury. I wonder how it will all end! By Jove, I should like to have a peep at our position, say, this day ten years! Please Providence, the boys will have struck out lines for themselves ere then, and some fellows will have induced the girls to quit my fireside too, if—if I see fit to make it worth their while. Miss Pauline, with five or six thousand pounds, would be a prize many men would like to secure. Lottie too would have a chance under the same conditions; there would be only Addie and I left to drift into autumn together. By Jove, I should like to know how it will end! Hang it, my glove is gone at last!" he exclaims aloud, in dismay.

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"I thought as much, Tom. I hope you have another pair, because the most skillful needle-and-thread in the world wouldn't bridge that chasm. Oh, I see you have another pair! Now, will you

concentrate your powerful intellect on my train for a minute? I'm going to walk slowly from the piano to the window, and I want you to tell me if you can detect the faintest outline of steel or wire, the merest suggestion of string or tape anywhere."

"No, Pauline, on my honor as a British merchant!" he answers solemnly. "I can detect not one trace of the inward mechanism of your dress. It is veiled to me in darkest art. You are inflated in a manner wonderful and fearful to behold."

"I believe you! That is what I call the perfection of a fan-tail; Armine is the only dress-maker in Kelvick who can work them like that," remarks Pauline complacently. "I flatter myself there won't be another train surpassing mine in the room. And fancy, Tom—Addie wanted me to appear in a home-made muslin or grenadine, with a blue silk sash and blue ribbons in my hair, like a school-girl going out to a suburban tea-party! Wasn't I right to resist? Haven't I your entire approbation?"

"Certainly, I think the most extreme measure would justify the end you have achieved, Miss Lefroy," he answers, laughing.

"Well, one end you have certainly achieved, my dear sister," says Addie ruefully. "You have certainly crushed my poor dress, put me out of the field altogether, which is rather hard lines, considering I'm a—a bride and all that. Nobody will look at me when you are near."

"Then I must keep well out of your way, dear," she answers sweetly. "Ah, here comes the carriage at last! Where's my fan, bouquet, handkerchief? Oh, dear, if I should get myself crushed or squeezed before I arrive! Tom, I engage the front of the brougham; you and Addie must sit together at the back. It's wrong to separate those whom Heaven has joined together, you know."

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"Pauline," cries Addie sharply, "I wish you would not make those flippant remarks; they're extremely unbecoming!"

Pauline raises her saucy eyes to her brother-in-law's disturbed face, and asks innocently—

"Am I flippant, Tom? Have I said anything wrong? Tell me—do you want the back all to yourself?"

"I want neither the back nor the front, my dear," he answers placidly. "I'd rather not be brought into close contact with the mysteries of your dress. I'm going to enjoy my cigar on the box-seat."

"Are you? I dare say you'll like it better than being squashed between us," assents Pauline lightly.

"You are going to do nothing of the kind," interposes Addie, with flaming face. "I will not allow it. Going to sit outside for a seven miles' drive on a snowy night in January, just to save a few wretched flowers from being crushed! Pauline, I'm ashamed of you!"

"My dear Addie, don't get so hot about it, it was my own suggestion, not your sister's. I do not mind the weather in the least. It's not a bad kind of night for the season of the year, and I have a famous overcoat lined with fur, and my cigar."

They are all three standing in the porch. Addie suddenly walks back into the hall, and begins undoing her wraps; they follow her in quickly.

"What are you doing? What is the matter?"

"I am not going to the ball, Pauline; I should not like to crush your flounces, dear," she answers, with sparkling eyes.

Pauline crimsons.

"Addie, how—how spiteful you are!" she cries, angrily. "You know I did not want your husband to sit on the box-seat; he suggested it himself. There is plenty of room for us all inside. Oh, come along, Addie; don't be so nasty and spiteful!"

But she is not to be propitiated; she shakes off her sister's protesting hands, and moves away upstairs.

"I am not nasty or spiteful, Pauline; but I do not feel inclined for this ball. I feel a headache coming on. Mr. Armstrong will take you there without me."

Pauline remains motionless, and casts an appealing look at her brother-in-law.

"Tom, go after her—see what you can do. I should only make matters worse."

After a second's hesitation, he follows Addie up the stairs, and lays his hand gently on her shoulder.

"Addie, come back; I won't go to the ball without you. Come back!"

"What nonsense! You can go very well without me. I do not care for it, I tell you."

She speaks sharply and sullenly enough; but a few hot tears trickle down her cheeks as she turns away her face from his scrutiny.

Before he knows what he is about, he takes her handkerchief, and wipes them away softly, whispering, beseechingly—

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"I will do what you like, sit where you like. Come, my own dear little girl—come!"

She puts her hand on his arm.

"You will sit inside with us?"

"Of course, if you wish it. I would not have proposed the box-seat if I had known you would not like it, Addie. I never thought of the weather. Why, I have slept out of doors in Canadian

backwoods in three times as severe weather as this, and I'm alive to tell the tale—ah, scores of times!"

The drive is an uncomfortable one for all three, though Pauline, anxious to remove the impression of the scene, rattles "nineteen to the dozen." Her sister speaks not a word, and Armstrong is too wrapped up in somber, anxious thought to respond.

Clearly as one would read an open book, he can now read the page of his little wife's troubled life—can read the meaning of flushing cheek, quivering lip, tearful eye—can see the passion of revolt that stirs her sensitive being—can feel how her pride, her delicacy is daily, hourly, outraged by the condition of their lives—and his heart yearns over her.

"If," he thinks, with an impotent sigh, "I had chosen the other sister, it would have been different; her coarser, more selfish nature would have adapted itself to the circumstances without a pang. She would have accepted without murmur or protest the best I had to give, would have put her hands into my pocket and spent my money with the freedom and *insouciance* of esteemed wifeness, would never have disturbed my equanimity by one of those piteous pleading looks, half pain, half defiance, that thrill through me with a foreboding of coming tragedy. I wonder how it will all end! Why will she not accept the inevitable, and give me peace at least? Peace is all I ask from her. If she would take things as her sisters and her brothers do, I should in time become reconciled to my fate, should learn to feel toward her as I feel toward them; but she will not—she will not. She will go her own way, and keep my heart in a ferment, watching her every movement, straining my ears to catch every tone of her ever-changeable voice."

He looks with a sort of admiring impatience at her, as she sits by his side, her eyes closed, the trace of tears staining her flushed cheeks, and something tells him that it will always be so between them, that she will never harden, never learn to eat his bread with the easy unconsciousness of her kindred, never suffer him to despise her, and thus emancipate himself.

Armstrong is an epicure in sexual sentiment. He can love no woman whom he cannot esteem. The loveliest face shielding a venal soul has no attraction for him; and women for the possession of whose frail fairness men in his rank of life have bartered the hard-earned wages of years, have abandoned home, wife, and children, to him are as innocuous as the homeliest-featured crone. Having always been a comparatively successful man, in his many wanderings he has been waylaid by harpies of various nationalities, experienced in attack; but honeyed speech or melting glance has never charmed a guinea from his pocket or a responsive smile from his granite lips—[81] and this through no sense of moral or religious rectitude, but simply because he can not value the favoring of any woman in whom self-respect does not govern every other feeling, sway every action of her life. The woman he loves shall be a lady to the core, pure-minded, dainty, sensitive, and proud. In his wife he recognizes these qualities, and worships them accordingly; and yet, with the perverse selfishness innate even in the best of mankind, he would fain see her stripped of them all in order to shake himself free from her thralldom and heal up the wound she has unwittingly dealt his pride and self-esteem.

He knows, if she can but lower herself in his eyes by some act of meanness, folly, or ingratitude, her downfall will be permanent, and he will regain the even tenor of his life, and be his own master again.

"Here we are at last, Addie; wake up—wake up! How lovely the house looks blazing with light! Listen to the music; they must have begun dancing. Oh, Tom, get out quick!"

However, when they appear on the gay and crowded scene, Miss Pauline's effervescence somewhat subsides. A feeling of diffidence, of timidity almost, seizes her. She half shrinks behind her brother-in-law's broad shoulders when one of their hostess's sons appears, a smiling partner in tow. However, it is Mrs. Armstrong who is borne off first; and then Pauline steps a little forward and sends her roving eye round the room with success. A little later Addie returns breathless, with eyes sparkling with excitement and pleasure.

"I've had such a lovely dance, Tom; I never thought I should like it so much or keep in step as I did! Where's Polly? How is she getting on?"

Armstrong points across the room, where Miss Lefroy, with her deer-like head erect, stands surrounded by a group of young men eagerly seeking to inscribe her name on their cards.

"She's getting on fairly for a beginner, isn't she? I don't fancy she'll trouble us much more with her society to-night."

He is right. Miss Pauline, whether ignorant of or regardless of the etiquette of ball-room proprieties, returns no more to the corner she left in maiden trepidation at the request of a dapper little squire, fair-haired and blue-eyed, whose heart she stormed the first moment she entered the room.

"Tom," says Addie, two hours later, when she returns again, a little exhausted with the unusual exercise, to the spot where he stands so patiently propped up against the wall watching the *élite* of Nutshire taking their pleasure, "look at Pauline; she is dancing again with that blue-eyed boy—the fourth time, I think. I tried to attract her attention two or three times; but she either did not or would not see me. I don't know much about the proprieties; but don't you think—"

"I know even less about them than you, my dear. I think I have not been to half a dozen balls in

my life, and never before as the guardian of a young lady's morals; so I won't presume to advise you. It seems to me she is enjoying herself in a very innocent and above-board manner. I wouldn't try to stop her."

"Do you know her partner, Tom?"

"Oh, yes. Jack Everard of Broom Hill, a thorough little gentleman and a general favorite in the county, I believe, but not much of a lady's man. I'm surprised to see him here." [82]

"Horsy?"

"Yes, and doggy; he keeps a famous breed of greyhounds. Pauline seems to have made quite a conquest."

"I wonder what they are talking about so earnestly? Dogs, I suppose; Pauline loves dogs, you know, better almost than human beings."

"Hem!"

"You think she is flirting? Oh, there you make a mistake! There is nothing Pauline despises so much as flirting and love-making and nonsense. I wouldn't be the man to make a soft speech to her, I know!"

"Everard is a plucky little fellow."

"Pauline's snubs are hard to get over."

"I say, Addie—look! There's an engagement going on now; the tall cavalryman seems to be getting the worst of it. I suppose it's about a disputed dance; they're referring to their cards. How red Everard is! the quiver of his nostrils indicates bloodshed, nothing else."

"He just looks like an angry turkey-cock."

"And, by Jove, look at your sister, Addie! Look at the supreme indifference of her attitude, the queenly wave of her fan! Wouldn't you say she was the heroine of half a dozen London seasons at the least? Bravo, Polly, bravo! You'll get on, my dear."

Miss Lefroy is the acknowledged belle of the evening; every man in the room seeks to be introduced to her, and people who for the last twelve years have sat in the pew next to hers at church, who have never taken the trouble of noticing her presence during her long Cinderellahood, now load her with fulsome compliments and attentions when they see the tide of popular favor turning her way; and she receives it all with the dignity and gracious indifference of one bred in the purple and fed on adulations from her cradle. Poor Jack Everard never suspects that the few hot words so gravely yet soothingly suppressed by his lovely partner, that escaped him after supper, are the first whispers of love that have ever tickled her cold ear, that this is the first night any one has told her she is fair in the eyes of men.

"Miss Lefroy," exclaims that young gentleman in a stealthy whisper when the night is far advanced and the ball-room thinning visibly, "there's a plot against you; they want to take you home. Your brother-in-law is skirmishing for you briskly in all the passages. Unless you deliver yourself into my hands at once, you can not fail to be caught."

"They want to go? Oh, impossible," she cried in dismay, "when I'm engaged for half a dozen dances yet! It's quite early; they couldn't be so selfish!"

"Couldn't they! Your sister says that Mr. Armstrong is very tired and has to be up early in the morning to go to his business, and that she won't wait another minute. She commissioned me to bring you to her at once; allow me."

She puts her hand mechanically on his arm, and he leads her off in the opposite direction to that where Addie, sleepy and impatient, sits waiting, knowing that her husband's thoroughbreds have been pawing the gravel for the last half hour in the frosty night, and that he himself, somewhat weary, is longing for a few hours' rest before the busy day begins. [83]

The culprits are passing through a distant conservatory, when a tall handsome girl with masses of golden hair stops them, unceremoniously and holds up her card for Everard's inspection.

"Yes, Jack; indeed you may blush! To three dances you scribbled your name, and never came up for one. If we moved in a different sphere of life I think my feelings would find rather strong expression."

Pauline crimsons to the roots of her hair, and, scenting an insult, draws away haughtily; but her suspicions are speedily allayed.

The young lady cuts Everard's excuses short.

"There, there! I'll forgive you, on condition that you present me to your partner, whom I am anxious to know. Our mothers were friends long ago, before either of us was born."

He speedily complies with her request.

"Miss Lefroy, will you allow me to introduce you to my cousin, Miss Wynyard, who is anxious to make your acquaintance?"

The girls bow. Miss Wynyard puts out her hand and says, with a frank laugh—

"Miss Lefroy, do you know that this is a very generous overture on my part, considering the attitude that you and I must henceforth assume toward each other?"

"I don't understand. What attitude?" asks Pauline, puzzled, yet interested.

"That of Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth; of Mrs. Clive and Mrs. Oldfield—the rival queens, in fact. You've deposed me to-night; for three years since I came out I have been the undisputed belle of Nutshire society—haven't I, Jack, haven't I? You know you can't deny it, sir!"—impatently to her cousin, who receives her bold statement with a contemptuous chuckle.

"I don't deny that you have been pretty popular, Flo," he answers quietly; "but let me tell you, my dear, that you did not go down with lots of fellows I know. They thought you a good deal too free and fast. They may have liked to talk with you and have enjoyed your society for the time; but afterward—afterward—I've heard them—heard them—"

Miss Wynyard's face flushes; her bold eyes droop for a second.

"Isn't a cousin a detestable institution, Miss Lefroy?" she says, with a vexed laugh. "Don't you believe a word he says; you can get my character from any one you like but him, and you'll hear there is nothing very reprehensible in me."

"I'll take your character from yourself," answers Pauline, who finds herself taking a sudden fancy to this outspoken young person.

"Thank you. Then you must learn that my bark is worse than my bite, and that, though I'm fast and speak out plainly, I'm not a bad person at bottom, and not a bit of a sneak. What I have to say I say to your face, and you know the worst of me at once. Will you take me as you find me and strike up a friendship with me? Half the men and all the old women of the place will swear that I shall hate you like poison for being younger and handsomer and fresher than myself. Suppose you and I strike up a defensive alliance in the cause of common womanhood, and refute their slanders with an eternal friendship?"

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"Don't, Miss Lefroy, don't!" puts in Everard aggravatingly. "You don't know what her bark is when she's in full cry. Her style is as bad—"

"Be quiet, Jack, do! I'm not speaking to you."

"And I'm not listening to him in the least, Miss Wynyard," says Pauline quickly; "and I'm quite ready to enter an alliance with you on the spot."

"Done! We'll never let a man or the pattern of a frock come between us—never."

"Certainly not."

"The last friend I had—for whom I'd have sacrificed my very life—broke from me because I happened to copy her Ascot dress and look better in it than she did."

"You may copy every article of clothing I wear," says Pauline warmly.

"Thank you; you are thorough. I'll send over my maid to-morrow to take off the cut of that train—it was the best-setting one in the room. And now nearest and dearest must part. You'll see me soon—before the end of the week. By the bye, what's your name?"

"Pauline. And yours?"

"Florence."

"Good-night, Florence."

"Good-night, Pauline."

Thus Miss Pauline cements the first friendship outside her erst all sufficing family-circle, a friendship which, as the months go by, takes her further and further from the sister with whom she has hitherto shared every thought, every hope of her life, and who has sacrificed herself irretrievably to give her a home.

CHAPTER XV.

"THERE, Bob—there was my bill of fare for the night"—throwing a glossy pink card across the table—"two lords, three baronets—at least, eldest sons of baronets—a colonel, a couple of majors, no end of smaller fry, captains, lieutenants, militia and regulars, for whom of course I hadn't dances, though they kept buzzing about me half the night, all the same."

"Bravo, Polly—you have been going it, and no mistake! I thought you'd have been a wall-flower, knowing so few, being fresh 'on the flure,' and all that."

Pauline tosses her pretty head.

"Me a wall-flower? Small fear of that, sir, I can tell you! Why, several of my partners told me I was the belle of the room!"

They are all at dinner on the day after the ball, Robert having been driven over with his brother-in-law to get a full account of his sister's first appearance in society.

"Well, I'm glad you weren't fated to blush unseen, Polly. Have you any other festivity in prospect?"

"No," she answers lugubriously, "not a thing. The Chomley Arkwrights have cards out for a dance on the thirty-first, but you know Mrs. Arkwright never called on Addie—I can't imagine why—and so I suppose we shall not be asked. It's really too bad—though they may relent at the eleventh

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hour. If they don't you will have to give a ball for me, Tom, instead. I feel I can't exist without another soon."

"Let us hope they will relent, my dear."

"I can't imagine why they didn't ask us, for the whole county is to be there; several of my partners said that it was a shame to leave us out, and that they wouldn't go there if I didn't get an invite."

"Your partners seem to have been very pronounced in their remarks for so short an acquaintance, Pauline," says Armstrong, a little gravely.

"They were, Tom, rather," she answers, giggling and blushing somewhat. "I had hard work to suppress some of them after supper, I can tell you."

"O Mary Ann, O Mary Ann,
I'll tell your mar!
I never thought, when you went out,
You'd go so far,"

hums Robert, with music-hall jocularity.

A faint expression of disgust crosses Armstrong's dark face, which his wife notes with a wondering start. What does it mean? Is it possible that he, Armstrong of Kelvick, the plebeian bred, who never, according to his own admission, had familiar intercourse with gentlewomen until he married her, thinks her blue-blooded sister, Pauline Lefroy, the offspring of Bourbon chivalry, a little vulgar now and then? Is it possible that her manner, so boastfully elated, her unabashed account of her conquests, jars on him, as it does on her—Addie? If so, how much they have in common, this husband and wife, severed by nearly a score of years, by position, education, and mode of life, estranged by fate from communion of thought, from interchange of sympathy—how much in common still!

"I wish Pauline would not talk like that," she thinks, with shamefaced irritation. "I wonder she does not feel that it is unladylike, indelicate. I wonder Robert, who has such keen perception, does not try to check her, instead of backing her up."

"Yes, it is most aggravating, I must say," continues Pauline, harping on her grievance. "I can't imagine what those Arkwrights mean by it, and they such near neighbors too! I wish you, Tom, or Addie, would do something in the matter."

"I can't see what we could do, Pauline," he answers, smiling, "unless you would have us follow Thackeray's advice—go straight to head-quarters and 'ask to be asked.' It would be rather an extreme measure, but I believe it has been successful in many cases."

"Polly," says Goggles, nodding her head mysteriously, "I think I know why you weren't asked, only—only—perhaps you wouldn't like me to tell."

Pauline laughs contemptuously.

"You know, Goggles? A very likely story indeed!"

"I just do know!" answers Goggles, stung into retort. "They don't ask you, Pauline, because papa owes Major Arkwright a lot of money, which he never paid—a debt of honor, I think they call it, and—" [86]

"What nonsense you are talking!" breaks in Robert sharply. "I never met such a senseless chatterbox as you are, Lottie—always chattering of things you know nothing about, taking the wrong end of every story."

"I am doing nothing of the kind, Bob, and I know perfectly well what I am talking about. I heard Aunt Jo tell her Cousin Jenny Bruce the whole story. Major Arkwright and papa were in the same regiment, and they had an awful row together over cards, and the major called papa a black something or other—black-foot was it? No, not black-foot, but black-leg—I remember now I thought it such a funny word—black-leg!"

Before the end of this unfortunate speech, Armstrong, with innate delicacy, rises to his feet and begins addressing his wife in a loud voice; but it is of no use—he can not drown his sister-in-law's shrill triumphant tone, and so he hurries from the room, and leaves the family to fight it out among themselves.

Robert's handsome face is scarlet; he turns to his eldest sister fiercely.

"Addie, what in the world do you mean by letting that child loose as you do? If you have not sufficient authority to keep her in the school-room, where she ought to be, you ought at least to be able to muzzle her in society; she is getting perfectly intolerable!"

"What can I do?" answers Mrs. Armstrong, with quivering voice. "Nobody minds what I say, nobody pays the least attention to my wishes. I am a cipher in my own house."

"That's because you don't assert yourself properly," strikes in Pauline trenchantly. "You are all fire and fury for the moment, Addie, and then you subside and let things go. There is nothing solid in your character, and there is a want of dignity and repose in your manner that you really ought to supply now that you are a married woman. Don't you agree with me, Robert?"

"Perfectly, my child. What you want is backbone, Addie—backbone."

"It seems to me that I want a good many things to content you all," she says bitterly. "I sometimes

wonder, if I had gone to Birmingham as a nursery-governess, instead of doing as I did, whether I shouldn't have given you all, myself included, more satisfaction in the long run, and—"

"Now, Addie, now why will you fly off at a tangent like that, and drag in matter that has nothing to do with the question? You know you did everything for the best; and I'm sure your marriage so far has turned out most satisfactory, and—"

"Suppose you leave my marriage and its result out of the question, Robert!" she interrupts quickly. "It is a subject I would rather not discuss with you, if you do not mind."

"Whew—what a little spitfire she has become!" exclaims Bob, somewhat discomfited, when Addie has left the room. "She must be hard to get on with, Polly, if she often pulls like that."

"Oh, I don't mind her in the least!" answers Polly lightly. "As you say, Bob, she has no backbone; so I let her calm down, stick quietly to my point all the time, and get what I want in the end. The brother-in-law is harder to manage; but I think I have discovered the way to work him too." [87]

"Have you?" he asks eagerly. "D'ye know, it strikes me you're a pretty sharp customer to deal with, sister mine; there's more in you than appears on the surface."

"I don't want to boast; but I think I shall get on," she answers, with becoming modesty.

"But the discovery, Polly, the discovery? You'll share it with your beloved brother, won't you?"

"I will, if you promise not to overwork it."

"I promise!"

"Well, then, when you want to coax anything out of him, want to go anywhere, or get him to do anything for you, just hint to him judiciously that you think Addie would like it, or is anxious on the subject, and you'll find somehow that the thing will work as you want."

"Oh!" says Robert, with a sigh of enlightenment; and then he falls into a "brown-study," in which he seeks the most diplomatic way of introducing his sister's name into a certain personal project that lies very near his heart, and which he is half afraid to broach to his indulgent brother-in-law.

"I managed the ball on that principle," says Pauline, with a low laugh. "I hinted to him that it had been the dream of Addie's life that we two should go to our first ball together, and he took the bait at once. It was only a partial falsehood, Bob, you know, because long ago she and I used occasionally to build castles in the air; we always entered fairyland in a double pair of glass slippers, Addie and I—we always met our prince at the same magic ball. Hers, I remember, poor dear, was a tall slim youth, fair-haired, blue-eyed, and scarlet-coated; mine was dark and fierce, mysteriously wicked."

"You didn't see his shadow last night, Polly?"

"No," she answers, with a gay heart-whole laugh—"no, he wasn't there. I doubt if I shall ever meet him in the flesh. Besides, I don't think my ideal would make what you call a comfortable every-day husband—an article I mean to go in for one day or another."

"Yes," says Bob, oracularly, "I suppose that is your game, Polly—matrimony. You must act like the sensible prudent girl I take you to be, and give the family a good lift in that way."

"I mean to do so."

"You must have position—good unassailable county position—as well as money, remember, to make up for poor Addie's *mesalliance*."

"I certainly ought to do better than Addie, for I'm much handsomer than she, and my manners are more taking—and—and dignified. Oh, yes, I hope I shall do better than she!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ON the following day Lady Crawford calls to congratulate Mrs. Armstrong and her sister on the success of their first appearance. She is the prime busy-body, scandal-monger, matrimonial agent of Nutshire, who, having most successfully secured partners for three sons, five daughters, and innumerable nephews and nieces, has turned her energies and interests to the manipulating of her neighbors' affairs, and is quite eager to take the "new people" in hand, seeing a promising figure in Miss Lefroy. [88]

"You did very well, very well indeed, my dears," she says, in a tone of friendly encouragement. "That dress of yours, Miss Lefroy, was particularly well made—Armine, wasn't it? Yes, so I thought. Just a leetle too much trimming to my mind; but then I believe I'm very antiquated in my tastes, and do not care to see a young girl at her first ball dressed like a bride. *Autres temps, autres modes*, you will say; and I dare say you are right. Girls nowadays would rather overdo a thing ten times than run the risk of looking a little dowdy."

"I hope, Lady Crawford," says Addie meekly, though with twinkling eyes, "that you do not think we overdid it?"

"Oh, no, no, my dear young lady!" protests the dowager, with gracious *empressement*. "Pray do not imagine such a thing. I thought you both looked and behaved charmingly, I am sure."

"You are very kind indeed."

"Not at all, not at all. I would not say so if I did not think it. And I must say"—turning quickly to Pauline, who is quite unprepared for the attack—"that I was especially struck with the judgment and discernment you showed, Miss Lefroy, in your marked encouragement of young Everard of Broom Hill."

"Lady Crawford!"

"You danced with him four times, wasn't it?—and let him take you down to supper," she says emphatically, her eyes fixed on Pauline's blushing face.

"I—I don't remember; I believe so," she stammers, too taken aback to defend herself.

"And my daughter, Mrs. Stanley Roberts, overheard him offering you a mount for the meet next week. I hope you accepted. Let me tell you, my dear, that I consider there is not a more eligible young fellow in the county for a girl circumstanced as you are than Jack Everard of Broom Hill."

"Lady Crawford," breaks in Addie, with spirit, "let me thank you in my sister's name for the kind interest you take in her welfare; but I'm greatly afraid she does not deserve your encomiums on her judgment. She is very young—not eighteen yet—and is not up to the point of looking at her partners in the light of future husband, I fancy."

"Isn't she?" returns her ladyship, no whit taken aback. "Then she'll soon learn sense. At any rate, she cannot do better than encourage young Everard. She couldn't get a husband to suit her better; and for a girl circumstanced—I mean that he is a right good-hearted little fellow, and Broom Hill is a nice sunny spot, the house in perfect order, fit for a bride any day. He paid off the last charge on the property last Christmas, when his sister married Fred Oldham—wretched match it was too for her; and now he has a clear rent-roll of two thousand five hundred, and not an acre mortgaged. I have it on the best authority. You may trust me, Miss Lefroy; I never make a mistake in these matters."

"You are very kind, Lady Crawford, but I have no intention—"

"Of course not, of course not, my child!"—tapping Pauline's shoulder good-humoredly as she rises to depart. "No girl has the slightest intention of getting married until she is asked point-blank; we all know that. However, don't snub poor Jack, for he has been badly used already. He was, you must know, devotedly attached to my daughter Alice, now Lady Frampton; but she preferred Sir Charles, and of course I couldn't interfere; besides, he was the better match. Still poor Jack felt the blow keenly, gave up society for a time, and all that; but now I am happy to see he is getting cured by degrees, and you must not throw him on the sick-list again—ha, ha! Good-by, Mrs. Armstrong, good-by; I'll soon give you a friendly call again. By the bye, you're not going to the Arkwrights on Friday? No, of course not—I forgot. Foolish woman that Susan Arkwright, keeping up—Well, well, I must be off. *Au revoir*, don't forget my advice, either of you."

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"There, Addie," laughs Pauline—"your snub did not have the least effect! I wouldn't try it again, if I were you. After all, she means well, and I'm sure is a most good-natured old soul on the whole. Oh!"—drawing back suddenly from the window.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing—I mean only a dog-cart driving up the avenue, with two men in it. I—I—think they are Mr. Everard and a cousin who is stopping with him."

"They are coming here!" exclaims Addie. "Send down word at once to say 'Not at home,' Pauline."

"Not at home! Why should we say that?"

"Oh—well—because neither of the boys nor my husband is in! I—I don't care about receiving young men I scarcely know in their absence."

"What absurd nonsense! Why, you are a married woman, Addie; you can receive as many men as you like! Fancy saying 'Not at home' after their driving such a distance to see you! Absurd!"

So the young men enter, warm their frozen hands at a cozy fire, are fed on hot tea and "cushiony" muffins, and, what they relish most, bask in the welcoming smile of Miss Lefroy's beautiful face.

"Do you know, Mrs. Armstrong," says Everard presently, when the stiffness due to their first appearance has worn off, "you were very near not having the pleasure of our society this afternoon. It was touch and go with you, I can tell you, five minutes ago."

"How was that, Mr. Everard?"

"Why, just outside your gate we came full tilt against Lady Crawford's equipage, coming out, and I turned to Cecil and said, 'My boy, if we're wise, we shall beat a retreat, for I expect we've not a shred of character left;' but he, fearless in his innocence, callous to the breath of calumny, urged me onward. What are you laughing at? Mrs. Armstrong, Miss Lefroy, I was right; she did backbite me—said something about me—eh?"

"'Conscience makes cowards of us all,' Mr. Everard," says Addie. "I do not say Lady Crawford mentioned your name."

"Oh, but she did!" he persists, in an anguish of apprehension. "I can see it in both your faces; I know she did. Miss Lefroy"—turning a crimson face and pair of imploring blue eyes to that young lady—"say you don't believe a word she said. Don't judge me on her report; every one knows that she's the most infer—I mean outrageous gossipmonger, the most extravagant—"

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"Mr. Everard, Mr. Everard," laughs Pauline, "you are putting your foot deeper and deeper into the mire with every word! If you go on longer in that strain, I shall be inclined to believe that you

are a villain of the deepest stage-dye."

"Turn your eyes my way, Miss Lefroy," pleads Mr. Cecil Dawson, a handsome saucy Oxonian. "I challenge your closest scrutiny. Gaze into my limpid countenance, and tell me can you detect therein the faintest trace of uneasiness or apprehension? Could anything be more calm, more effulgent with the glow of seraphic virtue and—and—"

"Inordinate conceit! No, Mr. Dawson. I think not."

He draws himself up in mock indignation, and then, deeming it wiser to leave the field to his more eligible cousin, strolls languidly over to Addie, whom he seeks, with but scant success, to entice into a light flirtation, that young person being quite unversed in the art of *persiflage* or delicately-flavored "chaff" in which he excels.

"You'll tell me what she said, won't you, Miss Lefroy?" implores Everard, hanging ardently over the low chair where Pauline sits diligently working in the breast of a crewel-stork. "You'll give a fellow a chance, won't you? In common fairness you must. Just an idea, a hint—that's all I want—and I'll make her eat her own words—by Jove, I will! Tell me, tell me!"

"But, Mr. Everard, what am I to tell you? I never said that Lady Crawford even—"

"No, no; but you looked it, and you can't deny that she mentioned my name. You can't look me in the face now, and say she didn't. No; I thought not. By Jove, it's an awful fate to be at the mercy of a woman of that kind, to be taunted with—with sins you don't even know the name of, with crimes you never—"

"Mr. Everard, am I taunting you?"

"Yes, you are, Miss Lefroy—you know you are," he answers bitterly. "Your eyes are taunting me, your laugh is taunting me; you—you are making me utterly miserable."

"Am I really?" answers Pauline, jumping up and moving across the room. "Then I had better leave you at once."

He makes no effort to follow her, but sits staring blankly out at the chill winter landscape, for the poor young fellow is woefully in love and full of despondent diffidence.

"Don't look so sad," says a small mysterious voice at his side. "I heard what she said, and it was not very bad, after all."

"You did, you jolly little girl?" he exclaims eagerly. "You'll tell me what it was, won't you?"

"Oh, I daren't! I'm forbidden to open my lips when there are visitors. I always say the wrong thing, you know. They'd be mad if they knew I was talking to you now. I've been hiding behind the curtain for the last hour, and heard everything."

"You'll tell me? I'll swear, if you like, that they shall never know. Do, do, you dear little girl! I will promise to bring you the biggest box of sweets you ever had in your life, if you do."

"When?" asks Lottie skeptically.

"To-morrow."

"Will there be 'chocolate-cream' and 'Turkish delight' in it?"

"There will—pounds of both!"

"Then she only said that you were a very nice eligible young man, that your property was worth two thousand five hundred pounds, and that you had been frightfully in love with her daughter Alice, Lady Something or Other, but that you were beginning to get over it now."

"It's a lie—a shameless, impudent lie, a most confounded lie!" cries the faithless Everard, striding quickly to Pauline's side, his face crimson with wrath. "Don't believe a word of it, Miss Lefroy—don't. I never cared a straw for Alice Crawford—never! A little, pale-faced, snub-nosed chit—she's the last girl in Nutshire I'd wish to marry! Say you don't believe it!"

"Who—who told you?" stammers Pauline, with flaming face, suddenly guessing the truth. "I know it was my sister."

She darts across to the curtains, seizes the culprit in a vicious grip, and leads her to the door, where she pauses to take breath and review her position.

Having come to the conclusion that she has tried her lover sufficiently, Miss Pauline takes another course, which is so soothing and satisfactory that in a very short space of time the clouds have disappeared from Everard's ruddy brow and he is in Paradise again.

The short afternoon wanes, twilight advances, then dusk; still Mrs. Armstrong's guests linger.

"I wish they'd go!" she thinks a little uneasily. "This is not a visit, but a visitation; and we look so—so familiar grouped round the fire in this easy way. I wish Pauline would sit on a chair, and not loll on the rug playing with the kitten; I wish that ridiculous boy would not sprawl at my feet in that affected high-art attitude—it looks too idiotic. What will Tom say when he comes in? Dear me, six o'clock, and not a move between them yet! Will they never go?"

When Tom comes in, he seems startled for a moment by the strange invasion of his hearth; but what he says is courteous and hospitable in the extreme. When the dressing-bell sounds, and the young men rise at last to their feet, full of confused apologies, he begs them to remain to dinner, which they do unhesitatingly.

It is midnight before they leave; Armstrong, who has been seeing them off, meets his sister-in-law

going to bed. She stops him, and lays her hand coaxingly upon his arm.

"What a jolly little evening we've had, haven't we, Tom? Do you know, I think I enjoy a little family gathering like this quite as much as a big ball; and so does Addie. What spirits she was in this evening, wasn't she?"

"Yes," he says, in half soliloquy, "I think she enjoyed herself; society suits her."

"Of course it does; it suits all healthy-minded young people. It's the best tonic she could have. You must remember, Tom, she's very young—only two years older than me."

"Why do you say that to me?" he asks, fixing his somber eyes on her face. "Do you think my years weigh on her life? Do I—oppress her?"

"Oh, no, no! I only meant that, though she is married, she still can enjoy fun and—and society just as well as any of us; and, as for dancing, I know she delights in it." [92]

"You think so?"—eagerly.

"I am sure of it. I am sure, too, that though she sometimes tries to put on heavy matronly airs before you and others, she has the same wild fund of spirits in reserve as ever, and is at heart, as I've said before, just as fond of fun and society as any of us."

"Thank Heaven for that!" he mutters to himself. "Patience! A few years—nay, a few months more, and all these shadows will have passed away. I must give her society." Then, aloud—"You think she enjoyed herself this evening, Pauline, and, if I proposed giving a few dinner parties, and perhaps a dance occasionally, she would not think it a trouble, a bore—eh?"

"I am certain there is nothing would give her greater pleasure; but at the same time, Tom," says Miss Pauline, with wily impressiveness, "if she thought, suspected even, that you were doing it solely for her sake, she would be the first to oppose it, to say she hated entertaining, thought it a bother, and so on."

"I see."

"So, Tom, you must not pay the least attention to her if she pretends to dislike gayety, for I, who have known her all her life, can assure you that there is nothing she is so fond of, or that agrees so well with her. And, as for the trouble of writing invitations and entertaining guests, why, there are always Bob and I at hand to take our share of the labor and make ourselves as useful to you and Addie as we can, Tom."

"What a good girl you are, Pauline," says Armstrong, patting her shoulder approvingly, with a smile which she does not quite understand—"quite a fireside treasure!"

CHAPTER XVII.

"AND so you like her, Bob?"

"Rather, Polly; she's an A 1 specimen, and no mistake! I suspect I should soon be her slave if I saw too much of her," says Mr. Lefroy, smoothing his budding mustache.

The subject of this encomium is Miss Florence Wynyard, who has run over on a tricycle to luncheon, and who has laid herself out to fascinate the whole family, deeming Nutsgrove extremely comfortable quarters in which to establish herself when affairs are uncomfortable at home.

Florence is the only unmarried daughter of the house of Wynyard. Her mother is a weak-minded peevish old lady, entirely under the dominion of her husband, a gentleman of convivial nature, but extremely uncertain temper, whose periodical attacks of mingled rage and gout render him for the time being fit for a menagerie or a lunatic asylum; hence life at head-quarters is not always very pleasant, and Florence has established for herself a firm *pied à terre* in some half dozen neighboring houses, whither she can fly at the first paternal growl and remain until the storm has blown over. Within ten minutes after her arrival she determined that Nutsgrove shall ere long be included among her harbors of refuge.

"Yes," she thinks, "I should decidedly like the run of this house." [93]

At a glance she takes in the luxury, the comfort, the freedom, the festive atmosphere that reigns throughout, and easily sees that with judicious management she could twist the simple family round her fingers.

Her demeanor under the critical eyes of her host and hostess is admirable. She is lively, amusing, unaffected, almost ladylike, in fact, the faint ring of "loudness" she can not shake off passing for merely the effervescence of youth, robust health, and good temper. When alone with Pauline and Robert she casts off the mask at once, thus thoroughly fascinating those inexperienced young persons with the full flavor of her "fastness" and the quality and compass of her *camaraderie* and good-fellowship.

Miss Wynyard is a debonair and not unkindly type of the girl of the period, eminently selfish, but not ill-natured. She is not beyond making a friend of one of her own sex if the conquest is an easy one, but her great object in life is to be "all things to all men," to charm all men of all ages, all classes, all conditions of nature, from the schoolboy to the veteran, from the lord of the soil to the

serf. She is successful in an unusual degree, her weapon of attack being one which, when skillfully used, seldom fails, for it tickles the most vital part of male human nature—its vanity. Her list of conquests is inexhaustible, varied, and not altogether creditable to her reputation, if the whispers of the county clubs are to be accepted, which fortunately they are not—very generally at least. For instance, the version of her rupture with Lord Northmouth a week before her marriage—which, rumor said, was owing to that infatuated nobleman's discovering the existence of a correspondence with a good-looking railway-guard at Kelvick Junction—was entirely discredited in the county; and, though Miss Wynyard was certainly left lamenting with seventeen trousseau dresses on hand, not even the most exclusive doors were closed to her on that account, and she wore her brilliant weeds so gallantly, alluding to her recreant *fiancé* so easily, lightly, and kindly, that in time it came to be pretty generally accepted that she had thrown him over, not he her.

"And you mean to tell me you are not going to the Arkwrights' on Friday, Polly?" she asks incredulously, when the two girls are exchanging confidences, and examining dresses in the seclusion of Pauline's bedroom. "What a shame. I'll soon make that right for you. Susan Arkwright is a connection of mine, you—"

"You are very kind," interrupts Pauline a little confusedly; "but on the whole perhaps it would be better, Flo, not to—to say anything about it. You see, I—I believe there was some misunderstanding or other between our family and theirs in days gone by, and—"

"Misunderstanding? Ha, ha!" breaks in Miss Wynyard, with her frank bold laugh. "That's a good way of putting it, and no mistake! Don't you know, my dear, that Robert the Dev—I mean your father—nearly drove Syd Arkwright to the wall in their soldiering days, and then invited his wife to elope with him? Susan was a very pretty woman a dozen years ago. Misunderstanding indeed! But that's all past and gone now, and it's ridiculous of them to visit it on you—very bad policy indeed. Just as if scores of others in the county hadn't as deep a grudge against your name as they! Polly, what's the matter? Why do you turn away? You absurd child, to mind my chatter! You can't be such an utter baby as not to know what your father was! Why should you mind talking about him with me, your dearest friend, your own Florrie? It it comes to that, you may discuss my old *pater's* youthful peccadilloes as freely as you like. I dare say they were not more edifying than yours, only he did not wear such a bold front. Your father, my dear, was one of the handsomest, most reckless, and fascinating scamps of his generation. I was just thinking this afternoon if that very good-looking son of his takes to his ways, the husbands, fathers, brothers of Nutshire ought to rise in crusade and drive him from the soil—ha, ha!"

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"Bob is not like that. Bob is a well-minded boy," murmurs the sister, in a rather stifled voice.

"The boy is father to the man, you would say. Well, time will reveal. Now hold up your head and give me a kiss, you absurd little goose! I must soon knock that nonsense out of you; and you'll come to the Arkwrights' if I work the invite? That's right. Jack would never forgive me, he said, if I didn't make you promise to come; and I can't afford to fall out with Jack; he's useful to me in many ways—though I do loathe cousins."

Miss Wynyard "worked the invite" in time. On the very morning of the ball cards came for Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong and Miss Lefroy.

"The eleventh hour in every sense of the word; they hadn't a post to spare. Addie, have you your dress ready? Do you care to go?"

"No, Tom, no," she answers, with downcast eyes, "I would rather not go if you don't mind."

"Certainly not, my dear. Do exactly as you like in the matter. I quite agree with you. I think the invitation rather too unconventional in its delivery. Mrs. Arkwright ought at least to have called on you if she wished you to go to her ball."

"I'll refuse at once, politely of course."

"You needn't refuse for me, Addie," says Pauline lightly, when Armstrong has left. "I mean to go to the ball."

"What—alone, Pauline?"

"No—the Wynyards have offered to take me. I had a note from Flo, telling me to come over early and put up with her for the night—that is in case you refused to go."

"You are wise in your generation, Pauline!" says Addie, with a contemptuous smile.

"Wiser than you in yours, Addie," she retorts angrily. "I think it shows a churlish and ill-bred—yes, ill-bred spirit to refuse the hand of good-fellowship when it is so frankly offered. The Arkwrights and the Lefroys have been at feud for the last generation; for all we know, we may be the parties in fault, and yet they are the first to make an advance which you—you—"

"That is enough, Pauline," says her sister coldly; "we need not discuss the matter further. You evidently mean to accept these people's tardy hospitality, whether I wish it or not; so go—go to this ball and enjoy it, if you can. I dare say your enjoyment won't be much marred by the fact that I am both hurt and deeply disappointed by your conduct."

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"It takes very little to hurt and disappoint you nowadays, Addie."

"I don't know that, Pauline," she says wearily. "It seems to me that I have food daily for disappointment, pain, and remorse."

"In other words, Addie, you mean that you are tired of us, tired of your brothers and sisters, who

once were all to you! You would like to be rid of us!" says Pauline bitterly.

"Tired of you?" she echoes drearily. "I don't know; I think I'm most tired of myself, of my life, of my fate, of everything."

Pauline is moved, deeply moved for the moment, by the blank hopeless sorrow of the young face. She opens her arms, draws her sister's head on her bosom, and whispers, half crying herself—

"What is it—what is it, Addie, my darling? Are you very unhappy? If—if—you like we will go away all of us somewhere—somewhere where he shall never find you again. Tell me, sister darling—is he unkind to you?"

"Oh, no, no," she answers back, in a torrent of tears, her hot face buried in her sister's neck—"not that—not that! I can not tell you—you would not understand; it is only sometimes I feel so miserable that I should like to die. You must make allowance for me, Polly love, when I'm like that. You must try to bear with my peevishness, my ill-temper, my nastiness, for I can not help it, dear—indeed I can not. I feel so sore, so miserable, so nerveless, that I long to make every one as wretched as myself. I don't know what comes over me, what is the matter with me. I have no cause, no reason—oh, no, no! He is good to me, Polly, good—the best husband any woman could have; never believe anything but that—never! Look into my eyes if you doubt my word. You will read the truth there."

"Then what does it mean? What makes you so miserable and uneasy?"

"I don't know—I can not tell you—I have not an idea. I think I'm possessed!" she answers wildly; then, after a pause, throwing her arms round Pauline's neck in feverish appeal—"But it makes no difference to you, Polly; you love me just the same, don't you, dear sister? You have not changed, or grown cold, or ceased to care for me; you love me just the same? Oh, Polly, Polly darling, say you do!"

Pauline's answer is soothing, tender, and reassuring enough to calm the sudden storm; and the two sisters spend the morning together in loving amity; then, at Lottie's suggestion, they all three adjourn to the kitchen, to make a big plum-cake for Hal's Easter hamper, to the astonishment and dismay of Mrs. Armstrong's accomplished cook, who strongly objects to the "messin' and mashin' and worritin'" of amateurs in her domain.

The woolly snow-clouds clear away in the afternoon, and the leafless branches of the grove are bright with crisp frosty sunlight.

"Lottie, Lottie," calls out Addie from the drawing-room, where she has been finishing letters for the post, a ring of the coming spring in her fresh young voice, "tell Poll to put on her hat and cloak quickly, and we'll all three have a scamper through the grove. The pond behind Sallymount farm ought to be frozen now; we might have a grand slide on the sly."

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"Oh, but, Addie, don't you know Poll's gone? She ordered the carriage after luncheon, packed up her ball-dress, and went off to the Wynyards' for the ball. Didn't she tell you?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SNOW has gone from the ground, the frost from the air, blustering March is paving the way for tearful April. Miss Pauline Lefroy, luxuriously basking in an easy-chair by the fire, a limp manuscript resting on her knee, is murmuring words of sweetest love in a low, monotonous voice to Mr. Everard, stretched on the rug at her feet—words which reach Mrs. Armstrong in detached sentences, as she sits by the window, sewing, a sufficiently listless and preoccupied chaperone to satisfy even the most exacting lover.

"And what a beautiful ring!"

"And you like this ring? Ah, it has indeed a luster since your eyes have shone on it! Henceforth hold me, sweet enchantress, the Slave of the Ring!" he answers, in impassioned accents.

"Oh, dear," muses Addie, "what high-flown rubbish! I don't think such wooing would win me. Pauline must be of different metal—rather soft metal, I should say. 'Sweet enchantress,' 'slave of the ring!' I'm glad Tom didn't make such a fool of himself when—when we were courting. Heigh-ho, what a long afternoon it is! I wonder will the boys turn up early? Robert has not been here for two Saturdays running. I—"

"There is something glorious in the heritage of command. A man who has ancestors is like a representative of the past," says Pauline, in haughty melodramatic accents.

"Stuff, Pauline, stuff!" mutters her sister, impatiently tugging at her knotted thread. "Precious heritage of command our ancestors have given us! Nice representatives some of our forefathers were! If Bob or Hal took to representing them, I wonder what—"

"Ah, Pauline, not to the past, but to the future looks true nobility, and finds its blazon in posterity."

"Come, that sounds like nonsense, as well as I can make out. Why, Jack Everard, will you always speak to Pauline as if your windpipe were padded with cotton-wool; it can't make her love you, and it is so exasperating when you want to hear—"

"No, no, I would not, were I fifty times a prince, be a pensioner on the dead. I honor birth and

ancestry when they are regarded as the incentives to exertion, not the title-deeds to sloth!"

"Not the title-deeds to sloth!" repeats Addie, leaning forward eagerly to catch the falling cadence of his voice as it approaches a period.

"It is our fathers I emulate when I desire that beneath the evergreen I myself have planted my own ashes may repose. Dearest, couldst thou see with my eyes!"

Addie, looking up, sees her husband standing inside the door, smiling at the fireside duet. She beckons him to her, noiselessly makes room for him on the couch, and with her finger pressed to her lips motions him to listen. [97]

"Margined by fruits of gold
And whispering myrtles, glassing softest skies
As cloudless, save with rare and roseate shadows,
As I would have thy fate!"

Armstrong's face is a study of ludicrous amazement as the words fall in musical sequence from Everard's lips, and, when Pauline, leaning over him, murmurs ardently, "My own dear love!" he half rises to his feet; but Addie's hand detains him.

"A palace lifting to eternal summer," continues the lover bleatingly; and then a ray of enlightenment crosses Armstrong's perplexed face, his restlessness subsides, he leans back and watches wistfully the mobile flushing face of his young wife, as she, bending forward eagerly with hands clasped, drinks in the luscious picture of wedded bliss that the gardener-poet paints for her he loves so cruelly. As he continues, Everard's delivery improves; the wooliness leaves his voice, and a ring of true passion which no art could ever teach him vibrates through his every tone and finds an echo in Addie's heart, thrilling through her like an electric current in which pain and pleasure are so subtly blended that she can not tell which predominates.

"We'd read no books
That were not tales of love, that we might smile
To think how poorly eloquence of words
Translates the poetry of hearts like ours!
And, when night came, amidst the breathless heavens
We'd guess what star should be our home when love
Becomes immortal; while the perfumed light
Stole through the mists of alabaster lamps,
And every air was heavy with the sighs
Of orange-groves and music from sweet lutes
And murmurs of low fountains that gush forth
I' the midst of roses! Dost thou like the picture?"

Addie turns to her husband with dewy eyes, and lays her hand timidly on his breast, echoing the last eager words—"Dost thou like the picture?"—in a soft whisper.

"I don't know—I did not listen," he answers dreamily. "I never could thrill to Melnotte's lyre. It is too measured, too smooth, too flowery to breathe the fire of earth-born passion."

"Then you do not believe in the eloquence of love?"

"No. I believe that the voice of love—the love man feels but once in a life—finds no polished utterance. It is most times dumb, strangled by the impotence, the poverty of words, or else finds vent in harsh, uncouth, halting measure. It never pleads in flowing rhythm; if it could, more lovers would be successful. You could be won, Addie, by honeyed words. I read it in your face as you sat listening."

"You gave me no honeyed words, no measured music, and yet—and yet—" Her whisper is drowned by Pauline's "stagey" metallic voice—

"Oh, as the bee upon the flower I hang
Upon the honey of thy eloquent tongue!
Am I not blest? And, if I love too wildly,
Who would not love thee like Pauline?"

"There—that will do for to-day, Melnotte. Go back to your spade and wheelbarrow. We know our parts to perfection. I'm sick of rehearsing." [98]

"That last scene, Pauline—we're not up in it yet—"

"Pauline! Mr. Everard, what do you mean?"

"I mean Pauline Deschappelles, of course."

"I see, I see. The last scene? Oh, I'm up in it thoroughly; and, besides, I have not time now! I must write a line to Florrie before post-time."

She turns away lightly, and Everard's eyes, following her despondently, rest on the husband and wife sitting side by side.

"I did not know you were there," he says, strolling moodily toward them. "What did you think of it?"

"We thought it capital," answers Armstrong encouragingly. "That last bit was most touchingly

delivered—quite up to Barry Sullivan."

"Oh, I feel I shall do my part right enough; but your sister, Mrs. Armstrong, is not up to the mark! Don't you feel it—eh? She's very well—perfection, in fact—in the light, frivolous parts; but where the ring of passion comes in she is hard, stagey, unfeeling. She is not Bulwer's Pauline, she's herself—Pauline Lefroy—and no coaching, no training, will make her anything else."

"Why not suggest her giving the part to a more competent person? I am sure she would fall in with your wish at once," says Addie, a little hurt at the young man's plain and truthful speaking. He does not answer, does not even seem to hear; then, suddenly, after an uncomfortable pause, he bursts out in doleful appeal—

"Mrs. Armstrong, tell me—do you think I have a ghost of a chance?"

"A ghost of a chance of what?"

"Of winning your sister, of getting her to like me?"

Mr. Everard is a young gentleman of limited reserve, and from the first has made no effort to disguise his devotion to Pauline, yet this point-blank attack takes Addie somewhat aback.

"I—I really don't know, Mr. Everard," she stammers. "I can not tell. Why not ask her yourself?"

"Ask her myself! Why, I have asked her myself at least fourteen times in the last month."

"Fourteen times, by Jove!" exclaims Armstrong—"fourteen times! I did not know till now that Jacob was of British breed."

"And what does she say?" asks Addie, eagerly.

"Oh, she says the same thing always—she's over-young to marry yet! She says that she won't be able to make up her mind for ever so long, that she has not the faintest idea whether she likes me or dislikes me, that it would be of no use trying to find out until she is older, and all that sort of thing. You see, Mrs. Armstrong, she doesn't encourage, and yet she doesn't discourage, and—and—there I am!"

"And there I wouldn't stay!" says Addie, impetuously. "I'd make her say 'Yes' or 'No,' and have done with it at once."

"If I did so, it would be 'No' at once, and—and—" with a quiver in his voice—"I don't think I could bear that. I love your sister, Mrs. Armstrong, better than my life; so I would rather go on clinging to a straw, hang on to her patiently, and perhaps in the end work her into liking me. They say love begets love, don't they? If so, she must in time take a spark from me."

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"And how long do you intend going on burning?"

"Until she is twenty. She says that she won't make up her mind to marry any one until she has seen a little of the world, that many girls sacrifice their life's happiness by taking the first man that asks them, that she, even herself, in her limited experience, has seen too much of the misery of hasty and incongruous marriages to risk a mistake herself—Eh—what's the matter? Dropped your scissors, Mrs. Armstrong? Why, here they are beside you! So she won't accept any one until she is twenty; however, I'll wait and watch, and nag and worry her for two years more, and you'll put in a word for me now and then, won't you, both of you? She'll never get any one to love her as well as I do; and I'm not badly off, Mrs. Armstrong. Your husband here can look into my affairs, prod my property as much as he likes; he'll find it in paying order, swept and garnished for matrimony, drained and fenced, and—"

"I do not doubt it, Mr. Everard," breaks in Addie, earnestly; "and I do not mind admitting that both my husband and I—is it not so, Tom?—quite approve your suit and wish you good speed; but I do not approve of your resolution to hang on to Pauline by the careless thread of hope she offers. You may only reap much misery and disappointment in the future. She knows you love her—you have told her so. I would leave her, let her go her own way during the time she specifies; and then, if you are of the same mind still, renew your offer, propose for the fifteenth and last time."

"Mrs. Armstrong, were you ever in love?"

"In—in—love!" she stammers with crimson face. "In love!" She makes a mighty effort to give a light evasive answer; but a lump in her throat stifles her utterance.

Her husband comes to the rescue with cheerful tact.

"My dear Everard," he says, in mock indignation, "will you please remember that I am a man and a husband? If you press the question home, allow me time to vanish at least from—"

"Beg pardon, I'm sure," the young man mutters, in some confusion. "I did not know what I was saying. What a duffer I am, to be sure, always blurting out the wrong thing at the wrong moment. Forgive me, Mrs. Armstrong, I assure you I never—"

"Look, Addie—there are some visitors coming up the avenue! Who are they?" asks Armstrong hastily, with much apparent interest.

"By Jove," exclaims Everard, his ruddy face turning green with jealousy, "if it's not Stanhope Peckham again! Every time I come to this house I find that sprawling bru—fellow, tracking my footsteps. By Heaven, it would be too monotonous if it were not so exasperating! How any woman can stand a man who wears such trousers and such collars beats my comprehension! Of all the howling Bond Street cads I ever—I say, Mrs. Armstrong, do you know what little Loo Hawker christened him? Sharp girl, that little Loo! Collared Head—ha, ha! Collared Head!"

"Collared Head! How?"

"Don't you see? Because his face is so mottled and spotty, and his collars throttle him up to the ears, Collared Head—by Jove, it's about the best thing I ever heard! If 'Punch' could only get hold of it! Collared Head—ha, ha!" [100]

"Addie," says Armstrong, in a low voice, "I want to say something to you. Will you come into my study for a few minutes?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"I am going away—"

"Going away! Where—when—how long?"

CHAPTER XIX.

"I AM going away," repeats Armstrong to his wife, "at once, on business. I must leave in ten minutes. I am going up to town first, then on to Dublin and Cork."

"How long will you be away?"

"Ten days—a fortnight at the longest. I have brought over Bob to stay with you during my absence, and have given him all directions which I have not had time to give you. I hope he'll take good care of you."

"I'm sure he will enjoy the change and the responsibility; and I'll see that he leaves in time for business every morning," says Addie mechanically.

"Oh, that is not necessary! He need not go to Kelvick. The fact is—I meant to have told you before, but other things put it out of my head—Robert is no longer in the office—has resigned his appointment, in fact," announces Armstrong.

"You could not keep him? I'm not surprised."

"No; it was his own wish to leave. He was totally unsuited to the work."

"And what is he going to do now?"

"Going to try soldiering."

"Soldiering? You mean he is going to—enlist!"

"Dear me, no, child! What an idea! He means to start with his commission, of course."

"But that is absurd! He has nothing; it is impossible for him to live in the army without money. I—I know—a cousin of mine who has three hundred a year besides his pay, and he is always in debt. It is absurd! I wonder at you, Tom, to encourage him in such an idea!" Her eyes flash on him defiantly.

"He is fit for nothing else, and it has been the dream of the boy's life. I think he will do well in the army; and he is not in the least extravagant. You must admit that, Addie."

She sighs wearily. Suddenly her face clears.

"He'll never get in; he won't have a chance. The examination is competitive, and getting worse and worse every year. The Hawksby and the Wilmott boys have been plucked twice, and have given it up as a bad job. Robert will never pass!"

"He is not going up for the direct Sandhurst exam. He has applied for a commission in the county militia, and, after serving two trainings, he can enter the cavalry with a merely nominal exam., I believe."

She is silent for a moment; a few hot tears steal down her face, her hands drop to her sides with a gesture of tired bitterness.

"So—so he will be a pensioner on you all his life," she says slowly; "he will eat the bread of dependence until he dies. And I can do nothing—nothing; my hands are tied—tied"—twisting her wedding-ring feverishly round and round, as if she would fain wrench it off. [101]

He takes her hand and holds it for a moment in his firm clasp.

"Not yet, Addie, not yet. You promised me a year, remember."

"Such a long year—such a long year!" she sobs.

"I tried to make it as short for you as I could," he says, with almost pathetic humbleness.

"You did, you did; but you went the wrong way to work, Tom, the wrong way."

"So I fear, poor child; but I did it for the best."

"Will you tell Robert you have changed your mind, and do not wish him to enter the army?"

"I could not do that," he says reluctantly. "I have given him my word, his heart is set on it; besides, I conscientiously think it is the only career in which he has any chance of succeeding. You will agree with me when you have had time to think it over."

"You are robbing him of his manhood, his self-respect; you—you have no right to do it. He does

not feel—understand now; but he will one day, when it will perhaps be too late. Oh, why do you do it—why? Is it to punish me, to avenge the wrong I did you, to heal the wound I dealt your pride, by humbling mine to the dust? I believe it is—I believe it is; I do not clearly know—I can not fathom you yet. Sometimes I place you on a pedestal high above others, of stuff too noble, too generous, too strong to seek to sting a thing as small, as pitiful, as helpless as myself. Then at other times, as now, you stand among your fellow-men, of common clay like them, vain, small, revengeful, unforgiving, cruel even!"

His eyes sink, a dusky glow creeps over his face, as he asks himself if there is not a little truth in her judgment of him. Does he not find an acknowledged sneaking satisfaction in thus watching her writhing under his kindness, in loading her shrinking shoulders with the weight of his benefits? After all, is there any necessity for him to mount that swaggering brainless boy on the charger his father rode so disreputably—Robert's wish is to join the —th Hussars, a regiment in which both his father and two uncles served, which his grandfather commanded during the Peninsular campaign with much gallantry and distinction—any necessity to pander to the sister's daily increasing vanity and greed of admiration, to feed them all on the fat of the land, as he is doing?

"Ah, you cannot look me in the face!" she continues, with a sad laugh. "My estimate was right; you do not stand on the pedestal, after all. Well, well, husband, you are getting full value for your outlay; your coals of fire reach me, scorch me, every one; my heart is scarred—sore—"

"As Heaven is my witness," he says hurriedly, "I would not willfully hurt a hair of your head! I would not—"

"Then tell Bob you refuse to help him with his commission," she puts in quickly. "He is paralyzed if he can not reach your pockets. Tell him, Tom—tell him that you have changed your mind, that you can't make him an allowance."

"It is too late, I fear, Addie; his militia commission arrived to-day; but—but—we can talk it over when I return, if you like." [102]

"Train-time just up, sir; the trap is at the door!"

She walks away to the window to hide her face as her sisters come dancing in, having only just heard of Armstrong's intended departure.

"You'll be sure to be back before the theatricals, Tom? You know I'm to act in both pieces; and the Hawksbys will be disappointed if you don't put in an appearance," says Pauline effusively. "The third of May, remember!"

"You'll see me long before that."

"And, Tom dear," puts in Lottie, rubbing her cheek affectionately against his coat-sleeve, "you're going to London, aren't you? If you should any day happen to be passing before that big sweetshop in Regent Street—"

"I'll not forget you, little woman."

"You dear! And, Tom, listen! Above all things, see they give you plenty of 'Turkish delight.'"

"'Turkish delight'? I'll make a note of it."

"You'll know it easily. Don't let them put you off with cocoanut-paste; it's not the same. The 'delight' is flat and pink and sticky, powdered in sugar—you'll remember? Burnt almonds, chocolate-creams, and dragées are also very good at that shop; but I leave it all to yourself."

"And, Tom, if you should chance, in the course of your travels, to come across a pair of twelve-buttoned palest eau-de-Nil gloves, six-and-a-quarter, and an aigrette, Tom, of the same color, with one of those golden humming-birds posed in the center, you'll remember your poor little sister-in-law wants both articles—they are not to be had in Kelvick—to make her new ball-dress just the sweetest thing out. You'll not forget—twelve-buttoned, six-and-a-quarter, foamy green? Good by, Tom, good-by! We'll be as good as gold while you are away—you'll see!"

He kisses them hurriedly, and then approaches his wife at the window.

"Good-by, dear," he says gently, almost entreatingly, bending over her. "Won't you say a word to me, Addie?"

She turns away with a pettish gesture; then, after a lingering moment, he leaves her.

However, just when he is stepping into the dog cart, she runs out, and seizes him almost viciously by the arm.

"You're coming back? You're coming back?" she asks fiercely. "This is not a trick, a ruse, to get away and make me stay on here—is it—is it? Because—because—it won't do, I tell you; I won't stand it—nothing on earth would make me!"

"My dear child," he answers, in a tone of such genuine amazement that she is disarmed at once and a little ashamed of her impetuosity, "what an idea to take into your head! Fancy a man of my age and standing abandoning my wife, family, home—my beloved chimney-pots—at a moment's notice like this!"

"I—I believe you, and—I'll say good-by to you now, if you like," she says, laughing, and awkwardly raising her face to his.

As his mustache lightly brushes her cheek, she whispers eagerly—

"I'm sorry you're going, Tom—I'm awfully sorry. It—it would take very little to make me cry. How horrid of you to laugh like that! I shall miss you, I know, every day. Oh, can't you believe me—can't you believe me a little sometimes?"

"Twelve buttons, eau-de-Nil, six-and-a-quarter!" "Turkish delight, pink and sticky, chocolate-cream!" are the last words borne on the breeze as Armstrong drives down the avenue.

Turning suddenly to nod in acquiescence, with a throb of joy he sees a handkerchief applied to his wife's eyes.

"Could she have known—have guessed I should look round?" he thinks, in happy doubt. "In any case she might have been ready for the emergency. Bah! I believe her eyes are as dry and as bright as her precious sister's this minute. I wish—I wish I had given in about that wretched commission, though. Confound that boy! He's a desperate nuisance. Suppose I turn back and do so now? But no; if I did, her life wouldn't be worth living with him in the house. It will be time enough when I come back. I won't be more than a week away, if I can help it."

When the dog-cart has disappeared, Addie faces her brother.

"Well, Robert, I have to congratulate you on your improved prospects. I heard of them only a few minutes ago. It's a big jump from a junior clerk in a merchant's office to a lieutenancy in a cavalry regiment."

"Oh, ah, yes—Armstrong told you!" the young gentleman replies, with affected nonchalance, to hide his inward perturbation. "Yes, we have been working the thing for some time; but I did not like to tell you anything about it until it was finally settled."

"I knew all along," says Pauline triumphantly. "Isn't it grand news, Addie? Fancy, his commission arrived this morning, and you have now the honor of addressing a full-blown lieutenant in the Royal Nutshire Fusiliers. Wouldn't you almost guess it by the extra vitality of his mustache?"

"Yes," simpers Robert, "I am now a member of that gallant corps; and a rare lot of fellows some of them are. You know most of them, Polly, don't you?"

"All those worth knowing, Bob. I had an invitation, you must know, to command the regiment last Thursday."

"No! Had you, though? Fancy old Freeman turning spooney at his time of life! Well, I never! You would have been his third wife, wouldn't you, Poll?"

"I should have started with two sons and a daughter older than myself," says Pauline.

"Well, I hope he'll let me off easily during the training, for your sake, my dear."

"When did you leave Mr. Armstrong's office?" asks Addie, in a chilly voice.

"Oh, I cut the shop nearly three weeks ago! Couldn't stand it any longer, you know. It is all very well for a man brought up to that sort of thing, with mercantile parents, *et cætera*, but with me it was different. Then the society I had to mix in, to rub against officially all day—very good fellows in their way, respectable and all that, but not—not the class I could stand. I saw that from the beginning, and Armstrong himself came to acknowledge it in the end. Clear-sighted fellow, your husband, Addie. He quite understood and sympathized with my inclination for soldiering—in fact, as I learned rather to my surprise, he had done a little in that line in his early days."

"A little!" exclaimed Addie. "He served in a two-year campaign, fought in nine pitched battles, and was wounded several times, very severely indeed at Vicksburg!"

"Ah, indeed!" says Robert patronizingly. "Strange he never mentioned the fact to me until the other day, when I was quite astonished at the—ah—technical knowledge he seemed to have of military affairs, and then he casually mentioned his early experience."

"He served in the ranks, Robert—what you would do if you had any real sense of manliness and honor," remarks Addie quickly.

"What do you mean, Adelaide? How dare you address such words to me?"

"I mean what I say. I mean that lots of gentlemen's sons nowadays, who have no means of getting commissions, enlist in the ranks and work their way bravely up the tree, as you ought to do."

"You mean me—me—Robert Lefroy—to enlist as a common soldier—me to herd for years with the most degraded class of society in the kingdom! I think you are losing your senses, Adelaide," he says contemptuously.

"No, I am not, Robert; and I maintain it would be infinitely less degrading to do so than to go on sponging for years on the almost unparalleled generosity of a man with whom you are connected by no ties of kindred, and to whom we already owe a weight of obligation we can never hope to repay. Why should it be derogatory to you, if your heart is really set on soldiering, to begin in the ranks and work your way manfully, bravely up to a commission, as my husband did?"

"You cannot compare me and my estate in life," he retorts angrily, "with that of your husband, a man who never owned a grandfather, who had no prestige to support, no family to consider. It is

simply senseless comparing me to him."

"It is, it is!" she answers, with kindling eyes. "My husband did not own a grandfather; but he owns an upright, proud, self respecting spirit, and he would rather, yes—I know it—a hundred times starve in the streets from which he sprung than live on another man's alms as you do, Robert Lefroy!"

"Stow that, Addie, stow that!" he cries, roughly advancing to her, glaring with anger. "I have taken a good deal from you; but I'll not stand any more. For the future, mind your own affairs and let me mind mine, and never again presume to address me on this subject. If I liked, I could retort on you, and tell you to do your duty as a wife more effectively than you do, to make your husband's life happier, instead of preaching to others; but—but, degraded and unmanly as I am, I make it a rule never to strike a woman, no matter how much she deserves it; and I'll leave you now with the warning, which I'll take measures to make you respect, that I am doing duty in this house by your husband's orders."

"I think—I think I almost hate you, Robert!" she mutters between her teeth, as he strides away. "I wish I had let you go to Calcutta a year ago with the salt—I wish I had!" [105]

"Addie, Addie," cries Pauline, dancing in, "aren't you dressed for dinner yet? Two of our fellows—I mean the Royal Nutshire—are dining with us, you know. The dressing bell has rung."

"Two men dining here to-night! Who asked them?"

"Robert, of course. Haven't you heard the convivial orders that Tom gave before he left—that, above all things, we weren't to wear the willow for him, that we were to ask our neighbors in to spend the evening just as if he were at home, and have everything the same? Bob is in a great state about the *menu*, as it seems we have the reputation at the club of having the best-flavored *entrées* and the subtlest Burgundy in the county, and he naturally feels the responsibility of his position."

"Do you mean to tell me," Addie says slowly, "that my husband gave Robert the permission to ask in any guests he likes, and as often as he likes, during his absence?"

"I believe so—at least, all those whom he himself saw fit to entertain, with the exception of one or two naughty boys, the Dean's sailor-son, young Vavasour, among the number—which is rather a pity, for I like young Vavasour's roving black eyes. I must confess however that he's left us a good wide margin; so I—"

"Pauline, do you know how often we have dined absolutely *en famille* during the last two months? I have kept an account. Exactly fourteen times—fourteen times in sixty days! And we have given five large dinner-parties and three small dances."

"Well, what of that? I think we have done very nicely. Besides, you must remember we dined out on an average once a week, and two of your dinner-parties were for Tom's Kelvick friends, whom you insisted on entertaining. Ye gods, what entertainments they were! Never shall Bob or I get over the last bunch—Alderman Gudgeon and his lady, and the Methodist vessel, with his two ruby-nosed daughters, and the brewer's son, who sung 'In the Gloaming' and 'Nancy Lee'—never shall I forget!"

"And never shall I forget Bob's rudeness and yours that evening, Pauline, and the way you and he sat in a corner and sniggered; it was the most unladylike thing I ever saw in my life. I can tell you my husband thought so too."

"Oh, well, don't bother about that now, but go and dress for dinner! I daresay it was unladylike; but I know I couldn't help it. I have a much keener sense of the ridiculous than you, Addie, you know. Oh, by the bye, I forgot to tell you that Flo Wynyard and a cousin, a very jolly girl who is staying on a visit with her, are coming over to-morrow to remain until Tom returns; they'll keep us alive at any rate, and it will be very convenient for the rehearsals, our being together."

"More convenient still if we put the whole company up until he returns; they are only seventeen, I believe, including the supers. Better consult Robert!"

But this bit of sarcasm is quite lost on Miss Pauline, who only laughs and admits that it would be very jolly; she fears, however, that the whole company would not agree under one roof, particularly as four or five of the leading men are awfully spooney on her and unpleasantly jealous of one another. [106]

Here the gracious voice of Robert receiving "our fellows" in the hall recalls Addie to her duty. She goes upstairs, puts on her dinner-dress, and re-appears, as sulky and uninviting a little hostess as one would care to see; but Pauline's smile and Robert's cordiality, flavored with the renowned Burgundy, fully make up for her lack of courtesy; and her guests pay no more attention to her, give no more heed to her somber looks than if she were a marble effigy of "Gloom."

CHAPTER XX.

"No, no, Mrs. Armstrong—impossible. We can't let you in. Manager's orders can't be questioned."

No admittance except on business. And you have none, Addie; so be off!"

It is the last dress rehearsal before the final performance; and the company have unanimously elected that it shall take place at Nutsgrove, being a more central position, they argue, and there being more fun to be had there than under the superintendence of old General and Mrs. Hawksby, who have got up the theatricals for the amusement of their eldest son and daughter. So the school-room is converted into a green-room and the drawing-room turned topsy-turvy to represent as nearly as possible the stage-arrangement at New Hall, the Hawksby's place.

"You might very well let me in," grumbles Addie. "What harm will it do for me to see you dressed? It's nonsense!"

"No admittance except on business; critics and reporters rigidly excluded."

The door is shut in her face, she moves away listlessly, then pauses for a moment, looking out at the dappled glory of the spring sky.

"What am I to do with myself all the afternoon?" she mutters languidly. "I feel too lazy for a walk. I'll get Lottie to come for a drive with me! She'll be glad to get off her lessons for once."

But Addie finds that Miss Lottie has taken it upon herself to dispense with her governess for the afternoon, and is busy preparing for a rat-hunt in the grove with Hal and two of his school-friends who are spending the day with him.

"Very sorry, Addie, I can't go for a drive with you; but I wouldn't miss the hunt for anything. Hal said at first that I wasn't to come—wasn't it nasty of him? But Burton Major stood up for me, and they had to give in. I like Burton Major awfully—don't you, Addie?—much better than Wilkins Minor; he's such a nice boy. I hope he'll come over every Saturday."

"He has been over three Saturdays running, Lottie; you can't complain," says Addie.

"No. He says he likes this place awfully, Addie; he'd much rather spend his holidays here than at home. Now I must be off. I wish you were coming with us, too, Addie—'twould be much jollier than driving about by yourself; but I don't think the boys would like it, you know."

"I suppose not, Lottchen. I must only put up with my own society, which is not very exhilarating at the best of times." [107]

How is she to kill the afternoon? Echo answers, "How?" She goes up to her bedroom yawning wearily, and looking around vaguely for inspiration, but none comes.

"Miss Addie, Miss Addie, what are you doing sitting moping there? Why don't you go out for a good brisk walk this lovely afternoon, and get up a bit of an appetite for your dinner, which you want badly enough, I've been noticing for the last week?" says Mrs. Turner, unceremoniously, entering the room about half an hour later, and laying her hand with a motherly gesture on the girl's shoulder, as she reclines in an arm-chair by the open window.

"A walk, Sally? I don't feel equal to it somehow; and I have no one to walk with me; besides, they're all otherwise engaged."

The old woman grunts, and then says abruptly—

"When is your husband coming home, Miss Addie? He's a long time away."

"Yes," she answers, a little sadly, "more than six weeks; and he meant at first, to remain only ten days; then he got that telegram, you know, which obliged him to go to New York. But in his last letter he says he hopes to be home soon now—next week probably."

"I hope he will. To my mind, Miss Addie, there's been a sight too much junketing and racketing going on in this house, and it's time some of it should be put a stop to. It's not agreeing with you, my dear, let me tell you—far from it."

"Sally," says Addie, after a short pause, "I am very like my mother, am I not?"

The question startles the old woman; she looks quickly at her young mistress, and then answers lightly—

"You are and you aren't, my dear. Of course there's a certain likeness—for you're not a bit of a Lefroy; but she was a far prettier woman than you, Miss Addie, far prettier."

"I know that; but the other day I was looking at that picture of her painted ten months before she died, and I thought her very like me—only prettier, of course, as you say."

"I don't agree with you a bit—not a bit," says Mrs. Turner, rising abruptly. "I don't see the least likeness. She was pale and faded and worn like before she died, as why shouldn't she be, after all the troubles she'd gone through, and bearing six children, and all that, poor darling? And you, Miss Addie, are fresh and rosy and young, and all your troubles to come—"

"Fresh and rosy and young,
And all my troubles to come!"

laughs Addie, "Why, Sally, that's pretty! Are you aware of it?"

"The first bit of poetry I ever made in my life, Miss Addie, I give you my word. And now get up, like a dear young lady, and take a turn in the garden, and forget—forget—"

"Forget my mother died of decline before she was thirty! Yes, I will, Sally," she says, with a careless laugh. "I don't think of it often, I assure you."

"What makes you think of it at all?" asks the other sharply.

Addie, for answer, holds up her handkerchief, on which there is a bright red stain.

"That," cries Mrs. Turner, with a loud shrill laugh—"that? Musha, it's little need it takes to put it into your head! That? Why, before I was your age, Miss Addie, when I was a slip of a girl of eighteen, I was mortal bad in that way, and was never a bit the worse of it afterward; and my brother's child—I often told you about Kate McCarthy that married the miller's son—why, she was that bad with blood-spitting that all the doctors said she couldn't live a year; and now she's as strong and as healthy a woman as ye'd find in the County Westmeath, and the mother of twelve children, every one of them as strong as herself! That indeed!" [108]

"Fresh and rosy and young,
And all my troubles to come,'

"—a cheerful little verse, Sally. I must set it to music and sing it to myself whenever I feel in exuberant spirits like now. 'Fresh and rosy and young'"—looking at herself critically in the glass. "Yes, I'm afraid I don't look like dropping into a picturesque decline yet a bit; but then, Sally, if all my troubles are to come, wouldn't it be as well for me to give them the slip—"

"Tut, tut, Miss Addie! Much ye know about it! When you've got your troubles, you won't be anxious to give them the slip; you'll stick to them fast enough, I'll be bound!"

"Stick to my troubles, Sally? You're not talking poetry now, but blank verse, a thing I never could understand."

"Never mind; are ye going out? You understand that, I hope?"

"Oh, yes, you old bother!"

She walks languidly round the old garden, picks herself a bunch of pale May blossoms, and then re-enters the house, and tries the handle of the drawing-room door, hearing sounds of inviting merriment within, but the key is still obdurately turned.

After some minutes of irresolution, she goes into her husband's study opposite, and sinks into a chair at his desk, on which her head droops wearily.

"I do miss you, Tom—I do, I do! I wish you'd come home—I wish you'd come home! I wonder what you would say if I showed you that little red stain on my handkerchief? Would you be startled as Sally was? Would you be sorry or glad, frightened or relieved? It may mean nothing—I dare say it does mean nothing; but still, if it did mean liberty to you, would you take it gladly or painfully? Would you miss me at all as I miss you now? Would you sometimes come here of an evening, when your busy day was done, and think a little of the foolish hot-headed girl you once loved and tried to make happy, but couldn't? Would you think of her kindly, pitifully, tenderly even, and forgive her at last?"

"Fresh and rosy and young,
And all my troubles to come.'

"Bother that idiotic little distich—I can't get it out of my head! 'All my troubles to come'—'all my troubles to come.' A pretty prospect! As if I have not had enough of them already. Much Sally knows! 'All my troubles to come,' and I only twenty-one—twenty-one to-day; and nobody wished me a happy birthday—nobody. It is the first time in twenty-one years that I have been forgotten, wholly, completely forgotten! Sally might have remembered; she helped to bring me into the world. Aunt Jo might have remembered; she was my godmother. Pauline, Bob, Hal—ah, well, they were full of other things! Perhaps it won't be so hard to forget me if I—I go altogether. The first time in twenty-one years! It's an evil augury; it means—means perhaps"—with a shuddering sigh—"I may never see another birthday. Oh, if some one would break the spell! I don't want to die—I don't want to die! I'm too young yet, I'm too young. No matter what my troubles may be, I don't want to die. Mother had a longer time; she was twenty-nine, and I am only twenty-one—twenty-one—" [109]

A loud burst of laughter from the drawing-room comes through the half-open door, and then a few bars of rollicking life stirring music that changes into a rhythmic mournful waltz.

Addie's eyes close, and presently her spirit wanders back to a certain day of sunny girlhood, when they all drank her health in bumpers of raspberry vinegar, and Teddy—bright Teddy Lefroy—knotted a silk handkerchief round her young throat, and, with his lips to her blushing ear, murmured fondly—

"Many happy returns, sweet Cousin Addie!"

She feels the clasp of his warm fingers on her neck, feels his lips brushing her cheek, and slowly opens her eyes to see her husband's swarthy face bending over hers. She does not start or speak a word, but just remains for a moment as she is, looking straight into his grave inquiring eyes, smiling faintly, rosy with sleep.

"Am I welcome?" he asks softly.

"I have missed you," she says—"missed you every day. You are welcome."

She rises heavily, rubs the sleep from her eyes, and puts her hands in his.

"What brings you here alone? Where are the others? Why are you not with them?" he asks, frowningly scrutinizing her face.

"The others are all rehearsing for the theatricals to-morrow night—a dress rehearsal—and they would not let me into the drawing-room. I—I felt sad in my own room, and there was such a smell of roast mutton in the dining room that I came here to rest after my walk. I did not know you would arrive, or I would not have intruded. I will go if I am in the way."

He looks at her again, sharply, earnestly, and notices a glazy brightness about her eyes and a quiver almost of pain about her mouth that tells him his absence has not brought the rest and peace he hoped it would.

"In the way?" he repeats lightly. "Well, well, perhaps you are. Still, if you'd make me a nice hot cup of tea at once, I think I could bear with your company, and condone the intrusion even, for I'm very hungry and thirsty, my dear."

"You would like it really, Tom?" she cries, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks dimpling. "You would not rather have a brandy-and-soda, a sherry-and-seltzer—eh? The Royal Nutshire go in for no other refreshment 'tween meals."

"No, only a cup of tea made by your own hands, Addie. I have tasted no tea like yours in my wanderings."

"You want to put me into a good humor. Well, I have been in a precious temper all the afternoon; I feel better now. Let me look at you. Yes, you have a hungry look somehow, as if you hadn't eaten anything since you left America. You come straight from there, don't you?" [110]

"Yes, I landed at Liverpool five hours ago. So I look hungry? Is it a becoming expression?"

But she is already in quest of the tea-pot.

"I look hungry, hungry," he repeats, with a laugh of pitiful self-contempt; "and well I may, for I have hungered for you, love, love, night and day since I left you—hungered for a glimpse of your fair sweet face, for the sound of your voice—hungered for that careless note of welcome, that frosty smile you gave me just now. You have missed me, you say—ay, missed me as a callous child might miss a—"

"Tom, will you clear that end of the table, please? My arms are so tired."

"And no wonder, my dear girl! Why did you carry that heavy tray? Where are the servants?"

"I did not want any of them to know you had arrived—they would only be fussing and bothering—so I stole everything from the pantry—kettle, spirit-lamp, and all. You have a match—that's right!"

While she busies herself cutting the bread and making the tea, he opens a portmanteau, takes out a letter, and begins writing hurriedly.

"Only a line," he explains apologetically, "in answer to a business letter I found at my office. There—it is dispatched; I'll drop it into the post-bag outside the door. And now to our stealthy tea, my dear."

"Just turn the key in the door, Tom, will you? For, if Pauline, who has the nostrils of a hound, gets the fragrant aroma, she and the whole company will be in on us before you know where you are."

"Which the heavens forbid! There is the sound of as many voices—"

"The sound of seventeen voices—the whole company. They came early this morning, and are remaining to dance to-night. They were here the night before last too; they are here always."

"You have not had opportunity to miss me much then. Robert kept you alive, as I thought he would."

"Oh, yes, he did his best, and the Royal Nutshire helped him! He has four bosom-friends of his own age who are rather heavy in hand, and who belong to the leech tribe. When once they get into the house, you can't get them out. I'm rather sick of 'our fellows,' Tom, 'our training,' 'our mess,' 'our uniform,' *et cætera*. I wonder, if I went in and told them you had just returned from America very bad with yellow-fever, would it rout them before dinner, do you think?"

"I'm afraid not. The quarantine laws would not fit with my appearance here. That's Lottie's voice in the hall now."

"Yes; she has been out rat-hunting with Burton Major and Wilkins Minor—two school friends who are spending the day with Hal."

"By-the-bye, I was nearly forgetting her commission. In fact, at the eleventh hour, even at the Liverpool station, I purchased the 'Turkish delight,' *et cætera*. Here it is. I had to put it in with my letters. Pauline's gloves I nearly made a mess of too. Couldn't remember whether it was six-and-a-quarter or six-and-three-quarters. However, I chose the six and a quarter. Right, eh? That's fortunate. You gave me no message, Addie," he says hesitatingly, taking a case from the breast of his overcoat; "and so—so I was thrown on my own resources to choose you a *souvenir* of my travels. I hope you will like it; it's Yankee manufacture." [111]

She opens the case, and is unable to repress a cry of keen admiration when her eyes rest on a band of massive gold incrustated with diamonds, her initials sparkling in the center—a bracelet which, to her dazzled eyes, might grace the wrist of a Rothschild.

She looks at it for a moment in silence, and then pushes it back to him sullenly.

"No; I do not like it. Why do you bring me these things? You know I hate jewelry of all kinds; I have told you so often enough."

He takes the ornament from her, closes the case, and pushes it aside, saying quietly:

"I am unfortunate in my selection, after all. I do not ask you to accept the bracelet if you do not like it; only I think you—"

"You are angry with me?"

"No, not exactly angry, but I am a little hurt, I think. I wonder if you received any other birthday-gift quite as ungraciously as you did mine to-day, Adelaide?"

"Any other birthday-gift?" she repeats quickly, jumping to her feet, her face flushing suddenly. "Did you mean that bracelet as a birthday-gift? Tell me—tell me—quick!"

"It matters little what I meant it for now."

"You did then, you did?" she cries impetuously, stammering a little with emotion. "Who—who told you this was my birthday? How did you find out? When did you remember? You—you did not even know my name this time last year. How—how did you know this was my birthday?"

He stares at her in unspeakable surprise for a moment, and then says:

"My dear girl, what is the matter—what has excited you so? Is not this your twenty-first birthday? Yes? What mystery surrounds it? Why do you think it strange I should be aware of the fact?"

"I will tell you," she says hotly, "I will tell you. It startles—it surprises me, because you—you are the only person in the world who has remembered the fact—you, who, as I say, did not know my name was 'Addie' this time last year. I—I was crying here twenty minutes ago because every one had forgotten me for the first time in twenty years; my brothers, my sisters, my old nurse, who always met me on my birthday morning with warm kisses, glad wishes, even little worthless presents manufactured in stealth, did not give me one kind word this year—not one."

"My dear child, why should you mind that? It was only through inadvertence; they were so occupied with these theatricals and other things—"

"I know—I know the omission was not willful; why should it be? But it pained me all the same; it made me feel so sad and blank, that and—and other things, that I—I took it into my head I should never see another birthday unless some one broke the spell. I never thought of you. Give me back my present—quick! It is the loveliest, the sweetest thing I ever saw. I'd rather have a bracelet than anything you could give me. How did you guess my taste—how? How did you know I was dying for a bracelet just like this? Fasten it on my arm, Tom"—baring her pretty wrist eagerly—"so. How it sparkles! Now wish me a happy birthday, please."

[112]

He does so, smiling a little sadly.

"Not one, not one, Tom, but ten, twenty, thirty birthdays. Wish them to me with all your heart, your whole heart, Tom, for I feel I do not want to die for ever so long. I do not look like a person likely to die young, do I—do I?"—peering into his face with wistful pathos, her eyes swimming in unshed tears.

"Addie, what has put death into your thoughts to-day, you silly little girl? To-day of all days, when you are supposed to cast aside the fears and frivolities of girlhood and cut your wisdom-teeth."

"Then you do not think I look like a girl who would die young?" she persists, clinging to him.

"I do not know," he answers, banteringly, smoothing away the hair from her hot face. "If a blushing Hebe, for instance, be considered a candidate for the tomb, I may have a prospect of widowhood; but otherwise, Addie, otherwise, no—I cannot say you look or feel like a person who would die young"—touching the white shapely arm that rests on his knee.

She laughs complacently.

"It has not a ghostly feel, has it? Tom, do you think I have a pretty arm? One day I was picking a rose well above my head, and somebody told me I had."

"Who told you?"—sharply.

"Oh, a—well, how can I remember? Some one or other—it was long ago"—rather hurriedly. "What is your opinion? Have I a pretty arm?"

"I have not studied arms. It is a prettier arm than mine."

"You wretch! You will give diamonds and gold, but not one miserable little compliment. By the bye, I have not even thanked you for your diamonds or your good wishes."

"I do not want thanks. Spare me them."

"No, I must make some amends for my ungraciousness. I will not use many words—great gratitude, like great love, is sometimes dumb, I feel. May I thank you as graciously as I can, Tom—may I?"—raising her white arms to his neck, her parted lips to within a few inches of his half-averted face.

He tries to resist, to break the spell; he mutters to himself the words he heard her utter as an incantation, but they sound meaningless, impotent; he puts up his hand mechanically to remove her clasp, but only grasps hers to retain it more firmly there.

"May I?" she says again, her breath fanning his flushed face.

She sees his eyes deepening, smoldering, taking reluctant fire under her glance; she feels his chest heave with a restless struggling sigh, sees his proud head droop an inch nearer hers; in another second she knows victory will be hers; she will have Samson, shorn, at her feet again.

"Addie, Addie, open the door, open the door! What's the matter? The rehearsal's over, and we're going to dance! Open the door—quick!" [113]

With a cry, half of wrath, half of relief, he frees himself and confronts the astonished company—unthanked.

CHAPTER XXI.

"WONDERFUL—charming! A polished actress!" "Would make her fortune on the London boards, by Jove!" "Talk of Mrs. Langtry—she's a stick to Miss Lefroy!" "As to looks, who would compare them?" "Who indeed?"

"Your sister was charming—perfect, Mrs. Armstrong. I congratulate you most sincerely on her success. She is the feature of the evening, the center of all attraction. By Jove, I never thought I could sit out an hour and a half of amateuring until now—she chained me to my seat! A perfect Pauline!"

Addie listens to it all with a triumphant smile, and her eyes follow her beautiful sister, sailing through the ball-room in her gay theatrical feathers, with glowing eyes, her hair piled high over her forehead, powdered to perfection, blazing in diamonds.

"She is lovely, isn't she, Tom? You liked her acting, didn't you?"

"Her looks and her graces would carry almost any acting through," he answers temperately; "and we Nutshire notabilities are not subtle dramatic critics. It is a case of *Venus Victrix* with Pauline to-night. Yes, Addie, yes; I do think her lovely."

"Lovely?" echoes a harsh voice in Addie's ear which makes her start uncomfortably. "Yes, Armstrong, a good few share your opinion."

"Mr. Everard, I never saw you coming up. Allow me to congratulate you. Your Melnotte was so affecting; there were two old ladies near me almost in hysterics during the cottage scene. The comedy too was capital! What is the matter with you? Do you intend to play the tragedian all night, or have you come to ask me to dance at last?" she says gayly, her heart sinking at the sight of the lad's woe-begone face and the cold fire of his blue eyes.

"No, Mrs. Armstrong, I haven't come to ask you to dance, but to say good-by to you; I am going home."

"Going home, and the ball only beginning? Oh, nonsense, Jack!" she says, unconsciously using the familiar name, and laying her hand on his arm with a sisterly gesture.

"Yes," he says, a quiver in his voice, "I am going to follow your advice at last, Mrs. Armstrong. I am throwing up the game; she gave me the last straw five minutes ago."

"What did she do?"

"She would promise me only one dance; and, when I went up for it a minute ago, that fellow she is dancing with now—that hulking Guardsman—"

"Sir Arthur Saunderson?"

"Yes—claimed it too. She decided in his favor. She met him only a week ago, and I—I have followed her like a dog for the last five months, have anticipated her slightest wish, have obeyed her every wanton whim, have put my neck under her foot, let her trample me as she would!" [114]

"Oh, why, why did you not do as I told you, Jack? I warned you in time. I told you Pauline was too young, too careless, too high-spirited to be touched by love as yet; she told you so herself."

"Oh, yes!" he laughs bitterly. "She told me, she gave me a few yards to gambol in; but, when she saw me two or three times at the end of my tether, jibbing to get away, to be free, she gave me a little chuck that brought me back to her side in double-quick time. Oh, she did not use me well—your sister! I know I was warned; I don't mean to reproach any one or anything but my own besotted infatuation. I didn't expect her to fall in love with me. Oh, no, no! And I don't want any quarter now; I wouldn't take it, in fact. What chance should I have competing against Saunderson's sodden face, his fine leaden eye, his baronetcy, his twelve thousand a year? What chance indeed! I'm not going to try—not I! I'm off the day after to-morrow. Any commission for Norway, Mrs. Armstrong?"

"Norway? Are you going there?"

"Yes, in my cousin Archie Cleveland's yacht. We sail from Cowes next week—a jolly bachelor party."

"I wish you *bon voyage*, and a speedy cure," she says earnestly, pressing his hot hand.

"Thanks; awfully—Oh, yes. I'm sure I shall get over it fast enough! I feel I shall, in fact; I've a strong constitution. Good-by, Mrs. Armstrong, good-by, Armstrong! Thanks, old fellow, for all your good wishes, your kindness to me, *et cætera*. I'll not forget them, though I will her—ay, fast enough, Heaven helping me!"

He takes a long hungry look at the girl whom he loves flying past him in his rival's arms, his heavy tow-colored mustache almost brushing her lovely glowing face, upturned to his.

The poor boy turns aside to hide the unmanly moisture clouding his bright eyes, and finds Addie's pitying little palm still imprisoned in his grasp.

"Oh, Ad—Mrs. Armstrong," he cries with a sob in his voice, "if—if Heaven had only given her your tender heart, your sweet nature—"

"And her own face and figure," puts in Addie quickly, with a soft laugh. "But, Jack, what would my poor husband have left then? Not a very promising patchwork—eh?"

"Your husband? Oh, he is a lucky fellow!"

"Is he?" says Addie, wheeling round and looking up into her husband's face with a bright, eager, questioning look. "Is he, Tom?"

Years after Everard remembered the look, the attitude of husband, of wife, as they stood thus gazing at each other under the big magnolia shrub—remembered the tune of the waltz that pursued him as he walked down the avenue, his brain on fire, his heart bursting with wrath, love, and despair.

"There, Tom—look! What a disgraceful state your table is in! All the letters that arrived while you were in New York higgledy-piggledy all over the place! When are you going to settle them?"

"When I have time; they are not of much importance—only bills, prospectuses, begging-letters, receipts—" [115]

"May I settle them for you? Do let me; I'll do it so nicely. All the receipts in one drawer, bills in another, prospectuses in another, and begging-letters in the waste-paper basket—"

"Bravo, Addie, bravo! I see you know how to set to work."

"Then I may do it? You do not mind my opening them? You have no secrets?"—running her hand lightly through the pile. "What is this large square envelope, crested and monogrammed, addressed in a lady's writing, kissing the face of the income-tax? You look guilty, Tom! Am I touching pitch?"

"You are touching an invite to a dinner-party—a gentleman's dinner-party at the Challice's on Friday week," he says, laughing.

"Would you like it answered? I'll answer it for you. You can not go, Tom, for I've written to Aunt Jo to come next week; and the chances are ten to one she'll arrive on that very day, and it would look very bad if you were absent, wouldn't it? You were always such a favorite of hers, you know."

"I won't be absent then. I'm not sorry for the excuse; those aldermanic feasts are becoming rather too much for my digestion of late. I'm afraid I'm getting old, Addie, and feeble—"

"Old and feeble!" she retorts. "I never saw a stronger-looking man than you; you have a grasp of iron. Taunt me with being like Hebe indeed! You are a mixture of Vulcan and Samson."

"Samson's days were short on earth; you may be a widow before you are thirty, Addie."

She looks at him with startled eyes; but his face is careless and unconscious. She moves away hurriedly.

"I may be a widow before I am thirty! The very words they used a year ago; and I—I—actually laughed—yes, I remember, I laughed. What a wretch I was! And now—now I can not bear to hear them, even in jest, not even in jest, my dear, my dear!"

It is a week after the theatricals. An unusual spell of quiet and peace has followed the excitement and racket of the preceding month, for Robert and the "Royal Nutshire" have left the soil for their annual month's picnicking in the Long Valley, and Miss Wynyard, not able to bear the reaction of dullness, has taken flight likewise, and is enjoying herself in town, while Pauline, in deserted Nutsgrove, pores greedily over the accounts of her gay doings, and valiantly determines that her sister shall have a comfortable *pied-à-terre* in the neighborhood of Eaton Square or Park Lane next season.

Meanwhile Addie is working briskly at clearing the study-table. The waste-paper bag is filling rapidly with the fluent literature of professional beggary, when suddenly a long sheet of paper bearing Madame Armine's address on the top, closely covered with scratchy French writing, drops in dismay from her hands. It is Miss Lefroy's account for goods supplied from the sixteenth of January to the first of May, and three figures represent the total. Poor Addie stares at them stupidly, rubs her eyes, even goes to the window for a moment to take breath and clear the cobwebs from her brain; but when she comes back they confront her still. One hundred and eighty-four pounds! Pounds—not pence, not shillings even, but pounds, sterling pounds!

"What do they mean?" she asks aloud. "It must—it must be a stupendous mistake. How could any girl wear or order one hundred and eighty-four pounds' worth of clothes in less than six months? Impossible! She has been remarkably well-dressed of late, I have noticed, and—and I remember Lady Crawford telling me that she is considered one of the best got-up girls in Nutshire. Her last ball-dress was very handsome; but—but, all the same, this bill is simply incredible. It's a mistake—of course it's a mistake! It's an account of some large family—the Douglasses or the Hawksbys probably—and they have got hers; that's it, of course. I'll just run my eyes down the items to make sure. How hard they are to make out! Let me see—let me see. Costume of white satin *merveilleuse*, and gauze and flounces of Cluny lace, sixteenth of January—forty-five pounds. That [116]

sounds like the dress she got for the Arkwrights'—satin gauze and Cluny lace; but—but forty-five pounds! I thought it would be ten at the outside. To be sure, I never ordered a dress for myself, so—so I don't know; but forty-five pounds! It's awful, awful!"

With head down-bent she goes slowly and laboriously through each item; when she reaches the total, her face is crimson with shame and bewilderment. She pushes the document from her, walks feverishly up and down the room, then takes up the account again.

"*Sortie du bal* of silver plush trimmed in blue fox-fur—twenty-eight pounds ten shillings. That can't—can't mean that simple little dolman she wore going to the theatricals the other night? Impossible! I'll go and ask her about this at once."

She rushes off, scared and excited, calling her sister's name loudly. No answer comes to her in the house. She passes out, the ominous document trembling in her hands.

"Here I am, under the ash in the tennis-ground! What's the matter? What has happened? Any one hurt?"

"No," pants Addie, "no; it's a bill of yours, an awful bill, from Armine—since last January. I can't make it out; it must be wrong. I got such a shock when I saw the total."

She parts the drooping boughs of the ash, and finds herself confronted by her sister, crimson with confusion and anger, and Sir Arthur Saunderson, caressing his tawny mustache, an amused smile stealing over his insolent dissipated face.

"Oh, is that you, Sir Arthur?" she exclaims, with scant courtesy, knowing that her husband has a strong personal objection to that gentleman. "I did not know you were here."

"Came half-hour 'go. Pleasure a-finding Miss Lefroy in the grounds; did not go the house," he answers languidly. "Lovely aft'noon, ain't it?"

"Lovely," she answers shortly, sitting down beside Pauline, with an irritated gesture that says as plainly as words could say, "You're in the way, sir; your departure would be acceptable."

But he takes not the slightest notice; and presently, after a few half whispered sentences, he and Pauline rise together for the ostensible purpose of examining some early rose-blooms in the pleasure-ground, leaving her alone.

"Horrid man!" she mutters indignantly. "How can Pauline stand him? She knows perfectly well too that Tom objects to his coming here. If his morals are as bad as his manners, I don't wonder he does, I'm sure! And, oh dear me, I remember the days when I used to imagine a Guardsman an angel of fascination and manly grace, something every girl must fall down before and worship at the first glance, not an insolent goat-faced clown like—Well, I am getting bitter! I hope he'll go soon, in time for me to go over that bill with Pauline before Tom returns. I wonder has he seen it yet? If he has, I shall not be able to look him in the face. One hundred and eighty-four pounds! More than the whole six of us had to live on for two years! One hundred and eighty-four pounds! It grows bigger every time I think of it. One—"

[117]

"Addie, Addie, my love!"

She starts, and then leans forward in an attitude of breathless, puzzled expectancy, her hands clasped. Was she dreaming? Did her senses deceive her? Surely a voice whispered her name, a voice that takes her back with a thrill of reluctant pain to a summer night four years ago.

She turns and finds herself clasped in a man's arms, feels a shower of kisses falling on her scared and shrinking face.

CHAPTER XXII.

ARMSTRONG is detained at his office until late this evening. Feeling inclined for exercise after his long sedentary day, he gets out of the trap near the place where he found Addie lying under the tree, and, walking across the grove, enters the shrubby path bordering the tennis-ground, where the sound of voices at the further end attracts his attention. Dusk has already fallen, but he can clearly distinguish the figures of a man and woman walking arm-in-arm in front of him. His face darkens.

"Miss Pauline and one of her admirers," he mutters contemptuously. "She is carrying matters a little too far. I will let her know that these twilight rambles are not to my taste, and that as long as she remains an inmate of my house she must restrict her flirtations to more decorous hours—at least, out of doors."

He walks quickly after the pair along the mossy sward, then suddenly, when within thirty yards of them, he stops short and shrinks instinctively behind the sheltering ash-boughs, for he sees that the girl is not Pauline, but his own wife, and that her hands are clasped with an appearance of affectionate *abandon* on the arms of a man who, as well as he can make out in the gloom, is a perfect stranger.

Too astonished either to advance or recede, he stands motionless, thinking painfully and confusedly, then comes to the conclusion that he has made a mistake, that his fancy has tricked him. He is on the point of starting forward, when Addie's voice, low, troubled, eager, yet with a ring of unrestraint, of familiarity even, that makes his pulse throb with jealous pain, reaches him

distinctly on the breathless night-air.

"Oh, no, no—not that—not that! You do not know what you ask—what it would cost me. He is good, generous, kind, unselfish even—not that, not that!"

There is a slight pause before the answer comes, in a voice so pure, sweet, and infinitely sad as to strike musically on the listener's tortured ear—a voice that Armstrong has never heard before, and yet that thrills through him with a strange vague sense of familiarity. [118]

"Be it so—be it so. I will not ask what would cost you so much. Why should I, why should I, my dear, my dear? What hold have I on your life? Ah, none—none! You belong to another now, to another who you say is good, generous, kind, unselfish even, which I am not. Go back to your husband, your home, my girl, and forget that I darkened your path again—go back; I want nothing from you."

"And you," she asks wistfully—"you? What will you do? Where will you go?"

"I?" he questions drearily, passing his hand over her downcast head. "Do not ask, *ma mie*, do not ask."

"Yes, yes, you must tell me; I must know."

He stoops and puts his lips close to her ear. With a shrill cry she pushes him from her.

"You are trying to frighten me—to win me over. How cruel you are! You do not mean that?"

"No, no," he answers soothingly, "of course I don't. I can't imagine what made me blurt out such nonsense. Give me a kiss, a little one, a last kiss, and let me go."

"And let you go!" she echoes wildly. "How can I do that with such a threat ringing in my ears? Do you think I have no heart, no feeling left, because I am married—no memory?"

"You have a husband, good, kind, and—what is it?—generous and unselfish. Keep your heart, your feelings for him; cast out the memory of me from your life, for I will never cross your path again; forget me from this hour—let my fate not trouble you henceforth; do you hear? This is my last, my only request. Forget me; go back to your husband, Adelaide, and sleep out your life in peace and—and happiness by his side."

"Sleep out my life in peace and happiness," she echoes bitterly. "Vain request! You have murdered sleep for me to-night—destroyed happiness. Why did you come? Could you not have let me be? Oh, I have suffered since I saw you last—suffered, suffered! And now—now, when a glimpse of rest, of happiness even, was coming to me with the summer, you step in and take it from me. Heaven pity me, Heaven pity me!"

"Hush, hush!" he cries, his voice tremulous with pathos. "I will not have you say that. I want nothing from you—nothing, I tell you, but forgetfulness—nothing; blot out the memory of this hour, the memory of that cowardly unmeaning whisper—forget it—forget, my Adelaide!"

"I can not, I can not, for something tells me that it was not without meaning. And I loved you once—oh, yes, I loved you once! I was only a child, I know; but I loved you. Can I now live and feel myself your murderess? I can not."

Crying bitterly, she buries her face on his breast. He leans over her, murmuring tender, soothing words; while Armstrong, whose presence they are too absorbed, too agitated to notice, stands beside them, his hot breath almost fanning their averted faces, beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead at the mighty effort he is making to restrain the instinct that urges him to hurl them asunder, trample to death the shapely sweet-voiced lover, and overwhelm her with the discovery of her treachery and deceit. But he restrains himself. After all, what is she to him, or he to her, his wife in name only? Her past he entered not into—their future will be spent apart. What have they in common? Nothing but the memory of two short weeks of union, which to him and her alike were clouded with bitterness, repulsion, and torturing recollection. Why then should he make himself ridiculous, pose as an outraged husband? He does not value her compassionate appreciation of his worth, does not want her tears, her kisses, her love. Why, then, in Heaven's name, should he interfere with her lover's enjoyment of them, the lover whom she jilted for his gold? [119]

"Let her and him go to the dogs!" he mutters, striding away contemptuously. "Let the chapter of my married bliss close as it may, I care not a jot!"

He goes without one backward glance, and thus seals the fate of his life and hers.

The echo of his footsteps startles them; they move apart, look apprehensively around, but no further movement is to be heard.

Addie's face is white and still; she stands erect before her companion, and says slowly—

"You have conquered; I will do what you want. Let me go now."

He opens his arms rapturously, with an exclamation of delight, while she flies away, wringing her hands, and muttering piteously—"Heaven help me, Heaven help me!"

"And so," thinks Armstrong, as he walks blindly round and round the silent park, "it has ended like every commonplace three-volume novel, after all! My fate is in no wise different from that of the ponderous middle-aged husband of domestic drama. The lover has turned up at last; Jamie has come back from sea, as I might have guessed he would sooner or later, and his sweetheart tells him, almost in the words of the old song, that 'Auld Robin Gray's been a good man to me.' Generous, kind, unselfish I have been, she tells him. Well, so I have, I think; but the *rôle* of Auld

Gray begins to pall. I'll throw it up soon. I'll just give her a week clear from to-day to make what reparation she can, to confess all; and, if she does not, I will tell her what I know, what she hid from me so artlessly, then shut up Nuts Grove, take up my quartets in Kelvick—which I ought never to have left—and pack off my incumbrances—my precious wife and family—to old Jo at Leamington. Old Jo! I wonder was she in the plot, too? But of course she was; she did the 'pressin' sair' with a firm motherly hand! By Heaven, how cleverly they hid it all between them! How well Jamie was kept in the background—not the faintest suggestion of his existence! Even now I have not the least idea who he is; but I'll soon find out. As well as I could see in the gloaming, my rival is an uncommonly good-looking shapely fellow, and his voice—ah, well, his voice could win its way to any woman's heart! I wonder are they sighing out their sweet farewells still! It was a touching interview; but my poor little wife was not quite as temperate in her caresses as the young lady in the ballad. Jamie got more than one kiss to-night. Not that it matters to me whether it was one or a hundred—not a jot!" [120]

"If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be?"

"Not a jot—not a jot now!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHEN Armstrong enters the drawing-room, half an hour later, there is small evidence of any volcanic element in the cheerful family group that meets his glance.

Pauline is lying in an easy-chair reading a novel, Addie and Lottie are engaged with *bésique*, the Widow Malone purring on the latter's lap.

"How late you are!" is Pauline's languid greeting. "We waited dinner fifteen minutes."

"I was detained at the office," he answers, throwing himself into a chair which commands a good view of the players, full face, three-quarters, and profile.

"Yes," he thinks after a few minutes' scrutiny, after intercepting a frightened, questioning, furtive glance—"yes, I think I am to be told of Jamie and his unexpected return from sea; she is evidently mustering courage to unburden her conscience. I wonder how long will she be getting up sufficient steam? I must give her a helping hand."

"What is it? You want to speak to me?" he says, as gently as he can, meeting a second imploring look, as they both stand at the foot of the stairs, when the party in the drawing-room has broken up for the night.

But she shrinks back in evident dismay.

"No, no! What—what made you think that? I—I don't want to say anything in particular, only, 'Good-night.'"

"I beg your pardon. Good-night."

Two days go by, and no confession comes; the third brings Robert on a hurried visit from Aldershot to consult his brother-in-law, about some hitch in his qualification for the cavalry.

At dinner Armstrong learns what he wants to know—the identity of his wife's lover.

"I say, girls," blurts out Robert, suddenly, "you'd never guess whom I met at Kelvick station this morning, not if I gave you twenty chances."

"We'll not try," retorts Pauline. "The weather is too hot for conundrums. Who was it, Robert?"

"Teddy Lefroy."

"No! You don't mean it! How was he looking? Did you know him at once? When is he coming to see us?" exclaim the two younger girls together.

Addie says not a word.

"Looking? Well, not A 1, I must say. I'm greatly afraid poor Ted is going down the tree, at a smart pace too. I scarcely knew him at first, he had so run to seed both in looks and clothing. You remember what a dapper fellow he was four years ago." [121]

"Poor Ted—I am sorry! He was too nice to last, I always thought," said Pauline, lightly. "Where is he now—with his regiment?"

"No; he has left his regiment, I regret to say, and is now thrown on society without resource or occupation. Punchestown finished him up, and the Beechers won't have anything more to say to him. He talks of going to the Colonies."

"Well, I hope he'll come to see us before he leaves this neighborhood. Did you ask him to, Bob?"

"I did, of course; but somehow he seemed strangely disinclined to come—gave a lot of patched-up excuses; however, he said he'd do his best. You'll find him greatly altered."

"Addie," says Lottie, joining in the conversation for the first time, "I'm sure it's on account of you he won't come—because you're married, you know."

There is a brief silence, broken by Addie asking confusedly, her cheeks flushing—

"What do you mean, Lottie? Why should my marriage prevent Teddy from coming here?"

"Oh, well, you know what I mean!" replies Lottie, giggling foolishly. "You may open your eyes as wide as you like, Addie; but you know perfectly well what I mean—you know that Teddy and you were awful spoons long ago. Don't you remember the night Hal and I hid up in the cherry-tree and saw you and him walking up and down the orchard with his arm round your waist, and how angry and red you got when Hal gave a big crow and called out, 'I see you—yah!' Don't you remember? And the photo we found in your desk wrapped up in—"

Here, with a suppressed cry, Lottie stops, the toe of Robert's boot having just met a tender part of her shin.

Armstrong rises to open the door for his wife, who passes out with flaming cheeks and downcast head, then resumes his seat by his brother-in-law's side, and they sit together smoking and talking business far into the night.

Four days more go by, and the week of grace is nearly spent, when one evening a knock comes at Armstrong's study-door, and his wife enters, pale and wild-looking, her hair blown about, and the skirt of her dress wet, as if she has just been trailing it through damp grass.

"She has had another interview with Jamie, and now for the upshot!" he thinks grimly. "I must try to tune my nerves for hysterics, I suppose. My wife's emotions are always dished up hot."

"You wish to speak to me?" he asks gravely. "Won't you sit down?"

"I want to know if you can give me five hundred pounds," she says, in a clear mechanical voice, as if she were repeating a lesson.

"Five hundred pounds?" he echoes blankly.

"Yes, five hundred pounds, can you give it to me to-night? That is all I want to say to you."

"I can give you a check for that amount, which you can cash, in any of the banks in Kelvick to-morrow. Will that do?"

"Yes, that will do."

[122]

He fills in the check, signs it, and hands it to her without a word.

"Thank you," she says, huskily. "It is a big sum. I—I may be able to repay it; but I don't know when."

"Pray don't mention it. I consider the money well laid out," he says shortly.

"I understand you—oh, I understand you! The money has bought you your freedom—that is what you mean," she says, fixing her wild eyes on his face. "Any lingering spark of—of affection, of esteem, of pity you still had for me is gone now. Yes? I thought so—I thought so; but I could not help it; the pressure brought to bear on me was too strong. I could not help it! Oh, if you knew—if I could only tell you—"

"Pray don't offer any explanation. I assure you I seek none. I am quite satisfied that you wanted the money badly, or you would not have applied to me."

He busies himself stamping some letters for the post; while she stands by staring at him helplessly, the check lying under her nerveless hand.

He looks up at her after a moment, a grim elation flooding his soul—looks at her standing mute in her utter abasement before him, cowering, shrinking, a thing too mean for pity, too despicable for wrath.

"And to think that I wasted the best wealth of my life on such a woman as she," he mutters, turning away in burning self-contempt—"to think that I lay awake at night thirsting for her love, treasuring her every wanton smile, gloating over every kind word she gave me—to think that in this very room scarce ten days ago, she almost tricked me into believing in her again, a woman who could stoop to sponge on me, her much-enduring husband, to sponge for the lover who comes cringing round my gates, his craven hand outstretched to rob me of my substance as well as my honor! They are a noble race, these Lefroys! It was a lift in the world for me, Tom Armstrong, the foundling, to take one of them to my bosom! Faugh!"

"What do you want? Can I do anything more for you?" he says, sternly, turning round, to find her standing by his side.

"No, nothing—nothing," she pants, dry-eyed. "I only want you to say something to me—it does not matter what—to abuse me and mine, to give voice to your contempt, to tell me what you feel."

"What good would it do you or me?" he asks roughly. "You can guess pretty well what I feel; my emotions are not very complex at this moment, I can tell you."

She wrings her hands, and tries to speak; but only a gurgling sound comes. He looks on, smiling lightly.

"Oh, if it could only turn out a dream—all a dream!" she whispers hoarsely. "If this year could be blotted out, and you could find yourself coming home one May evening, and see me lying in the wood, you would drive on and leave me there, would you not, Tom?"

"No," he says, after a short pause. "On consideration, I think I should stop and send you home to your aunt in my trap."

"You would not bring me here?"

"Certainly not—that is, presuming the panorama of this happy year had been foreshadowed to me in sleep. And you—you surely would not have me do so, eh? Your present feelings tally with mine, do they not?" [123]

"My present feelings! Will you let me tell you what they are? If—if I had this year to spend over again, if we had, as we so futilely presume, lived through it in a painful sleep, its every pang, its every troubled experience—"

"Yes, I follow you."

"And you were to bring me here and ask me to be your wife again, my answer would be 'Yes.' I would marry you, Tom, if you had not a penny in the world to tempt me with—marry you if I knew you to be a vagrant, a homeless vagrant, as they say you once were, wandering through the streets of Kelvick, and that I had to share a garret with you until the day I died! You don't believe me—ah, you don't believe me?"

She approaches, and lays a shaking hand on his arm. He turns with a fierce oath, his face blazing with scorn, repulsion, contempt unutterable, and, hurling her from him, strides from the room.

"Believe you? Believe you? By Heaven, I don't!" are his hot parting words.

Her head strikes rather sharply against the woodwork of the window; she remains for a few moments with eyes closed, struggling against nausea, then lifts her handkerchief to her mouth, from which a thin red stream is issuing slowly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"GET up, Miss Pauline, get up quick!"

"What is the matter, Sally?" cries Pauline, rubbing her eyes. "How funny you look! Has anything happened?"

"Hush! Yes; your sister—Miss Addie—is—is missing! She is not in her room, and her bed has not been slept in all night."

"Addie—Addie missing? I—I don't understand! What do you mean, Sally? Missing—where?"

"Heaven knows—Heaven knows!" cries the old woman, wringing her hands. "I believe she had words with her husband after dinner last night. She went to her room, saying she had a headache, and—and no one has seen or heard anything of her since."

Pauline, now thoroughly awake and startled, springs out of bed.

"But her husband, Sally! He—he knows where she is? What does he say?"

"I told him, and he said nothing—absolutely nothing; he didn't seem surprised or startled, but just went into his study, locked the door after him, and has been there ever since."

"I—I don't think there is anything to be alarmed about," says Pauline, her teeth chattering nevertheless; "it is a sudden quarrel, I suppose. She—she is very hot tempered, you know, and has gone off in a huff for a couple of days to Aunt Jo. Give me a bit of paper, Sally. I'll scribble a telegram to Leamington, and we'll have an answer in half an hour, and—wait—wait—I'll send another to Bob—he'll be wanted on the spot to patch up matters. Now, Sally, I'll depend on you to keep it as dark as possible. Don't let Lottie know on any account, or the other servants, if possible. We'll have it all right before the evening, never fear!" [124]

Three hours later Robert Lefroy, warm, dusty, and excited from suspense—for the telegram has told him nothing but that he is wanted immediately—arrives at Nutsgrrove, and is received by Pauline with scared white face in the dining-room.

"What is it? What has happened? Any one ill—hurt?" he asks breathlessly.

"No, no! Speak lower, and keep—keep composed as I am. It's Addie—she's missing! Since last night nobody knows what—what has become of her. Listen, listen—don't speak yet! She had a row with her husband after dinner, and must have gone away soon after, and—"

"Yes—Aunt Jo? Have you tele—"

"I have, and she's not there, and has not been there. I've made cautious inquiries at the farm; but no one saw her there either; and—and I don't know what to do, I'm so frightened!"

"Her husband—Tom—what does he say? What is he doing?"

"He has been locked up in his study all the morning, and I—I was afraid to go in to him. I thought that I would wait until you came, that you would—would manage better than I should."

"I will go to him at once. Give me a glass of wine, sister."

"But, Bob darling, listen—listen to what they say! Oh, it's dreadful—dreadful to have such—such vile suspicions afloat!"

"What suspicions? What d'ye mean?"

"Sally heard in the kitchen, half an hour ago, that one of the maids, seeing off a friend by the 10.30 up-train last night, is sure—sure she saw Addie at the station, going off in the train with—with a stranger, who—who took her ticket for her!"

"A stranger! What stranger? What the deuce do you mean, Pauline?" cries the boy fiercely, shaking off her clinging arms.

"Oh, I don't mean anything! It's only what they say, the wretches! And that is not all; they say she—she was heard two or three times out in the grounds last week talking to some man and crying bitterly. The cook's little sister and brother heard her one night, and saw her distinctly."

"Pauline! How could you degrade yourself by listening to such low, vile slanders? It is infamous!"

"It was Sally who told me—told me in order that her husband might know at once and take some measures to stop these scandalous lies. He has not stirred from his study to-day."

"I will go to him at once. I'll stir him pretty quick, I can tell you! My poor little sister! I'll see you avenged," says Robert fiercely. He knocks at the door boldly. After a few seconds he is admitted; and stands facing his brother-in-law, who greets him gravely.

"Tom, Tom," he bursts out at once, "what—what is the meaning of all this? What is there between you and Addie? Where has she gone to? What does it mean?"

"Your sister has left me, Robert. I know nothing more about her movements than this note will tell you. I found it this morning on my table, her wedding-ring inclosed." [125]

Robert takes up the note and reads slowly the following—

"This is to tell you I am going. I see it is all over at last. I could not live with you again after your words to me this evening. You have done your best, but you have failed. Heaven reward you and keep you all the same! Do not ever think of me again; I am going to him who has brought this ruin on me; it is his duty to bear with me now for the few short years I may yet have to drag on my wretched life.

ADELAIDE."

Robert raises a bloodless face and stares stupidly at his brother-in-law.

"I—I don't understand. What can she mean? For Heaven's sake, Armstrong, can't you speak? 'I am going to him who has brought this—this ruin on me.' She—she must be mad—stark staring mad! Whom—whom does she mean? Tom, Tom, for Heaven's sake, tell me!"

"She means that she has gone to the man," says Armstrong, with contemptuous sternness, "whom you forced her to jilt in order to marry me."

The boy's expression of bewilderment is so genuine as to impress him for a moment.

"The man we forced her to jilt to marry you! The mystery thickens. She jilted no man to marry you, Armstrong; I'll swear it on the Bible, if you like. You were the only man who ever asked her in marriage; there was no one else—we knew no one, she went nowhere. You must be mad yourself to say such a thing!"

"There was not this cousin—Edward Lefroy—the casual mention of whose name disturbed her so much a few evenings ago that she had to leave the room in your very presence?"

"Edward Lefroy—Teddy Lefroy!" he retorts impatiently. "Why, he was only a boy, a schoolboy, whom we looked on as a brother, whom—whom Addie has not met since she was a child! Teddy Lefroy? Your suspicion is absurd, below contempt, Armstrong! I—I am ashamed of you!"

Armstrong only smiles very bitterly.

"You will not think my suspicions below contempt when I tell you, my boy, that I myself saw your sister a few evenings ago crying in this man's arms, bemoaning her fate, struggling weakly against the temptation into which she has now fallen, urging—"

"You saw her—you saw her, you heard her! Armstrong, I don't believe you!" he bursts out impulsively. "I don't believe you! You were dreaming, drunk—"

"No, Robert, no," he answers drearily. "I was quite sober, and I was standing within a few yards of them both. There was no mistake—I heard and saw them distinctly."

"And—and you did not interfere?"

"No. Why should I? Your sister and I had lived for many months in a mere semblance of union, her actions were quite free. Besides, I thought that worldly consideration, her affection for you, would prevent her from taking the extreme step she did."

"I don't believe it, I don't believe it!" cries Robert, his voice struggling with rising sobs. "I don't care what you saw or what you heard, Thomas Armstrong! I have known my sister for twenty years, and you for one, and I'll stake her honor, her virtue, her truth against your word any day, and maintain it before the world too! How dare you say such things of her, you—you cowardly low-bred upstart! Oh, Tom, Tom," pleads the poor lad, hot tears raining down his cheeks unchecked, "look me in the face and tell me you don't believe it! You don't, you can't, you dare not believe it! Think of her as you saw her daily amongst us here—so light-hearted, careless, [126]

impulsive, so quick to resent injustice, so tender with suffering, so anxious to please you, to entice you into her innocent girlish pleasures, so dainty in her speech, in her actions—dainty even to prudishness! You—you have seen her in society among men; but you have never detected a light word, a flirting glance. No, no! She was voted slow, heavy in hand, full of airs among our fellows. Men never dared try to flirt with her as they do with other young married women, I tell you. Tom, Tom, think of all this, and say—say you don't believe it—say you will put your shoulder to the wheel and help me to clear up the mystery, find her, and bring her home to us again! Addie, Addie, the best of us all, the sweetest, the most unselfish, the truest-hearted! She would go through fire and water for any one she loved. You don't know her as I do. Listen, Tom, listen! A few years ago, when I had scarlet fever, and they said I could not recover, she ran away from the farm to which they had all been sent, climbed into my room through the window, hid under the bed when the doctor came, and remained to nurse me until I was well. And you think—you think that she—"

He stops and looks imploringly into Armstrong's sad stern face; but he answers only by laying a pitying hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I tell you, I tell you," he continues passionately, shaking off his hand, "that she was nearer heaven than any of us, all her life through—the best of us all, whom every one loved, whom every one turned to for help, for pity, for affection—the best of us all—the best of us all! You know that yourself—you, her husband. I have seen it in your face—ay, twenty times. And you believe that Heaven would let such as she become a—"

The harsh word dies on his lips, his head falls forward on his outstretched arms.

"Robert," answers Armstrong, after a short pause, "you plead well. There is much truth in what you urge; but I, alas, can convince you in your own words! Your sister was hot, impulsive, warm-hearted, and—and would go through fire and water for any one she loved. She is doing so now, Heaven help her!"

"I don't believe it, I don't believe it! Give me proofs!"

"Proofs!" he repeats impatiently. "Great Heaven, boy, what surer proof could I give you than her own words? Read her confession again. You—you don't suppose it's a fraud? What motive could I have in forging the record of my dishonor?"

"I can't understand it, I can't understand it!"

"I can, and you will also, when I tell you that the villain, in my hearing, threatened to take his own life if she refused to listen to him. Judge the effect of such a threat on any one of her impulsive nature." [127]

"I—I wish I had killed him that day I met him! Oh if I had only known, only guessed! Even now, Armstrong, I tell you I can not realize it—I can not! He was utterly penniless too; he asked me to lend him a five-pound note, and told me, if he could manage his passage-money, he would sail in the 'Chimborazo' for Melbourne on the seventeenth."

"He has managed his passage-money. Your sister got five hundred pounds from me last evening."

The words seemed to have slipped out unconsciously, for the deep flush of shame that spreads over Robert's face is reflected as warmly in the speaker's the same moment.

There is a pause, broken only by Robert's hot panting breath; then Armstrong speaks again.

"The 'Chimborazo,' you say? She sailed from Gravesend on the seventeenth, and takes in passengers at Plymouth two days later. To-day is—let me see—the nineteenth. Yes, they would be just in time, leaving here last night, to sail in her."

"Tom," says Robert, rising to his feet, "will you grant me a last request? Come with me now at once, and see if—if your suspicion is correct, if we can find any trace of them on board—I—I mean at the shipping-agents, among the list of cabin-passengers. Will you, will you?"

"Yes, my boy, if you like," he answers wearily. "But, if my suspicion is verified to-day, you must never allude to this subject again before me. I do not object to let you and yours continue to look on me as a friend, but you must forget henceforth that you ever called me brother-in-law."

"Yes," Robert answers, his handsome head downcast, his burning eyes painfully averted—"yes, I—I can easily do that, because—because, I shall forget I ever had a sister. Armstrong, Armstrong, you—you understand what I feel, if—if this should prove true. I—I may not be able to speak to you again; but you understand, don't you, that the pain, the disgrace, the wrong that we—that she has brought on your life can never, if I live to be an old man, be entirely wiped from mine? You understand," he continues, with flashing eyes, the veins in his neck swelling with suppressed emotion, "that, if—if either of them crossed my path at this moment, I should have as little compunction in striking them dead at my feet as I should have in crushing out the life of the meanest, most harmless insect that crawls on earth? You—you believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, Robert, I do," he answers, grasping Robert's outstretched hand, feeling for the first time in his life a sense of respect, of esteem almost, for the unfortunate boy.

THE next morning, when, ill with crying, Pauline opens her swollen eyes, she finds a letter from Robert lying on the table by her bedside. Its contents bring on a fresh outburst of grief that lasts far into the day.

"You are to forget," he writes, "that you ever had an elder sister; you are to blot her out from your life as if she had never been, to remove all traces of her existence from your sight, never to sully your lips by uttering her name, if you wish still to call me brother." [128]

Then he tells her that among the list of passengers that have sailed that morning for Melbourne in the "Chimborazo" they have seen the names of "Mr. and Mrs. Edward Lefroy."

When, late in the afternoon, Pauline creeps down-stairs, she finds the stillness of the grave shrouding the house.

Armstrong has not returned; he does not cross the threshold of Nutsgrove. Lottie has been sent up to Sallymount Farm to spend the day, and most of the servants, with Mrs. Turner's approval, have leave granted during the absence of the master and mistress, who, she elaborately explains, have gone to the seaside for a few weeks' change of air. A futile explanation. They all know, as well as if the news were published in that morning's "Times," that the establishment is broken up for good, and that they will never gather again in cheerful circle round the roomy hearth of the servants' hall, discussing the goings on of the folk upstairs, laying jocular bets as to which of Miss Pauline's lovers will win the day, and as to how long the master will stand Mr. Lefroy's imperious ways, *et cætera*, and other topics of a like personal but highly interesting nature.

When the long spring day is coming at last to a close, Pauline dries her eyes, rings for a cup of tea, and then, drawing her desk to the couch on which she is lying, after some troubled deliberation writes a note, which early next morning is put into the hands of Mr. Everard, then smoking a cigar on the deck of the "Sea-Gull," lying at anchor between Southsea and Ryde.

"NUTSGROVE, Thursday.

"I am alone, and in deep distress. All day long I have sighed for the sound of a true friend's voice, for the clasp of a comforting hand on mine. I thought of you—I don't know why. Can you come to

PAULINE?"

"No, Pauline, I can't come! Sorry to disoblige a young lady; but I can't come to you. Certainly not!" he mutters stoutly, pacing the deck with hurried step, the letter fluttering in his hand. "Certainly not, Miss Pauline! You've signaled too late—too late, young lady; you must get some other hand than mine to clasp you in your distress. Saunderson's paw ought to do the business; it's big enough, at any rate. 'Alone and in deep distress.' By Jove, I wonder what it means? She must have quarreled with her sister, or with Armstrong. Well, well, it's no business of mine; I won't bother any more about it. Ah, here's the morning paper! I wonder if Carleton has won his race? Hang it, I've thrown away my cigar! Let me see—Cambridgeshire meeting. Ah, here it is!"

But, alas, Everard can extract no information from the sporting-column this morning, for all up and down the page the words are dancing in letters of fire—

"Can you come—can you come—can you come to Pauline?"

He throws down the newspaper in disgust, and exclaims irritably—

"I can't, I can't, I tell you—I can't!"

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Half an hour later two sailors are pulling him as hard as they can to Portsmouth Harbor, whence an express bears him northward to Pauline in her distress.

Long before he arrives, the first half hour after he enters Nutshire, he knows the reason of her hurried appeal, and the news of the scandal—with which the whole of Kelvick is ringing—stupefies the young man almost as much as it did poor Robert. He sits staring blindly at the flying landscape, trying to realize the startling truth; but he can only picture Addie as he last saw her but one week before, standing under the big magnolia, her hand clasped in his smiling up into her husband's placid face.

"They're a bad lot—a bad lot!" he mutters weakly. "What's bred in the bone comes out in the flesh! A bad lot, those Lefroys! Thank Providence, I've had nothing to say to them. Poor Armstrong, what an—"

"Jack—Mr. Everard—won't you say good morning to me? My hand has been outstretched for the last two minutes."

He turns quickly, to find a young lady seated opposite to him, a young lady with whom he has been on terms of almost brotherly intimacy since he was a long-legged youth in knickerbockers and she a chubby-faced child in stiff-tucked shirts—Miss Cicely Deane, his rector's model daughter.

She is a small, prim little person, with pretty brown eyes and a soft drawling voice that makes very sweet music in her father's church, and draws many wandering spirits from things of earth, from contemplation of their neighbors' bonnets, to thoughts of Him whom they have met to praise in concert.

"Saint Cecilia, you here?" he exclaims in surprise. "You must have got in at Kelvick. I was looking out of the window, and never heard you."

"Yes, Jack, you were wrapped up in a 'referee,' as Mr. Weller would call it—I hope it was a pleasant one. I went over to Kelvick early this morning to consult Miss Challice about the children's school-feast on Thursday; it is to be a great affair this year."

"Ah, indeed! And how are you all doing since I saw you last, Cicely? Father, mother well? Sisters and brothers ditto? That's right, I needn't ask about the rest—the sick, the old, the maimed, the grumbler, the impostor; they—"

"We always have them among us. Yes, Jack, I thank you on their behalf for kind inquiries, and also for the check you sent me before leaving; it is that which has enabled me to invite four hundred little Kelvickites to enjoy the green fields and woods of Broom Hill on Thursday with our own flock. But tell me—what has brought you to this part of the country again? I thought you intended spending the summer yachting with your—"

"And so I do. I only ran up to-day on a matter of—of urgent business. I'm returning to the 'Gull' in the morning, and we sail for Norway at the end of the week."

"You will dine with us this evening, won't you, Jack? I dare say you won't find things very comfortable at Broom Hill, returning so unexpectedly."

"Thank you, Cicely; I'll dine with you with much pleasure. Seven o'clock, isn't it?"

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"Yes—here is our station. Hand me those parcels—tenderly, please. What—are you not getting out too?"

"Ah, yes—no—yes! By Jove, I'm too late! Returning by next train!" he shouts.

The carriage door is banged, there is a shrill whistle, and the train is moving smoothly to the next station, Nutsford.

"I—I meant to have got out," he mutters blankly—"of course I did. Hanged if I know what came over me. However, I suppose I had better go on now, after having come so far. Who's afraid? I'll pretty soon let her understand the light I view her distress in, let her know she can't make a cat's-paw of me to get back to respectability, comfort, and position! Who's afraid? Not I!"

Thus plumed with self-confidence, his doughty arm braced to meet Miss Lefroy's hand in the cool platonic grasp of friendship and vague sympathy, Mr. Everard reaches Nutsgrove. There is not a sound of life about the place; the blinds are all down, and old Sally Turner, the erst dignified housekeeper, opens the hall door for him and bids him enter.

"You wish to see Miss Lefroy, sir? Yes, she is at home. To the left, in school-room, sir, she will receive you."

He finds himself standing in a darkened room, and for a few moments, after the glare of unshadowed day, can distinguish nothing; then he sees a tall willowy figure dressed in black advancing toward him. Pauline, pale as a ghost, her starry eyes full of unshed tears, her mouth quivering and uplifted, looking more beautiful in her abashed woe than she looked crowned with diamonds, flushed with triumph, as he saw her last, lays her hand timidly on his shrinking shoulder.

"You have come, my friend, my friend!"

Some six hours later Everard is seated in the Rectory garden, helping Miss Deane to pin small bits of numbered paper on a miscellaneous collection of articles that are to delight four hundred smoky little souls on Thursday; but his thick lazy fingers do but little work compared with those of his companion, who watches his movements with some anxiety.

"Jack," she exclaims at last, in temperate expostulation, "please—please don't put a pin through her nose! That doll is a special prize, and the number will be found quite as easily on any part of her skirt. Perhaps you had better let me finish—"

"Cicely," he says hurriedly, his face flushing, "I want to tell you something. I—I thought I should like to tell you first. You remember when we were children I always came to you—"

"Yes, I remember. What is your news, Jack? Something nice—and important I can see by your face."

"I am going to be married, Cicely, to the dearest, sweetest, loveliest girl in England!"

"To Miss Lefroy?"

"Yes, yes—to whom else?"

"I—I congratulate you, Jack, most sincerely," says Cicely, in her little prim measured accents, putting her hand in his, first waiting to adjust the position of the pin in the doll's polonaise. "I saw you admired her very much all last winter; she is very beautiful. You have not been long engaged?"

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"Only since this afternoon, and—and I don't want to make any secret of my great happiness and—luck," he says warmly, almost pugnaciously, looking her in the face.

"Of course not," she answers; but, under his steady questioning gaze a faint pink stains her

cheek, and he knows that the story of the fallen sister has reached even this sheltered little vestal.

"Well, Cicely, I think I'll take myself off and tell your parents of my happiness. I'm not of much use to you, I fear."

"Not much in your present state of mind certainly," she says, with a bright cold smile.

"And, besides, there are two sons of Leviticus prowling outside, gazing at me, their eyes glowing with most unholy fire. I hope their fists will prove steadier than mine, though I doubt it. Oh, Saint Cecilia, Saint Cecilia, I wonder how many slaughtered curates lie on your soul! Who would be your father's henchman in the cloth?"

He goes, humming a rollicking love-song of old Tom Moore's, and the curates come in and bravely stick, stitch, plaster, and sort the charitable chattels, and make discreet but eager love to their rector's daughter—a young lady who, besides her many moral and personal attractions, inherits a snug little fortune of fifteen thousand pounds from a maternal aunt, and is the granddaughter of a mighty earl with two fat livings in his gift. But their vows and smiles are all in vain, for Cicely bestowed that otherwise well-ordered piece of mechanism, her heart, one January noon, some three years before, on a fresh-faced Eton lad who, at the imminent risk of his life, unaided, rescued her and a school-friend of her own age from a cruel death on the day the ice broke so unexpectedly on the lake in Saunderson Park—and this young gentleman was, alas, the lucky lover of Miss Lefroy!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE summer goes by drowsily. Before the brambles are tinted a purplish red, before the leaves of the spotted sycamore and tawny beech strew the crisp carpet of the grove, the name, almost the memory, of Adelaide Lefroy has passed from Nutshire. Fresher scandals have cropped up. A certain great lady, mature in years, has seen fit to elope one morning with her brother's stud-groom, a good-looking lad of twenty, and so the more commonplace misdemeanor of the younger woman has to make way for this startling event. Then the races come on, followed by a big fancy-ball and a lawn-tennis tournament—the first held in the county. Altogether the people have enough to busy their minds and their tongues about besides those unfortunate and disreputable Lefroys, who, moreover, have had the grace to retire from the scene at once and supply no further food for popular comment for the time being.

Pauline and her sister go to Aunt Jo, under whose protection the former intends to remain until the new year, when she is to return to her native soil as Mrs. Everard of Broom Hill.

Robert has established himself in London, and is reading steadily for his "exam." He refused at first to continue preparing for the army, and offered to take his young brother with him and emigrate to some fever-haunted colony on the coast of Brazil; but Armstrong vehemently interposed, and pointed out to him that his only chance of success lay in sticking to the profession that he had chosen. And so Master Robert, after some demur, gave in, and Hal remained a pupil at Dr. Jellett's, where, in the course of the summer, having worked himself into the first cricket eleven, he speedily forgets the fate, bitterer than death, that divides him forever from her who was more of mother than sister to him during his boyhood. He forgets her more easily and naturally than his elder brother, who, in the early vehemence of his indignation, thrust the slippers her fingers worked for him into the fire, mutilated half a dozen handkerchiefs marked with her hair, his last birthday-gift from her just before he joined the militia, tore to shreds the picture of a grinning chubby baby seated on Aunt Jo's *moire antique* knee which he found in an album on that lady's table, besides other acts of theatrical repudiation, which called forth a murmur of remonstrance from Pauline—Pauline, too scared and cowed at first to realize as she does later the full measure, the heartless selfishness of her sister's conduct.

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The first month after the catastrophe is a very trying one to poor Miss Darcy, whose grief is almost dumb, paralyzed by the shock that has come to her without a word or sign of preparation, but which is none the less bitter for all that. Pauline makes no effort to lighten her burden, but sits all day long, when she is not writing to her betrothed, in gloomy apathy, brooding over her wrongs, over the comforts, the luxury she has lost, the position as wife of a wealthy baronet she almost grasped, now out of her reach forever, *et cætera*. And Lottie—poor, foolish Lottie—the child's tearful questions and piteous pertinent inquiries for her dearest Addie, so painful to parry, make the hours of day so unbearable that Miss Darcy at last packs her off to a day-school in the neighborhood, where soon the variety of her new life and the excitement of making friends have the desired effect. Addie's name comes day by day less often to her lips, and at last is heard no more.

Nutsgrove is closed; every window is heavily barred, carpets and curtains are rolled up in cumbrous bundles, the pieces of furniture in their holland blouses looking like ungainly ghosts in the deadened light to poor Sally Turner, as she wanders weekly through the house, incensing her master's property with red pepper to keep away the moths, laying the dust with her fruitless tears.

Armstrong is re-established in his old quarters at Kelvick, both in appearance and manner so little affected by his domestic calamity that even his nearest friends forbear to sympathize with him, and come in time to believe that Mrs. Armstrong's elopement has, after the first sting, been

accepted by the husband as an unqualified blessing rather than a painful bereavement. But he steadfastly refuses the suggestion of Robert Lefroy and of others to seek redress and freedom through the arm of the law, grimly stating that divorce to him would be a useless instrument, as he has had quite enough of matrimony to last him his life.

In July the election comes on; and, after a most exciting and energetic contest with a skillful and popular opponent, whose father is one of the Government leaders, Armstrong is returned as Liberal member for his native town, which for many years he represents, to the unqualified satisfaction of his constituents. [133]

The county sees little of him; he courteously but persistently refuses all invitations to return to the society to which his marriage introduced him, but, *en revanche*, seeks distraction in unlimited aldermanic feasts, sober supper and card parties, and all kinds of corporate festivities, and entertains also very successfully in his own house—only gentlemen, of course. Young ladies no longer look on him with eyes of interest or speculation, and Miss Challice never beckons him to her tea-table now; but, when, toward the end of the year, that young lady marries one of the curates who has vainly sighed at Miss Deane's feet, his wedding-gift to her is viewed both by her mother and her female friends as a fitting act of compensation for the unmeaning and deceptive attention he paid her in the old days, before his own most disastrous connection with that wretched young woman who inveigled him so disastrously.

One evening in late December he sits in his office frowning discontentedly at the contents of a letter lying on his desk in Aunt Jo's old-fashioned spider-web handwriting. The note is affectionate and mournful in tone, and contains a request—it is almost an appeal—that he will be present at Pauline's marriage on the 14th proximo.

"I suppose I shall have to go; but it will be an awful nuisance," he thinks fretfully. "From the way she puts it, I don't see how I can well refuse; and, poor old soul, she has had so much to contend against, so much trouble in her old age, that it would be churlish of—By Jove, here comes the bridegroom-elect to enforce the invitation. No quarter for me now! Well, Everard, how are you? Come in, come in—I'm quite alone."

Mr. Everard enters with a rather rakish swagger, his face very red, his blue eyes sparkling with what Armstrong thinks a jovial vinous glow. He throws himself into a chair, stretches his legs well before him, and says huskily—

"Seen the morning's paper, Armstrong?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Births, deaths, and marriages?"

"No."

"No? Then there's something among them will interest you. See here, old man."

He takes a crumpled newspaper from his breast, and lays it on the desk, pointing with moist shaking finger to the following announcement, which Armstrong reads aloud—

"On the 27th instant, by special license, Sir Arthur Saunderson, Bart., of Saunderson Park, Nutshire, Captain, Grenadier Guards, to Pauline Rose, daughter of the late Colonel Lefroy of Nuts Grove."

"Hoax?" asks Armstrong breathlessly.

"Not a bit of it," Everard answers spasmodically—*bonâ fide*. "Bolted three days ago; letter from the aunt last night, another from her ladyship this morning announcing the fact, asking forgiveness, explaining all most satisfactorily. Saunderson's been on her track for the last month, dogging her everywhere. Found in the end she loved him better than me; wouldn't wreck my happiness, and so bolted. Beautiful letter; I'll show it to you." [134]

Armstrong springs from his desk with a loud harsh laugh that echoes weirdly through the silent room; then, going up to his flushed, scowling visitor, seizes his hand with a grip that makes him wince:

"I congratulate you—I congratulate you, Everard, my boy: you're in luck, and no mistake! I don't know when I heard a bit of news that gave me greater pleasure. You're an honest lad; I liked you from the first, and would have saved you if I could; but I saw it would have been of no use. And now the baronet has done the job for you! Long life to him—long life to him! Stay and dine with me, Jack, and we'll drink his health and her ladyship's in the best bumper in my cellar. More power to the pair of them—more power to them, I say!"

Everard frees his hand sullenly, and says, with an awkward impatience—

"All right, all right, Armstrong; you mean well, but—but—that will do. Stay and dine with you—eh? Don't mind if I do; we ought to be good company, by Jove, for we're both knocking about in much the same boat, you and I."

"In much the same boat," Armstrong interrupts, with another grating laugh—"in much the same boat, you call it—ha, ha! Not so, not so, my boy; for you have gallantly drifted into port, your keel just a trifle scratched, while I—I have been buffeted among the rocks and quicksands of holy matrimony, and had the waters pitching into my raked sides. In—in much the same boat, you call it! By Jove, that is a good one, you know!"

"Oh, Armstrong, Armstrong, shut up! You mean well, I know," cries the young man bitterly, his head dropping upon his breast; "but you can't understand what I feel, or how I loved that girl

almost from the first day I saw her, how I would have crawled to the end of the world to give her an hour's pleasure. To think—to think she'd treat me so, cast me aside for that yellow-faced hound!"

"With his title and his twelve thousand a year. Come, Everard, come; do her at least the justice to admit that she never tried to deceive you as to her character, never tried to hide from you that she was vain, worldly, ambitious, and candidly selfish, that her aim in life was to marry as high up the tree as she could reach. You must admit that you saw through her almost from the start, that you walked with unbandaged eyes into the pitfall she prepared for you. Why, man alive, I've heard you scores of times railing against her heartlessness, her selfish—"

"Oh, what does all that signify? Nothing—nothing; I loved her—I loved her!" he reiterates irritably. "And, if you had ever loved any one when you were my age, Armstrong, you'd find such considerations afford precious little comfort to you in—in a crisis like this. I loved her, her selfishness, her ambition, her worldliness, the queenly calm with which she requited my slavish worship, her indifference—everything about her I loved! Oh, Pauline, Pauline!"

Armstrong smiles and does not again try to pour oil on the troubled waters, foreseeing, with a sense of relief, that the worldly violence of his friend's woe will soon wear itself out, the scratch [135] be healed with the gracious aid of time.

Everard stays to dinner. During that trying repast and for many hours afterward, far into the dismal night, he treats his patient host to the full flavor of his bereavement in its many hysterical phases. He is by turns morose, wrathful, fiendishly sarcastic, buoyant, bloodthirsty, and maudlin; but, when he rises at last to depart, Armstrong has successfully dissuaded him from his purpose of seeking death at once, and has almost induced him to stick to his colors at Broom Hill, and not show the white feather when the Saundersons return to Nutshire from the honeymoon.

"Be a man, be a man, Everard!" he urges vehemently. "Show her and him of what stuff you are made. Why in the world should you go and leave your place in the middle of the hunting-season and wander over the world, bellowing your woes and labeling yourself a jilted man, an object of pity and derision to the whole county? Stay and face them—stay and face them, my boy."

"I'll try—I'll try, by Jove, I will!" he answers, fervently wringing his friend's hand. "I say, Armstrong, do you know, you're a thundering good fellow, you are. And you'll come and look me up sometimes at Broom Hill if I screw up my courage to stay, won't you? There's a bond of union between us, you know. I'm in as bad a boat as you, any day, say what you like. But—but there's justice and mercy somewhere, isn't there, old fellow—if we believe what the parsons tell us—eh?"

"I hope so," says Armstrong, a little wearily. "Good-night!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

EVERARD does not go abroad. He hears the cheers of the tenantry assembled to greet the bride and bridegroom as they sweep past his gate to the park, and scarcely winces. He hunts almost daily, and appears in society just as usual; but he does not meet Lady Saunderson, half to his relief, half to his disappointment, for the county has decreed that for some time at least her ladyship is to reside in Coventry.

Her escapade has followed that of her sister too quickly for even the most forward sycophant to overlook it; and so day after day the bride sits waiting in her beautiful drawing-room for the visitors that do not come, vowing vengeance silently, determined to give back slight for slight, snub for snub, while her husband, scowling, wanders through the still stately house to which he is for a few weeks confined with a sharp attack of rheumatism.

The officers of the Kelvick garrison give a large ball toward the middle of February, to which every one is invited. Everard dutifully puts in an appearance, though he is half dead with fatigue after a heavy day's hunting. He throws himself into an easy-chair in a cool corner behind a curtain, and is just dropping into a pleasant slumber, when one of his hosts, who has but lately joined the garrison, awakes him with a vehement nudge.

"I say, Everard, you know every one here; tell me who is that girl coming in at the door with the big yellow man? By Jove, she is a stunner! Who is she—eh, eh?"

Everard turns languidly, and then the blood rushes to his face, for within half a dozen yards of him stands Pauline, her dusky head erect, looking at him with eyes lustrous, calm, superbly [136] indifferent—a look that seems to say, "Forgive me, if you like. Come to my side again. I do not want you; but I will not repel you. Come!"

He stands rooted to the spot as she passes him by, her dress brushing his knees. Her lovely face softens for a moment; she smiles half sadly, half contemptuously, as she whispers—

"Not a word, Jack? Well, perhaps you are right. Do not wear the willow, though; I am not worth it."

"Who is she—eh, Everard? Can't you speak?"

"Oh, she is a—a Lady Saunderson! I say, Archer, introduce me to that girl in pink over there, will you? Jolly-looking girl!"

His fatigue forgotten, unfelt, Everard is soon whirling quickly round the room, whispering

nonsense into his partner's ear, but feeling everywhere, though he looks not directly at her again, the cold beautiful face of the woman he loves, watching him, reading the tempest of his mind.

"Very good—very good indeed, Jack; but take care not to overdo it. Take your pleasure a little more languidly; it will be much more effective," says Miss Wynyard, laying her hand encouragingly on her cousin's shoulder.

"Have you spoken to her, Florry?" he asks eagerly.

"No, I have only bowed and half smiled; but in a month or two," says Miss Wynyard frankly, "I guess our hands will meet in amity. You won't mind, will you, Jack? But you know the principle of my life has always been to make friends with the mammon of iniquity; and it is a principle that I have found to pay in the long run. How well she is looking, and how grandly she carries it off, doesn't she? I always knew there was a spice of the fiend in Pauline Lefroy. Do you know, Jack, I rather pity Sir Arthur, ill-conditioned animal that he is. He must have loved her to—"

"Loved her! Pshaw! He never meant to marry her from the beginning; he actually said so one day at the club to a fellow I know; and it was only when he found I was in possession that he appeared on the scene and took to dogging her again."

"Well, never mind, Jack; you have come out of the business capitally, with a dignity and a reserve that quite astonished me."

"Oh," says Everard candidly, "I wear well before the world! But I don't mind telling you, Flo, that I was pretty well bowled over at first, raved like the victim of a melodrama, wanted to pursue the guilty pair, brain the bridegroom, *et cætera*. Fortunately a friend of sterner stuff than I am, who had also been tried by the fire, steadied me in time, and made me acknowledge that there is not a woman living worth the sigh of an honest man; and so I dried up."

"Not a woman living?" repeats Miss Wynyard, with an earnestness very foreign to that young person's tone in a ball-room or elsewhere. "Stuff, Jack, stuff! Loose statements of that kind do not patent your good sense or your cure, let me tell you. You were born of a woman, were you not—a woman whom, as well as I can remember, you loved, revered, and mourned—"

"Shut up, Flo," he says roughly, his face flushing; "I won't stand preaching from you! As if—as if I would compare my mother—" [137]

"That's just the point, dear boy, I wish to lead you to. The memory of your mother ought to save you from falling into the deep cant, the twopenny cynicism of the jilted man who labels every woman worthless because he happens to be ill-used by an ambitious flirt. No, all women are not worthless; and there are many in the world too good for you, Jack—ay, too good for men ten times better than you. I know of one who once loved a man—Jack, are you listening? I am going to tell you a most interesting story."

He turns listlessly.

"Ay, Flo? A woman you once knew of, who loved a man. And what was her history?"

"A blank, my lord; she never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek."

"More fool she! Was he well off?"

"But, being a little lady," continues Flo, needless of the interruption, "as proud, shy, sensitive, as she was loving, she did not, Viola-wise, sit, like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief, but moved among her fellow-men with placid unconcern and a heart-whole surface, did her duties bravely, took her pleasures as gayly as any other girl of her age, and even trained herself to smile in the face of the man she loved when the dolt was chanting the praises of another woman. Her mother even did not know her secret."

"And yet she confided in you! You must have a fund of sympathy in reserve somewhere, Flo, that I could never reach."

"She never confided in me. I found it out in an unguarded moment, when she believed herself alone. The man had been twisting a bit of scented weed around his finger, and, when he left her, carelessly threw it into her lap; then she—"

"Glued it to her quivering lips, watered its limpness with her tears, *et cætera*. A very piteous tale! Flo, the question is, Was the man worth such a Spartan struggle? What was he like? Had he twelve thousand a year?"

"The man?" she repeats carelessly. "Oh, well, he wouldn't have caused me a heart-ache! He was much like other men, commonplace, selfish, yet good-natured in the main, young, fairly good-looking, and worth about three thousand a year. You know him better than I."

"Do I?"—stifling a yawn.

"Yes, for that man's father is your father's son."

"Let me see. Sisters and brother I have none, but that man's father is my father's son. That's a disputed problem, Flo; it disturbed the intellects of the Royal Nutshire for three hours at mess. The real answer is 'My son,' you know."

"You have no son, I believe."

"Then the solution is myself—eh? You mean to intimate that I am the hero of this touching minor

tale. Who is Viola, pray?

"Find out."

"Not I," he says, with a short laugh. "I don't believe in her existence. Come along, Flo; we're missing a capital waltz."

They revolve in silence. When the music ceases, he leads her to a retired corner of the refreshment-room, and, while they are sipping ices, he says, with a sneaky tone of would-be indifference— [138]

"Well, you might as well tell me who she is, Flo."

"Who is who?" she asks, turning her head aside to hide her triumphant smile. "Oh, Viola! What is the good of telling you anything about her if you believe she is a myth?"

"I should have the opportunity of proving the truth of your flattering tale."

"But why should I betray the secret she has guarded so gallantly? It is very mean and unmanly of you to try to worm it out of me, Jack."

"Why did you tell me anything about it? I gave you no opening for the anecdote," he says rather warmly.

"I told you, old boy," Miss Flo replies, laying her hand with a sisterly gesture on his shoulder, "because I like you and—and wish to do you good. I fancied that the contemplation of another's disappointment might alleviate yours, and perhaps distract your mind from—from other people," she winds up rather lamely.

"I see—I see. You're a good girl, Flo—thanks, thanks, my dear—but you must have thought me a precious fool to accept a legend of the kind as gospel, to fancy any woman nourishing a hopeless passion for a commonplace, selfish, soft-headed simpleton with an income of only three thousand a year!"

"Believe it or not as you like," she answers hotly. "What I tell you is true and the girl is here in this room—not a dozen yards from us."

He looks eagerly to right and left, and shrugs his shoulder impatiently.

"There are about forty smiling virgins within a dozen yards of me. How am I to pick out the stricken one? As you have gone so far, Florrie," he whispers coaxingly, "you might as well commit yourself altogether."

"Well, Jack," she answers, with well-feigned reluctance, "whatever your faults may be, you are a gentleman, and—and, if I do you'll take no advantage, or betray—"

"Of course not. What do you take me for?"

"The girl is Cicely Deane."

"Cicely Deane!" he echoes, with an incredulous laugh. "Well, Flo, I think you might have made a better shot than that. Cicely Deane! Why, she looks on me as a sort of elder brother! I've known her since she was a baby. It's too preposterous, you know. Why, I should rather suspect you, *ma belle*, of falling in love with—with me than that self-possessed, cold-blooded little saint, the legitimate prey of the Church!"

"The Church has not had much success as yet. Last week she refused the Honorable and Reverend Basil Wendrop, Lord Hareford's second son, a divine with the profile of an Antoninus and the tongue of a Chrysostom; her parents are in despair about it. Ah, there is my partner at the door looking for me—Major Newton! I want you to look at him rather particularly, Jack, because I'm half contemplating matrimony with that lucky individual."

"Newton? O, I know him well! He's a very good fellow—just returned from India, has he not?" [139]

"Yes; he has been away six years. He turned up the other day and calmly informed me that I had solemnly promised long ago to marry him if he could make a certain competence—a most ridiculous sum! I don't think I could have mentioned it, even in the school-room. Seven thousand pounds—absurd, you know! I don't remember the circumstance—in fact, I could scarcely recall the poor man's existence when he first appeared; but it seems he has been living on that promise for the last six years in one of the most unhealthy holes in India, starving and screwing to make up that wretched sum; and—now—now—if you please, he wants me to marry him and share it with him. He fell in love with me when I was a great fat-faced tomboy in the school-room, and has never thought of any one since—ridiculous man!"

"And you think of rewarding his fidelity? Do you like him, Flo?"

"Yes," she answers, with a faint blush, "I—I think I rather like him. He—he is nothing much to look at, of no particular position, not well off, and—and I suppose—in fact, I know—I could do better; but—"

"Yes?"

"Six years! A long time, wasn't it, Jack?" she says a little wistfully. "Six years—and—and I scarcely thought of him once after he left—poor Claud! All the others whom I jilted, or who jilted me, were on their legs a month or two afterward. I don't think, Jack, I have a very bounteous store of affection to bestow on any man, I don't think I have it in me to care for any one as I care for myself; still six years, you know—"

"Is a good spell. I would marry him if I were you. You have knocked about long enough now, Flo. I

shouldn't be surprised if you found matrimony a pleasant change. Anyhow, you'll have my best wishes," says Everard heartily.

"Don't congratulate me yet," she answers flurriedly. "I—I haven't made up my mind in the least. After all, matrimony is a desperate plunge; once you're in, you can never get out again; and—and I could do so much better—so much better. There's Pelham Windsor. I had a great case with him at Brighton before Christmas, and he has asked mother and me down to his place in Hampshire next month—the Towers—a regular show-place—stabling for forty horses—"

"Pelham Windsor! He's a most insufferable little snob, Flo—scarcely up to your shoulder—and was divorced from his first wife."

"I know, I know," she answers petulantly. "But it was all her fault; she—"

"Of course, of course—it always is!"

"Flo—Miss Wynyard, I have been looking for you everywhere. This is our dance, I believe."

Major Newton stands before them, a man of about thirty-six, with a lean yellow face, sad brown eyes, and a long gaunt body emaciated by fever—a most incongruous cavalier for the lively florid Miss Wynyard, who however rises at once and lays her hand a little nervously on his arm, whispering to her cousin before she goes— [140]

"Remember, Jack, I have your promise; not a word, a look, a sign to betray—"

"Oh, stuff, Florrie!" he answers impatiently. "Do you fancy I gave your nonsense a second thought? Absurd!"

Nevertheless, absurd as it seems, the nonsense does occupy his thoughts a good deal during the remainder of the evening, and, instead of following Lady Saunderson's conquering movements with stealthy feverish glance, as he has been doing hitherto, he finds himself watching little Cicely taking her pleasure, with an interest and a curiosity she has never roused in him before.

But, watch as closely as he may, he can detect no confirmatory sign, not even when he is bending over her, whispering pretty compliments in her ear. When his arm encircles her waist, her face within a few inches of his own, whirling round the room, her breath comes none the faster, her color does not change, her eye does not sink under his puzzled animated scrutiny.

"Flo," he whispers to his cousin, when he is cloaking her on her departure about two hours later, "you were out, my dear—quite out. You are either grossly mistaken, or were willfully misleading me. I've watched her, and there's not a sign of truth in your revelation—not a sign. I've watched her."

"Oh, if you have, Jack, of course that settles the question! I was grossly mistaken. Who could deceive your gimlet-eyes?"

"Not you, *ma belle*, not you, at any rate!" he retorts quickly, smiling into the girl's handsome sparkling face. "You've taken the plunge, Florrie! I thought you would. Come behind the curtain until I congratulate you on the spot."

Just as their lips are meeting in frank cousinly good-will, the drapery parts, and Major Newton, with no very pleasant expression, glares in on them.

Miss Wynyard, with the experience of many past misconceptions, hastens to explain the position of affairs, which her *fiancé* accepts amicably; and for the first time in the annals of her checkered career the course of Miss Wynyard's love runs smooth into the sea of matrimony about two months later.

She makes the major an excellent wife; and, though, as the years roll on, their means do not increase in proportion to their family, Mrs. Newton is never heard to complain or taunt her sober husband with the fact that she might have done better—not even when Madame Armine loses her custom altogether, and necessity has trained her hitherto idle fingers to turn her dresses and darn her children's stockings. The friendship between her and Lady Saunderson does not prosper, for their paths naturally diverge somewhat widely, and, when they meet again, after the lapse of some years, those erst kindred spirits find they have scarce a thought, a wish, a pleasure in common.

Pauline looks upon Florrie with contempt, as having degenerated into a dowdy, baby-ridden drudge, and Florrie pities Lady Saunderson's unloved and childless lot, chained to a man whom she despises and dislikes, with no light ahead to relieve the gray dreariness of coming age, when her beauty and her social triumphs will be things of the past. [141]

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOR three months Mr. Everard puzzles over the flattering yet almost incredible revelation of Miss Cicely's attachment to him, during which time he leaves no stone unturned, no device unburied to lure the wily damsel into some sign of self-betrayal. He haunts the Rectory night and day, dropping in at most inopportune moments, until Lady Emily Deane, a most energetic and methodical housewife, declares him a worse infliction than half a dozen school-boys home for the holidays, and sighs for the racing season that will take him away from Nutshire for a time.

But all Jack's watchings, spyings, ruses, and maiden traps are of no avail. Cicely shows him

neither more nor less favor than she has done all her life, treats him with the same careless sisterly regard, smiles when she welcomes him, but does not sigh when she bids him good-by, and betrays no annoyance, pain, or pettishness when he flirts in her presence, any more than when his love for Pauline was at its fever height. So at the end of the three months he has to acknowledge himself just as puzzled and as excited as he was the first evening.

In the meantime, rather to his dismay, he begins to find many charms and attractions in the demure brown-eyed little lady which were hidden to him before. He finds a strange soothing pleasure in watching her, as he lies stretched on the old fashioned school-room sofa, busy over her endless household work, stitching, painting, making up accounts, cutting out clothes for the poor, overlooking her young sister's school-tasks, *et cætera*, as seemingly undisturbed, callously unconscious of his presence, as if he had been a stone effigy of idleness.

Her voice "grows" on him likewise; its music, which he has listened to carelessly, mechanically for so many years, stirs his heart at last, as it has stirred many men before him, who have been chilled by the cold graciousness of the girl's face and manner—for, when Cicely sings, she pours forth her whole soul, and speaks of love human and divine with an unrestrained, an *entraînant* passion which no art could have taught her.

Many a time during the sweet chill nights of early spring, when Everard hangs over her as she sits at the piano, her voice quivering through the still room with harmonious pain, her eyes glowing, her whole sober being startled into spiritual life, the young man thinks that the supreme moment has come, that his presence has helped to awake the sentimental tumult, only to be cruelly undeceived, when the last note has vibrated, by some commonplace disenchanting remark that makes him long to shake her.

"A pretty song, is it not, Jack?" she asks one night, while his every nerve is thrilling with responsive fervor. "Do you like it in the higher or lower key best? May Bennet sings it in sharps; but I like flats best—don't you?"

"You sing of love almost as if you felt it, Cicely," he whispers tentatively. "Sappho could not have put more expression into her dying lay than you did just now into that 'Adieu.'" [142]

"I like mournful music," she says, her fingers wandering silently over the keys.

"Yes; your songs always tell of death and parting and broken faith—blighted blossoms."

"Our sweetest songs are those which tell of saddest thought." So says the poet, Jack; and, you see, my life is so full of bright and pleasant things, so happy and commonplace, that, when I sing, I like to wander in soul among the royally afflicted."

"You are happy, Cicely?" he asks wistfully, laying his hot hand with a timid appealing touch on her straying fingers. "You want nothing in your life?"

"Nothing, Jack—nothing. What could I want more than I have?" she answers, in a mild Sunday-school tone of reproof. "Heaven has laden me with benefits; I have had few crosses."

"Well, I have not the same complaint, goodness knows!" he says, moving away sullenly.

Occasionally he meets Lady Saunderson in society, where she is now beginning to take a prominent lead, the term of her sojourn in Coventry having been summarily curtailed by the rumor that she is going to give a big ball, which brings young ladies to their senses and fills the dowagers' bosoms with Christian feelings toward the beautiful culprit; but Jack and she do not speak to each other again until one evening, riding home, his horse dead-beat after two hard runs, he hears a gay clear voice address him in the gloom—a voice that brings the blood to his face and sets his pulses throbbing.

"Is the road wide enough for you and me to walk abreast, Jack Everard?"

He looks up and sees that she has reined in at a cross-road, and is waiting to join him.

"May I ride by your side as far as the Park gates? I am quite alone—my husband is dining with the Hussars at Kelvick."

"I shall be happy to escort you, Lady Saunderson," he answers stiffly.

"Dear, dear!" cries Pauline, with a free careless laugh. "So we are riding the high horse still! Get down, Jack, get down; the animal does not suit you in the least. Get down, and let us be friends again. I always liked you, Jack—always."

"We need not try to analyze the nature of your attachment, Lady Saunderson. I think I ought to understand it perfectly now."

"I doubt if you do," she says, with a slight break in her voice, her small gloved hand caressing his horse's steaming shoulder. "You never judged me fairly, Everard. With you I was always either an angel or an offspring of Jezebel, whereas I am but just something of an ambitious, selfish, yet not wholly heartless woman. It—it cost me a pang, I can tell you, to treat you as I did. But something told me I should not make you happy, or you me; and I am more sure of it even now than I was then. And you, dear boy, is it not so with you?" she asks, leaning forward until her breath fans his face, her great dark eyes, half wistful, half contemptuous, lifted to his averted ones. "Have you not learned to thank Providence for your escape?"

"Yes, Pauline," he answers gravely, "I have indeed—and from my heart."

"Good boy, good boy. So we can cry quits. Give me your hand. What? Are you afraid to touch me? What harm can I do you, Jack? You have sowed your wild oats, and I am a respectable British matron; we—we couldn't flirt now even if we tried, could we? But we could be friends and

comforting neighbors, and sometimes, in the long winter evenings ahead, if you should feel the sanctity of your fireside a little overpowering, if the flannel petticoats, the soup-societies, the cardinal virtues, should prove a little oppressive, why, you could steal up to me and distend your lungs with the breath of frivolity, freedom, and—"

"Lady Saunderson," he says huskily, struggling to resist the spell she is weaving about him, "I—I do not understand what you mean."

"No? Then come up to the Park and dine with me to-night, and I'll tell you. We—we can't flirt, you know; but we can sit and watch the young moon rise from behind Broom Hill while we talk over the giddy days of our youth. My husband will be so glad to see you; he is most anxious that we should be friends, and would even go the length of offering you an apology for past unpleasantness, only he does not know how you would receive it. Come, Jack—come!"

They are just outside the Rectory gates, from which a party are issuing for a late practice—Cicely, with a roll of music, two or three of her sisters, and a tall curate carrying a lantern, which he suddenly lifts, hearing the horses hoofs, thus revealing to the astonished group Everard's disturbed face within a foot of Lady Saunderson's, cool and undaunted, her hand still resting familiarly on the pommel of his saddle. The curate looks away hastily from the evil tableau, but Cicely bows gravely, and then moves on up the winding hill at the top of which her father's church is picturesquely situated.

Everard reins in, and looks after them with frowning brow; his companion also turns round in her saddle, laughing tantalizingly.

"Which is it to be, Jack? The broad smooth road that leads to destruction and the Park, or the narrow briery path—"

"I'll follow the light. Good-night, Lady Saunderson," he says quickly, wheeling his horse round.

"The light!"—her voice comes back to him mockingly through the gloom. "Take care, *mon cher*; the curate is swinging it rather knowingly to-night."

On the following morning, when Everard appears at the Rectory, he finds the household in a state of anxious commotion. The bishop is coming the next day, and Lady Emily has been called upon to provide an elaborate breakfast for thirty guests at desperately short notice.

Jack is in every one's way, of course—in the way of the rector, receiving a deputation of churchwardens in his study, in the way of the servants' brooms and dusters, in the way of his hostess, sorting out her best glass and china, superintending *soufflés*, and *mayonnaises*.

"You are not hunting to-day, are you, Jack?" she says, with a sigh of irritation which she cannot repress, when a handsome cut-glass decanter slips from his meddlesome fingers to the floor. [144]
"What a pity! The day is perfect, is it not?"

"I dare say you wish I were, Lady Emily," he answers, with an awkward laugh; "but, unfortunately for you, it's a blind day. I wonder where Cicely is; I have been looking for her everywhere. She asked me to get her some ferns a few days ago; and I don't know if they're the right sort."

"Cicely?"—briskly. "I think she's gone down to the church to practice the new *Te Deum*. I have not seen her for some time; you'll surely find her there, or up at the school-house."

"No; I've tried both unsuccessfully. Old Crofts said she had returned home. I can't imagine where she has hidden herself."

However, some five minutes later he runs her to earth in the old day-nursery, where she has taken refuge from the prevailing bustle to copy some music.

"May I come in?" he asks wistfully. "Shall I be as much in the way here as I seem to be everywhere else, Cicely?"

"Not if you sit quite still and do not expect to be entertained," she answers composedly. "I have to make out five copies of this wretched *Te Deum* before afternoon practice. Oh, dear, I do wish amateur organists would be content with Mozart, Haydn, and Co., and not force their compositions on the public! It is weary work."

"How neatly you do it! What clever fingers you have, Miss Deane!" he says, throwing himself into a chair, and leaning his arms on the table.

She puts a slim finger to her lips in warning reply.

Twenty minutes pass by in profound silence. Everard takes up a pen, for which he finds swift employment. To his horror, the young man becomes aware that he has been illustrating the margin of one of Miss Deane's finished copies with skeleton hunting-sketches, adding arms and legs to the crotchets and quavers, giving features to the open notes.

"What are you trying to do, Jack?" she asks, leaning across the table to reach a book, and steadying herself with the help of his bent shoulder.

"Trying to do?" he repeats, one hand quickly veiling the work of desecration, the other imprisoning his companion's. "I am trying to make love to you, Cicely. Is it any good?"

For an instant she remains motionless; then she snatches her hand from his shoulder as if it had been stung, crimsons to the roots of her hair, and says, her voice quivering with pain and anger—

"Jack Everard, how—how dare you make me an answer like that? You know how I dislike flippant speeches of the kind."

"Flippant!" he answers hotly. "I did not mean it to be so. Nobody as much in earnest as I am could be flippant. I love you, Cicely Deane, and, though I know I am not worthy of you, I ask you to be my wife on my knees, if you like. Do you think I am in earnest now?"

"Yes," she says, panting a little, and raising her eyes, gleaming, wrathful, defiant, to his eager face. "I believe you are in earnest; and I wish you to understand that I am in earnest too, thoroughly in earnest, when I beg of you, Jack Everard, if you value my esteem, my friendship, never to speak to me on such a subject or in that tone. It—it is eminently painful and distasteful to me." [145]

"Thank you, Miss Deane; you—you speak to the point. I will not incur the risk of losing your esteem and friendship ever again, you may be sure. Good-morning."

He walks from the room without another word, down the stairs and out of the house, forgetting to take his hat and stick from the hall. He stands for a moment leaning against the garden gate, his blue eyes moist, his lips quivering with pain and cruel disappointment, a heavy shower falling on his uncovered head.

At that moment Lady Saunderson's brougham flashes past. She looks out and gives him a brilliant smile, half questioning, half pitying, a smile that goads him to a feeling of impotent desperation.

"I am a lucky fellow—by the powers I am!" he mutters fiercely, with clinched fists.

"Jack, Jack, where are you going? Where's your hat? What's the matter?"

Little Emily Deane's astonished voice recalls him to his senses. He puts up his hand to his sleek dripping head and retraces his steps mechanically, Emily trotting by his side.

"Is there anything the matter with you, Jack? You look so hot and funny! Have you been fighting with Cissy?—for she looks so funny too. Her face is like fire, she would scarcely speak to me, and, when I leaned over her, I saw she was crying like anything."

"Crying?" he says quickly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. She didn't want me to notice, and pushed me away quite crossly; but I saw great fat tears splashing down on the music she was copying, and swelling out the notes. Did you say anything to annoy her? Cissy never cries, you know—not even when she had two big teeth pulled out, or when she was reading the death of Little Nell. Bill says she's the dryest girl he ever met."

Everard stands for a moment hesitating, hat in hand; then he walks back quickly and stealthily to the room where Cicely sits, her face hidden on her outstretched arms, shedding the bitterest, most shamefaced tears of her life. The poor child does not doubt but that she betrayed her secret to him from whom she would have guarded it at the cost of her life, and that he, actuated by a sense of pitiful kindness, resolved to assure her happiness at the expense of his own.

She feels sore, wounded, insulted, all the sunshine gone from her sky. She knows that she can never again look with anything but shame and pain into the bright face she loves so well, never again listen in peace to the only voice that can ever reach her heart. She knows she has lost her lover, her friend, her self-respect, at one blow; and the cross she is called upon thus suddenly to bear seems too heavy for her slight shoulders.

At this crisis Everard steals in softly, closing the door, drops upon his knees by her side, put his arms round her neck, his face close to hers, and whispers eagerly, before she can repulse him—

"Don't cry, don't cry, Cissy darling! I was a fool, a presumptuous fool, to think you could ever learn to—to care for me. What woman could love me, I should like to know? Forget my presumption, dear, and, when I am gone, remember me only as the friend of your childhood, the boy whom you loved as a brother—nothing more." [146]

"You are—are going—where?" she asks, weakly trying to free herself from his clasp.

"I do not know yet—anywhere—anywhere far away from you. Will you give me a kiss, Cissy, to let me know you bear me no ill-will—a farewell kiss, dear? 'It may be for years, and it may be forever,' *et cætera*—you can not grudge me that."

He gently lifts the shielding arm and puts his lips to her shrinking face. She shivers slightly, and raises her heavy eyes with a sort of piteous protest to his. He kisses away the tears from her eyelashes, whispering mournfully the single word—

"Farewell."

They remain for a few moments locked in each other's arms.

"Love," he says, at last, "won't you say farewell?"

Her lips part, her breath comes quickly, she tries to speak, but all sound dies in her throat.

"Cissy, Cissy, can't you speak? I am waiting. Is it so hard to say the word 'Farewell,' little friend?"

"Yes, yes," she stammers, "it is hard. Let me go, Jack—let me go! I—I will say it presently—presently—presently."

"I am in no great hurry to hear it, dear; it is such a wailing sort of word—it has the ring of death. Yet I can not go until you say it."

"You are stifling me!" she says passionately. "Let me go, let me go; I can not breathe!"

"Say 'Farewell!'"

He waits, waits on patiently; but she never says it.

"Six for me—all Christmas-cards—hurrah, hurrah! Three for you, Aunt Jo; two for you, Robert; none for you, Mr. Armstrong; none for you, Hal."

It is Christmas-time, nearly two years since the Lefroys have left Nutsgrove. The boys are spending the festive season at Leamington. Mr. Armstrong has also reluctantly accepted Miles Darcy's pressing invitation, for these meetings are painful to him. Although his lost wife's name is never mentioned, yet there is always a suggestion of her existence in the old lady's depressed flurried manner, and in her anxiety to propitiate him and seem at ease in his presence; moreover, Lottie, who has cast aside all her delicacy and is growing up a plump rosy-cheeked lass, at times is so like her unfortunate sister that he turns away his eyes from her with a sense of sore repugnance.

"Two letters for me, Goggles? Then hand them over at once."

"Here they are, Bob. One of them is a bill, and the other is from foreign parts. What a lot of postmarks it has, to be sure! Whom is it from, Bob?"

He takes up the letter carelessly, then drops it with a quick exclamation.

Miss Darcy, who is seated beside him at the breakfast-table, turns suddenly. Her eyes fall on the upturned address; she springs to her feet with a cry.

"At last—at last! Quick, Robert, quick—open it, my boy!"

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But Robert rises deliberately, his face white and set, walks over to the fire, and thrusts the unopened letter into the blazing coal. His aunt stares for a second paralyzed, then rushes forward to snatch it out; but she is stopped by Robert, whose strong young arms pinion hers powerless to her side. She struggles fiercely, and then appeals to Armstrong, who is staring in much astonishment at the extraordinary scene.

"Tom—Tom Armstrong, save it, save it! For the love of Heaven, save it! It's from her—from your unfortunate wife! Oh, save it!"

Without a moment's hesitation he thrusts his hand into the fire, burning himself smartly; but he is too late—all that he rescues is a quivering sheet that crumbles to ashes in his grasp. Miss Darcy bursts into tears; she turns to Robert, her voice husky with bitterness and anger.

"Heaven will punish you—oh, Heaven will punish you, you wicked, heartless boy, for this morning's deed! Christmas morning, the morning of peace on earth and love and forgiveness, when that poor wandering sinner, probably weary of the ways of sin, thought she might reach your heart of stone—she, Robert Lefroy, who crept to your bedside, when you were thought to be dying of an infectious fever, and nursed you night and day! Oh, Heaven will punish you for this!"

"I can not help it," Robert sullenly replies. "I have done this before, and so has my sister Pauline, and I will do it again and again."

"Leave my house, leave my house, all of you! I will have no feasting here. This to me is a day of mourning, not of rejoicing. Thomas Armstrong, you came to me to-day against your will, I know. I thank you for your goodness in so humoring an old woman; but you may go now. I will not ask you to come here again. Good-by, good by! You are a just, generous, and honest man, and have treated me and mine well; but I wish I had never seen your face. I do not want to see it any more. The object of my life is taken from me to-day. I have no further motive in dragging out my weary life, or in struggling to—"

"My dear lady," breaks in Armstrong gently. "There is no reason for you to take so hopeless a view of the case; the disaster is not irretrievable. You will probably hear from—from your niece again."

But Miss Darcy, heedless of the interruption, goes on, in whining soliloquy—

"I loved her, I loved her! She was to me as my own child; her first cry was uttered in my arms, and I wanted to save her from eternal death, to bring her here and on her knees to receive your pardon, Thomas Armstrong, and then to take her away with me to some quiet corner of the world, where she could live down the memory of her sin and spend her days in preparation to meet her Judge. But my hope is gone. Something tells me that we shall never hear of her again, that she will sink too low for even a voice from heaven to reach her in the mist of coming death. We shall never hear of her again—never! Go from me now, all of you; you can say nothing, do nothing, to comfort me. Go and leave me to my grief!"

They obey her silently. Robert takes his brother back with him to town, where they dine with some military acquaintances. Lottie spends a merry evening at the house of a neighboring school-friend, winding up with snap-dragon and an impromptu dance. Armstrong, returning home to a solitary dinner, is met at the station by Everard, who carries him off to Broom Hill, where he is most heartily welcomed by its new mistress, the late Miss Cicely Deane, who makes a most charming hostess, and her husband the happiest man in the parish. The whole party from the rectory spend the day with the bride and bridegroom; and late in the evening, when the young people are tired of romping and laughing, Cicely sings some sweet old-fashioned carols breathing of love and fireside peace, and the music of her rare voice brings to Armstrong's hardened heart

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a softening touch; he thinks with gentleness, almost with pity, of her who has wronged him past retrieval.

But Miss Darcy's forebodings prove true; no other letter comes from across the sea, and Adelaide's name is not mentioned again.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Two years more go by. The Lefroys, though enjoying both health and prosperity, are no longer banded together in family union as in days of yore. Lady Saunderson, whose social engagements are increasing day by day, is spending the winter and early spring in Rome; Robert is with his regiment at Sheffield, Hal on board a training-ship at Portsmouth, and Lottie finishing her education in an advanced collegiate academy in South Kensington. They are all doing well in the world, and growing out of the passionate attachment they once had for their old home, which still remains desolate and untenanted.

One night, Armstrong takes Lottie and a school-friend to the theater.

"You have enjoyed yourself, my dear?" he asks, when he is taking them home.

"Oh, I don't think I ever enjoyed anything so much in my life before! Feel my handkerchief, Mr. Armstrong. Wouldn't you think I had soaked it in a tub of water? And I'm sure Susie Arthur's sobs were quite heartrending. Oh, we've enjoyed ourselves tremendously."

"It was quite too awfully touching. Thank you so much, Mr. Armstrong, for bringing us," chimes in the sensitive Miss Arthur.

"I'm so glad we decided on 'Jo,' instead of 'Hamlet.' Shakespeare is such a grind sometimes; isn't he, Susie? And now, if we knew some kind friend who would take us to see the Kendals, I think we should die happy, shouldn't we Susie?"

And Lottie lifts her round bonny face, framed in a white hood, appealingly to Armstrong, who smiles negatively and turns away his head. The brougham stops, and with a sigh the two blooming school-girls descend, and Armstrong drives back to his hotel in Piccadilly, where, after knocking about a few billiard-balls, he lights a cigar and strolls out again. This time he unconsciously wends his way eastward, his mind absorbed in a semi-political, semi-commercial speculation in which he is much interested, having invested a large sum of money and allowed his name to appear at the head of the list of directors. Heedless of time or distance, he walks on, with knitted brow and absorbed senses, until he is vigorously recalled to reality by a grimy hand making a snatch at his watch-chain, which, however, he is expert enough to rescue; but the would-be thief wriggles himself out of his grasp. On looking round he finds that he has strayed into the back slums of Shoreditch, into a regular labyrinth of reeking streets, dark lanes, and courts, from which egress seems almost impossible. He seeks in vain for a policeman to direct him, makes inquiries right and left, but receives only slangy, insulting, and sometimes almost threatening answers. At last he turns to a weather-beaten motherly-looking old lady presiding over a sugar-stick stall at a corner of a lane, who responds by throwing her arms protectingly around him, and murmuring words soothing but tipsy toned.

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"Losh yer way, did shye, me love? Mile-En' Road, to b'shure; bring ye there insh jiffy. Come 'long, come 'long, me lamb! Mile-En' Road—insh jiffy"—leading him at the same moment to the open door of a public-house opposite.

He tries laughingly to shake her off; but she clings to him with a grasp of iron. Being unwilling to use her roughly, he is about to put his hand into his pocket to purchase freedom, when a sudden drunken sortie from the house in question hurls them both off the footpath and effects his purpose. The row soon looks rather alarming, people crowding from all parts, and the night becomes hideous with shrieks and imprecations. Armstrong stands by, watching a scene to which he was well accustomed in his earlier days, until he notices that two policemen, pluckily trying to restore order, are getting rather badly handled; then he begins pushing his way to give them help, when an unexpected backward movement of the crowd obliges him to retreat, and a woman, who has been feebly struggling to get away, is thrown heavily against his shoulder, where she lies without movement. He throws his strong arm around her and plows his way to an open hall door a few yards further down, where he leans panting for a moment against the wall.

"Are you hurt?" he asks gently; but, as she makes no answer, he raises the hanging head, and the dismal yellow light of a gas-jet in the street outside falls on the face of Adelaide Armstrong—a face livid, worn, ghastly, from which the bloom and life of youth have fled.

Armstrong does not recognize her in the least; nevertheless he remains gazing with a startled fascination into the unconscious face until she opens her heavy eyes and looks straight into his.

"Thomas Armstrong!" she says dreamily.

"Great Heaven," he cries, "is it you?"

He starts back, shaking her from him; she sways, tries to save herself, and is on the point of falling when he puts out his hand, and she grasps it feverishly.

"I—I think I must have been crushed a little in the crowd; I feel faint," she says gaspingly. "Will you—help me up to my room? It is in the next house to this." Then, seeing that he hesitates, she

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adds, with a hard laugh, "You can take a bath—wash off my touch—afterward, you know."

Gravely he puts out his arm, and they toil slowly and silently up the rotting evil-smelling stairway to a garret furnished with one chair, a table, and a litter in one corner, dimly suggesting a bed. She sinks upon the chair exhausted.

"There is a bit of candle on the table. If you have a match, will you strike it?"

He obeys her mechanically. When the dismal tallow light reveals the bare hideousness of the room she leans her arms on the table and looks full into his stern face with unabashed, and, to him, crime-hardened glance.

"How well you wear, Thomas Armstrong! How strong and big and full of life you are! It gives me breath to look at you."

"You are ill?" he says abruptly.

"Ill! Well, I am not exactly in what you call robust health; I haven't been for many a day. I wish I could get into the consumptive hospital. A woman on the landing below me, a French-polisher, said she'd try to get me in when she came back from a job in the country; she has been a long time away."

"You are alone?"

"Yes; he left me three weeks ago to attend some Newmarket meeting, and he has not returned since. I suspect he doesn't mean to do so either, though he has left an old portmanteau in my charge. I—I am not what you call a cheerful or fascinating companion for any man—am I? You—you would not like to escort me down Regent Street, would you, Mr. Armstrong?"

He answers not a word.

"Do you know, I passed my brother Robert Lefroy in the Strand a week ago. When I uttered his name he sprung off the footpath to avoid my touch, and jumped into a passing hansom, as if to get out of the very air I was breathing; he looked almost ill when he saw me. You bore the shock better; but then you are made of stronger stuff than he, and, besides, you sprung from the depths into which I have sunk. You are acclimatized. Won't you sit down? I haven't a second chair; but the corner of the table near the door will bear your weight."

"Have you no one to help you? Are you destitute?" he asks, bringing out his words with a jerk.

"He left me seven-and-sixpence when he went away, saying he would be back in a few days. I have had nothing since; and yet he knew I was dying and friendless. I wrote to my sister Lady Saunderson when I first landed, and asked her, for the love of Heaven, for the sake of the same mother who bore us, to give me help, to let me die somewhere out of this hole of pestilence and crime; but she never answered my letter." She stops, then says, with a peevish querulous gesture, "Thomas Armstrong, why don't you say something to me, instead of staring as if I were a ghost, a ghoul?"

"What can I say, woman?" he answers roughly. "What words are needed to emphasize the retribution of your sin to me? If you want money I will give it to you as freely as I would to any needy sufferer, as freely as I will give you pity and pardon; but why should I seek to moralize on your pitiful fate, to reproach you when Heaven has so terribly avenged my wrongs?"

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"Heaven?" she interrupted, with a touch of the old fire in her thin wailing voice. "Where is Heaven? Heaven exists only when one is young and happy and healthy, free from care and sorrow when the sun is shining and the blood warm with hope and youth and love; with a body worn with disease, gnawed with want, and a soul sick with the sight of pain and misery and sin that never can be relieved, who can feel that there is a heaven? Ah, who can believe in heaven then, I ask? Come to my bedside every day Thomas Armstrong, with Bible, bell, and candle, whisper words of hope, of promise in my dying ears, and yet, if you speak with the tongue of an angel, and not of a man, you will not be able to lift the shroud from my soul, nor kindle one spark of heaven-born fire in my breaking heart. I defy you—I defy you!"

"Yet I will try."

"Too late, too late—you come too late!" she murmurs, her voice dying away in a dry choking sob.

He tries to utter some hackneyed refutation, but the commonplace words die on his lips, and a heavy silence follows as his eyes, in which all wrath and repugnance have now made way for pain and pity infinite, rest on the cowering wreck of womanhood whom he has loved with a love that comes to men of his metal only once in a life.

An angry curse, followed by a woman's coarse laugh, breaks the stillness. There is the sound of stumbling footsteps on the stairs, and the next moment the door is burst open, and a tall, gaunt-looking man, past the prime life, with dark gleaming eyes, and a thin chiseled face scarred with the ravages of fast living and squalid dissipation, stands on the threshold.

"Adelaide"—he speaks in a sweet thrilling voice that sounds so incongruous coming from the hard sensual mouth—"are you here? Quick, my girl—give me those deeds I left behind. I'm off to Antwerp in half an hour. Infernal run of luck throughout! I'll write for you when—Eh, whom have you here? Who is this?"—starting back with lowering brow when he catches sight of Armstrong's flaming face.

"I'll introduce you," says Addie rising quickly and turning to her husband. "This is, I believe, the only member of our estimable family whose acquaintance you have not yet made. My father, Colonel Lefroy—Mr. Armstrong of Kelvick."

But, before the words have left her mouth, Colonel Lefroy, with an angry oath, has disappeared, and is stumbling frantically down the stairs.

For fully two minutes Armstrong, with dazed face, remains staring at the spot where he stood; then he turns slowly to Addie.

"Is that—that man your father?" he asks.

She nods bitterly.

"You have been living with him lately?"

"I have lived with him ever since I left you—four years ago."

"Since you left me—since you left me!" he repeats stupidly. "And—and your lover—where is he? What did you do with him?"

"My lover?"—a faint flush stealing into her own cheek. "What do you mean, Thomas Armstrong? [152] Something insulting, I—I suppose. Well, I do not care; I have not much feeling left now—not enough blood in my veins to resent a sting, a blow from you as I once did. My lover!"

"Yes, I repeat, your lover—the man you loved before you knew me, with whom you sailed to Melbourne in the 'Chimborazo' four years ago—your cousin, Teddy Lefroy."

To this statement she makes no reply whatever; her head sinks forward on her outstretched arm. After waiting a moment, his blood on fire, his every nerve quivering, he leans over her, thinking she has fainted; but he sees that her eyes are wide open and tearless, and that there is a strange smile on her pinched mouth.

"Go away, go away!" she cries querulously. "Can't you let me die in peace? I am so tired—so tired of you all—of husbands, lovers, father, brothers, sisters. Oh, go away—go away, all of you! I want peace."

"Adelaide," he says sharply, using her name for the first time. "you must answer me—you must speak. Did you sail to Melbourne with your cousin as his wife?"

"How—how dare you ask me such a question?"

"I have dared, and I will dare again and again, until you answer me."

"No," she says fiercely, "I did not! How could I do such a thing when I was your wife? I have not seen my Cousin Teddy Lefroy since I was a girl of sixteen. I heard he married, four years ago, a barmaid of some theater-restaurant, and went to Australia with her—that is all I know about him. And now—now will you go? You have done your worst, have offered me the grossest insult a husband could offer a wife. Will you follow my father?"

Armstrong draws a mighty breath, and passes his hand over his brow with a scared helpless gesture. He walks to the window, which he pulls open, thrusts his hot head out into the night, and then comes back to the table, and, leaning over the sick girl, asks, in a choking whisper:

"Why did you do it—why did you do it, Adelaide, my wife? Why did you make me, your brothers and sisters, believe that you—you were worthless—oh, why—in Heaven's name, why?"

"I don't know—I can't remember; it was so long ago! What does it matter now?" she answers wearily, her eyes closing. "I feel so ill, so tired. I can't talk any more."

He drops upon his knees by her side, and brings his head on a level with hers.

"Adelaide, Adelaide, by the love I once bore you, by all the pain, the trouble you brought into my life, I implore you to answer me!"

The quivering earnestness of the appeal rouses her. She rubs her eyes and struggles into an upright position.

"Let me think—let me think—it is so long ago. I did not let them believe anything but the truth. I wrote almost at once—before I went to America—and told them whom I was with and why I was going. I wrote many times to Robert and to Pauline, with letters inclosed for Aunt Jo and the others; but they never answered me."

"They burned them unread. Oh, Heaven forgive them, Heaven forgive them, for I can not!" he [153] mutters hoarsely.

But Addie betrays no indignation, no surprise, no regret.

"Did they?" she murmurs indifferently. "That would explain."

"Addie, Addie, why did you leave me—my love, my love?"

A flush spreads over her face and a sparkle comes to her eye which almost brings back her youth again.

"Why did I leave you? Because you had learned to hate, to despise me, because I—we were all making your life unbearable, and I saw no other means by which I could free your home, give you back peace; and I left you because I loved you—loved you, oh, a thousand times better than you ever loved me!"

"Oh, child, child!"

"I saw you had learned to hate, to loathe me—I saw it in your eyes when—when—I asked you for that wretched money."

"The money—the money," he says eagerly, "you wanted for your father?"

"Yes; he had forged a check for that amount, hoping to be able to refund the money before his crime should be discovered; but, finding he could not, and seeing ruin staring him in the face, he came to me, having heard that I had married a rich man, and asked me to get it from you. I promised, and for a whole week I tried—tried to ask you; but I found I couldn't; and when at the end of the week I told him so, he held a loaded revolver to his temple and was about to blow his brains out on the spot. But I wrenched the weapon from his hand, ran straight into the house, and got the money from you. I got the money; but—but it cost me home—home, happiness, youth and life. I knew that we two could carry on the farce no longer, that the same roof could not shelter us again. I told my father that you had discarded me forever and that he must keep me with him. We sailed for America, and lived a hand-to-mouth existence there in the lowest haunts of Bohemianism among gamblers, sharpers, reprobates of all nations and classes until two months ago when we came home. What a life—what a life! I—I tried to get away many times, to support myself free from him; but my health was against me from the start, so I had to stay with him or starve, though he tried to shake me off often enough. I—I could have taken a—a husband before my looks went; but I didn't—I didn't because I thought the husband I had left would come to rescue me. I lived on this hope for two years; every morning when I woke I said, 'He will come to-day; he must come to-day!' I longed for you, Tom, I hungered for you, and I hoped—always hoped—for every night you used to whisper to me in my sleep that you were coming to take me home again. But you never came—ah, you never came! And then the great longing for you died in me; disease was wasting me. I became torpid, callous, and I thought no more of you or—Tom, Tom, what is the matter? Why, you are crying! How funny to see a man cry! You are sorry for me? Don't, please, don't—I—I don't like it."

He is kneeling on the ground before her, sobbing wildly, kissing her feet, the hem of her dress, moaning forth inarticulate cries of love, remorse, pain, and pity infinite.

She leans forward, and looks at him for a few moments with cold sparkling eyes; then her better nature reasserts itself, and, after making several unsuccessful efforts to rouse him, she lays her hot thin fingers on his swelling neck and whispers in his ear— [154]

"Tom, listen! I—I am hungry, dear. I have not eaten anything to-day."

He rises to his feet, stares at her with filmy eyes, then seizes her in his arms, with her pale face strained to his breast, and carries her down the rotting stairway, away from darkness, pain, and want, to warmth, peace, care, and love unsleeping, that are to be her lot while her days are yet of earth.

Armstrong wants at first to carry off his wife to Madeira, Nice, Algiers; but the doctors are of unanimous opinion that her strength is not sufficient to bear the fatigue of such a journey, but that later on in the season, after a few months' rest and care, she may be moved to a warmer climate.

"Then tell me—tell me," he asks feverishly, "what I am to do for her in the meantime. I—I want to cure her quickly; what am I to do?"

"Take her where she wishes to go, within moderate distance; give her whatever she fancies, keep up her spirits, keep her mind undisturbed, and do not leave her much alone."

"But medicine—what medicine is she to get? Surely you will give her something to strengthen her?" pleads Armstrong, an icy chill creeping over him at the vagueness of the prescription.

"Certainly, certainly," says Dr. Gibson, one of the greatest authorities on lung disease in the United Kingdom, seizing a sheet of paper and writing hurriedly; "but remember, Mr. Armstrong, that good nutriment, complete rest of mind and body, and cheerful companionship will do more to restore your wife's health than all the medicine in an apothecary's shop."

With despair in his heart and a smile on his lips Armstrong kneels by his wife's chair, tells her that he has medical leave to take her away from the close crowded city, and asks whither she would like to go—to Brighton, Bournemouth, Cheltenham, the Isle of Wight?

Addie shakes her listless head—she has no wish, no fancy in the matter—wherever Tom wishes; she does not mind—it is all the same to her. He sighs noiselessly; everything is the same to her now, all the life, the vivacity, the eager pretty willfulness that charmed him, are gone. She lies all day with half-closed eyes, silent, torpid, enjoying the good things he heaps upon her with a dumb animal appreciation, taking no interest in any earthly matter, asking no questions or explanations, unmoved by—seemingly unaware of—the yearning anguished eyes that never leave her face, the hot and restless hands that always hover round her, anticipating her lightest want, holding to her lips food and medicine, from which she turns aside with childish distaste.

"But you used to like the sea, don't you remember, Addie?" he pleads wistfully. "Bournemouth is, I believe, a lovely place. I think we'll decide on it."

"Yes," she answers indifferently. "But I hope it is not too far away; I feel so tired still. Are there not primroses in the room? Hold them to my face, Tom. How sweet they are—primroses! Why, it must be spring again, and the grove all yellow with them! And the white lilac too must be coming into bloom outside the school-room window." [155]

"Addie," he says quickly, "would you like me to take you home, my darling?"

"Yes," she answers slowly, drawing a long breath; "I think I should like to spend another spring at

home. Yes, take me home."

Home! Is she going home only to die? is the question ever present to the penitent and remorseful husband.

CHAPTER XXX.

MR. ARMSTRONG telegraphs to Mrs. Turner, who is still in occupation at Nuts Grove, and the old place is dusted, swept, aired, and garnished. One soft April day Addie comes home again, and walks heavily through the familiar rooms, leaning on her husband's arm. Almost from the first day he notices a change for the better in her appearance and manner; her step gains firmness, her appetite improves; and one night, about a week after their return, when she stands by the drawing-room window, her face buried in a bunch of lilac-blossoms, there comes a radiance to her eyes, an eager softness to her voice that thrills him with wild hope.

"I'm glad we came home; aren't you, Tom?" she whispers, nestling close to him. "Let us never go away again. I'm tired of wandering; and I shall get well here, I know, without going to Madeira or Algiers. I feel to-night that I should like to live. Things are coming back to me again that I once loved—you amongst them, Tom. I am growing fond of you again—oh, yes, life is coming to me with the summer, and even good looks also! Look!" she cries gayly, pulling him to a glass and putting her face close to his swarthy one. "Am I not almost pretty to-night? You'd know me if you met me in the streets now, wouldn't you, Tom? Why, I want only a little red in my cheeks, a few freckles on the bridge of my nose, and some curliness in my fringe to be myself again—quite my old self again!"

"You can do without the fringe, young lady," says Armstrong, who has the old-fashioned male distaste for the modern style of hairdressing, pushing back two or three lank locks from her forehead.

"No, no; I must have a fringe, a regular Skye-terrier one too; my face looks so bald and hard without it. It's all that horrible cod-liver oil that's coming out in my hair and making it so thin and straight! I won't take any more of it, Tom; it's of no use trying to force me," she adds, with a low soft laugh that comes to him like a strain of sweetest music. "I'm going to get well without it—you'll see."

Later on that evening she startles him by alluding for the first time to her sisters and brothers, quite casually too, as if the thought of them had just struck her incidentally. She has been looking over an old photographic album, and, stopping before one of her sisters—Pauline—she says lightly—

"The others, Tom? They are doing well, aren't they—dear old Jo and Polly and Bob and Hal and Lottchen?"

"Yes, yes, love," he answers eagerly. "They are all doing well, every one of them."

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"I should like to see them again," she says, after a pause—"to see them all together sitting here around me as in the old days. Will you ask them to come, Tom?"

"Yes, if you think you feel quite—quite rested enough, dear, after your journey," he answers reluctantly.

So they all come in haste and trembling, Lady Saunderson giving up two important appointments with Worth, traveling up from London with her elder brother, who seems paralyzed by the news that he had heard so unexpectedly.

Armstrong interviews them first, and in a few stern impressive words gives them the outline of their sister's story, and warns them against exciting her with ill-timed emotion in her critical state.

So with smiling faces and cheerful words they welcome her back as if she has been on a pleasant trip. There are no passionate tears, no hysterical kisses, no entreaties for forgiveness, no remorseful appeals. The meeting which Armstrong has been dreading opens and closes in sunshine, and Addie, propped up with cushions, greets them with glistening unresentful glance and gentle loving words.

"How well they look! Don't they, Tom?" she cries, turning a beaming face to her husband, against whose shoulder she is resting. "And, take them all in all, what a good-looking family they are to be sure! Why, Lottie, what an immense girl you have grown! And you've got all the doubtful bloom of my teens, roses, flesh, and freckles—all. I don't suppose it would become me to call you pretty, would it? Polly, what a swell you are—just like pictures from *Le Follet*. But your face hasn't changed much. Bob, I won't believe that mustache is genuine until I pull it. Come over here, sir, and face the light at once! What! You are afraid? I thought so," she adds with a gay laugh, as the boy turns away swiftly to hide the burning tears he can not keep from his eyes.

They sit together all the afternoon, chatting merrily, recalling old family jokes, making plans for the future; and, when tea is brought in, Addie insists on pouring it out, her husband's large hand covering hers and guiding the spout to the tea-pot. She makes them all drink her health, declares she has never felt so well and happy in her life, and sends a loving message to poor Aunt Jo, who is laid up with rheumatic fever, which Lottie promises to deliver without fail. Then she makes

engagements to spend a week with Bob at Aldershot during the maneuvers, to visit Hal at the Naval College, to stop a month at the Park with Pauline, and to take Lottie for a trip abroad during the holidays. Toward evening she seems a little tired; so, at a signal from Armstrong, the family withdraw by degrees, and she sinks into a light doze, from which she awakes with an uneasy start.

"Tom, Tom, where are you?"

"Here, here, where I always am—by your—side, sweetheart."

"They have all gone?"

"Yes, for the present."

She raises herself up, puts her warm arms round his neck, and whispers—

"And now only you—only you to the end!"

Seeing the spasm of pain that crosses his dark face, she turns the sob into a laugh, and, taking a pink anemone from a glass on the table, begins to fray it childishly. [157]

"Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, gentleman, plowboy, apothecary—'Apothecary! Oh, you stupid, empty-headed flower—much you know about it! I wish I had a daisy—a big milky-petaled daisy; they always tell the truth—always."

"What did they tell you, love?"

"That I was to marry a gentleman, Tom—a gentleman. I consulted them every day nearly for three weeks before I married you, and they always gave me the same answer. If—if I were going to die—which I have not the slightest intention of doing—I should ask you, Tom, to plant only daisies on my grave."

"I think it would be more to the point," he answers lightly, "if I made the request of you, considering that I am almost twenty years your senior, and that I, not you, my dear, was the object of the pointed and persistent compliment."

"Very well then," she says, laughing; "I'll plant your grave all with big daisies, Tom Armstrong, gentleman, and I'll come and water them every evening—when you're dead."

"Ah, if you did, my own, my sweet,
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My dust would hear you and beat
Had I lain for a century dead—
Would start and tremble under your feet,
And blossom in purple and red!"

"My dust would hear you and beat had I lain for a century dead," she repeats softly. "There is fiber as well as music in that idea; I like it. 'Had I lain for a century dead'—the old tune of the immortality of love, Tom, sung by poets and psalters since the world began. And so you think your dusty old heart would feel me, your drumless ear would hear me a century hence?" Then, after a pause, looking up into his face with a twitching mouth that brings a dead dimple to life—"But suppose, Tom—suppose my second husband carried the watering-pot—would your dust blossom into purple and red then?"

"You little Goth! You soulless barbarian!" he exclaims, in mock indignation. "Catch me ever dropping out of prose for your edification again!"

"There—don't be cross; I'll always leave him at home when I come to call on your poor ghost. Now are you satisfied?"

The stars come out, faintly studding the purple vault of heaven; a tiny breeze sweeps the budding world, bringing to the sick girl the perfume of a thousand flowers, telling her of the sweets and the joys, the bloom of the coming summer, which she may never know.

"Were it ever so airy a tread,
My dust would hear you and beat
Had I lain for a century dead,"

she repeats softly; then, suddenly starting to her feet with a peevish wailing cry—"Why do you talk to me of death—death, only death? Oh, I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I tell you! I can not die now—it would be double death! I am so young, I have suffered so"—sinking upon her knees and clasping her hands piteously—"not yet, dear Heaven, ah, not yet! Give me this summer—this one summer; it is all I ask! Tom, why don't you speak—why don't you look at me? Ah, you have no hope—no hope! I saw it in their faces to-day; I see it in yours every time you look at me. You know I'm doomed—you know I'm doomed!" [158]

"I know nothing, nothing," he answers, in a smothered voice, clasping her to his breast and kissing the tears from her gray scared face, "but that they say that the Almighty's power is great and His mercy infinite."

"And I have one lung left, you know; I have one lung left!" she pleads peevishly. "The doctors at the hospital told me that; and people have been known to live for years with one lung, with great care and love. And I have both—I have both! I ought to last the summer; it is so near now; the roses are budding outside the window, the apple trees are white with blossom—it is so near! Oh, Tom, my love, my life, keep me with you this one summer, this one summer, please!"

She lives to see the summer, to see the tall daisies and sleepy cowslips bow their scorched heads to the dust, and the roses drop leaf by leaf from their thorny stem—lives to welcome the golden sheaves of autumn; and, when the first bud shrivels in the grove, she is carried, not to that quiet garden behind the church to lie beside her mother, but to the balmy shores of Algiers, where summer meets her again and lingers with her so kindly and helpfully that three years go by before Tom Armstrong sets eyes on the tall chimneys of his native town again.

One bright July day two ladies are seated at the window of the old drawing-room at Nutsgrove. One, old and massively spectacled, is busy knitting a diminutive jersey; the other, with a pretty air of chronic invalidism that Mrs. Wittiterly might have copied with effect, is lying in an easy-chair, her white hands idle on her lap, watching a baby, unwieldy and almost shapeless with the quantity of flesh his tender age has to carry, playing with a kitten at her feet, pulling its tail, turning back its ears, clasping it ecstatically to a fat heaving chest, until at last, with one frantic wriggle and a smart little tap on the chubby arm torturing it, the unfortunate brute gets free, and, with a spring, clears the open window.

"Well done, puss, well done!" says Addie, laughing. "For the last ten minutes I've been trying to summon up energy to come to your rescue, but couldn't. Well done!"

For a moment the baby looks in utter silence from the thin red streak on his arm to his mother's callous face; then, having taken in the full measure of his grievance, he stiffens out his limbs, clinches his fists, closes his eyes, opens his mouth until the corners almost reach his ears, and gives vent to the most soul-piercing, stupendous roar that has ever echoed through the walls of Nutsgrove within the memory of a Lefroy.

The mighty volume electrifies the household, and brings servants and friends from all quarters—brings Armstrong from his study, his face pale with apprehension.

"What is it? He is killed—my boy?"

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"No," pants Addie, "not quite. There is, I think, a little life left in him still."

"But he has frightened, he has excited you, my love; you look quite flushed. You must drink this glass of wine at once, Addie."

"He is gone?" asks Miss Darcy, cautiously withdrawing her fingers from her tortured ears, and, turning to her host and hostess, exclaims contemptuously—

"And that—that is the child you would have me believe is the offspring of a woman with one lung! Adelaide, my niece, excuse plain speaking; but it's my impression you're nothing more nor less than a humbug—an arrant humbug!"

THE END.

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