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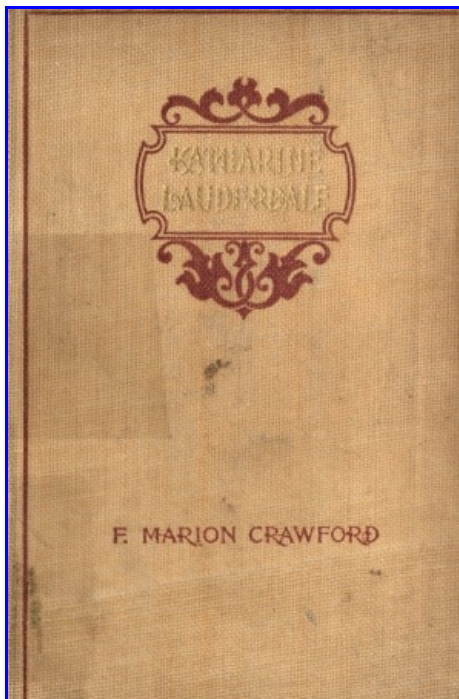
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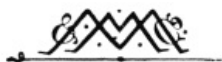
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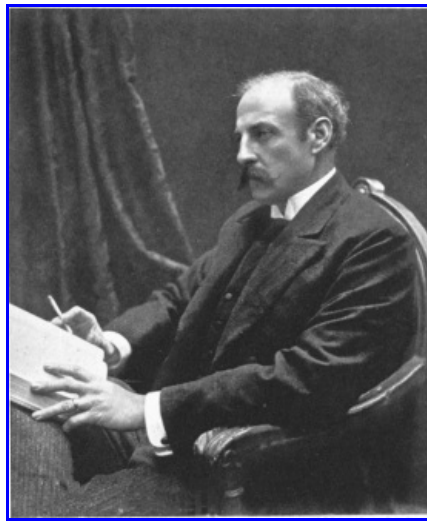
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KATHERINE LAUDERDALE





F. Marion Crawford

KATHARINE LAUDERDALE

BY
F. MARION CRAWFORD
AUTHOR OF "SARACINESCA," "PIETRO GHISLERI," ETC.

VOL. I

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALFRED BRENNAN

New York
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KATHERINE LAUDERDALE.

CHAPTER I.

"I PREFER the dark style, myself—like my cousin," said John Ralston, thoughtfully.

"And you will therefore naturally marry a fair woman," answered his companion, Hamilton Bright, stopping to look at the display in a florist's window. Ralston stood still beside him.

"Queer things—orchids," he observed.

"Why?" Nothing in the world seemed queer or unnatural to Bright, who was normally constituted in all respects, and had accepted the universe without comment.

"I am not sure why. I think the soul must look like an orchid."

"You are as bad as a Boston girl," laughed Bright. "Always thinking of your soul! Why should the soul be like an orchid, any more than like a banana or a turnip?"

"It must be like something," said Ralston, in explanation.

"If it's anything, it's faith in a gaseous state, my dear man, and therefore even less visible and less like anything than the common or market faith, so to say—the kind you get at from ten cents to a dollar the seat's worth, on Sundays, according to the charge at the particular place of worship your craving for salvation leads you to frequent."

"I prefer to take mine in a more portable shape," answered Ralston, grimly. "By the bottle—not by the seat—and very dry."

"Yes—if you go on, you'll get one sort of faith—the lively evidence of things unseen—snakes, for instance."

Bright laughed again as he spoke, but he glanced at his friend with a look of interest which had some anxiety in it. John Ralston was said to drink, and Bright was his good angel, ever striving to be entertained unawares, and laughing when he was found out in his good intentions. But if Bright was a very normal being, Ralston was a very abnormal one, and was, to some extent, a weak man, though not easily influenced by strong men. A glance at his face would have convinced any one of that—a keen, nervous, dark face, with those deep lines from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth which denote uncertain, and even dangerous tempers—a square, bony jaw, aggressive rather than firm, but not coarse—the nose, aquiline but delicate—the eyes, brown, restless, and bright, the prominence of the temples concealing the eyelids entirely when raised—the forehead, broad, high, and visibly lean like all the features—the hair, black and straight—the cheek bones, moderately prominent. Possibly John Ralston had a dash of the Indian in his physical inheritance, which showed itself, as it almost always does, in a melancholic disposition, great endurance and an unnatural love of excitement in almost any shape, together with an inborn idleness which it was hard to overcome.

Nothing is more difficult than to convey by words what should be understood by actual seeing. There are about fifteen hundred million human beings alive to-day, no two of whom are exactly alike, and we have really but a few hundreds of words with which to describe any human being at all. The argument that a few octaves of notes furnish all the music there is, cannot be brought against us as a reproach. We cannot speak a dozen words at once and produce a single impression, any more than we can put the noun before the article as we may strike any one note before or after another. So I have made acknowledgment of inability to do the impossible, and apology for not being superhuman.

John Ralston was dark, good-looking, nervous, excitable, enduring, and decidedly dissipated, at the age of five and twenty years, which he had lately attained at the time of the present tale. Of his other gifts, peculiarities and failings, his speech, conversation and actions will give an account. As for his position in life, he was the only son of Katharine Ralston, widow of Admiral Ralston of the United States Navy, who had been dead several years.

Mrs. Ralston's maiden name had been Lauderdale, and she was of Scotch descent. Her cousin, Alexander Lauderdale, married a Miss Camperdown, a Roman Catholic girl of a Kentucky family, and had two children, both daughters, the elder of whom was Mrs. Benjamin Slayback, wife of the well-known member of Congress. The younger was Katharine Lauderdale, named after her father's cousin, Mrs. Ralston, and she was the dark cousin whom John admired.

Hamilton Bright was a distant relative to both of these persons. But by his father's side he had not originally belonged to New York, as the others did, but had settled there after spending some years of his early youth in California and Nevada, and had gone into business. At four and thirty he was the junior partner in the important firm of Beman Brothers and Company, Bankers, who had a magnificent building of their own in Broad Street, and were very solidly prosperous, having shown themselves to be among the fittest to survive the financial storms of the last half century. Ralston's friend was a strong, squarely built, very fair man, of what is generally called the Saxon type. At first sight, he inspired confidence, and his clear blue eyes were steady and true. He had that faculty of looking almost superhumanly neat and spotless under all circumstances, which is the prerogative of men with straight, flaxen hair, pink and white complexions, and perfect teeth. It was easy to predict that he would become too stout with advancing years, and he was already a heavy man, though not more than half an inch taller than his friend and distant cousin, John Ralston. But no one would have believed at first sight that he was nine years older than the latter.

The nature of friendship between men has been almost as much discussed as that of love between man and woman, but with very different results. He laughs at the idea of friendship who turns a little pale at the memory of love. At all events, most of us feel that friendship is generally a less certain and undeniable thing, inasmuch as it is harder to exclude from it the element of personal interest and advantage. The fact probably is, that no one person can possibly combine all the elements supposed to make up what every one means by friendship. It would be far more reasonable to construct one friendship out of many persons, securing in each of them one at least of the qualities necessary. For instance, the discreet man, to whom it is safe to tell secrets when they must be told at all, is not as a matter of course the man most capable of giving the best advice; nor, if a certain individual is extremely generous and ready to lend all he has to his friend, does it follow that he possesses the tough, manly nature that will face public scorn rather than abandon that friend in his hour of need. Some men, too, want sympathy in their troubles, and will have it, even at the cost of common sense. Others need encouragement; others, again, need most of all to be told the unpleasant truth about themselves in the most pleasant form practicable. Altogether it seems probable that the ideal friend must either be an altogether superhuman personage, or a failure in so far as his own life is concerned.

Hamilton Bright approached as nearly to that ideal as his humanity would allow. He did not in the least trouble himself to find out why he liked Ralston, and wished to be of service to him, and he wisely asked for nothing whatever in return for what he gave. But he was very far from looking up to him, and perhaps even from respecting him as he wished that he might. He simply liked him better than other men, and stood by him when he needed help, which often happened.

They left the florist's window and walked slowly up Fifth Avenue. John Ralston was a born New Yorker and preferred his own city to any other place in the world with that solid, satisfactory, unreasoning prejudice which belongs especially to New Yorkers and Parisians, and of which it is useless to attempt any explanation. Hamilton Bright, on the contrary, often wished himself away, and in spite of his excessively correct appearance even the easy formality of American metropolitan life was irksome to him. He had loved the West, and in the midst of great interests and advantages, he regretted his former existence and daily longed for the clearer air and bolder breath of Nevada. The only objects about which he ever displayed much enthusiasm were silver and cattle, about which Ralston knew nothing and cared less.

"When is it to be?" asked Bright after a long silence.

Ralston looked at him quickly.

"What?" he asked in a short tone.

Bright did not answer at once, and when he spoke his voice was rather dull and low.

"When are you going to be married? Everybody knows that you are engaged."

"Then everybody is wrong. I am not engaged."

"Oh—I thought you were. All right."

Another pause followed and they walked on.

"Alexander Junior said I was a failure," observed Ralston at last. "That was some time ago."

"Oh—was that the trouble?"

Bright did not seem to expect any reply to the question, but his tone was thoughtful.

"Yes," answered Ralston, with a short, discontented laugh. "He said that I was of no use whatever, that I never did anything and never should."

"That settled it, I suppose."

"Yes. That settled it. There was nothing more to be said—on his side, at least."

"And how about your side?"

"We shall see."

Ralston shut his lips viciously and his clean-cut, prominent chin looked determined enough.

"The fact is," said his friend, "that Alexander Junior was not so awfully far wrong—about the past, at all events. You never did anything in your life except make yourself agreeable. And you don't seem to have succeeded in that with him."

"Oh, he used to think me agreeable enough," laughed the younger man. "He used to play billiards with me by the month for his liver, and then call me idle for playing with him. I suppose that if I had given up billiards he would have been impressed with the idea that I was about to reform. It wouldn't have cost me much. I hated the stupid game and only played to amuse him."

"All the same—I wish I had your chances—I mean, I wish I may have as good a chance as you, when I think of getting married."

"My chances!" Ralston did not smile now, and his tone was harsh as he repeated the words. He glanced at his companion. "When will that be?" he asked after a moment's pause. "Why don't you get married, Ham? I've often wondered. But then—you're so cursedly reasonable about everything! I suppose you'll stick to the single ticket as long as you have strength to resist, and then you'll marry a nurse. Wise man!"

"Thank you. You're as encouraging as usual."

"You don't need encouragement a bit, old man. You're so full of it anyhow, that you can spare a lot for other people. You have a deuced good effect on my liver, Ham. Do you know it? You ought to look pleased."

"Oh, yes. I am. I only wish the encouragement might last a little longer."

"I can't help being gloomy sometimes—rather often, I ought to say. I fancy I'm a born undertaker, or something to do with funerals. I've tried a lot of other things for a few days and failed—I think I'll try that. By the by, I'm very thirsty and here's the Hoffman House."

"It's not far to the club, if you want to drink," observed Bright, stopping on the pavement.

"You needn't come in, if you think it's damaging to your reputation," answered Ralston.

"My reputation would stand a good deal of knocking about," laughed Bright. "I think my character would bear three nights a week in a Bowery saloon and spare time put in now and then in a University Place bar, without any particular harm."

"By Jove! I wish mine would!"

"It won't," said Bright. "But I wasn't thinking of your reputation, nor of anything especial except that things are generally better at a club than at a hotel."

"The Brut is good here. I've tried it—often. Come along."

"I'll wait for you outside. I'm not thirsty."

"I told you so," retorted Ralston. "You're afraid somebody will see you."

"You're an idiot, Jack!"

Thereupon Bright led the way into the gorgeous bar, a place probably unique in the world. A number of pictures by great French masters hang on the walls—pictures unrivalled, perhaps, in beauty of execution and insolence of conception. The rest is a blaze of polished marble and woodwork and gleaming metal.

Ralston nodded to the bar-tender.

"What will you have?" he asked, turning to Bright.

"Nothing, thanks. I'm not thirsty."

"Oh—all right," answered Ralston discontentedly. "I'll have a pint of Irroy Brut with a bit of lemon peel in it. Champagne isn't wine—it's



"A place probably unique in the world."—Vol. I., [p. 10](#).

only a beverage," he added, turning to Bright as though to explain his reasons for wanting so much.

"I quite agree with you," said Bright, lighting a cigar. "Champagne isn't wine, and it's not fit to drink at the best. Either give me wine that is wine, or give me whiskey."

"Whichever you like."

"Did you say whiskey, sir?" enquired the bar-tender, who was in the act of rubbing the rim of a pint glass with a lemon peel.

"Nothing, thank you. I'm not thirsty," answered Bright a third time.

"Hallo, Bright, my little man! What are you doing here? Oh—Jack Ralston—I see."

The speaker was a very minute and cheerful specimen of human New York club life,—pink-cheeked, black-eyed, neat and brisk, not more than five feet six inches in height, round as a little barrel, with tiny hands and feet. He watched Ralston, as soon as he noticed him. The bar-tender had emptied the pint bottle of champagne into the glass and Ralston had set it to his lips with the evident intention of finishing it at a draught.

"Hold on, Jack!" cried Frank Miner, the small man. "I say—easy there! You'll have apoplexy or something—I say —"

"Don't speak to a man on his drink, Frank," said Bright, calmly. "When I drove cattle in the Nacimiento Valley we used to shoot for that."

"I shall avoid that place," answered Miner.

Ralston drew a long breath as he set down the empty glass.

"I wanted that," he said, half to himself. "Hallo, Frank—is that you? What will you have?"

"Nothing—now—thank you," answered Miner. "I've satisfied my thirst and cured my tendency to vice by seeing you take that down. You're a beautiful sight and an awful example for a thirsty man. Get photographed, Jack—they could sell lots of copies at temperance meetings. Heard the story about the temperance tracts? Stop me if you have. Man went out to sell teetotal tracts in Missouri. Came back and his friends were surprised to see him alive. 'Never had such a good time in my life,' said he. 'Every man to whom I offered a tract pulled out a pistol and said, 'Drink or I'll shoot.' And here I am.' There's a chance for you, Jack, when you get stuck."

Bright and Ralston laughed at the little man's story and all three turned and left the bar-room together.

"Seen the old gentleman lately?" enquired Frank Miner, as they came out upon the pavement.

"Do you mean uncle Robert?" asked Bright.

"Yes—cousin Robert, as we call him."

"It always amuses me to hear a little chap like you calling that old giant 'cousin,'" said Bright.

"He likes it. It makes him feel frisky. Besides, he is a sort of cousin. My uncle Thompson married Margaret Lauderdale—"

"Oh, yes—I know all about the genealogy," laughed Bright.

"Who was Robert Lauderdale's own cousin," continued Miner. "And as Robert Lauderdale is your great-uncle and Jack Ralston's great-uncle, that makes you second cousins to each other and makes me your—let me see—both —"

"Shut up, Frank!" exclaimed Ralston. "You've got it all wrong again. Uncle Robert isn't Bright's great-uncle. He's first cousin to your deceased aunt Margaret, who was Bright's grandmother, and you're first cousin to his mother and first cousin, once removed, to him; and he's my third cousin and you're no relation to me at all, except by your uncle's marriage, and if you want to know anything more about it you have your choice between the family Bible and the Bloomingdale insane asylum—which is a quiet, healthy place, well situated."

"Well then, what relation am I to my cousin Robert?" asked Miner, with a grin.

"An imaginary relation, my dear boy."

"Oh, I say! And his being my very own aunt by marriage's own cousin is not to count for anything, because you two are such big devils and I am only a light weight, and you could polish your boots with me if I made a fuss! It's too bad! Upon my word, brute force rules society as much as it ever did in the middle ages. So there goes my long-cherished claim upon a rich relation. However, you've destroyed the illusion so often before that I know how to resurrect it."

"For that matter," said Bright, "the fact is about as illusory as the illusion itself. If you insist upon being considered as one of the Lauderdale tribe, we're glad to have you on your own merits—but you'll get nothing out of it but the glory—"

"I know. It gives me a fictitious air of respectability to be one of you. Besides, you should be proud to have a man of letters—"

"Say an author at once," suggested Ralston.

"No. I'm honest, if I'm anything,—which is doubtful. A man of letters, I say, can be useful in a family. Suppose, for instance, that Jack invented an electric street-dog, or—"

"What?" enquired Ralston, with a show of interest. "An electric what?"

"I was only thinking of something new," said Miner, thoughtfully.

"I thought you said, an electric street-dog—"

"I did—yes. Something of that sort, just for illustration. I believe they had one at Chicago, with an india-rubber puppy,—at least, if they didn't, they ought to have had it,—but anything of the kind would do—self-drying champagne—anything! Suppose that Jack invented something useful like that, I could write it up in the papers, and get up advertisements for it, and help the family to get rich."

"Is that the sort of literature you cultivate?" asked Bright.

"Oh, no! Much more flowery—quite like the flowers of the field in some ways, for it cometh up—to the editor's office—in the morning, and in the evening, if not sooner, it is cut down—by the editor—dried up, and withered, or otherwise disposed of, so that it cannot be said to reach the general public."

"Not very paying, I should think."

"Well—not to me. But of course, if there were not so much of it offered to the magazines and papers, there wouldn't be so many people employed by them to read and reject articles. So somebody gets a living out of it. I console myself with the certainty that my efforts help to keep at least one man in every office from starvation. I spoke to cousin Robert about it and he seemed rather pleased by the idea, and said that he would mention it to his brother, old Mr. Alexander, who's a philanthropist—"

"Call him cousin Alexander," suggested Ralston. "Why do you make any distinction?"

"Because he's not the rich one," answered Miner, imperturbably. "He'll be promoted to be my cousin, if the fortune is left to him."

"Then I'm afraid he'll continue to languish among your non-cousin acquaintances."

"Why shouldn't he inherit the bulk of the property?" enquired Miner, speaking more seriously.

"Because he's a philanthropist, and would spend it all on idiots and 'fresh air funds,' and things of that sort."

"There is Alexander Junior," suggested Miner. "He's careful enough, I'm sure. I suppose it will go to him."

"I doubt that, too," said Bright. "Alexander Junior goes to the opposite extreme. However, Jack knows more about that than I do—and is a nearer relation, besides."

"Ham is right," answered John Ralston, thoughtfully. "Cousin Sandy is the most villainous, infernal, steel-trap-fingered, patent-locked old miser that ever sat down in a cellar chinking money bags."

"There's a certain force about your language," observed Miner.

"I believe he's not rich," said Bright. "So he has an excuse."

"Poor!" exclaimed Ralston, contemptuously. "I'm poor."

"I wish I were, then—in your way," returned Miner. "That was Irroy Brut, I noticed. It looked awfully good. It's true that you haven't two daughters, as your cousin Sandy has."

"Nor a millionaire son-in-law—like Ben Slayback,—Slayback of Nevada he is, in the Congressional Record, because there's another from somewhere else."

"He wears a green tie," said Miner, softly. "I saw him two years ago, before he and Charlotte were married."

"I know," answered Ralston. "Cousin Katharine hates him, I believe. Uncle Robert will probably leave the whole fortune in trust for Slayback's children. There's a little boy. They say he has red hair, like his father, and they have christened him Alexander—merely as an expression of hope. It would be just like uncle Robert."

"I don't believe it," said Bright. "But as for Slayback, don't abuse him till you know him better. I knew him out West, years ago. He's a brick."

"He is precisely the colour of one," retorted Ralston.

"Don't be spiteful, Jack."

"I'm not spiteful. I daresay he's full of virtue, as all horrid people are—inside. The outside of him is one of nature's finest failures, and his manners are awful always—and worse when he tries to polish them for the evening. He's a corker, a thing to scare sharks with—it doesn't follow that he's been a train-wrecker or a defaulting cashier, and I didn't say it did. Oh, yes—I know—handsome is that puts its hand into its pocket, and that sort of thing. Give me some soda water with a proverb in it—that confounded Irroy wasn't dry enough."

Frank Miner looked up into Bright's eyes and smiled surreptitiously. He was walking between his two taller companions. Bright glanced at Ralston's lean, nervous face, and saw that the lines of ill-temper had deepened during the last quarter of an hour. It was not probable that a pint of wine could alone have any perceptible effect on the man's head, but it was impossible to know what potatoes had preceded the draught.

"No," said Bright. "Such speeches as that are not spiteful. They're foolish. Besides, Slayback's a friend of mine."

Miner looked up again, but in surprise. Ralston turned sharply on Bright.

"I say, Ham—" he began.

"All right, Jack," Bright interrupted, striding steadily along. "We're not going to quarrel. Stand up for your friends, and I'll stand up for mine. That's all."

"I haven't any," answered Ralston, growing suddenly gloomy again.

"Oh! Well—so much the better for you, then."

For a few moments no one spoke again. Miner broke the silence. He was a cheerful little soul, and hated anything like an unpleasant situation.

"Heard about the cow and the collar-stud, Jack?" he enquired, by way of coming to the rescue.

"Chestnut!" growled Ralston.

"Of course," answered Miner, who was nevertheless convinced that Ralston had not heard the joke. "I wasn't going to tell it. It only struck me just then."

"Why?" asked Bright, who failed to see any connection between a cow, a stud and Ralston's bad humour.

"The trouble with you, Bright, is that you're so painfully literal," returned Miner, who had got himself into a conversational difficulty. "Now I was thinking of a figurative cow."

"What has that to do with it?" enquired Bright, inexorably.

"It's very simple, I'm sure. Isn't it, Jack?"

"Perfectly," answered Ralston, absently, as he watched a figure that attracted his attention fifty yards ahead of him.

"There!" exclaimed Miner, triumphantly. "Jack saw it at once. Of course, if you want me to explain anything so perfectly idiotic—"

"Oh, don't bother, I'm stupid to-day," said Bright, completely mystified.

"What's the joke, anyhow?" asked Ralston, suddenly realizing that Miner had spoken to him. "I said I understood, but I didn't, in the least. I was thinking about that—about Slayback—and then I saw somebody I knew, and I didn't hear what you said."

"You didn't lose much," answered Miner. "I should be sincerely grateful if you'd drop the subject, which is a painful one with me. If anything can touch me to the quick, it's the horrible certainty that I've pulled the trigger and that the joke hasn't gone off, not even flashed in the pan, or fizzled, or sputtered and petered out, or even raised itself to the level of a decent failure, fit for immediate burial if for nothing else."

"You're getting a little mixed in your similes, Frank," observed Bright.

"The last one reminds me of what Bright and I were talking of before you joined us, Frank," said Ralston.

"Burial?"

"The next thing before it—undertakers. I'm thinking of becoming one. Bright says it's the only thing I've not tried, and that as I have the elements of success in my character, I must necessarily succeed in that. There's a large establishment of the kind in Sixth Avenue, not far from here. I think I'll call and see a member of the firm."

"All right," assented Miner, with a laugh. "Take me in with you as epitaph-writer. I'll treat your bodies to a display of the English language that will make them sit up."

"I believe you could!" exclaimed Bright, with a laugh.

Ralston turned to the left, into Thirty-second Street. His companions, quite indifferent as to the direction they took, followed his lead.

"I'm going to do it, Ham, you know," said Ralston, as they walked along.

"What?"

"I'm going to the undertaker's in Sixth Avenue."

"All right—if you think it amusing."

"We'll all go. It's appropriate to go as a body, if one goes there at all."

"Frank," said Bright, gravely, "be funny if you can. Be ghastly if you like. But if you make puns, make them at a man of your own size. It's safer."

The little man chirped pleasantly in answer, as he trotted along between the two. He believed, innocently enough, that Bright and Ralston had been at the point of a quarrel, and that he had saved the situation with his nonsense.

At the end of the street, where it makes a corner with Broadway, stands a big hotel. Ralston glanced at the door on Thirty-second Street, which is the ladies' entrance, and stopped in his walk.

"I want to leave a card on some people at the Imperial," he said. "I'll be back in a moment." And he disappeared within.

Bright and Miner stood waiting outside.

"Do you believe that—about leaving a card?" asked Miner, after a pause.

"I don't know," answered Bright.

"Because I think he's got the beginning of a 'jag' on him now. He's gone in for something short to settle that long drink. Pity, isn't it?"

Bright did not answer at once.

"I say, Frank," he said at last, "don't talk about Jack's drinking—there's a good fellow. He'll get over it all right, some day."

"People do talk about it a good deal," answered Miner. "I don't think I'm worse than other people, and I'll try to talk less. But it's been pretty bad, lately. The trouble is, you can't tell just how far gone he is. He has a strong head—up to a certain point, and then he's a fiend, all at once. And he's always quarrelsome, even when he's sober, so that's no sign."

"Poor chap! He inherits it to some extent. His father could drink more than most men, and generally did."

"Yes. I met a man the other day—a fellow in the Navy—who told me they had no end of stories of the old Admiral. But no one ever saw him the worse for it."

"That's true enough. But no nerves will last through two generations of whiskey."

"I suppose not." Miner paused. "You see," he continued, presently, "he could have left his card in half the time he's been in there. Come in. We shall find him at the bar."

"No," said Bright. "I won't spy on him. I shouldn't like it myself."

"And he says he has no friends!" exclaimed Miner, not without admiration.

"Oh, that's only his way when he's cross. Not that his friends are of any use to him. He'll have to work out his own salvation alone—or his own damnation, poor devil!"

Before Miner made any answer, Ralston came out again. His face looked drawn and weary and there were dark shadows under his eyes. He stood still a moment on the threshold of the door, looked deliberately to the left, towards Broadway, then to the right, along the street, and at last at his friends. Then he slowly lighted a cigarette, brushed a tiny particle of ash from the sleeve of his rough black coat and came out upon the pavement, with a quick, decided step.

"Now then, I'm ready for the undertaker," he said, with a sour smile. "Sorry to have kept you waiting so long," he added, as though by an afterthought.

"Not a bit," answered Miner, cheerfully.

Bright said nothing, and his quiet, healthy face expressed nothing. But as they went towards the crossing of Broadway, he was walking beside Ralston, instead of letting little Frank Miner keep his place in the middle.

CHAPTER II.

It was between three and four o'clock, and Broadway was crowded, as it generally is at that time in the afternoon. In the normal life of a great city, the crowd flows and ebbs in the thoroughfares as regularly as the blood in a living body. From that mysterious, grey hour, when the first distant rumble is heard in the deserted streets, just before the outlines of the chimneys become distinct against the clouds or the murky sky, when the night-worker and the man of pleasure, the day-labourer and the dawn, all meet for a brief moment at one of the crossings in daily life's labyrinth, through all the four and twenty hours in which each pulsation is completed, until that dull, far-off roll of the earliest cart echoes again, followed within a few minutes by many others,—round and round the clock again, with unflinching exactness, you may note the same rise and fall of the life-stream.

The point at which Ralston and his companions crossed Broadway is a particularly busy one. It is near many of the principal theatres; there are a number of big hotels in the neighbourhood; there are some fashionable shops; it is only one short block from the junction of Broadway and Sixth Avenue, where there is an important station of the elevated road, and there are the usual carts, vans and horse-cars chasing each other up and down, and not leaving even enough road for two carriages to pass one another on either side of the tracks. The streams of traffic meet noisily, and thump and bump and jostle through the difficulty, and a man standing there may watch the expression change in all the faces as they approach the point. The natural look disappears for a moment; the eyes glance nervously to the right and left; the lips are set as though for an effort; the very carriage of the body is different, as though the muscles were tightened for an exertion which the frame may or may not be called upon to make instantly without warning. It is an odd sight, though one which few people see, every one being concerned to some extent for his own safety, and oblivious of his neighbour's dangers.

Ralston and the others stood at the corner waiting for an opportunity to pass. There was a momentary interruption of the line of vehicles on the up-town side, which was nearest to them. Ralston stepped forward first toward the track. Glancing to the left, he saw a big express cart coming up at full speed, and on the other track, from his right as he stood, a horse-car was coming down, followed at some distance by a large, empty van. The horse-car was nearest to him, and passed the corner briskly. A small boy, wheeling an empty perambulator and leading a good-looking rough terrier by a red string, crossed towards Ralston between the horse-car and the van, dragging the dog after him, and was about to cross the other track when he saw that the express cart rattling up town was close upon him. He paused, and drew back a little to let it pass, pulling back his perambulator, which, however, caught sideways between the rails. At the same instant the clanging bell and the clatter of a fire engine, followed by a hook and ladder cart, and driven at full speed, produced a sudden commotion, and the man who was driving the empty van looked backward and hastened his horses, in order to get out of the way. In the confusion the little boy and his perambulator were in danger of annihilation.

Ralston jumped the track, snatched the boy in one arm and lifted the perambulator bodily with his other hand, throwing them across the second pair of rails as he sprang. He fell at full length in the carriage way. He lay quite still for a moment, and the horses of the empty van stuck out their fore-feet and stopped with a plunge close beside him. The people paused on the pavement, and one or two came forward to help him. There is no policeman at this crossing as a rule, as there is one a block higher, at the main corner. Ralston was not hurt, however, though he had narrowly escaped losing his foot, for the wheel of one of the vehicles had torn the heel from his shoe. He was on his legs in a few moments, holding the terrified boy by the collar, and lecturing him roughly upon the folly of doing risky

things with a perambulator. Meanwhile the horse-cars and wagons which had blocked the crossing having moved off in opposite directions, Bright and Frank Miner ran across. Bright was very pale as he passed his arm through Ralston's and drew him away. Miner looked at him with silent admiration, having all his life longed to be the hero of some such accident.

"I wish you wouldn't do such things, Jack," said Bright, in his calm voice. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," answered Ralston, who seemed to have enjoyed the excitement. "The thing almost took off my foot, though. I can't walk. Come over to the Imperial again. I'll get brushed down, and take a cab. Come along—I can't stand this crowd. There'll be a reporter in a minute."

Without further words the three recrossed the street to the hotel.

"I don't suppose the most rigid doctor would object to my having something to drink after that tumble," observed Ralston, as they passed through the crowded hall.

"Every man is the best judge of what he wants," answered Bright.

Few people noticed, or appeared to notice, Ralston's dilapidated condition, his smashed hat, his dusty clothes and his heelless shoe. He found a hall-boy who brushed him, and little Frank Miner did his best to restore the hat to an appearance of respectability.

"All right, Frank," said Ralston. "Don't bother—I'm going home in a cab, you know."

He led the way to the bar, swallowed half a tumbler of whiskey neat, and then got into a carriage.

"See you this evening," he said briefly, as he nodded to Bright and Miner, and shut the cab door after him.

The other two watched the carriage a moment, as it drove away, and then looked at one another. Miner had a trick of moving his right ear when he was puzzled. It is rather an unusual peculiarity, and his friends knew what it meant. As Bright looked at him the ear began to move slowly, backwards and forwards, with a slight upward motion. Bright smiled.

"You needn't wag it so far, Frank," he said. "He's going home. It will be all right now."

"I suppose so—or I hope so, at least. I wonder if Mrs. Ralston is in."

"Why?"

"The trouble with you intelligent men is that you have no sense," answered the little man. "He's had another drink—four fingers it was, too—and he's been badly shaken up, and he had the beginning of a 'jag' on before, and he's going home in a rolling cab, which makes it worse. If he meets his mother, there'll be a row. That's all. Even when I was a boy it wasn't good form to be drunk before dinner, and nobody drinks now—at least, not as they used to. Well—it's none of my business."

"It's everybody's business," said Bright. "But a harder man to handle I don't know. He'll either come to grief or glory, or both together, one of these days. It's not the quantity he takes—it's the confounded irregularity of him. I'm going to the club—are you coming?"

"I may as well correct my proofs there as anywhere else. Pocket's full of them." Miner tapped his round little chest with an air of some importance.

"Proofs, eh? Something new?"

"I've worn them out, my boy. They're incapable of returning me with thanks any more—until next time. I've worn them out, heel and toe,—right out."

"Is it a book, Frank?"

"Not yet. But it's going to be. This is the first—a series of essays, you know—this is the wedge, and I've got it in, and I'm going to drive it for all I'm worth, and when there are six or seven they'll make a book, together with some other things—something in the same style—which have appeared before."

"I'm very glad, old man. I congratulate you. Go in and win."

"It's an awful life, though," said Frank Miner, growing suddenly grave.

Bright glanced at the neat, rotund little figure, at the pink cheeks and bright eyes, and he smiled quietly.

"It's not wearing you to the bone yet," he observed.

"Oh—that's no sign! Look at Napoleon. He had rather my figure, I believe. What's the good of getting thin about things, anyhow? It's only unhappy people who get thin. You work hard enough, Ham, in your humdrum way—oh, I don't envy your lot!—and you're laying it on, Ham, you're laying it on steadily, year after year. You'll be a fat man, Ham—ever so much fatter than I am, because there's twice as much of you, to begin with. Besides, you've got a big chest and that makes a man look stout. But then, you don't care, do you? You're perfectly happy, so you get fat. So would Apollo, if he were a successful banker, and gave up bothering about goddesses and things. As for me, I about keep my weight. Given up bread, though—last summer. Bad thing, bread."

So Miner chattered on as he walked by his friend's side, towards the club. There was no great talent in him, though he had drifted into literature, and of industry he had not so much as he made people believe. But he possessed the treasure of cheerfulness, and dispensed it freely in his conversation, whereas in his writings he strove at the production of gruesome and melancholy tales, stories of suffering and horror, the analysis of pain and the portraiture of death in many forms. The contradiction between the disposition of literary men and their works is often a curious study.

Mrs. Ralston was at home that afternoon, or rather, to be accurate in the social sense, she was in, and had given orders to the general effect that only her particular friends were to be admitted. This, again, is a statement susceptible of misapprehension, as she had not really any particular friends in the world, but only acquaintances in divers degrees of intimacy, who called themselves her friends and sometimes called one another her enemies. But of such matters she took little heed, and was at no pains to set people right with regard to her private opinion of them. She did many kind things within society's limits and without, but she was wise enough to expect nothing in return, being well aware that real gratitude is a mysterious cryptogam like the truffle, and indeed closely resembling the latter in its rarity, its spontaneous growth, its unprepossessing appearance, and in the fact that it is more often found and enjoyed by the lower animals than by man.

It may be as well to elucidate here the somewhat intricate points of the Lauderdale's genealogy and connections, seeing that both have a direct bearing upon the life of Katharine Lauderdale, of John Ralston, and of

many others who will appear in the course of this episodic history.

In old times the primeval Alexander Lauderdale, a younger son of an honourable Scotch family, brought his wife, with a few goods and no particular chattels, to New York, and they had two sons, Alexander and Robert, and died and were buried. Of these two sons the elder, Alexander, did very well in the world, married a girl of Dutch family, Anna Van Blaricorn, and had three sons, and he and his wife died and were buried beside the primeval Alexander.

Of these three sons the eldest was Alexander Lauderdale, the philanthropist, of whom mention has been made, who was alive at the time this story begins, who married a young girl of Puritan lineage and some fortune. She died when their only son, Alexander Lauderdale Junior, was twenty-two years of age. The latter married Emma Camperdown, of the Kentucky Catholic family, and had two daughters, the elder, Charlotte, married at the present time to Benjamin Slayback of Nevada, member of Congress, the younger, Katharine Lauderdale, being John Ralston's dark cousin.

So much for the first of the three sons. The second was Robert Lauderdale, the famous millionaire, the uncle Robert spoken of by Ralston and the others, who never married, and was at the time of this tale about seventy-five years of age. He originally made a great sum by a fortunate investment in a piece of land which lies in the heart of the present city of Chicago, and having begun with real estate he stuck to it like the wise man he was, and its value doubled and decupled and centupled, and no one knew how rich he was. He was the second son of the elder son of the primeval Alexander.

The third son of that elder son was Ralph Lauderdale, who was killed at the battle of Chancellorsville in the Civil War. He married a Miss Charlotte Mainwaring, whose father had been an Englishman settled somewhere in the South. Katharine, the widow of the late Admiral Ralston, was the only child of their marriage, and her only child was John Ralston, second cousin to Katharine Lauderdale and Mrs. Slayback.

But the primeval Alexander had a second son Robert, who had only one daughter, Margaret, married to Rufus Thompson. And Rufus Thompson's sister married Livingston Miner of New York, and was the mother of Frank Miner and of three unmarried daughters. That is the Miner connection.

And on the Lauderdale side Rufus Thompson had one daughter by his wife, Margaret Lauderdale; and that daughter married Richard Bright of Cincinnati, who died, leaving two children, Hamilton Bright and his sister Hester, the wife of Walter Crowdie, the eminent painter of New York. This is the relationship of the Brights to the Laurdaldes. Bright, John Ralston and Katharine Lauderdale were all descended from the same great-great-grandfather—the primeval Alexander. And as there is nothing duller to the ordinary mind than genealogy, except the laborious process of tracing it, little more shall be said about it hereafter, and the ingenious reader may refer to these pages when he is in doubt.

It has been shown, however, that all these modern individuals with whom we have to do come from a common stock, except little Frank Miner, who could only boast of a connection by marriage. For it was a good stock, and the families of all the women who had married into it were proud of it, and some of them were glad to speak of it when they had a chance. None of the Laurdaldes had ever come to any great distinction, it is true, except Robert, by his fabulous wealth. But none of them had ever done anything dishonourable either, nor even approaching it. There had not even been a divorce in the family. Some of the men had fought in the war, and one had been killed, and, through Robert, the name was a power in the country. It was said that there had never been any wild blood in the family either, until Ralph married Miss Mainwaring, and that John Ralston got all his faults from his grandmother. But that may or may not be true, seeing that no one knows much of the early youth of the primeval Alexander before he came to this country.

It is probably easier for a man to describe a man than a woman. The converse may possibly be true also. Men see men, on the whole, very much as they are, each man being to each other an assemblage of facts which can be catalogued and referred to. But most men receive from woman an indefinite and perhaps undefinable impression, besides, and sometimes altogether at variance with what is merely visible. It is very hard to convey any idea of that impression to a third person, even in the actual presence of the woman described; it is harder still when the only means are the limited black and white of printed English.

Katharine Lauderdale, at least, had a fair share of beauty of a certain typical kind, a general conception of which belongs to everybody, but her aunt Katharine had not even that. No one ever called Katharine Ralston beautiful, and yet no one had ever classed her among pretty girls when she had been young. Between the two, between prettiness and beauty, there is a debatable country of brown-skinned, bright-eyed, swift-like women of aquiline feature, and sometimes of almost man-like energy, who succeed in the world, and are often worshipped for three things—their endurance, their smile and their voice. They are women who by laying no claim to the immunities of womanhood acquire a direct right to consideration for their own sakes. They also may often possess that mysterious gift known as charm, which is incomparably more valuable than all the classic beauty and perfection of colouring which nature can accumulate in one individual. Beauty fades; wit wears out; but charm is not evanescent.

Katharine Ralston had it, and sometimes wondered what it was, and even tried to understand herself by determining clearly what it was not. But for the most part she thought nothing about it, which is probably the best rule for preserving it, if it needs any sort of preservation.

Outwardly, her son strongly resembled her. He had from her his dark complexion, his lean face and his brown eyes, as well as a certain grace of figure and a free carriage of the head which belong to the pride of station—a little exaggerated—which both mother and son possessed in a high degree. Katharine Ralston did not talk of her family, but she believed in it, as something in which it was good to believe from the bottom of her heart, and she had brought up John to feel that he came from a stock of gentlemen and gentlewomen who might be bad, but could not be mean, nor anything but gentle in the vague, heraldic sense of that good word.

She was a sensible woman and saw her son's faults. They were not small, by any means, nor insignificant by their nature, nor convenient faults for a young gentleman about town, who had the reputation of having tried several occupations and of having failed with quite equal brilliancy in all. But they were not faults that estranged him from her, though she suffered much for his sake in a certain way. She would rather have had him a drunkard, a gambler, almost a murderer, than have seen him turn out a hypocrite. She would far rather have seen him killed before her than have known that he had ever lied to save himself, or done any of the mean little sins, for which there may be repentance here and forgiveness hereafter, but from the pollution of which honour knows no purification.

Religion she had none whatever, and frankly owned the fact if questioned directly. But she made no profession of atheism and gave no grounds for her unbelief. She merely said that she could not believe in the existence of the soul, an admission which at once settled all other kindred points, so far as she was concerned. But she regretted her own position. In her childhood, her ideas had been unsettled by the constant discussions which took place between her parents. Her father, like all the Lauderdales, had been a Presbyterian. Her mother had been an Episcopalian, and, moreover, a woman alternately devout and doubting. Katharine shared neither the prejudices nor the convictions of either. Then she had married Admiral Ralston, a man, like many officers of the Navy, of considerable scientific acquirements, and full to overflowing of the scientific arguments against religion, which were even more popular in his day than they are now. What little hold the elder Katharine had still possessed upon an undefined future state was finally destroyed by her sailor husband's rough, sledge-hammer arguments. In the place of religion she set up a sort of code of honour to which she rigidly adhered, and in the observance of which she brought up her only son.

It is worth remarking that until he finally left college she encouraged him to be religious, if he would, and regularly took him to church so long as he was a boy. She even persuaded his father not to talk atheism before him; and the admiral, who was as conservative as only republicans can be, was quite willing to let the young fellow choose for himself what he should believe or reject when he should come to years of discretion. Up to the age of twenty-one, Jack had been a remarkably sober and thoughtful young fellow. He began to change soon after his father died.

Ralston let himself in with his key when he got home and went upstairs, supposing that his mother was out, as she usually was at that hour. She heard his footstep, however, as he passed the door of her own sitting-room, on the first landing, and having no idea that anything was wrong, she called to him.

"Is that you, Jack?"

Ralston stopped and in the dusk of the staircase realized for the first time that he was not sober. He made an effort when he spoke, answering through the closed door.

"It's all right, mother; I'll be down in a few minutes."

Something unusual in the tone of his voice must have struck Mrs. Ralston. He had made but two steps forward when she opened the door, throwing the light full upon him.

"What's the matter, Jack?" she asked, quietly.

Then she saw his face, the deep lines, the drawn expression, the shadows under the eyes and the unnatural dull light in the eyes themselves. And in the same glance she saw that his hat was battered and that his clothes were dusty and stained. She knew well enough that he drank more than was good for him, but she had never before seen him in such a state. The broad daylight, too, and the disorder of his clothes made him look much more intoxicated than he really was. Katharine Ralston stood still in silence for a moment, and looked at her son. Her face grew a little pale just before she spoke again.

"Are you sober enough to take care of yourself?" she asked rather harshly, for there was a dryness in her throat.

John Ralston was no weakling, and was, moreover, thoroughly accustomed to controlling his nerves, as many men are who drink habitually—until the nerves themselves give way. He drew himself up and felt that he was perfectly steady before he answered in measured tones.

"I'm sorry you should see me just now, mother. I had a little accident, and I took some whiskey afterwards to steady me. It has gone to my head. I'm very sorry."

That was more than enough for his mother. She came swiftly forward, and gently took him by the arm to lead him into her room. But Ralston's sense of honour was not quite satisfied.

"It's partly my fault, mother. I had been taking other things before, but I was all right until the accident happened."

Mrs. Ralston smiled almost imperceptibly. She was glad that he should be so honest, even when he was so far gone. She led him through the door into her own room, and made him sit down in a comfortable chair near the window.

"Never mind, Jack," she said, "I'm just like a man about understanding things. I know you won't do it again."

But Ralston knew his own weakness, and made no rash promises then, though a great impulse arose in his misty understanding, bidding him then and there make a desperately solemn vow, and keep it, or do away with himself if he failed. He only bowed his head, and sat down, as his mother bid him. He was ashamed, and he was a man to whom shame was particularly bitter.

Mrs. Ralston got some cold water in a little bowl, and bathed his forehead, touching him as tenderly as she would have touched a sick child. He submitted readily enough, and turned up his brows gratefully to her hand.

"Your head is a little bruised," she said. "Were you hurt anywhere else? What happened? Can you tell me now, or would you rather wait?"

"Oh, it was nothing much," answered Ralston, speaking more easily now. "There was a boy, with a perambulator, getting between the cars and carts. I got him out of the way, and tumbled down, because there wasn't even time to jump. I threw myself after the boy—somehow. The wheel took off the heel of my boot, but I wasn't hurt. I'm all right now. Thank you, mother dear. There never was anybody like you to understand."

Mrs. Ralston was very pale again, but John could not see her face.

"Don't risk such things, Jack," she said, in a low voice. "They hurt one badly."

Ralston said nothing, but took her hand and kissed it gently. She pressed his silently, and touched his matted hair with her tightly shut lips. Then he got up.

"I'll go to my room, now," he said. "I'm much better. It will be all gone in half an hour. I suppose it was the shaking,—but I did swallow a big dose after my tumble."

"Say nothing more about it, my dear," answered Mrs. Ralston, quietly.

She turned from him, ostensibly to set the bowl of water upon a table. But she knew that he could not be perfectly himself again in so short a time, and if he was still unsteady, she did not wish to see it—for her own sake.

"Thank you, mother," he said, as he left the room.

She might have watched him, if she had chosen to do so, and she would have seen nothing unusual now—

nothing but his dusty clothes and the slight limp in his gait, caused by the loss of one low heel. He was young, and his nerves were good, and he had a very strong incentive in the shame he still felt. Moreover, under ordinary circumstances, even the quantity he had drunk would not have produced any visible bodily effect on him, however it might have affected his naturally uncertain temper. It was quite true that the fall and the excitement of the accident had shaken him.

He reached his own room, shut the door, and then sat down to look at himself in the glass, as men under the influence of drink very often do, for some mysterious reason. Possibly the drunken man has a vague idea that he can get control over himself by staring at his own image, and into the reflection of his own eyes. John Ralston never stayed before the mirror longer than was absolutely necessary, except when he had taken too much.

But to-day he was conscious that, in spite of appearances, he was rapidly becoming bodily sober. If it had all happened at night, he would have wound up at a club, and would probably have come home in the small hours, in order to be sure of not finding his mother downstairs, and he would have been in a very dubious condition. But the broad light, the cold water, his profound shame and his natural nerve had now combined to restore him, outwardly at least, and so far as he was conscious, to his normal state.

He bathed, looked at the clock, and saw that it was not yet five, and then dressed himself as though to go out. But, before doing so, he sat down and smoked a cigarette. He felt nervously active now, refreshed and able to face anything. Before he had half finished smoking he had made up his mind to show himself to his mother and then to go for a walk before dinner.

He glanced once more at the mirror to assure himself that he was not mistaken, and was surprised at the quick change in his appearance. His colour had come back, his eyes were quiet, the deeper lines were gone from his face—lines which should never have been there at five and twenty. He turned away, well pleased, and went briskly down the stairs, though it was already growing dark, and the steps were high. After all, he thought, it was probably the loss of the heel from his shoe that had made him walk unsteadily. Such an absurd accident had never happened to him before. He knocked at the door of his mother's sitting-room, and she bade him come in.

"You see, mother, it was nothing, after all," he said, going up to her as she sat before the fire.

She looked up, saw his face, and then smiled happily.

"I'm so glad, Jack," she answered, springing to her feet and kissing him. "You have no idea how you looked when I saw you there on the landing. I thought you were really—quite—quite—but quite, quite, you know, my dear boy."

She shook her head, still smiling, and holding both his hands.

"I'm going for a bit of a walk before dinner," he said. "Then we'll have a quiet evening together, and I shall go to bed early."

"That's right. The walk will do you good. You're quite wonderful, Jack!" She laughed outright—he looked so perfectly sober. "Don't drink any more whiskey to-day!" she added, not half in earnest.

"Never fear!" And he laughed too, without any suspicion of himself.

He walked rapidly down the street in the warm glow of the evening, heedless of the direction he took. By fate or by habit, he found himself a quarter of an hour later opposite to Alexander Lauderdale's house. He paused, reflected a moment, then ascended the steps and rang the bell.

"Is Miss Katharine at home?" he enquired of the girl who opened the door.

"Yes, sir. She came in a moment ago."

John Ralston entered the house without further question.

CHAPTER III.

RALSTON entered the library, as the room was called, although it did not contain many books. The house was an old-fashioned one in Clinton Place, which nowadays is West Eighth Street, between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue, a region respectable and full of boarding houses. In accordance with the customs of the times in which it had been built, the ground floor contained three good-sized rooms, known in all such houses as the library, the drawing-room or 'parlour,' and the dining-room, which was at the back and had windows upon the yard. The drawing-room, being under the middle of the house, had no windows at all, and was therefore really available only in the evening. The library, where Ralston waited, was on the front.

There was an air of gravity about the place which he had never liked. It was not exactly gloomy, for it was on too small a scale, nor vulgarly respectable, for such objects as were for ornament were in good taste, as a few engravings from serious pictures by great masters, a good portrait of the primeval Alexander Lauderdale, a small bronze reproduction of the Faun in the Naples museum, two or three fairly good water-colours, which were apparently views of Scotch scenery, and a big blue china vase with nothing in it. With a little better arrangement, these things might have gone far. But the engravings and pictures were hung with respect to symmetry rather than with regard to the light. The stiff furniture was stiffly placed against the wall. The books in the low shelves opposite to the fireplace were chiefly bound in black, in various stages of shabbiness, and Ralston knew that they were largely works on religion, and reports of institutions more or less educational or philanthropic. There was a writing table near the window, upon which a few papers and writing materials were arranged with a neatness not business-like, but systematically neat for its own sake—the note paper was piled with precision upon the middle of the blotter, upon which lay also the penwiper, and a perfectly new stick of bright red sealing-wax, so that everything would have to be moved before any one could possibly write a letter. The carpet was old, and had evidently been taken to pieces and the breadths refitted with a view to concealing the threadbare parts, but with effect disastrous to the continuity of the large green and black pattern. The house was heated by a furnace and there was no fire in the grim fireplace. That was for economy, as Ralston knew.

For the Lauderdals were evidently poor, though the old philanthropist who lived upstairs was the only living brother of the arch-millionaire. But Alexander Senior spent his life in getting as much as he could from Robert in order to put it into the education of idiots, and would cheerfully have fed his son and daughter-in-law and Katharine on bread and water for the sake of educating one idiot more. The same is a part of philanthropy when it becomes

professional. Alexander Junior had a magnificent reputation for probity, and was concerned in business, being connected with the administration of a great Trust Company, which brought him a fixed salary. Beyond that he assured his family that he had never made a dollar in his life, and that only his health, which indeed was of iron, stood between them and starvation, an argument which he used with force to crush any frivolous tendency developed in his wife and daughter. He had dark hair just turning to a steely grey, steel-grey eyes, and a long, clean-shaven, steel-grey upper lip, but his eyebrows were still black. His teeth were magnificent, but he had so little vanity that he hardly ever smiled, except as a matter of politeness. He had looked pleased, however, when Benjamin Slayback of Nevada had led his daughter Charlotte from the altar. Slayback had loved the girl for her beauty and had taken her penniless; and uncle Robert had given her a few thousands for her bridal outfit. Alexander Junior had therefore been at no expense for her marriage, except for the cake and decorations, but it was long before he ceased to speak of his expenditure for those items. As for Alexander Senior, he really had no money except for idiots; he wore his clothes threadbare, had his overcoats turned, and secretly bought his shoes of a little Italian shoemaker in South Fifth Avenue. He was said to be over eighty years of age, but was in reality not much older than his rich brother Robert.

It would be hard to imagine surroundings more uncongenial to Mrs. Alexander Junior, as Katharine Lauderdale's mother was generally called. An ardent Roman Catholic, she was bound to a family of rigid Presbyterians; a woman of keen artistic sense, she was wedded to a man whose only measure of things was their money-value; a nature originally susceptible to the charm of all outward surroundings, and inclining to a taste for modest luxury rather than to excessive economy, she had married one whom she in her heart believed to be miserly. She admitted, indeed, that she would probably have married her husband again, under like circumstances. The child of a ruined Southern family, loyal during the Civil War, she had been brought early to New York, and almost as soon as she was seen in society, Alexander Lauderdale had fallen in love with her. He had seemed to her, as indeed he was still, a splendid specimen of manhood; he was not rich, but was industrious and was the nephew of the great Robert Lauderdale. Even her fastidious people could not say that he was not, from a social point of view, of the best in New York. She had loved him in a girlish fashion, and they had been married at once. It was all very natural, and the union might assuredly have turned out worse than it did.

Seeing that according to her husband's continual assurances they were growing poorer and poorer, Mrs. Alexander had long ago begun to turn her natural gifts to account, with a view to making a little money wherewith to provide herself and her daughters with a few harmless luxuries. She had tried writing and had failed, but she had been more successful with painting, and had produced some excellent miniatures. Alexander Junior had at first protested, fearing the artistic tribe as a whole, and dreading lest his wife should develop a taste for things Bohemian, such as palms in the drawing-room, and going to the opera in the gallery rather than not going at all. He did not think of anything else Bohemian within the range of possibilities, except, perhaps, dirty fingers, which disgusted him, and unpunctuality, which drove him mad. But when he saw that his wife earned money, and ceased to ask him for small sums to be spent on gloves and perishable hats, he rejoiced greatly, and began to suggest that she should invest her savings, placing them in his hands at five per cent interest. But poor Mrs. Alexander never was so successful as to have any savings to invest. Her husband accepted gratefully a miniature of the two girls which she once painted as a surprise and gave him at Christmas, and he secretly priced it during the following week at a dealer's, and was pleased when the man offered him fifty dollars for it,—which illustrates Alexander's thoughtful disposition.

This was the household in which Katharine Lauderdale had grown up, and these were the people whose characters, temperaments, and looks had mingled in her own. So far as the latter point was concerned, she had nothing to complain of. It was not to be expected that the children of two such handsome people should be anything but beautiful, and Charlotte and Katharine had plenty of beauty of different types, fair and dark respectively. Charlotte was most like her mother in appearance, but more closely resembled her father in nature. Katharine had inherited her father's face and strength of constitution with many of her mother's gifts, more or less modified and, perhaps, diminished in value. At the time when this history begins, she was nineteen years old, and had been what is called 'out' in society for more than a year. She therefore, according to the customs of the country and age, enjoyed the privilege of receiving alone the young gentlemen of her set who either admired her or found pleasure in her conversation. Of the former there were many; of the latter, a few.

Ralston stood with his back to the empty fireplace, staring at the dark mahogany door which led to the regions of the staircase. He had only waited five minutes, but he was in an impulsive frame of mind, and it had seemed a very long time. At last the door opened. Katharine entered the room, smiled and nodded to him, and then turned and shut the door carefully before she came forward.

She was a very beautiful girl. No one could have denied that, in the main. Yet there was something puzzling in the face, primarily due, perhaps, to the mixture of races. The features were harmonious, strong and, on the whole, noble and classic in outline, the mouth especially being of a very pure type, and the curved lips of that creamy, salmon rose-colour occasionally seen in dark persons—neither red, nor pink nor pale. The very broadly marked dark eyebrows gave the face strength, and the deep grey eyes, almost black at times, had an oddly fixed and earnest look. In them there was no softness on ordinary occasions. They expressed rather a determination to penetrate what they saw, not altogether unmixed with wonder at the discoveries they made. The whole face was boldly outlined, but by no means thin, and the skin was perceptibly freckled, which is unusual with dark people, and is the consequence of a red-haired strain in the inheritance. The primeval Alexander had been a red-haired man, and Robert the Rich had resembled him before he had grown grey. Charlotte Slayback had christened the latter by that name. She had a sharp tongue, and called the primeval one Alexander the Great, her grandfather Alexander the Idiot, and her father Alexander the Safe. Katharine had her own opinions about most of the family, but she did not express them so plainly.

She was still smiling as she met Ralston in the middle of the room.

"You look happy, dear," he said, kissing her forehead softly.

"I'm not," she answered. "I'm glad to see you. There's a difference. Sit down."

"Has there been any trouble?" he asked, seating himself in a little low chair beside the corner of the sofa she had chosen.

"Not exactly trouble—no. It's the old story—only it's getting so old that I'm beginning to hate it. You

understand."

"Of course I do. I wish there were anything to be done—which you would consent to do." He added the last words as though by an afterthought.

"I'll consent to almost anything, Jack."

The smile had vanished from her face and she spoke in a despairing tone, fixing her big eyes on his, and bending her heavy eyebrows as though in bodily pain. He took her hand—firm, well-grown and white—in his and laid it against his lean cheek.

"Dear!" he said.

His voice trembled a little, which was unusual. He felt unaccountably emotional and was more in love than usual. The tone in which he spoke the single word touched Katharine, and she leaned forward, laying her other hand upon his other one.

"You do love me, Jack," she said.

"God knows I do," he answered, very earnestly, and again his voice quavered.

It was very still in the room, and the dusk was creeping toward the high, narrow windows, filling the corners, and blackening the shadowy places, and then rising from the floor, almost like a tide, till only the faces of the two young people seemed to be above it, still palely visible in the twilight.

Suddenly Katharine rose to her feet, with a quick-drawn breath which was not quite a sigh.

"Pull down the shades, Jack," she said, as she struck a match and lit the gas at one of the stiff brackets which flanked the mantelpiece.

Ralston obeyed in silence. When he came back she had resumed her seat in the corner of the sofa, and he sat down beside her instead of taking the chair again.

He did not speak at once, though it seemed to him that his heart had never been so full before. As he looked at the lovely girl he felt a thrill of passionate delight that ran through him and almost hurt him, and left him at last with an odd sensation in the throat and a painful sinking at the heart. He did not reflect upon its meaning, and he certainly did not connect it with the reaction following what he had made his nerves bear during the day. He was sincerely conscious that he had never been so deeply, truly in love with Katharine before. She watched him, understanding what he felt, smiling into his eyes, but silent, too. They had known each other since they had been children, and had loved one another since Katharine had been sixteen years old,—more than three whole years, which is a long time for first love to endure, unless it means to be last as well as the first.

"You said you would consent to almost anything," said Ralston, after a long pause. "It would be very simple for us to be married, in spite of everybody. Shall we? Shall we, dear?" he asked, repeating the question.

"I would almost do that—" She turned her face away and stared at the empty fireplace.

"Say, quite! After all, what can they all do? What is there so dreadful to face, if we do get married? We must, one of these days. Life's not life without you—and death wouldn't be death with you, darling," he added.

"Are you in earnest, Jack,—or are you making love to me?"

She asked the question suddenly, catching his hands and holding them firmly together, and looking at him with eyes that were almost fierce. The passion rose in his own, with a dark light, and his face grew pale. Then he laughed nervously.

"I'm only laughing, of course—you see I am. Why must you take a fellow in earnest?"

But there was nothing in his words that jarred upon her. He could not laugh away the truth from his look, for truth it was at that moment, whatever its source.

"I know—I understand," she said, in a low voice. "We can't live apart, you and I."

"It's like tearing out fingers by the joints every time I leave you," Ralston answered. "It's the resurrection of the dead to see you—it's the glory of heaven to kiss you."

The words came to his lips ready, rough and strong, and when he had spoken them, hers sealed every one of them upon his own, believing every one of them, and trusting in the strength of him. Then she pushed him away and leaned back in her corner, with half-closed eyes.

"I don't know why I ever ask if you're in earnest, dear," she said. "I know you are. It would kill me to think that you're playing. Women are always said to be foolish—perhaps it's in that way—and I'm no better than the rest of them. But you don't spoil me in that way. You don't often say it as you did just now."

"I never loved you as I do now," said Ralston, simply.

"I feel it."

"But I wish—well, impossibilities."

"What? Tell me, Jack. I shall understand."

"Oh—nothing. Only I wish I could find some way of proving it to you. But people always say that sort of thing. We don't live in the middle ages."

"I believe we do," answered Katharine, thoughtfully. "I believe people will say that we did, hundreds of years hence, when they write about us. Besides—Jack—not that I want any proof, because I believe you—but there is something you could do, if you would. I know you wouldn't like to do it."

It flashed across Ralston's mind that she was about to ask him to make a great sacrifice for her, to give up wine for her sake, having heard, perhaps—even probably—of some of his excesses. He was nervous, overwrought and full of wild impulses that day, but he knew what such a promise would mean in his simple code. He was not in any true sense degraded, beyond the weakening of his will. In an instant so brief that Katharine did not notice his hesitation he reviewed his whole life, so familiar to him in its worse light that it rose instantaneously before him as a complete picture. He felt positively sure of what she was about to ask him, and as he looked into her great grey eyes he believed that he could keep the pledge he was about to give her, that it would save him from destruction, and that he should thus owe his happiness to her more wholly than ever.

"I'll do it," he answered, and the fingers of his right hand slowly closed till his fist was clenched.

"Thank you, dear one," answered Katharine, softly. "But you mustn't promise until you know what it is."

"I know what I've said."

"But I won't let you promise. You wouldn't forgive me—you'd think that I had caught you—that it was a trap—all sorts of things."

Ralston smiled and shook his head. He felt quite sure of her and of himself. And it would have been better for her and for him, if she had asked what he expected.

"Jack," she said, lowering her voice almost to a whisper, "I want you to marry me privately—quite in secret—that's what I mean. Not a human being must know, but you and I and the clergyman."

John Ralston looked into her face in thunder-struck astonishment. It is doubtful whether anything natural or supernatural could have brought such a look into his eyes. Katharine smiled, for the idea had long been familiar to her.

"Confess that you were not prepared for that!" she said. "But you've confessed it already."

"Well—hardly for that—no."

The look of surprise in his face gradually changed into one of wondering curiosity, and his brows knit themselves into a sort of puzzled frown, as though he were trying to solve a difficult problem.

"You see why I didn't want you to promise anything rashly," said Katharine. "You couldn't possibly foresee what I was going to ask any more than you can understand why I ask it. Could you?"

"No. Of course not. Who could?"

"I'm not going to ask any one else to, you may be sure. In the first place, do you think it wrong?"

"Wrong? That depends—there are so many things—" he hesitated.

"Say what you think, Jack. I want to know just what you think."

"That's the trouble. I hardly know myself. Of course there's nothing absolutely wrong in a secret marriage. No marriage is wrong, exactly, if the people are free."

"That's the main thing I wanted to know," said Katharine, quietly.

"Yes—but there are other things. Men don't think it exactly honourable to persuade a girl to be married secretly, against the wishes of her people. A great many men would, but don't. It's somehow not quite fair to the girl. Running away is all fair and square, if people are ready to face the consequences. Perhaps it is that there are consequences to face—that makes it a sort of pitched battle, and the parents generally give in at the end, because there's no other way out of it. But a secret marriage—well, it doesn't exactly have consequences, in the ordinary way. The girl goes on living at home as though she were not married, deceiving everybody all round—and so must the man. In fact it's a kind of lie, and I don't like it."

Ralston paused after this long speech, and was evidently deep in thought.

"All you say is true enough—in a sense," Katharine answered. "But when it's the only way to get married at all, the case is different. Don't you think so yourself? Wouldn't you rather be secretly married than go on like this—as this may go on, for ten, fifteen, twenty years—all our lives?"

"Of course I would. But I don't see why—"

"I do, and I want to make you see. Listen to my little speech, please. First, we are both of age—I am so far as being married is concerned, and we have an absolute right to do as we please about it—to be married in the teeth of the lions, if that's not a false metaphor—or something—you know."

"In the jaws of hell, for that matter," said Ralston, fervently.

"Thank you for saying it. I'm only a girl and mustn't use strong language. Very well, we have a perfect right to do as we please. That's a great point. Then we have only to choose, and it becomes a matter of judgment."

"You talk like print," laughed Ralston.

"So much the better. We have made up our minds that we can't live without each other, so we must be married somehow. You don't think it's not—what shall I say?—not quite like a girl for me to talk in this way, do you? We have talked of it so often, and we decided so long ago!"

"What nonsense! Be as plain as possible."

"Because if you do—then I shall have to write it all to you, and I can't write well."

Ralston smiled.

"Go on," he said. "I'm waiting for the reasons."

"They could simply starve us, Jack. We've neither of us a dollar in the world."

"Not a cent," said Ralston, very emphatically. "If we had, we shouldn't be where we are."

"And your mother can't give you any money, and my father won't give me any."

"And I'm a failure," Ralston observed, with sudden grimness and hatred of himself.

"Hush! You'll be a success some day. That's not the question. The point is, if we tried to get married openly, there would be horrible scenes first, and then war, and starvation afterwards. It's not a pretty prospect, but it's true."

"I suppose it is."

"It's so deadly true that it puts an open marriage out of the question altogether. If there were nothing else to be done, it would be different. I'd rather starve than give you up. But there is a way out of it. We can be married secretly. In that way we shall avoid the scenes and the war."

"And then wait for something to happen? We should be just where we are now. To all intents and purposes you would be Spinster Lauderdale and I should be Bachelor Ralston. I don't see that it would be the slightest improvement on the present situation—honestly, I don't. I'm not romantic, as people are in books. I don't think it would be sweeter than life to call you wife, and when we're married I shall call you Katharine just the same. I don't distrust you. You know I don't. I'm not really afraid that you'll go and marry Ham Bright, or Frank Miner, nor even the most desirable young man in New York, who has probably proposed to you already. I'm not vain, but I know you love me. I should be a brute if I doubted it—"

"Yes—I think you would, dear," said Katharine, with great directness.

"So that since I'm to wait for you till 'something happens'—never mind to whom, and long life to all of them!—I'd rather wait as we are than go through it with a pack of lies to carry."

"I like you, Jack—besides loving you. It's quite another feeling, you know. You're such a man!"

"I wish I were half what you think I am."

"I'll think what I please. It's none of your dear business. But you haven't heard half I have to say yet. I'll suppose that we're married—secretly. Very well. That same day, or the next day, and as soon as possible, I shall go to uncle Robert and tell him the whole truth."

"To uncle Robert!" exclaimed Ralston, who had not yet come to the end of the surprises in store for him. "And ask him for some money, I suppose? That won't do, Katharine. Indeed it won't. I should be letting you go begging for me. That's the plain English of it. No, no! That can't be done."

"You'll find it hard to prevent me from begging for you, or working for you either, if you ever need it," said Katharine. There was a certain grand simplicity about the plain statement.

"You're too good for me," said Ralston, in a low voice, and for the third time there was a quiver in his tone. Moreover, he felt an unaccustomed moisture in his eyes which gave him pleasure, though he was ashamed of it.

"No, I'm not—not a bit too good for you. But I like to hear—I don't know why it is, but your voice touches me to-day. It seems changed."

Ralston was truthful and honourable. If he had himself understood the causes of his increased emotion, he would have hanged himself rather than have let Katharine say what she did, without telling her what had happened. He drank, and he knew it, and of late he had been drinking hard, but it was the first time that he had ever spoken to Katharine Lauderdale when he had been drinking, and he was deceived by his own apparent soberness beyond the possibility of believing that he was on the verge of being slightly hysterical. Let them who doubt the possibility of such a case question those who have watched a thousand cases.

There was a little pause after Katharine's last words. Then she went on,—explaining her project.

"Uncle Robert always says that nobody understands him as I do. I shall try and make him understand me, for a change. I shall tell him just what has happened, and I shall tell him that he must find work for you to do, since you're perfectly capable of working if you only have a fair chance. You never had one. I don't call it a chance to put an active man like you into a gloomy law office to copy fusty documents. And I don't call it giving you a chance to glue you to a desk in Beman Brothers' bank. You're not made for that sort of work. Of course you were disgusted and refused to go on. I should have done just the same."

"Oh, you would—I'm quite sure!" answered Ralston, with conviction.

"Naturally. Not but that I'm just as capable of working as you are, though. To go back to uncle Robert. It's just impossible, with all his different interests, all over the country, and with his influence—and you know what that is—that he should not have something for you to do. Besides, he'll understand us. He's a great big man, on a big scale, a head and shoulders mentally bigger than all the rest of the family."

"That's true," assented Ralston.

"And he knows that you don't want to take money without giving an equivalent for it."

"He's known that all along. I don't see why he should put himself out any more now—"

"Because I'll make him," said Katharine, firmly. "I can do that for you, and if you torture your code of honour into fits you can't make it tell you that a wife should not do that sort of thing for her husband. Can you?"

"I don't know," answered Ralston, smiling. "I've tried it myself often enough with the old gentleman. He says I've had two chances and have thrown them up, and that, after all, my mother and I have quite enough to live on comfortably, so he supposes that I don't care for work. I told him that enough was not nearly so good as a feast. He laughed and said he knew that, but that people couldn't stand feasting unless they worked hard. The last time I saw him, he offered to make Beman try me again. But I couldn't stand that."

"Of course not."

"I can't stand anything where I produce no effect, and am not to earn my living for ever so long. I wasn't to have any salary at Beman's for a year, you know, because I knew nothing about the work. And it was the same at the lawyer's office—only much longer to wait. I could work at anything I understood, of course. But I suppose I do know precious little that's of any use. It can't be helped, now."

"Yes, it can. But you see my plan. Uncle Robert will be so taken off his feet that he'll find you something. Then the whole thing will be settled. It will probably be something in the West. Then we'll declare ourselves. There'll be one stupendous crash, and we shall disappear from the scene, leaving the family to like it or not, as they please. In the end they will like it. There would be no lies to act—at least, not after two or three days. It wouldn't take longer than that to arrange things."

"It all depends on uncle Robert, it seems to me," said Ralston, doubtfully. "A runaway match would come to about the same thing in the end. I'll do that, if you like."

"I won't. It must be done in my way, or not at all. If we ran away we should have to come back to see uncle Robert, and we should find him furious. He'd tell us to go back to our homes, separately, till we had enough to live on—or to go and live with your mother. I won't do that either. She's not able to support us both."

"No—frankly, she's not."

"And uncle Robert would be angry, wouldn't he? He has a fearful temper, you know."

"Yes—he probably would be raging."

"Well, then?"

"I don't like it, Katharine dear—I don't like it."

"Then you can never marry me at all, Jack. At least, I'm afraid not."

"Never?" Ralston's expression changed suddenly.

"There's another reason, Jack dear. I didn't want to speak of it—now."

CHAPTER IV.

RALSTON said nothing at first. Then he looked at Katharine as though expecting that she should speak again and explain her meaning, in spite of her having said that she had not meant to do so.

"What is this other reason?" he asked, after a long pause.

"It would take so long to tell you all about it," she answered, thoughtfully. "And even if I did, I am not sure that you would understand. It belongs—well—to quite another set of ideas."

"It must be something rather serious if it means marriage now, or marriage never."

"It is serious. And the worst of it is that you will laugh at it—and I am sure you will say that I am not honest to myself. And yet I am. You see it is connected with things about which you and I don't think alike."

"Religion?" suggested Ralston, in a tone of enquiry.

Katharine bowed her head slowly, sighed just audibly and looked away from him as she leaned back. Nothing could have expressed more clearly her conviction that the subject was one upon which they could never agree.

"I don't see why you should sigh about it," said Ralston, in a tone which expressed relief rather than perplexity. "I often wonder why people generally look so sad when they talk about religion. Almost everybody does."

"How ridiculous!" exclaimed Katharine, with a little laugh. "Besides, I wasn't sighing, exactly—I was only wishing it were all arranged."

"Your religion?"

"Don't talk like that. I'm in earnest. Don't laugh at me, Jack dear—please!"

"I'm not laughing. Can't you tell me how religion bears on the matter in hand? That's all I need to know. I don't laugh at religion—at yours or any one else's. I believe I have a little inclination to it myself."

"Yes, I know. But—well—I don't think you have enough to save a fly—not the smallest little fly, Jack. Never mind—you're just as nice, dear. I don't like men who preach."

"I'm glad of it. But what has all this to do with our getting married?"

"Listen. It's perfectly clear to me, and you can understand if you will. I have almost made up my mind to become a Catholic—"

"You?" Ralston stared at her in surprise. "You—a Roman Catholic?"

"Yes—Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic. Is that clear, Jack?"

"Perfectly. I'm sorry."

"Now don't be a Puritan, Jack—"

"I'm not a Puritan. I haven't a drop of Puritan blood. You have, Katharine, for your grandmother was one of the real old sort. I've heard my father say so."

"You're just as much a Lauderdale as I am," retorted Katharine. "And if Scotch Presbyterians are not Puritans, what is? But that isn't what I mean. It's the tendency to wish that people were nothing at all rather than Catholics."

"It's not that. I'm not so prejudiced. I was thinking of the row—that's all. You don't mean to keep that a secret, too? It wouldn't be like you."

"No, indeed," answered Katharine, proudly.

"Well—you've not told me what the connection is between this and our marriage. You don't suppose that it will really make any difference to me, do you? You can't. And you're quite mistaken about my Puritanism. I would much rather that my wife should be a Roman Catholic than nothing at all. I'm broad enough for that, anyhow. Of course it's a serious matter, because people sometimes do that kind of thing and then find out that they have made a mistake—when it's too late. And there's something ridiculous and undignified about giving it up again when it's once done. Religion seems to be a good deal like politics. You may change once—people won't admire you—I mean people on your old side—but they will tolerate you. But if you change twice—"

"I'm not going to change twice. I've not quite, quite made up my mind to change once, yet. But if I do, it will make things—I mean, our marriage—almost impossible."

"Why?"

"The Catholics do everything they can to prevent mixed marriages, Jack,—especially in our country. You would have to make all sorts of promises which you wouldn't like, and which I shouldn't want you to make—"

Ralston laughed, suddenly comprehending her point of view.

"I see!" he exclaimed.

"Of course you see. It's as plain as day. I want to make sure of you—dear,"—she laid her hand softly on his,— "and I also want to be sure of being perfectly free to change my mind about my religion, if I wish to. It's a stroke of diplomacy."

"I don't know much about diplomatic proceedings," laughed Ralston, "but this strikes me as—well—very intelligent, to say the least of it."

Katharine's face became very grave, and she withdrew her hand.

"You mean that it does not seem to you perfectly honest," she said.

"I didn't say that," he answered, his expression changing with hers. "Of course the idea is that if you are married to me before you become a Catholic, your church can have nothing to say to me when you do."

"Of course—yes. You couldn't be called upon to make any promises. But if I should decide, after all, not to take the step, there would be no harm done. On the contrary, I shall have the advantage of being able to put pressure on uncle Robert, as I explained to you before."

"I didn't say I thought it wasn't honest," said Ralston. "It's rather deep, and I'm always afraid that deep things may not be quite straight. I should like to think about it, if you don't mind."

"I want you to decide. I've thought about it."

"Yes—but—"

"Well? Suppose that, after thinking it over for ever so long, you should come to the conclusion that I should not

be acting perfectly honestly to my conscience—that's the worst you could discover, isn't it? Even then—and I believe it's an impossible case—it's my conscience and not yours. If you were trying to persuade me to a secret marriage because you were afraid of the consequences, it would be different—"

"Rather!" exclaimed Ralston, vehemently.

"But you're not. You see, the main point is on my account, and it's I who am doing all the persuading, for that reason. It may be un—un—what shall I call it—not like a girl at all. But I don't care. Why shouldn't I tell you that I love you? We've both said it often enough, and we both mean it, and I mean to be married to you. The religious question is a matter of conviction. You have no convictions, so you can't understand—"

"I have one or two—little ones."

"Not enough to understand what I feel—that if religion is anything, then it's everything except our love. No—that wasn't an afterthought. It's not coming between you and me. Nothing can. But it's everything else in life, or else it's nothing at all and not worth speaking of. And if it is—if it really is—why then, for me, as I look at it, it means the Catholic Church. If I talk as though I were not quite sure, it's because I want to be quite on the safe side. And if I want you to do this thing—it's because I want to be absolutely sure that hereafter no human being shall come between us. I know all about the difficulties in these mixed marriages. I've made lots of enquiries. There's no question of faith, or belief, or anything of the sort in their objections. It's simply a matter of church politics, and I daresay that they are quite right about it, from their point of view, and that if one is once with them one must be with them altogether, in policy as well as in religion. But I'm not as far as that yet. Perhaps I never shall be, after all. I want to make sure of you—oh, Jack, don't you understand? I can't talk well, but I know just what I mean. Tell me you understand, and that you'll do what I ask!"

"It's very hard!" said Ralston, bending his head and looking at the carpet. "I wish I knew what to do."

Woman-like, she saw that she was beginning to get the advantage.

"Go over it all, dear. In the first place, it's entirely for my sake, and not in the least for yours. So you can't say there's anything selfish in it, if you do it for me, can you? You don't want to do it, you don't like it, and if you do it you'll be making a sacrifice to please me."

"In marrying you!" Ralston laughed a little and then became very grave again.

"Yes, in marrying me. It's a mere formality, and nothing else. We're not going to run away afterwards, nor meet in the dark in Gramercy Park nor do anything in the least different from what we've always done, until I've got what I want from uncle Robert. Then we'll acknowledge the whole thing, and I'll take all the blame on myself, if there is any—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind," interrupted Ralston.

"Unless you tell a story that's not true, you won't be able to find anything to blame yourself with," answered Katharine. "So it will be all over, and it will save no end of bother—and expense. Which is something, as neither of us, nor our people, have any money to speak of, and a wedding costs ever so much. I needn't even have a trousseau—just a few things, of course—and poor papa will be glad of that. You needn't laugh. You'll be doing him a service, as well as me. And you see how I can put it to uncle Robert, don't you? 'Uncle Robert, we're married—that's all. What are you going to do about it?' Nothing could be plainer than that, could it?"

"Nothing!"

"Now he will simply have to do something. Perhaps he'll be angry at first, but that won't last long. He'll get over it and laugh at my audacity. But that isn't the main point. It's perfectly conceivable that you might work and slave at something you hate for years and years, until we could get married in the regular way. The principal question is the other—my freedom afterwards to do exactly as I please about my religion without any possibility of any one interfering with our marriage."

"Katharine! Do you really mean to say that if you were a Catholic, and if the priests said that we shouldn't be married, you would submit?"

"If I couldn't, I couldn't," Katharine answered. "If I were a Catholic, and a good Catholic,—I wouldn't be a bad one,—no marriage but a Catholic one would be a marriage at all for me. And if they refused it, what could I do? Go back? That would be lying to myself. To marry you in some half regular way—"

"Hush, child! You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Yes, I do—perfectly. And you wouldn't like that. So you see what my position is. It's absolutely necessary to my future happiness that we should be quietly married some morning—to-morrow, if you like, but certainly in a day or two—and that nobody should know anything about it, until I've told uncle Robert."

"After all," said Ralston, hesitating, "it will be very much the same thing as though we were to run away, provided we face everybody at once."

"Very much better, because there'll be no scandal—and no immediate starvation, which is something worth considering."

"It won't really be a secret marriage, except for the mere ceremony, then. That looks different, somehow."

"Of course. You don't suppose that I thought of taking so much trouble and doing such a queer thing just for the sake of knowing all to myself that I was married, do you? Besides, secrets are always idiotic things. Somebody always lets them out before one is ready. And it's not as though there were any good reason in the world why we should not be married, except the money question. We're of age—and suited to each other—and all that."

"Naturally!" And Ralston laughed again.

"Well, then—it seems to me that it's all perfectly clear. It amounts to telling everybody the day after, instead of the day before the wedding. Do you see?"

"I suppose I ought to go on protesting, but you do make it very clear that there's nothing underhand about it, except the mere ceremony. And as you say, we have a perfect right to be married if we please."

"And we do please—don't we?"

"With all our hearts," Ralston answered, in a dreamy tone.

"Then when shall it be, Jack?" Katharine leaned towards him and touched his hand with her fingers as though to rouse him from the reverie into which he seemed to be falling.

The touch thrilled him, and he looked up suddenly and met her glance. He looked at her steadily for a moment, and once more he felt that odd, pleasurable, unmanly moisture in his



"She rose suddenly and pretended to busy herself with the single light."—Vol. I., [p. 79](#).

eyes, with a sweeping wave of emotion that rose from his heart with a rush as though it would burst his throat. He yielded to it altogether this time, and catching her in his arms drew her passionately to him, kissing her again and again, as though he had never kissed her before. He did not understand it himself, and Katharine was not used to it. But she loved him, too, with all her heart, as it seemed to her. She had proved it to him and to herself more completely within the last half hour, and she let her own arms go round him. Then a deep, dark blush which she could feel, rose slowly from her throat to her cheeks, and she instinctively disentangled herself from him and drew gently back.

"Remember that it's for my sake—not for yours, dear," she said.

Her grey eyes were as deep as the dusk itself. Vaguely she guessed her power as she gave him one more long look, and then rose suddenly and pretended to busy herself with the single light, turning it up a little and then down. Ralston watched the springing curves that outlined her figure as she reached upward. He was in many ways a strangely refined man, in spite of all his sins, and of his besetting sin in particular, and refinement in others appealed to him strongly when it was healthy and natural. He detested the diaphanous type of semi-consumptive with the angel face, man or woman, and declared that a skeleton deserved no credit for looking refined, since it could not possibly look anything else. But he delighted in delicacy of touch and grace of movement when it went with such health and strength as Katharine had.

"You are the most divinely beautiful thing on earth," he said, quietly.

Katharine laughed, but still turned her face away from him.

"Then marry me," she said, laughing. "What a speech!" she cried an instant later. "Just fancy if any one could hear me, not knowing what we've been talking about!"

"You were just in time, then," said Ralston. "There's some one coming."

Katharine turned quickly, listened a moment, and distinguished a footfall on the stairs outside the door. She nodded, and came to his side at once.

"You will, Jack," she said under her breath. "Say that you will—quick!"

Ralston hesitated one moment. He tried to think, but her eyes were upon him and he seemed to be under a spell. They were close together, and there was not much light in the room. He felt that the shadow of something unknown was around them both—that somewhere in the room a sweet flower was growing, not like other flowers, not common nor scented with spring—a plant full of softly twisted tendrils and pale petals and in-turned stamens—a flower of moon-leaf and fire-bloom and dusk-thorn—drooping above their two heads like a blossom-laden bough bending heavily over two exquisite statues—two statues that did not speak, whose faces did not change as the night stole silently upon them—but they were side by side, very near, and the darkness was sweet.

It was only an instant. Then their lips met.

"Yes," he whispered, and drew back as the door opened.

Mrs. Lauderdale entered the room.

"Oh, are you there, Jack?" she asked, but without any surprise, as though she were accustomed to find him with Katharine.

"Yes," answered Ralston, quietly. "I've been here ever so long. How do you do, cousin Emma?"

"Oh, I'm so tired!" exclaimed Mrs. Lauderdale. "I've been working all day long. I positively can't see."

"You ought not to work so hard," said Ralston. "You'll wear your eyes out."

"No, I'm strong, and so are my eyes. I only wanted to say that I was tired. It's such a relief!"

Mrs. Lauderdale had been a very beautiful woman, and was, indeed, only just beginning to lose her beauty. She was much taller than either of her daughters, but of a different type of figure from Katharine, and less evenly grown, if such an expression may be permitted. The hand was typical of the difference. Mrs. Lauderdale's was extremely long and thin, but well made in the details, though out of proportion in the way of length and narrowness as a whole.

Katharine's hand was firm and full, without being what is called a thick hand. There was a more perfect balance between flesh and bone in the straight, strong fingers. Mrs. Lauderdale had been one of those magnificent fair beauties occasionally seen in Kentucky,—a perfect head with perfect but small features, superb golden hair, straight, clear eyes, a small red mouth,—great dignity of carriage, too, with the something which has been christened 'dash' when she moved quickly, or did anything with those long hands of hers,—a marvellous constitution, and the dazzling complexion of snow and carnations that goes with it, very different from the softer 'milk and roses' of the Latin poet's mistress. Mrs. Lauderdale had always been described as dazzling, and people who saw her for the first time used the word even now to convey the impression she made. Her age, which was known only to some members of the family, and which is not of the slightest importance to this history, showed itself chiefly in a diminution of this dazzling quality. The white was less white, the carnation was becoming a common pink, the gold of her hair was no longer gold all through, but distinctly brown in many places, though it would certainly never turn grey until extreme old age. Her movements, too, were less free, though stately still,—the brutal word 'rheumatism' had been whispered by the family doctor,—and to go back to her face, there were undeniably certain tiny lines, and many of them, which were not the lines of beauty.

It was a brave, good face, on the whole, gifted, sometimes sympathetic, and oddly cold when the woman's temper was most impulsive. For there is an expression of coldness which weakness puts on in self-defence. A certain narrowness of view, diametrically opposed to a corresponding narrowness in her husband's mind, did not show itself in her features. There is a defiant, supremely satisfied look which shows that sort of limitation. Possibly such narrowness was not natural with Mrs. Lauderdale, but the result of having been systematically opposed on certain particular grounds throughout more than a quarter of a century of married life. However that may be, it was by this time a part of her nature, though not outwardly expressed in any apparent way.

She had not been very happy with Alexander Junior, and she admitted the fact. She knew also that she had been a good wife to him in every fair sense of the word. For although she had enjoyed compensations, she had taken advantage of them in a strictly conscientious way. Undeniable beauty, of the kind which every one recognizes instantly without the slightest hesitation, is so rare a gift that it does indeed compensate its possessor for many misfortunes, especially when she enjoys amusement for its own sake, innocently and without losing her head or becoming spoiled and affected by constant admiration. Katharine Lauderdale had not that degree of beauty, and there were numerous persons who did not even care for what they called 'her style.' Her sister Charlotte had something of her mother's brilliancy, indeed, but there was a hardness about her face and nature which was apparent at first sight. Mrs. Alexander had always remained the beauty of the family, and indeed the beauty of the society to which she belonged, even after her daughters had been grown up. She had outshone them, even in a world like that of New York, which does not readily compare mothers and daughters in any way, and asks them out separately as though they did not belong to each other.

She had not been very happy, and apart from any purely imaginary bliss, procurable only by some miraculous changes in Alexander Junior's heart and head, she believed that the only real thing lacking was money. She had always been poor. She had never known what seemed to her the supreme delight of sitting in her own carriage. She had never tasted the pleasure of having five hundred dollars to spend on her fancies, exactly as she pleased. The question of dress had always been more or less of a struggle. She had not exactly extravagant tastes, but she should have liked to feel once in her life that she was at liberty to throw aside a pair of perfectly new gloves, merely because when she put them on the first time one of the seams was a little crooked, or the lower part was too loose for her narrow hand. She had always felt that when she had bought a thing she must wear it out, as a matter of conscience, even if it did not suit her. And there was a real little pain in the thought, of which she was ashamed. Small things, but womanly and human. Then, too, there was the constant chafing of her pardonable pride when ninety-nine of her acquaintances all did the same thing, and she was the hundredth who could not afford it—and the subscriptions and the charity concerts and the theatre parties. It was mainly in order to supply herself with a little money for such objects as these that she had worked so hard at her painting for years—that she might not be obliged to apply to her husband for such sums on every occasion. She had succeeded to some extent, too, and her initials had a certain reputation, even with the dealers. Many people knew that those same initials were hers, and a few friends were altogether in her confidence. Possibly if she had been less beautiful, she would have been spoken of at afternoon teas as 'poor Mrs. Lauderdale,' and people would have been found—for society has its kindly side—who would have half-surreptitiously paid large sums for bits of her work, even much more than her miniatures could ever be worth. But she did not excite pity. She looked rich, as some people do to their cost. People sympathized with her in the matter of Alexander Junior's character, for he was not popular. But no one thought of pitying her because she was poor. On the contrary, many persons envied her. It must be 'such fun,' they said, to be able to paint and really sell one's paintings. A dashing woman with a lot of talent, who can make a few hundreds in half an hour when she chooses, said others. What did she spend the money on? On whatever she pleased—probably in charity, she was so good-hearted. But those people did not see her as Jack Ralston saw her, worn out with a long day's work, her eyes aching, her naturally good temper almost on edge; and they did not know that Katharine Lauderdale's simple ball gowns were paid for by the work of her mother's hands. It was just as well that they did not know it. Society has such queer fits sometimes—somebody might have given Katharine a dress. But Ralston was in the secret and knew.

"One may be as strong as cast-steel," he said. "Even that wears out. Ask the people who make engines. You'll accomplish a great deal more if you go easy and give yourself rest from time to time."

"Like you, Jack," observed Mrs. Lauderdale, not unkindly.

"Oh, I'm a failure. I admitted the fact long ago. I'm only fit for a bad example,—a sort of moral scarecrow."

"Yes. I wonder why?" Mrs. Lauderdale was tired and was thinking aloud. "I didn't mean to say that, Jack," she added, frankly, realizing what she had said, from the recollection of the sound of her own voice, as people sometimes do who are exhausted or naturally absent-minded.

"It wasn't exactly complimentary, mother," said Katharine, coldly. "Besides, is it fair to say that a man is a failure at Jack's age? Patrick Henry was a failure at twenty-three. He was bankrupt."

"Patrick Henry!" exclaimed Ralston. "What do you know about Patrick Henry?"

"Oh, I've been reading history. It was he who said, 'Give me liberty, or give me death.'"

"Was it? I didn't know. But I'm glad to hear of somebody who got smashed first and celebrated afterwards. It's generally the other way, like Napoleon and Julius Cæsar."

"Cardinal Wolsey, Alexander the Great, and John Gilpin. It's easy to multiply examples, as the books say."

"You're much too clever for me this evening. I must be going home. My mother and I are going to dine all alone and abuse our neighbours all the evening."

"How delightful!" exclaimed Katharine, thinking of the grim family table at which she was to sit as usual—there had been some fine fighting in Charlotte's unmarried days, but Katharine's opposition was generally of the silent kind.

"Yes," answered Ralston. "There's nobody like my mother. She's the best company in the world. Good night, cousin Emma. Good night, Katharine."

But Katharine followed him into the entry, letting the library door almost close behind her.

"It will be quite time enough, if you come and tell me on the evening before it is to be," she whispered hurriedly. "There's no party to-morrow night, but on Wednesday I'm going to the Thirlwalls' dance."

"Will any morning do?" asked Ralston, also in a whisper.

"Yes, any morning. Now go—quick. That's enough, dear—there, if you must. Go—good night—dear!"

The process of leave-taking was rather spasmodic, so far as Katharine was concerned. Ralston felt that same strange emotion once more as he found himself out upon the pavement of Clinton Place. His head swam a little, and he stopped to light a cigarette before he turned towards Fifth Avenue.

Katharine went back into the library, and found her mother sitting as the two had left her, and apparently unconscious that her daughter had gone out of the room.

"He's quite right, mother dear. You are trying to do too much," said Katharine, coming behind the low chair and smoothing her mother's beautiful hair, kissing it softly and speaking into the heavy waves of it.

Mrs. Lauderdale put up one thin hand, and patted the girl's cheek without turning to look at her, but said nothing for a moment.

"It's quite true," Katharine said. "You mustn't do it any more."

"How smooth your cheek is, child!" said Mrs. Lauderdale, thoughtfully.

"So is yours, mother dear."

"No—it's not. It's full of little lines. Touch it—you can feel them—just there. Besides—you can see them."

"I don't feel anything—and I don't see anything," answered Katharine.

But she knew what her mother meant, and it made her a little sad—even her. She had been accustomed all her life to believe that her mother was the most beautiful woman in the world, and she knew that the time had just come when she must grow used to not believing it any longer. Mrs. Lauderdale had never said anything of the sort before. She had been supreme in her way, and had taken it for granted that she was, never referring to her own looks under any circumstances.

In the long silence that followed, Katharine quietly went and closed the shutters of the windows, for Ralston had only pulled down the shades. She drew the dark curtains across for the evening, lit another gaslight, and remained standing by the fireplace.

"Thank you, darling," said Mrs. Lauderdale.

"I do wish papa would let us have lamps, or shades, or something," said Katharine, looking disconsolately at the ground-glass globes of the gaslights.

"He doesn't like them—he says he can't see."

There was a short pause.

"Oh, mother dear! what in the world does papa like, I wonder?" Katharine turned with an impatient movement as she spoke, and her broad eyebrows almost met between her eyes.

"Hush, child!" But the words were uttered wearily and mechanically—Mrs. Lauderdale had pronounced them so often under precisely the same circumstances during the last quarter of a century.

Katharine sighed, a little out of impatience and to some extent in pity for her mother. But she stood looking across the room at the closed door through which Ralston and she had gone out together five minutes earlier, and she could still feel his last kiss on her cheek. He had never seemed so loving as on that day, and she had succeeded in persuading him, against his instinctive judgment, to promise her what she asked,—the maddest, most foolish thing a girl's imagination could long for, no matter with what half-reasonable excuse. But she had his promise, which, as she well knew, he would keep—and she loved him with all her heart. The expression of mingled sadness and impatience vanished like a breath from a polished mirror. She was unconscious that she looked radiantly happy, as her mother gazed up into her face.

"What a beautiful creature you are!" said Mrs. Lauderdale, in a tone unlike her natural voice.

CHAPTER V.

KATHARINE had no anxiety about the future, and it seemed to her that she had managed matters in the wisest and most satisfactory manner possible. She had provided, as she thought, against the possibility of any subsequent interference with her marriage in case she should see fit to take the step of which she had spoken. The combination seemed perfect, and even a sensible person, taking into consideration all the circumstances, might have found something to say in favour of a marriage which should not be generally discussed. Ralston and Katharine, though not rich, were decidedly prominent young people in their own society, and their goings and comings interested the gossips and furnished food for conversation. There were many reasons for this. Neither of them was exactly like the average young person in the world. But the great name of Lauderdale, which was such a real power in the financial world, contributed most largely to the result. Every one who bore it, or who was as closely connected with it as the Ralstons, was more or less before the public. Most of the society paragraph writers in the newspapers spoke of the family, collectively and individually, as often as they could find anything to say about it, and as a general rule the tone of their remarks was subdued and laudatory, and betrayed something very like awe. The presence of the Lauderales and the Ralstons was taken for granted in all accounts of big parties, first nights at the opera and

Daly's, and of other similar occasions. From time to time a newspaper man in a fit of statistics calculated how many dollars of income accrued to Robert Lauderdale at every minute, and proceeded to show how much each member of the family would have if it were all equally divided. As Robert the Rich had made his money in real estate, and his name never appeared in connection with operations in Wall Street, he was therefore not periodically assailed by the wrathful chorus of the sold and ruined, abusing him and his people to the youngest of the living generation, an ordeal with which the great speculators are familiar. But from time to time the daily papers published wood-cuts supposed to be portraits of him and his connections, and the obituary notice of him—which was, of course, kept ready in every newspaper office—would have given even the old gentleman himself some satisfaction. The only member of the family who suffered at all for being connected with him was Benjamin Slayback, the member of Congress. If he ever dared to hint at any measure implying expenditure on the part of the country, he was promptly informed by some Honourable Member on the other side, that it was all very well for him to be reckless, with the whole Lauderdale fortune at his back, but that ordinary mortals had to content themselves with ordinary possibilities. The member from California called him the Eastern Cræsus, and the member from Massachusetts called him the Western Millionaire, and the member from Missouri quoted Scripture at him, while the Social-Democrat member from Somewhere—there was one at that time, and he was a little curiosity in his way—called him a Capitalist, than which epithet the social-democratic dictionary contains none more biting and more offensive in the opinion of its compilers. Altogether, at such times the Honourable Slayback of Nevada had a very bad quarter of an hour because he had married Charlotte Lauderdale,—penniless but a Lauderdale, very inadequately fitted out for a bride, though she was the grand-niece of Robert the Rich. Slayback of Nevada, however, had a certain rough dignity of his own, and never mentioned those facts. He had plenty of money himself and did not covet any that belonged to his wife's relations.

"I'm not as rich as your uncle Robert," he said to her on the day after their marriage, "and I don't count on being. But you can have all you want. There's enough to go round, now. Maybe you wouldn't like to be bothering me all the while for little things? Yes, that's natural; so I'll just put something up to your credit at Riggs's and you can have a cheque-book. When you've got through it, tell Riggs to let me know. You might be shy of telling me."

And Benjamin Slayback smiled in a kindly fashion not at all familiar to his men friends, and on the following day Charlotte received a notice from the bank to the effect that ten thousand dollars stood to her credit. Never having had any money of her own, the sum seemed a fortune to her, and she showed herself properly grateful, and forgave Benjamin a multitude of small sins, even such as having once worn a white satin tie in the evening, and at the opera, of all places.

Katharine was perfectly well aware that the smallest actions of her family were subjects for public discussion, and she knew how people would talk if it were ever discovered that she had been secretly married to John Ralston. On the other hand, the rest of the Lauderdals were in the same position, and would be quite willing, when they were acquainted with the facts, to say that the marriage had been a private one, leaving it to be supposed that they had known all about it from the first. She had no anxiety for the future, therefore, and believed that she was acting with her eyes open to all conceivable contingencies and possibilities. Matters were not, indeed, finally settled, for even after she was married she would still have the interview with her uncle to face; but she felt sure of the result. It was so easy for him to do exactly what he pleased, as it seemed to her, to make or unmake men's fortunes at his will, as she could tie and untie a bit of string.

And her confidence in Ralston was boundless. Considering his capacities, as they appeared to her, his failure to do anything for himself in the two positions which had been offered to him was not to be considered a failure at all. He was a man of action, and he was an exceptionally well-educated man. How could he ever be expected to do an ordinary clerk's work? It was absurd to suppose that he could change his whole character at a moment's notice, and it was an insult to expect that he should change it at all. It was a splendid nature, she thought, generous, energetic, brave, averse to mean details, of course, as such natures must be, impatient of control, independent and dominating. There was much to admire in Ralston, she believed, even if she had not loved him. And perhaps she was right, from her point of view. Of his chief fault she really knew nothing. The little she had heard of his being wild, as it is called, rather attracted than repelled her. She despised men whom she looked upon as 'duffers' and 'muffs.' Even her father, whose peculiarities were hard to bear, was manly in his way. He had been good at sports in his youth, he was a good rider, and could be trusted with horses that did not belong to him, which was fortunate, as he had never possessed any of his own; he was a good shot, as she had often heard, and he periodically disappeared upon solitary salmon-fishing expeditions on the borders of Canada. For he was a strong man and a tough man, and needed much bodily exercise. The only real 'muff' there had ever been in the family Katharine considered to be her grandfather, the philanthropist, and he was so old that it did not matter much. But the tales he told of his studious youth disgusted her, for some occult reason. All the other male relations were manly fellows, even to little Frank Miner, who was as full of fight as a cock-sparrow, in spite of his diminutive stature. Benjamin Slayback, too, was eminently manly, in an awkward, constrained fashion. Hamilton Bright was an athlete. And John Ralston could do all the things which the others could do, and did most things a trifle better, with a certain finished 'style' which other men envied. He was eminently the kind of man whose acquaintances at the club will back for money in every contest requiring skill and strength.

It was no wonder that Katharine admired him. But she told herself that her admiration had nothing to do with her love. There was much more in him than the world knew of, and she was quite sure of it. Her ideals were high, and Ralston fulfilled most of them. She always fancied that there was something knightly about him, and it appealed to her more than any other characteristic.

She felt that he could be intimate without ever becoming familiar. There is more in that idea than appears at first sight, and the distinction is not one of words. Up to a certain point she was quite right in making it, for he was naturally courtly, as well as ordinarily courteous, and yet without exaggeration. He did certain things which few other men did, and which she liked. He walked on her left side, for instance, whenever it was possible, if they chanced to be together in the street. She had never spoken of it to him, but she had read, in some old book on court manners, that it was right a hundred years ago, and she was pleased. They had been children together, and yet almost since she could remember he had always opened the door for her when she left a room. And not for her only, but for every woman. If she and her mother were together when they met him, he always spoke to her mother first. If they got into a carriage he expected to sit on the left side, even if he had to leave the pavement and go to the other door to get in. He never spoke of her simply as 'Katharine' if he had to mention her name in her presence to any one

not a member of the family. He said 'my cousin Katharine,' or 'Miss Lauderdale,' according to circumstances.

They were little things, all of them, but by no means absurd in her estimation, and he would continue to do them all his life. She supposed that his mother had taught him the usages of courtesy when he had been a boy, but they were a part of himself now. How many men, thought Katharine, who believed themselves 'perfect gentlemen,' and who were undeniably gentlemen in every essential, were wholly lacking in these small matters! How many would have called such things old-fashioned nonsense, who had never so much as noticed that Ralston did them all, because he did them unobtrusively, and because, in reality, most of them are founded on perfectly logical principles, and originally had nothing but the convenience of society for their object. Katharine had thought it out. For instance, most men, being right-handed, have the more skilful hand and the stronger arm on the lady's side, with which to render her any assistance she may need, if they find themselves on her left. There was never any affectation of fashion about really good manners, Katharine believed, and everything appertaining thereto had a solid foundation in usefulness. During Slayback's courtship of her sister she had found numberless opportunities of contrasting what she called the social efficiency of the man who knew exactly what to do with the inefficiency of him who did not; and, on a more limited scale, she found such opportunities daily when she saw Ralston together with other men.

He had a very high standard of honour, too. Many men had that, and all whom she knew were supposed to have it, but there were few whom she felt that she could never possibly suspect of some little meanness. That was another step to the pedestal on which she had set up her ideal.

But perhaps one of the chief points which appealed to her sympathy was Ralston's breadth of view, or absence of narrowness. He had spoken the strict truth that evening when he had said that he never laughed at any one's religion, and, next to love, religion was at that time uppermost in Katharine Lauderdale's mind. At her present stage of development everything she did, saw, read and heard bore upon one or the other, or both, which was not surprising considering the atmosphere in which she had grown up.

Alexander Junior had never made but one sacrifice for his wife, and that had been of a negative description. He had forgiven her for being a Roman Catholic, and had agreed never to mention the subject; and he had kept his word, as indeed he always did on the very rare occasions when he could be induced to give it. It is needless to say that he had made a virtue of his conduct in this respect, for he systematically made the most of everything in himself which could be construed into a virtue at all. But at all events he had never broken his promise. In the days when he had married Emma Camperdown there had been little or no difficulty about marriages between Catholics and members of other churches, and it had been understood that his children were to be brought up Presbyterians, though nothing had been openly said about it. His bride had been young, beautiful and enthusiastic, and she had believed in her heart that before very long she could effect her husband's conversion, little dreaming of the rigid nature with which she should have to deal. It would have been as easy to make a Roman Catholic of Oliver Cromwell, as Mrs. Lauderdale soon discovered to her sorrow. He did not even consider that she had any right to talk of religion to her children.

Charlotte Lauderdale grew up in perfect indifference. Her mind developed young, but not far. In her childhood she was a favourite of old Mrs. Lauderdale,—formerly a Miss Mainwaring, of English extraction, and the mother of Mrs. Ralston,—and the old lady had taught her that Presbyterians were no better than atheists, and that Roman Catholics were idolaters, so that the only salvation lay in the Episcopal Church. The lesson had entered deep into the girl's heart, and she had grown up laughing at all three; but on coming to years of discretion she went to an Episcopal church because most of her friends did. She enjoyed the weekly fray with her father, whom she hated for his own sake in the first place, and secondly because he was poor, and she once went so far as to make him declare, in his iron voice, that he vastly preferred Catholics to Episcopalians,—a declaration which she ever afterwards cast violently in his teeth when she had succeeded in drawing him into a discussion upon articles of faith. Her mother never had the slightest influence over her. The girl was quick-witted and believed herself clever, was amusing and thought she was witty, was headstrong, capricious and violent in her dislikes and was consequently convinced that she had a very strong will. She married Slayback for three reasons,—to escape from her family, because he was rich, and because she believed that she could do anything she chose with him. She was not mistaken in his wealth, and she removed herself altogether from the sphere of the Lauderdals, but Benjamin Slayback was not at all the kind of person she had taken him for.

Katharine was altogether different from her sister. She was more habitually silent, and her taste was never for family war. She thought more and read less than Charlotte, who devoured literature promiscuously and trusted to luck to remember something of what she read. Indeed, Katharine thought a great deal, and often reasoned correctly from inaccurate knowledge. In a healthy way she was inclined to be melancholic, and was given to following out serious ideas, and even to something like religious contemplation. Everything connected with belief in transcendental matters interested her exceedingly. She delighted in having discussions which turned upon the supernatural, and upon such things as seem to promise a link between the hither and the further side of death's boundary,—between the cis-mortal and the trans-mortal, if the coining of such words be allowable. In this she resembled nine-tenths of the American women of her age and surroundings. The mind of the idle portion of American society to-day reminds one of a polypus whose countless feelers are perpetually waving and writhing in the fruitless attempt to catch the very smallest fragment of something from the other side, wherewith to satisfy the mortal hunger that torments it.

There is something more than painful, something like an act of the world's soul-tragedy, in this all-pervading desire to know the worst, or the best,—to know anything which shall prove that there is something to know. There is a breathless interest in every detail of an 'experience' as it is related, a raising of hopes, a thrilling of the long-ready receptivity as the point is approached; and then, when the climax is reached and past, there is the sudden, almost agonizing relapse into blank hopelessness. The story has been told, but nothing is proved. We know where the door is, but before it is a screen round which we must pass to reach it. The screen is death, as we see it. To pass it and be within sight of the threshold is to die, as we understand death, and there lies the boundary of possible experience, for, so far as we know, there is no other door.

The question is undoubtedly the greatest which humanity can ask, for the answer must be immortality or annihilation. It seems that a certain proportion of mankind, driven to distraction by the battle of beliefs, has actually lost the faculty of believing anything at all, and the place where the faculty was aches, to speak familiarly.

That, at least, was how it struck Katharine Lauderdale, and it was from this point of view that she seriously

contemplated becoming a Catholic. If she did so, she intended to accept the Church as a whole and refuse, forever afterwards, to reopen the discussion. She never could accept it as her mother did, for she had not been brought up in it, but there were days when she felt that by a single act of will she could bind herself to believe in all the essentials, and close her eyes to the existence of the non-essentials, never to open them again. Then, she thought, she should never have any more doubts.

But on other days she wished that there might be another way. She got odd numbers of the proceedings of a society devoted to psychological researches, and read with extreme avidity the accurately reported evidence of persons who had seen or heard unusual sights or sounds, and studied the figures illustrating the experiments in thought-transference. Then the conviction came upon her that there must be another door besides the door of death, and that, if she were only patient she might be led to it or come upon it unawares. She knew far too little of even what little there is to be known, to get any further than this vague and not unpleasant dream, and she was conscious of her ignorance, asking questions of every one she met who took the slightest interest in psychical enquiries. Of course, her attempts to gain knowledge were fruitless. If any one who is willing to be a member of civilized society knew anything definite about what we call the future state, the whole of civilized society would know it also in less than a month. Every one can be quite sure of that, and no one need therefore waste time in questioning his neighbour in the hope of learning anything certain.

There were even times when her father's rigid and merciless view of the soul pleased her, and was in sympathy with her slightly melancholic temperament. The unbending, manly quality of the Presbyterian belief attracted her by its strength—the courage a man must have to go through life facing an almost inevitable hell for himself and the positive certainty of irrecoverable damnation for most of those dearest to him. If her father was in earnest, as he appeared to be, he could not have the slightest hope that her mother could be saved. At that idea Katharine laughed, being supposed to be a Presbyterian herself. Nevertheless, she sometimes liked his hard sayings and doings, simply because they were hard. Hamilton Bright had often told her that she had a lawyer's mind, because she could not help seeing things from opposite sides at the same time, whereupon she always answered that though she despised prejudices, she liked people who had them, because such persons were generally stronger than the average. Ralston, who had not many, and had none at all about religious matters, was the man with whom she felt herself in the closest sympathy, a fact which went far to prove to Bright that he was not mistaken in his judgment of her.

On the whole, in spite of the declaration she had made to Ralston, Katharine Lauderdale's state was sceptical, in the sense that her mind was in a condition of suspended judgment between no less than five points of view, the Presbyterian, the Catholic, the deistic, the psychologic, and the materialistic. It was her misfortune that her nature had led her to think of such matters at all, rather than to accept some existing form of belief and to be as happy as she could be with it from the first, as her mother had done: and though her intelligence was good, it was as totally inadequate to grapple with such subjects as it was well adapted to the ordinary requirements of worldly life. But she was not to be blamed for being in a state of mind to which her rather unusual surroundings had contributed much, and her thoughtful temperament not a little. If anything, she was to be pitied, though the mighty compensation of a genuine love had grown up year by year to neutralize the elements of unhappiness which were undoubtedly present.

It is worth noticing that at this time, which opened the crucial period of her life, she doubted her own religious convictions and her own stability of purpose, but she did not for a moment doubt the sincerity of her love for John Ralston, nor of his for her, as she conclusively proved when she determined to risk her whole life in such a piece of folly as a secret marriage.

When she came down to dinner on that memorable evening, she found her father and mother sitting on opposite sides of the fireplace. Alexander Junior was correctly arrayed in evening dress, and his clothes fitted perfectly upon his magnificent figure. The keen eye of a suspicious dandy could have detected that they were very old clothes, and Mr. Lauderdale would not have felt at all dismayed at the discovery of the fact. He prided himself upon wearing a coat ten years, and could tell the precise age of every garment in his possession. He tied his ties to perfection also, and this, too, was an economy, for such was his skill that he could wear a white tie twice, bringing the knot into exactly the same place a second time. Mont Blanc presented not a more spotless, impenetrable, and unchanging front than Alexander Junior's shirt. He had processes of rejuvenating his shoes known to him alone, and in the old days of evening gloves, his were systematically cleaned and rematched, and the odd ones laid aside to replace possible torn ones in the future, constituting a veritable survival of the fittest. Five and twenty years of married life had not taught him that a woman could not possibly do the same with her possessions, and he occasionally enquired why his wife did not wear certain gowns which had been young with her daughters. He never put on the previously mentioned white tie, however, unless some one was coming to dinner. When the family was alone, he wore a black one. As he was not hospitable, and did not encourage hospitality in his wife, though he praised it extravagantly in other people, and never refused a dinner party, the black tie was the rule at home. Black ties last a long time.

Katharine noticed the white one this evening, and was surprised, as her mother had not spoken to her of any guest.

"Who is coming to dinner?" she asked, looking at her father, almost as soon as she had shut the door.

Mr. Lauderdale's steel-grey upper lip was immediately raised in a sort of smile which showed his large white teeth—he had defied the dentist from his youth up, and his smile was hard and cold as an electric light.

"Ah, my dear child," he answered in a clear, metallic voice, "I am glad you notice things. Little things are always worth noticing. Walter Crowdie is coming to dinner to-day. In fact, he is rather late—"

"With Hester?" asked Katharine, quickly. Hester Crowdie was Hamilton Bright's sister, and Katharine liked her.

"No, my dear, without Hester. We could hardly ask two people to our every-day dinner."

"Oh—it's only Mr. Crowdie, then," said Katharine in a tone of disappointment, sitting down beside her mother.

"I hope you'll be nice to him, Katharine," said Mr. Lauderdale. "There are many reasons—"

"Oh, yes! I'll be nice to him," answered the young girl, with a short, quick frown that disappeared again instantly.

"I don't like your expression, my child," said Alexander Junior, severely, "and I don't like to be interrupted. Mr. Crowdie is very kind. He wishes to paint your portrait, and he proposes to give us the study he must make first, which will be just as good as the picture itself, I have no doubt. Crowdie is getting a great reputation, and a picture by him is valuable. One can't afford to be rude to a man who makes such a proposal."

"No," observed Mrs. Lauderdale as though speaking to herself. "I should really like to have it. He is a great artist."

"I haven't the least intention of being rude to him," answered Katharine. "What does he mean to do with my portrait—with the picture itself when he has painted it—sell it?"

"He would have a perfect right to sell it, of course—with no name. He means to exhibit it in Paris, I believe, and then I think he intends to give it to his wife. You always say she is a great friend of yours."

"Oh—that's all right, if it's for Hester," said Katharine. "Of course she's a friend of mine. Hush! I hear the bell."

"When did Mr. Crowdie talk to you about this?" asked Mrs. Lauderdale, addressing her husband.

"This morning—hush! Here he is."

Alexander Junior had an almost abnormal respect for the proprieties, and always preferred to stop talking about a person five minutes before he or she appeared. It was a part of his excessively reticent nature.

The door opened and Walter Crowdie appeared, a pale young man with heavy, red lips and a bad figure. His eyes alone redeemed his face from being positively repulsive, for they were of a very beautiful blue colour and shaded by extremely long brown lashes. A quantity of pale hair, too long to be neat, but not so long as worn by many modern musicians, concealed the shape of his head and grew low on his forehead. The shape of the face, as the hair allowed it to be seen, resembled that of a pear, wide and flaccid about the jaws and narrowing upwards towards the temples. Crowdie's hands were small, cushioned with fat, and of a dead white—the fingers being very pointed and the nails long and polished. His shoulders sloped like a woman's, and were narrow, and he was heavy about the waist and slightly in-kneed. He was too fashionable to use perfumes, but one instinctively expected him to smell of musk.

Both women experienced an unpleasant sensation when he entered the room. What Mr. Lauderdale felt it is impossible to guess, but as Katharine saw the two shake hands she was proud of her father and of the whole manly race from which she was descended.

Last of all the party came Alexander Senior, taking the utmost advantage of age's privilege to be late. Even he, within sight of his life's end, contrasted favourably with Walter Crowdie. He stooped, he was badly dressed, his white tie was crooked, and there were most evident spots on his coat; his eyes were watery, and there were wrinkles running in all directions through the eyebrows, the wrinkles that come last of all; he shambled a little as he walked, and he certainly smelt of tobacco smoke. He had not been the strongest of the three old brothers, though he was the eldest, and his faculties, if not impaired, were not what they had been. But the skull was large and bony, the knotted and wrinkled old hands were manly hands, and always had been, and the benevolent old grey eyes had never had the womanish look in them which belonged to Crowdie's.

But the young man was quite unconscious of the unfavourable impression he always produced upon Mrs. Lauderdale and her daughter, and his languishing eyelids moved softly and swept his pale cheeks with their long lashes as he looked from one to the other and shook hands.

Alexander Junior, whose sense of punctuality had almost taken offence, rang the bell as his father entered, and a serving girl, who lived in terror of her life, drew back the folding doors a moment later.

CHAPTER VI.

THE conversation at dinner did not begin brilliantly. Mrs. Lauderdale was tired, and Katharine was preoccupied; as was natural, old Mr. Lauderdale was not easily moved to talk except upon his favourite hobby, and Alexander Junior was solemnly and ferociously hungry, as many strong men are at regular hours. As for Crowdie, he always felt a little out of his element amongst his wife's relations, of whom he stood somewhat in awe, and he was more observant than communicative at first. Katharine avoided looking at him, which she could easily do, as she sat between him and her father. As usual, it was her mother who made the first effort to talk.

"How is Hester?" she asked, looking across at Crowdie.

"Oh, very well, thanks," he answered, absently. "Oh, yes,—she's very well, thank you," he added, repeating the answer with a little change and more animation. "She had a cold last week, but she's got over it."

"It was dreadful weather," said Katharine, helping her mother to stir the silence. "All grandpapa's idiots had the grippe."

"All Mr. Lauderdale's what?" asked Crowdie. "I didn't quite catch—"

"The idiots—the asylum, you know."

"Oh, yes—I remember," said the young man, and his broad red lips smiled.

Alexander Senior, whose hand shook a little, had eaten his soup with considerable success. He glanced from Katharine to the young artist, and there was a twinkle of amusement in the kindly old eyes.

"Katharine always laughs at the idiots, and talks as though they were my personal property." His voice was deep and almost musical still—it had been a very gentle voice in his youth.

"Not a very valuable property," observed Alexander Junior, fixing his eye severely on the serving girl, who forthwith sprang at Mrs. Lauderdale's empty plate as though her life depended on taking it away in time.

The Lauderdale's had never kept a man-servant. The girl was a handsome Canadian, very smart in black and white.

"Wouldn't it be rather an idea to insure all their lives, and make the insurance pay the expenses of the asylum?" enquired Crowdie, gravely looking at Alexander Junior.

"Not very practical," answered the latter, with something like a smile.

"Why not?" asked his father, with sudden interest. "That strikes me as a very brilliant idea for making charities self-supporting. I suppose," he continued, turning to his son, "that the companies could make no objections to insuring the lives of idiots. The rate ought to be very reasonable when one considers the care they get, and the medical attendance, and the immunity from risk of accident."

"I don't know about that. When an asylum takes fire, the idiots haven't the sense to get out," observed

Alexander Junior, grimly.

"Nonsense! Nonsense, Alexander!" The old man shook his head. "Idiots are just as—well, not quite as sensible as other people,—that would be an exaggeration—but they're not all so stupid, by any means."

"No—so I've heard," said Crowdie, gravely.

"So stupid as what, Mr. Crowdie?" asked Katharine, turning on him rather abruptly.

"As others, Miss Lauderdale—as me, for instance," he answered, without hesitation. "Probably we both meant—Mr. Lauderdale and I—that all idiots are not so stupid as the worst cases, which are the ones most people think of when idiots are mentioned."

"Exactly. You put it very well." The old philanthropist looked pleased at the interruption. "And I repeat that I think Mr. Crowdie's idea of insuring them is very good. Every time one dies,—they do die, poor things,—you get a sum of money. Excellent, very excellent!"

His ideas of business transactions had always been hazy in the extreme, and his son proceeded to set him right.

"It couldn't possibly be of any advantage unless you had capital to invest and insured your own idiots," said Alexander Junior. "And that would just amount to making a savings bank on your own account, and saving so much a year out of your expenses for each idiot. You could invest the savings, and the interest would be all you could possibly make. It's not as though the idiots' families paid the dues and made over the policies to you. There would be money in that, I admit. You might try it. There might be a streak of idiocy in the other members of the patient's family which would make them agree to it."

The old man's gentle eyes suddenly lighted up with ill temper.

"You're laughing at me, Alexander," he said, in a louder voice. "You're laughing at me!"

"No, sir; I'm in earnest," answered the son, in his cool, metallic tones.

"Don't the big companies insure their own ships?" asked the philanthropist. "Of course they do, and they make money by it."

"I beg your pardon. They make nothing but the interest of what they set aside for each ship. They simply cover their losses."

"Well, and if an idiot dies, then the asylum gets the money."

"Yes, sir. But an idiot has no intrinsic value."

"Why, then the asylum gets a sum of money for what was worth nothing, and it must be very profitable—much more so than insuring ships."

"But it's the asylum's own money to begin with—"

"And as for your saying that an idiot has no intrinsic value, Alexander," pursued the old man, going off on another tack, "I won't have you say such things. I won't listen to them. An idiot is a human being, sir, and has an immortal soul, I'd have you to know, as well as you or I. And you have the assurance to say that he has no intrinsic value! An immortal soul, made for eternal happiness or eternal suffering, and no intrinsic value! Upon my word, Alexander, you forget yourself! I should not have expected such an inhuman speech from you."

"Is the 'vital spark of heavenly flame' a marketable commodity?" asked Crowdie, speaking to Katharine in a low voice.

"Idiots have souls, Mr. Crowdie," said the philanthropist, looking straight across at him, and taking it for granted that he had said something in opposition.

"I've no doubt they have, Mr. Lauderdale," answered the painter. "I never thought of questioning the fact."

"Oh! I thought you did. I understood that you were laughing at the idea."

"Not at all. It was the use of the word 'intrinsic' as applied to the value of the soul which struck me as odd."

"Ah—that is quite another matter, my dear sir," replied the old gentleman, who was quickly appeased. "My son first used the word in this discussion. I'm not responsible for it. The younger generation is not so careful in its language as we were taught to be. But the important point, after all, is that idiots have souls."

"The soul is the only thing anybody really can be said to have as his own," said Crowdie, thoughtfully.

Katharine glanced at him. He did not look like the kind of man to make such a speech with sincerity. She wondered vaguely what his soul would be like, if she could see it, and it seemed to her that it would be something strange—white, with red lips, singing an evil song, which she could not understand, in a velvet voice, and that it would smell of musk. The side of her that was towards him instinctively shrank a little from him.

"I am glad to hear you say that, Mr. Crowdie," said the philanthropist with approbation. "It closes the discussion very fittingly. I hope we shall hear no more of idiots not having souls. Poor things! It is almost the only thing they have that makes them like the rest of us."

"People are all so different," replied the artist. "I find that more and more true every day. And it takes a soul to understand a soul. Otherwise photography would take the place of portrait painting."

"I don't quite see that," said Alexander Junior, who had employed the last few minutes in satisfying his first pangs of hunger, having been interrupted by the passage of arms with his father. "What becomes of colour in photography?"

"What becomes of colour in a charcoal or pen and ink drawing?" asked Crowdie. "Yet either, if at all good, is preferable to the best photograph."

"I'm not sure of that. I like a good photograph. It is much more accurate than any drawing can be."

"Yes—but it has no soul," objected Crowdie.

"How can an inanimate object have a soul, sir?" asked the philanthropist, suddenly. "That is as bad as saying that idiots—"

"I mean that a photograph has nothing which suggests the soul of the original," said Crowdie, interrupting and speaking in a high, clear tone. He had a beautiful tenor voice, and sang well; and he possessed the power of making himself heard easily against many other voices.

"It is the exact representation of the person," argued Alexander Junior, whose ideas upon art were limited.

"Excuse me. Even that is not scientifically true. There can only be one point in the whole photograph which is

precisely in focus. But that is not what I mean. Every face has something besides the lines and the colour. For want of a better word, we call it the expression—it is the individuality—the soul—the real person—the something which the hand can suggest, but which nothing mechanical can ever reproduce. The artist who can give it has talent, even if he does not know how to draw. The best draughtsman and painter in the world is only a mechanic if he cannot give it. Mrs. Lauderdale paints—and paints well—she knows what I mean.”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Lauderdale. “The fact that there is something which we can only suggest but never show would alone prove the existence of the soul to any one who paints.”

“I don’t understand those things,” said Alexander Junior.

“Grandpapa,” said Katharine, suddenly, “if any one asserted that there was no such a thing as the soul, what should you answer?”

“I should tell him that he was a blasphemer,” answered the old gentleman, promptly and with energy.

“But that wouldn’t be an argument,” retorted the young girl.

“He would discover the force of it hereafter,” said her father. The electric smile followed the words.

Crowdie looked at Katharine and smiled also, but she did not see.

“But isn’t a man entitled to an argument?” she asked. “I mean—if any one really couldn’t believe that he had a soul—there are such people—”

“Lots of them,” observed Crowdie.

“It’s their own fault, then, and they deserve no mercy—and they will find none,” said Alexander Junior.

“Then believing is a matter of will, like doing right,” argued the young girl. “And a man has only to say, ‘I believe,’ and he will believe, because he wills it.”

But neither of the Lauderdals had any intention of being drawn out on that point. They were good Presbyterians, and were Scotch by direct descent; and they knew well enough what direction the discussion must take if it were prolonged. The old gentleman put a stop to it.

“The questions of the nature of belief and free will are pretty deep ones, my dear,” he said, kindly, “and they are not of the sort to be discussed idly at dinner.”

Strange to say, that was the species of answer which pleased Katharine best. She liked the uncompromising force of genuinely prejudiced people who only allowed argument to proceed when they were sure of a logical result in their own favour. Alexander Junior nodded approvingly, and took some more beef. He abhorred bread, vegetables, and sweet things, and cared only for what produced the greatest amount of energy in the shortest time. It was astonishing that such iron strength should have accomplished nothing in nearly fifty years of life.

“Yes,” said Crowdie, “they are rather important things. But I don’t think that there are so many people who deny the existence of the soul as people who want to satisfy their curiosity about it, by getting a glimpse at it. Hester and I dine out a good deal—people are very kind, and always ask us to dinners because they know I can’t go out to late parties on account of my work—so we are always dining out; and we were saying only to-day that at nine-tenths of the dinners we go to the conversation sooner or later turns on the soul, or psychical research, or Buddhism, or ghosts, or something of the sort. It’s odd, isn’t it, that there should be so much talk about those things just now? I think it shows a kind of general curiosity. Everybody wants to get hold of a soul and study its habits, as though it were an ornithorynchus or some queer animal—it is strange, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Lauderdale, suddenly joining in the conversation. “If you once cut loose from your own form of belief there’s no particular reason why you should be satisfied with that of any one else. If a man leaves his house without an object there’s nothing to make him go in one direction rather than in another.”

“So far as that is concerned, I agree with you,” said Alexander Junior.

“There is truth to direct him,” observed the philanthropist.

“And there is beauty,” said Crowdie, turning his head towards Mrs. Lauderdale and his eyes towards Katharine.

“Oh, of course!” exclaimed the latter. “If you are going to jumble the soul, and art, and everything, all together, there are lots of things to lead one. Where does beauty lead you, Mr. Crowdie?”

“To imagine a vain thing,” answered the painter with a soft laugh. “It also leads me to try and copy it, with what I imagine it means, and I don’t always succeed.”

“I hope you’ll succeed if you paint my daughter’s portrait,” remarked Alexander Junior.

“No,” Crowdie replied thoughtfully, and looking at Katharine quite directly now. “I shan’t succeed, but if Miss Lauderdale will let me try, I’ll promise to do my very best. Will you, Miss Lauderdale? Your father said he thought you would have no objection.”

“I said you would, Katharine, and I said nothing about objections,” said her father, who loved accurate statements.

Katharine did not like to be ordered to do anything and the short, quick frown bent her brows for a second.

“I am much flattered,” she said coldly.

“You will not be, when I have finished, I fear,” said Crowdie, with quick tact. “Please, Miss Lauderdale, I don’t want you to sit to me as a matter of duty, because your father is good enough to ask you. That isn’t it, at all. Please understand. It’s for Hester, you know. She’s such a friend of yours, and you’re such a friend of hers, and I want to surprise her with a Christmas present, and there’s nothing she’d like so much as a picture of you. I don’t say anything about the pleasure it will be to me to paint you—it’s just for her. Will you?”

“Of course I will,” answered Katharine, her brow clearing and her tone changing.

She had not looked at him while he was speaking, and she was struck, as she had often been, by the exquisite beauty of his voice when he spoke familiarly and softly. It was like his eyes, smooth, rich and almost woman-like.

“And when will you come?” he asked. “To-morrow? Next day? Would eleven o’clock suit you?”

“To-morrow, if you like,” answered the young girl. “Eleven will do perfectly.”

“Will you come too, Mrs. Lauderdale?” Crowdie asked, without changing his manner.

“Yes—that is—not to-morrow. I’ll come one of these days and see how you are getting on. It’s a long time since I’ve seen you at work, and I should enjoy it ever so much. But I should rather come when it’s well begun. I shall learn

more."

"I'm afraid you won't learn much from me, Mrs. Lauderdale. It's very different work from miniature—and I have no rule. It seems to me that the longer I paint the more hopeless all rules are. Ten years ago, when I was working in Paris, I used to believe in canons of art, and fixed principles, and methods, and all that sort of thing. But I can't any more. I do it anyhow, just as it seems to come—with anything—with a stump, a brush, a rag, hands, fingers, anything. I should not be surprised to find myself drawing with my elbow and painting with the back of my head! No, really—I sometimes think the back of my head would be a very good brush to do fur with. Any way—only to get at the real thing."

"I once saw a painter who had no arms," said the old gentleman. "It was in Paris, and he held the brushes with his toes. There is an idiot in the asylum now, who likes nothing better than to pull his shoes off and tie knots in a rope with his feet all day long."

"He is probably one of us," suggested Crowdie. "We artists are all half-witted. Give him a brush and see whether he has any talent for painting with his toes."

"That's an idea," answered the philanthropist, thoughtfully. "Transference of manual skill from hands to feet," he continued in a low, dreamy voice, thinking aloud. "Abnormal connections of nerves with next adjoining brain centres—yes—there might be something in it—yes—yes—"

The old gentleman had theories of his own about nerves and brain centres. He had never even studied anatomy, but he speculated in the wildest manner upon the probability of impossible cases of nerve derangement and imperfect development, and had long believed himself an authority on the subject.

The dinner was quite as short as most modern meals. Old Mr. Lauderdale and Crowdie smoked, and Alexander Junior, who despised such weaknesses, stayed in the dining-room with them. Neither Mrs. Lauderdale nor Katharine would have objected to smoking in the library, but Alexander's inflexible conservatism abhorred such a practice.

"I can't tell why it is," said Katharine, when she was alone with her mother, "but that man is positively repulsive to me. It must be something besides his ugliness, and even that ought to be redeemed by his eyes and that beautiful voice of his. But it's not. There's something about him—" She stopped, in the sheer impossibility of expressing her meaning.

Her mother said nothing in answer, but looked at her with calm and quiet eyes, rather thoughtfully.

"Is it very foolish of me, mother? Don't you notice something, too, when he's near you?"

"Yes. He's like a poisonous flower."

"That's exactly what I wanted to say. That and—the title of Tennyson's poem, what is it? Oh—'A Vision of Sin'—don't you know?"

"Poor Crowdie!" exclaimed Mrs. Lauderdale, laughing a little, but still looking at Katharine.

"I wonder what induced Hester to marry him."

"He fascinated her. Besides, she's very fond of music, and so is he, and he sang to her and she played for him. It seems to have succeeded very well. I believe they are perfectly happy."

"Oh, perfectly. At least, Hester always says so. But did you ever notice—sometimes, without any special reason, she looks at him so anxiously? Just as though she expected something to happen to him, or that he should do something queer. It may be my imagination."

"I never noticed it. She's tremendously in love with him. That may account for it."

"Well—if she's happy—" Katharine did not finish the sentence. "He does stare dreadfully, though," she resumed a moment later. "But I suppose all artists do that. They are always looking at one's features. You don't, though."

"I? I'm always looking at people's faces and trying to see how I could paint them best. But I don't stare. People don't like it, and it isn't necessary. Crowdie is vain. He has beautiful eyes and he wants every one to notice them."

"If that's it, at all events he has the sense to be vain of his best point," said Katharine. "He's not an artist for nothing. And he's certainly very clever in all sorts of ways."

"He didn't say anything particularly clever at dinner, I thought. By the bye, was the dinner good? Your father didn't tell me Crowdie was coming."

"Oh, yes; it did very well," answered Katharine, in a reassuring tone. "At least, I didn't notice what we had. He always takes away my appetite. I shall go and steal something when he's gone. Let's sit up late, mother—just you and I—after papa has gone to bed, and we'll light a little wee fire, and have a tiny bit of supper, and make ourselves comfortable, and abuse Mr. Crowdie just as much as we like. Won't that be nice? Do!"

"Well—we'll see how late he stays. It's only a quarter past nine yet. Have you got a book, child? I am going to read that article about wet paintings on pottery—I've had it there ever so long, and the men won't come back for half an hour at least."

Katharine found something to read, after handing her mother the review from the table.

"Perhaps reading a little will take away the bad taste of Crowdie," said Mrs. Lauderdale, with a laugh, as she settled herself in the corner of the sofa.

"I wish something would," answered Katharine, seating herself in a deep chair, and opening her book.

But she found it hard to fix her attention, and the book was a dull one, or seemed so, as the best books do when the mind is drawn and stretched in one direction. Her thoughts went back to the twilight hour, when Ralston had been there, and to the decided step she was about to take. The only wonder was that she had been able to talk with a tolerable continuity of ideas during dinner, considering what her position was. Assuredly it was a daring thing which she meant to do, and she experienced the sensation familiar even to brave men—the small, utterly unreasoning temptation to draw back just before the real danger begins. Most people who have been called upon to do something very dangerous, with fair warning and in perfectly cold blood, know that little feeling and are willing to acknowledge it. It is not fear. It is the inevitable last word spoken by the instinct of self-preservation.

There are men who have never felt it at all, rare instances of perfectly phlegmatic physical recklessness. They are not the ones who deserve the most credit for doing perilous deeds. And there are other men, even fewer, perhaps, who have felt it, but have ceased to feel it, in whom all love of life is so totally and hopelessly dead that even the bodily, human impulse to avoid death can never be felt again. Such men are very dangerous in fight.

'Beware of him who seeks death,' says an ancient Eastern proverb. So many things which seem impossible are easy if the value of life itself be taken out of the balance. But with the great majority of the human race that value is tolerably well defined. The poor Chinaman who sells himself, for the benefit of his family, to be sliced to death in the stead of the rich criminal, knows within an ounce or two of silver what his existence is worth. The bargain has been made so often by others that there is almost a tariff. It is not a pleasant subject, but, since the case really happens, it would be a curious thing to hear theologians discuss the morality of such suicide on the part of the unfortunate wretch. Would they say that he was forfeiting the hope of a future reward by giving himself to be destroyed for money, of his own free will? Or would they account it to him for righteousness that he should lay down his life to save his wife and children from starving to death? For a real case, as it is, it certainly presents difficulties which approach the fantastic.

It was very quiet in the room, as it had been once or twice when there had been a silence between Katharine and Ralston a few hours earlier. The furniture was all just as it had been—hardly a chair had been turned. The scene came back vividly to the young girl's imagination, and the sound of Ralston's voice, just trembling with emotion, rang again in her ears. That had been the sweetest of all the many sweet hours she had spent with him since they had been children. Her book fell upon her knees and her head sank back against the cushion. With lids half drooping, she gazed at a point she did not see. The softest possible light, the exquisite, trembling radiance of spotless maidenhood's divinest dream, hovered about the lovely face and the girlish lips just parted to meet in the memory of a kiss.

Suddenly, from the next room, as the three men came towards the closed door of the library, Crowdie's laugh broke the stillness, high, melodious, rich. Some men have a habit of laughing at anything which is said just as they leave the dining-room.

Katharine started as though she had been stung. She was unconscious that her mother had ceased reading, and had been looking at her for several minutes, wondering why she had never fully appreciated the girl's beauty before.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked, as she saw the start and the quick expression of resentment and repulsion.

"It's that man's voice—it's so beautiful and yet—ugh!" She shivered as the door opened and the three men came in.

"You've not been long," said Mrs. Lauderdale, looking up at Crowdie. "I hope they gave you a cigar in there."

"Oh, yes, thanks—and a very good one, too," added the artist, who had not succeeded in smoking half of the execrable Connecticut six-for-a-quarter cigar which the philanthropist had offered him.

It seemed natural enough to him that a man who devoted himself to idiots should have no taste, and he would have opened his eyes if he had been told that the Connecticut tobacco was one of the economies imposed by Alexander Junior upon his long-suffering father. The old gentleman, however, was really not very particular, and his sufferings were not to be compared with those of Balzac's saintly charity-maniac, when he gave up his Havanas for the sake of his poor people.

Crowdie looked at Katharine, as he answered her mother, and continued to do so, though he sat down beside the latter. Katharine had risen from her seat, and was standing by the mantelpiece, and Mrs. Lauderdale was sitting at the end of the sofa on the other side of the fireplace, under the strong, unshaded light of the gas. She made an effort to talk to her guest, for the sake of sparing the girl, though she felt uncomfortably tired, and was looking almost ill.

"Did you talk any more about the soul, after we left?" she asked, looking at Crowdie.

"No," he answered, still gazing at Katharine, and speaking rather absently. "We talked—let me see—I think—" He hesitated.

"It couldn't have been very interesting, if you don't remember what it was about," said Mrs. Lauderdale, pleasantly. "We must try and amuse you better than they did, or you won't come near us again."

"Oh, as far as that goes, I'll come just as often as you ask me," answered Crowdie, suddenly looking at his shoes.

But he made no attempt to continue the conversation. Mrs. Lauderdale felt a little womanly annoyance. The constant and life-long habit of being considered by men to be the most important person in the room, whenever she chose to be considered at all, had become a part of her nature. She made up her mind that Crowdie should not only listen and talk, but should look at her.

"What are you doing now? Another portrait?" she asked. "I know you are always busy."

"Oh, yes—the wife of a man who has a silver mine somewhere. She's fairly good-looking, for a wonder."

His eyes wandered about the room, and, from time to time, went back to Katharine. Old Mr. Lauderdale was going to sleep in an arm-chair, and Alexander Junior was reading the evening paper.

"Does your work always interest you as it did at first?" asked Mrs. Lauderdale, growing more and more determined to fix his attention, and speaking softly. "I mean—are you happy in it and with it?"

His languid glance met hers for an instant, with an odd look of lazy enquiry. He was keen and quick of intuition, and more than sufficiently vain. There is a certain tone of voice in which a woman may ask a man if he is happy which indicates a willingness to play at flirtation. Now, it had never entered the head of Walter Crowdie that Mrs. Lauderdale could possibly care to flirt with him. Yet the tone was official, so to say, and he had some right to be surprised, the more so as he had never heard any man—not even the famous club-liar, Stopford Thirlwall—even suggest that she had ever really flirted with any one, or do anything worse than dance to the very end of every dancing party, and generally amuse herself in an innocent way to an extent that would have ruined the constitutions of most women not born in Kentucky. Even as he turned to look at her, however, he realized the absurdity of the impression he had received, and his eyes went mechanically back to Katharine's profile. The smile that moved his heavy, red mouth was for himself, as he answered Mrs. Lauderdale's question.

"Oh, yes," he said, quite naturally. "I love it. I'm perfectly happy." And again he relapsed into silence.

Mrs. Lauderdale was annoyed. She turned her head, under the glaring light, towards the carved pillar at the right of the fireplace. An absurd little looking-glass hung by a silken cord from the mantelpiece to the level of her eyes—one of those small Persian mirrors set in a case of embroidery, such as are used for favours at cotillions.

She saw very suddenly the reflection of her own face. The glass was perhaps a trifle green, which made it

worse, but she stared in a sort of dumb horror, realizing in a single moment that she had grown old, that the lines had deepened until every one could see them, that the eyes looked faded, the hair dull, the lips almost shrivelled, the once dazzling skin flaccid and sallow—that the queenly beauty was gone, a perishable thing already perished, a memory now and worse than a memory, a cruelly bitter regret left in the place of a possession half divine that was lost for ever and ever, dead beyond resurrection, gone beyond recall.

That was the most terrible moment in Mrs. Lauderdale's life. Fate need not have made it so appallingly sudden—she had prepared for it so long, so conscientiously, trying always to wean herself from a vanity the sternest would forgive. And it had seemed to be coming so slowly, by degrees of each degree, and she had thought it would be so long in coming quite. And now it was come, in the flash of a second. But the bitterness was not past.

Instinctively in the silence she looked up before her and saw her daughter's lovely face. Her head reeled, her sight swam. A great, fierce envy caught at her heart with iron fingers and wrung it, till she could have screamed,—envy of her who was dearest to her of all living things—of Katharine.

CHAPTER VII.

JOHN RALSTON had given his word to Katharine and he intended to keep it. Whenever he was assailed by doubts he recalled by an act of will the state of mind to which the young girl had brought him on Monday evening, and how he had then been convinced that there was no harm in the secret marriage. He analyzed his position, too, in a rough and ready way, with the intention of proving that the clandestine ceremony could not be of any advantage to himself, that it was therefore not from any selfish motive that he had undertaken to have it performed, and that, consequently, since the action itself was to be an unselfish one, there could be nothing even faintly dishonourable in it. For he did not really believe that old Robert Lauderdale would do anything for him. On the contrary, he thought it most likely that the old man would be very angry and would bid the young people abide by the consequences of their doings. He would blame Ralston bitterly. He would not believe that he had been disinterested. He would say that he had married Katharine, and had persuaded her to the marriage in the hope of forcing his uncle to help him, out of consideration for the girl. And he would refuse to do anything whatsoever. He might even go so far as to strike the names of both from his will, if he had left them a legacy, which was probable. But, to do Ralston justice, so long as he was sure of his own motives he had never cared a straw for the opinions others might form of them, and he was the last man in the world to assume a character for the sake of playing on the feelings of a rich relation. If Robert Lauderdale should send for him, and be angry, and reproach him with what he had done, John was quite capable of answering that he had acted from motives which concerned himself only, that he was answerable to no one but Katharine herself and that uncle Robert might make the best of it at his leisure. The young man possessed that sort of courage in abundance, as every one knew, and being aware of it himself, he suspected, not without grounds of probability, that the millionaire was aware of it also, and would simply leave him alone to his own devices, refusing Katharine's request, and never mentioning the question again. That the old man would be discreet, was certain. With a few rare exceptions, men who have made great fortunes unaided have more discretion than other people, and can keep secrets remarkably well.

The difficulty which presented itself to Ralston at once was a material one. He did not in the least know how such an affair as a secret marriage should be managed. None of his close acquaintances had ever done anything so unusual, and although he knew of two cases which had occurred in New York society, the one in recent years and the other long ago, he had no means of finding out at short notice how the actual formalities necessary had been fulfilled in either case. He knew, however, that a marriage performed by a respectable clergyman of any denomination was legal, and that a certificate signed by him was perfectly valid. He had heard of marriages before a Justice of the Peace, and even of declarations made before respectable witnesses and vouched for, which had been legal marriages beyond dispute, but he did not like the look of anything in which there was no religious ceremony, respectfully indifferent though he was to all religion. The code of honour, which was his only faith, is connected, and not even very distantly, with Christianity. There are honourable men of all religions under the sun, including that of Confucius, but we do not associate the expression 'the code of honour' with non-Christians—which is singular enough, considering the view the said code takes of some moral questions.

There must be a marriage service, therefore, thought Ralston, and it must be performed in New York. There was no possibility of taking Katharine into a neighbouring State, and he had no wish to do so for many reasons. He was not without foresight, and he intended to be able to prove at any future time that the formality, the whole formality, and nothing but the formality of the ceremony had been fulfilled. It was not easy. He racked his recollections in vain, and he read all the newspapers published that morning with an interest he had certainly never felt in them before, in the hope of finding some account of a case similar to his own. He thought of going to a number of clergymen, of the social type, with whom he had a speaking acquaintance, and of laying the facts before each in turn, until one of them consented to marry him. But though many of them were excellent men, he had not enough confidence in their discretion. He laughed to himself when he thought that the only men he knew who seemed to possess the necessary qualities for such a delicate affair were Robert the Rich himself and Hamilton Bright, whom Ralston secretly suspected of being somewhat in love with Katharine on his own account. It was odd, he thought, that of all the family Bright alone should resemble old Robert, physically and mentally, but the resemblance was undeniable, though the relationship only consisted in the fact that Bright was descended from old Robert Lauderdale's grandfather, the primeval Alexander often mentioned in these pages.

Ralston turned the case over and over in his mind. He thought of going to some dissenting minister quite unknown to him, and trying what eloquence could do. He had heard that some of them were men of heart to whom one could appeal in trouble. But he knew very well that every one of them would tell him to do the thing openly, or not at all, and the mere idea revived his own scruples. He wondered whether there were not churches where the marrying was done by batches of four and five couples on a certain Sunday in the month, as babies are baptized in some parts of the world, and whether he and Katharine could not slip in, as it were by mistake, and be married by a man who did not even know their names. But he laughed at the idea a moment later, and went on studying the problem.

Another of his ideas was to consult a detective, from a private office. Such men would, in all likelihood, know a

good deal about runaway couples. And this seemed one of the wisest plans which had suggested itself, though it broke down for two reasons. He hated the thought of getting at his result by the help of a man belonging to what he considered a mean and underhand profession; and he reflected that such men were always on the lookout for private scandals, and that he should be putting himself in their power. At last he decided to consult a lawyer. Lawyers and doctors, as a rule, were discreet, he thought, because their success depended on their discretion. He could easily find a man whom he had never seen, honest and able to keep a secret, who would give him the information he wanted in a professional way and take a fee for the trouble. This seemed to him honourable and wise. He wished everything to be legal, and the best way to make it so was to follow a lawyer's directions. There was not even a doubt but that the said lawyer, if requested, would make a memorandum of the case, and take charge of the document which was to prove that Katharine Lauderdale had become the lawful wife of John Ralston. There were lists and directories in which he could find the names of hundreds of such men. He was in his native city, and between the names and the places of business he thought he could form a tolerably accurate opinion of the reputation and standing of some, if not of all, of the individuals.

In the course of a couple of hours he had found what he wanted—a lawyer whose name was known to him as that of a man of good reputation and a gentleman, one whom he had never seen and who had probably never seen him, old enough, as he knew, to have a wide experience, yet not so old as to be justified in assuming airs of vast moral superiority in order to declare primly that he would never help a young man to commit an act of folly. For folly it was, as Ralston knew very well in his heart.

He lost no time, and within half an hour was interviewing the authority he had selected, for, by a bit of good luck, he was fortunate enough to meet the lawyer at the door of his office, just returning from luncheon. Otherwise he might have had some difficulty in gaining immediate admittance. He found him to be a grave, keen personage of uncertain age, who laid his glasses beside him on his desk whenever he spoke, and put them on again as soon as he had done. He wiped them carefully when Ralston had explained what he wanted, and then paused a moment before replying. Ralston was by no means prepared for what he said.

"I presume you are a novelist."

The lawyer looked at him, smiled pleasantly, looked away and turned his glasses over again.

The young man was inclined to laugh. No one had ever before taken him for a man of letters. He hesitated, however, before he answered, wondering whether he had not better accept the statement in the hope of getting accurate information, rather than risk a refusal if he said he was in earnest. The lawyer took his hesitation for assent.

"Because, in that case, it would not be at all difficult to manage," he continued, without waiting any longer for a reply. "Lots of things can happen in books, you see, and you can wind up the story and publish it before the people in the book who are to be kept in the dark have found out the secret. In real life, it is a little different, because, though it's very easy to be married, it's the duty of the person who marries you to send a certificate or statement of the marriage to the office where the record of statistics is kept."

"Oh!" ejaculated Ralston, and his face fell. "I didn't know that."

"Yes. That's necessary, on pain of a fine. And yet the marriage may remain a secret a long while—for a lifetime under favourable circumstances. So that if you are writing a story you can let the young couple take the chances, and you can give them in their favour."

"Well—how, exactly?" asked John. "That sort of thing isn't usual, I fancy."

"Not usual—no." The lawyer smiled. "But there are more secret marriages than most people dream of. If your hero and heroine must be married in New York, it is easy enough to do it. Nobody will marry them without afterwards making out the certificate, which is recorded. If anybody suspects that they are married, it is the easiest thing in the world to find out that the marriage has been registered. But if nobody looks for it, the thing will never be heard of. It's a thousand to one against anybody's finding it out by accident."

"But if it were done in that way it would be absolutely legal and could never be contested?"

"Of course—perfectly legal. But it's not so in all States, mind you."

"I wanted to know about New York," said Ralston. "It couldn't possibly take place anywhere else."

"Oh—well—in that case, you know all there is to be known."

"I'm very grateful," said John, rising. "I've taken up a great deal of your valuable time, sir. May I—"

In considerable doubt as to what he should do, he thrust his hand into his breast-pocket and looked at the lawyer.

"My dear sir!" exclaimed the latter, rising also. "How can you think of such a thing? I'm very glad indeed to have been of service to—a young novelist."

"You're exceedingly kind, and I thank you very much," said Ralston, shaking the outstretched hand, and making for the door as soon as possible.

He had not even given his name, which had been rather rude on his part, as he was well aware. At all events, the lawyer would not be able to trace him, which was a point to his advantage.

Oddly enough he felt a sense of satisfaction when he thought over what he had learned. He could tell Katharine that a really secret marriage was wholly impossible, and perhaps when she knew that she was running a risk of discovery she would draw back. He should be glad of that. Realizing the fact, he was conscious for the first time that he was seeking a way out of the marriage and not a way into it, and a conflict arose in his mind. On the one hand he had given Katharine his word that he would do what she asked, and his word was sacred, unless she would release him from the promise. On the other side stood that intimate conviction of his own that, in spite of all her arguments, it was not a perfectly honourable thing to do, on its own merits. He could not help feeling glad that a material difficulty stood in the way of his doing what she required of him.

In any case he must see her as soon as possible. He ascertained without difficulty that they need not show evidence that they had resided in New York during any particular period, nor were there any other formalities to be fulfilled. He went home to luncheon with his mother—it was on the day after he had given his promise to Katharine, for he had lost no time—and he went out again before three o'clock, hoping to find the young girl alone.

To his annoyance he found her with her mother in the library. Mrs. Lauderdale was generally at work at that

hour, if she was at home, but to-day she, who was always well, had a headache and was nervous and altogether different from herself. Katharine saw that she was almost ill, and insisted upon staying at home with her, to read to her, or to talk, as she preferred, though Mrs. Lauderdale begged her repeatedly to go away and make visits, or otherwise amuse herself as she could. But the young girl was obstinate; she saw that her mother was suffering and she had no intention of leaving her that afternoon. Alexander Junior was of course at his office, and the philanthropist was in his own quarters upstairs, probably dozing before the fire or writing reports about idiots.

It was clear to Ralston in five minutes that Mrs. Lauderdale was not only indisposed, but that she was altogether out of temper, a state of mind very unusual with her. She found fault with little things that Katharine did in a way John had never noticed before, and as for himself, she evidently wished he had not come. There was a petulance about her which was quite new. She was not even sitting in her usual place, but had taken the deep arm-chair on the other side of the fireplace, and turned her back to the light.

"You seem to be as busy as usual, Jack," she observed, after exchanging a few words.

"I'm wishing I were, at all events," he answered. "You must take the wish for the deed."

"They say that there's always plenty of work for any one who wants it," answered Mrs. Lauderdale, coldly.

"If you'll tell me where to find it—"

"Why don't you go to the West, as young Bright did, and try to do something without help? Other men do."

"Bright took money with him," answered Ralston.

"Did he? Not much, then, I fancy. I know he lived a hard life and drove cattle—"

"And bought land in wild places which he found in the course of his cattle driving. The driving was a means of getting about—not unpleasant, either—and he had some money to invest. I could do the same, if I had any."

"You know it's quite useless, mother," said Katharine, interposing before Mrs. Lauderdale could make another retort. "You all abuse him for doing nothing, and yet I hear you all say that every profession is overcrowded, and that nobody can do anything without capital. If uncle Robert chose, he could make Jack's fortune by a turn of his hand."

"Of course—he could give him a fortune outright and not feel it—unless he cared what became of it."

There was something so harsh about the way in which she spoke the last words that Ralston and Katharine looked at each other. Ralston did not lose his temper, however, but tried to turn the subject with a laugh.

"My dear cousin Emma," he said, "I'm the most hopeless case living. Please talk about somebody who is successful. There are lots of them. You've mentioned Bright already. Let us praise him. That will make you feel better."

To this Mrs. Lauderdale said nothing. After waiting a moment Ralston turned to Katharine.

"Are you going out this afternoon?" he asked, by way of hinting that he wanted to see her alone.

"No," said Mrs. Lauderdale, answering for her. "She says she means to stay at home and take care of me. It's ever so good of her, isn't it?"

"Yes," answered Ralston, absently.

It struck Katharine that, considering that her mother had been trying for half an hour to persuade her to go out, it would have been natural to propose that she should go for a short walk with John, and that the answer had come rather suddenly.

"But you can't stay at home all day," said Ralston, all at once. "You'll be having a headache yourself. Won't you let Katharine come with me for half an hour, cousin Emma? We'll walk twice round Washington Square and come right back. She looks pale."

"Does she?" Mrs. Lauderdale glanced at the girl's face. "I don't think so," she continued. "Besides—"

"What is it?" asked Ralston, as she hesitated and stopped. "Isn't it proper? We've often done it."

Mrs. Lauderdale rose from her chair and stood up, tall and slim, with her back to the mantelpiece. The light fell upon her face now, and Ralston saw how tired and worn she looked. Immediately she turned her back to the window again, and looked at him sideways, resting her elbow on the shelf.

"What is the use of you two going on in this way?" she asked suddenly.

There was an awkward silence, and again Katharine and Ralston looked at one another. They were momentarily surprised out of speech, for Mrs. Lauderdale had always taken their side, if not very actively, at least in a kindly way. She had said that Katharine should marry the man she loved, rich or poor, and that if she chose to wait for a poor man, like Ralston, to be able to support her, that was her own affair. The violent opposition had come from Katharine's father when, a year previously, the two had boldly told him that they loved each other and wished to be married. Alexander Junior did not often lose his temper, but he had lost it completely on that occasion, and had gone so far as to say that Ralston should never enter the house again, a verdict which he had been soon forced to modify. But he had said that he considered John an idle good-for-nothing, who would never be able to support himself, let alone a wife and children; that his, Alexander's, daughter should never marry a professional dandy, who was content to let his widowed mother pay his extravagant tailor's bills, and who played poker at the clubs as a source of income; that it was not enough of a recommendation to be half a Lauderdale and to skim the cream from New York society in the form of daily invitations—and to have the reputation of being a good polo player with other people's horses, a good yachtsman with other people's yachts, and of having a strong head for other people's wines. Those were not the noble qualities Alexander Junior looked for in a son-in-law. Not at all, sir. He preferred Benjamin Slayback of Nevada. The Lauderdales were quite able to make society accept Benjamin Slayback of Nevada, because Benjamin Slayback of Nevada was quite able to stand upon his own feet anywhere, having worked for all he had, like a man, and having pushed himself into the forefront of political life by sheer energy and ability, and having as good a right and as good a chance in every way as any man in the country. No, he was certainly not a Lauderdale. If Lauderdales were to go on marrying Lauderdales and no one else, there would soon be an end of society. He advised John Ralston to go to Nevada and marry Benjamin Slayback's sister, if she would look at him, which was more than doubtful, considering that he was the most atrociously idle young ne'er-do-weel—here Alexander's Scotch upper lip snapped like a steel trap—that ever wasted the most precious years of life between the society of infatuated women by day, sir, and the temptations of the card-table and the bottle by night—the favourite of fine ladies, the boon companion of roisterers and the sport of a London tailor.

Which was a tremendous speech when delivered at close quarters in Alexander Junior's metallic voice, and in his most irately emphatic manner, while the grey veins swelled at his grey temples, and one iron hand was clenched ready to strike the palm of the other when the end of the peroration was reached. He allowed himself, as a relation, even more latitude in his language than he would have arrogated to himself as Katharine's father. He met John Ralston not only as the angry stage father meets the ineligible and determined young suitor, but as one Lauderdale meeting another—the one knowing himself to be irreproachable, upbraiding the other as the disgrace of the family, the hardened young sinner, and the sport of his tailor. That last expression had almost brought a smile to Ralston's angry face.

He had behaved admirably, however, under such very trying circumstances, and afterwards secretly took great credit to himself for not having attacked him whom he wished for a father-in-law with the furniture of the latter's own library, the chairs being the only convenient weapons in the room. Alexander the Safe, as his own daughter called him, could probably have killed John Ralston with one back-hander, but John would have liked to try him in fight, nevertheless. Instead of doing anything of the kind, however, John drew back two steps, and said as much as he could trust himself to say without foaming at the mouth and seeing things in scarlet. He said that he did not agree with his cousin Alexander upon all the points the latter had mentioned, that he did not care to prolong a violent scene, and he wished him good morning. Thereupon he had left the house, which was quite the wisest thing he could do, for when Alexander was alone he found to his extreme annoyance that he had a distinct sensation of having been made almost ridiculous. But he soon recovered from that, for whatever the secret mainspring of his singular character might be, it was certainly not idle vanity.

Mrs. Lauderdale had consoled Katharine, and Ralston too, for that matter, as well as she could, and with sincere sympathy. Ralston continued to come to the house very much as he pleased, and Mr. Lauderdale silently tolerated his presence on the rare occasions of their meeting. He had certainly said more than enough to explain his point of view, and he considered the matter as settled. It was really not possible to keep a man who was his cousin altogether away, and he suffered also from a delusion common to many fathers, which led him to think that no one would ever dare to act against his once clearly expressed wishes.

Between Katharine and her mother and Ralston there remained a sort of tacit understanding. There was no formal engagement, of course, which would have had to be concealed from Mr. Lauderdale, but Mrs. Lauderdale meant that the two young people should be married if they continued to love one another, and she generally left them as much together as they pleased when Ralston came.

It was, therefore, not strange that they should both be surprised by the nature of her sudden question as she stood by the fireplace looking sideways at Ralston, with her back to the light.

"What is the use?" asked Katharine, repeating the words in astonishment and emphasizing the last one.

"Yes. What is the use? It is leading to nothing. You never can be married, and you know it by this time. You had much better separate at once. It will be easier for you now, perhaps, than by and by. You are both so young!"

"Excuse me, cousin Emma," said Ralston, "but I think you must be dreaming."

He spoke very quietly, but the light was beginning to gleam in his eyes. His mother was said to have a very bad temper, and John was like her in many respects. But Mrs. Lauderdale continued to speak quite calmly.

"I have been thinking about you two a great deal lately," she said. "I have made a mistake, and I may as well say so at once, now that I have discovered it. You wouldn't like me to go on letting you think that I approved of your engagement, when I don't—would you? That wouldn't be fair or honest."

"Certainly not," answered Ralston, in a low voice, and he could feel all his muscles tightening as though for a physical effort. "Have you said this sort of thing to Katharine before, or is this the first time?"

"No, she hasn't said a word," replied Katharine herself.

The girl was standing by the easy chair, her hand resting on the back of it, her face pale, her great grey eyes staring wide open at her mother's profile.

"No, I have not," said Mrs. Lauderdale. "I thought it best to wait until I could speak to you together. It's useless to give pain twice over."

"It is indeed," said Ralston, gravely. "Please go on."

"Why—there's nothing more to be said, Jack," answered Mrs. Lauderdale. "That's all. The trouble is that you'll never do anything, and you have no fortune, nor any prospect of any—until your mother—"

"Please don't speak of my mother in that connection," interrupted Ralston, his lips growing white.

"Well—and as for us, we're as poor as can be. You see how we live. Besides, you know. Old Mr. Lauderdale gets uncle Robert to subscribe thousands and thousands for the idiots, but he never suggests that they are far better off than we are. However, those are our miseries and not yours. Yours is that you are perfectly useless—"

"Mother!" cried Katharine, losing control of herself and moving a step forward.

"It's all right, dear," said Ralston. "Go on, cousin Emma. I'm perfectly useless—"

"I don't mean to offend you, Jack, and we're not strangers," continued Mrs. Lauderdale, "and I won't dwell on the facts. You know them as well as I do, and are probably quite as sorry that they really are facts. I will only ask one question. What chance is there that in the next four or five years you can have a house of your own, and an income of your own—just enough for two people to live on and no more—and—well—a home for Katharine? What chance is there?"

"I'll do something before that time," answered Ralston, with a determined look.

But Mrs. Lauderdale shook her head.

"So you said last year, Jack. I repeat—I don't want to be unkind. How long is Katharine to wait?"

"I'll wait all my life, mother," said the young girl, suddenly speaking out in ringing tones. "I'll wait till I die, if I must, and Jack knows it. And I believe in him, if you don't—against you all, you and papa and uncle Robert and every one. Jack has never had a chance that deserves to be called a chance at all. He must succeed—he shall succeed—I know he'll succeed. And I'll wait till he does. I will—I will—if it's forever, and I shan't be tired of waiting—it will always be easy, for him. Oh, mother, mother—to think that you should have turned against us! That's the hard thing!"

"Thank you, dear," said Ralston, touching her hand lovingly.

Mrs. Lauderdale had turned her face quite away from him now and was looking at the clock, softly drumming with her fingers upon the mantelpiece.

"I'm sorry, Katharine," she said. "But I think it, and I've said it—and I can't unsay it. It's far too true."

There was a dead silence for several seconds. Then Katharine suddenly pushed Ralston gently toward the door.

"Go, Jack dear," she said in a low voice. "She has a dreadful headache—she's not herself. Your being here irritates her—please go away—it will be all right in a day or two—"

They had reached the door, for Ralston saw that she was right.

"No," said Mrs. Lauderdale from the fireplace, "I shan't change my mind."

It was all so sudden and strange that Ralston found himself outside the library without having taken leave of her in any way. Katharine came out with him.

"There's a difficulty," he whispered quickly as he found his coat and stick. "After it's done there has to be a certificate saying that—"

"Katharine! Come here!" cried Mrs. Lauderdale from within, and they heard her footstep as she left the fireplace.

"Come to-morrow morning at eleven," whispered Katharine.

She barely touched his hand with hers and fled back into the library. He let himself out and walked slowly along Clinton Place in the direction of Fifth Avenue.

CHAPTER VIII.

KATHARINE went back to the library mechanically, because Mrs. Lauderdale called her and because she heard the latter's step upon the floor, but not exactly in mere blind submission and obedience. She was, indeed, so much surprised by what had taken place that she was not altogether her usual self, and she was conscious that events moved more quickly just then than her own power of decision. She was observant and perceptive, but her reason had always worked slowly. Ralston, at least, was out of the way, and she was glad that she had made him go. It had been unbearable to hear her mother attacking him as she had done.

She believed that Mrs. Lauderdale was about to be seriously ill. No other theory could account for her extraordinary behaviour. It was therefore wisest to take away what irritated her and to be as patient as possible. There was no excuse for her sudden change of opinion, and as soon as she was quite well she would be sorry for what she had said. Katharine was not more patient than most people, but she did her best.

"Is anything the matter, mother? You called so loud." She spoke almost before she had shut the door behind her.

"No. Did I? I wanted him to go away, that was all. Why should he stand there talking to you in whispers?"

Katharine did not answer at once, but her broad eyebrows drew slowly together and her eyelids contracted. She sat down and clasped her hands together upon her knee.

"Because he had something to say to me which he did not wish you to hear, mother," she answered at last.

"Ah—I thought so." Mrs. Lauderdale relapsed into silence, and from time to time her mouth twitched nervously.

She glanced at her daughter once or twice. The young girl's straight features could look almost stolid at times. Her patience had given way once, but she got hold of it again and tried to set it on her face like a mask. She was thinking now and wondering whether this strange mood were a mere caprice of her mother's, though Mrs. Lauderdale had never been capricious before, or whether something had happened to change her opinion of Ralston suddenly but permanently. In the one case it would be best to bear it as quietly as possible, in the other to declare war at once. But that seemed impossible, when she tried to realize it. She was deeply, sincerely devoted to her mother. Hitherto they had each understood the other's thoughts and feelings almost without words, and in all the many little domestic difficulties they had been firm allies. It was not possible that they were to quarrel now. The gap in life would be too deep and broad. Katharine suddenly rose and came and sat beside her mother and drew the fair, tired face to her own, very tenderly.

"Mother dear," she said, "look at me! What is the matter? Have I done anything to hurt you—to displease you? We've always loved each other, you and I—and we can't really quarrel, can we? What is it, dearest? Tell me everything—I can't understand it at all—I know—you're tired and ill, and Jack irritated you. Men will, sometimes, even the very nicest men, you know. It was only that, wasn't it? Yes—I knew it was—poor, dear, darling, sweet, tired little mother, just let your dear head rest—so, against me—yes, dear, I know—it was nothing—"

It was as though they had changed places, the mother and the daughter. The older woman's lip quivered, as her cheek rested on Katharine's breast. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, two tears gathered just within the shadowed lids, and grew and overflowed and trembled and fell—two crystal drops. She saw them fall upon the rough grey stuff of her daughter's frock, and as she lay there upon the girl's bosom with downcast eyes, she watched her own tears, in momentary apathy, and noticed how they ran, then crawled along, then stopped, caught as it seemed in the stiff little hairs of the coarse material—and she noticed that there were a few black hairs mixed with the grey, which she had not known before.

Then quite suddenly, just as they were shrinking and darkening the wool with two small spots, a great irresistible sob seemed to come from outside and run through her from head to foot, and shook her and hurt her and gripped her throat. A moment more and the flood of tears broke. Those storms of life's autumn are chill and sharp. They are not like the showers of spring, quick, light and soft, that make blossoms fragrant and woods sweet-scented.

Katharine did not understand, and her face was gentle and full of pain as she pressed her mother to her bosom.

"Don't cry, mother—don't cry!" she repeated again and again.

"Ah, Katharine—child—if you knew!" The few words came with difficulty, as each sob rose and would not be forced back.

"No, darling—don't! There, there!" And the young girl tried to soothe her.

Suddenly it all ceased. With an impatient movement, as though she despised herself, Mrs. Lauderdale drew

back, steadied herself with one hand upon the end of the sofa, turned her head away and rose to her feet.

"Go out, child—leave me to myself!" she said indistinctly, and going quickly towards the door. "Don't come after me—don't—no, don't," she repeated, not looking back, as she went out.

Left to herself, and understanding that it was better not to follow, Katharine stood still a moment in the middle of the room, then went to the window and looked out, seeing nothing. She did not know what it all meant, but she felt that some great change which she could not comprehend had come over her mother, and that they could never be again as they had been. A mere headache, the mere fatigue from overwork, could not have produced such results. Nor was Mrs. Lauderdale really ill, as the girl's womanly instinct had told her within the last five minutes. The trouble, whatever it might be, was mental, and the tears had given it a momentary relief. But it was not over.

Katharine went out, at last, and was glad to breathe the keen air of the wintry afternoon; glad, too, to be alone with herself. She even wished that she were not obliged to go into Fifth Avenue, where she might meet an acquaintance, or at all events to cross it, as she decided to do when she reached the first corner. Going straight on, the next street was University Place, and the lower part of that was quiet, and Waverley Place and the neighbourhood of the old University building itself. She could wander about there for half an hour without going so far as Broadway, nor southwards to the precincts of the French and Italian business colonies. So she walked slowly on, and then turned, and turned again, round and round, backwards and forwards, meeting no one she knew, thinking all the time and idly noticing things that had never struck her before, as, for instance, that there is a row of stables leading westward out of University Place which is called Washington Mews, and that at almost every corner where there is a liquor-shop there seems to be an Italian fruit-stand—the function of the 'dago' being to give warning of the approach of the police, in certain cases, a fact which Katharine could not be expected to know.

Just beyond the aforesaid Mews, at the corner of Washington Square, she came suddenly upon little Frank Miner, his overcoat buttoned up to his chin and a roll of papers sticking out of his pocket. His fresh face was pink with the cold, his small dark mustache glistened, and his restless eyes were bright. The two almost ran against one another and both stopped. He raised his hat with a quick smile and put out his hand.

"How d'ye do, Miss Lauderdale?" he asked.

In spite of the family connection he had never got so far as to call her Katharine, or even cousin Katharine. The young girl shook hands with him and smiled.

"Are you out for a walk?" he asked, before she had been able to speak. "And if so, may I come too?"

"Oh, yes—do."

She had been alone long enough to find it impossible to reach any conclusion, and of all people except Ralston, Miner was the one she felt most able to tolerate just then. His perfectly simple belief in himself and his healthy good humour made him good company for a depressed person.

"You seemed to be in such a hurry," said Katharine, as he began to walk slowly by her side.

"Of course, as I was coming to meet you," he answered promptly.

"But you didn't know—"

"Providence knew," he said, interrupting her. "It was foreordained when the world was chaos and New York was inhabited by protoplasm—and all that—that you and I should meet just here, at this very minute. Aren't you a fatalist? I am. It's far the best belief."

"Is it? Why? I should think it rather depressing."

"Why—no. You believe that you're the sport of destiny. Now a sport implies amusement of some kind. See?"

"Is the football amused when it's kicked?" asked Katharine, with a short laugh.

"Now please don't introduce football, Miss Lauderdale," said Miner, without hesitation. "I don't understand anything about it, and I know that I should, because it's a mania just now. All the men get it when the winter comes on, and they sit up half the night at the club, drawing diagrams and talking Hebrew, and getting excited—I've seen them positively sitting up on their hind-legs in rows, and waving their paws and tearing their hair—just arguing about the points of a game half of them never played at all."

"What a picture!" laughed Katharine.

"Isn't it? But it's just true. I'm going to write a book about it and call it 'The Kicker Kicked'—you know, like Sartor Resartus—all full of philosophy and things. Can you say 'Kicker Kicked' twenty times very fast, Miss Lauderdale? I believe it's impossible. I just left my three sisters—they're slowly but firmly turning into aunts, you know—I left them all trying to say it as hard as they could, and the whole place clicked as though a thousand policemen's rattles were all going at once—hard! And they were all showing their teeth and going mad over it."

"I should think so—and that's another picture."

"By the bye, speaking of pictures, have you seen the Loan Collection? It's full of portraits of children with such extraordinary expressions—they all look as though they had given up trying to educate their parents in despair. I wonder why everybody paints children? Nobody can. I believe it would take a child—who knew how to paint, of course,—to paint a child, and give just that something which real children have—just what makes them children."

She was silent for a moment, following the unexpected train of thoughts. There were delicate sides to his nature that pleased Katharine as well as his nonsense.

"That's a pretty idea," she said, after thinking of it a few seconds.

"Everybody tries and fails," answered Miner. "Why doesn't somebody paint you?" he asked suddenly, looking at her.

"Somebody means to," she replied. "I was to have gone to sit to Mr. Crowdie this morning, but he sent me word to come to-morrow instead. I suppose he had forgotten another engagement."

"Crowdie is ill," said Miner. "Bright told me so this morning—some queer attack that nobody could understand."

"Something serious?" asked Katharine, quickly.

"Oh, no—I suppose not. Let's go and see. He lives close by—at least, not far, you know, over in Lafayette Place. It won't take five minutes to go across. Would you like to go?"

"Yes," answered the young girl. "I could ask if he will be able to begin the picture to-morrow."

They turned to the right at the next crossing and reached Broadway a few moments later. There was the usual

crowd of traffic in the great thoroughfare, and they had to wait a moment at the crossing before attempting it. Miner thought of what he had seen on the previous afternoon.

"Did you hear of Jack Ralston's accident yesterday?" he asked.

Katharine started violently and turned pale. She had not realized how the long hours and the final scene with her mother had unstrung her nerves. But Miner was watching the cars and carts for an opening, and did not see her.

"Yesterday?" she repeated, a moment later. "No—he came to see us and stayed almost till dinner time. What was it? When did it happen? Was he hurt?"

"Oh—you saw him afterwards, then?" Miner looked up into her face—she was taller than he—with a curious expression—recollecting Ralston's condition when he had last seen him.

"It wasn't serious, then? It had happened before he came to our house?"

"Why—yes," answered the little man, with a puzzled expression. "Was he all right when you saw him?"

"Perfectly. He never said anything about any accident. He looked just as he always does."

"That fellow has copper springs and patent joints inside him!" Miner laughed. "He was a good deal shaken, that's all, and went home in a cab. I should have gone to bed, myself."

"But what was it?"

"Oh—what he'd call nothing, I suppose! The cars at the corner of Thirty-second and Broadway—we were waiting, just as we are now—two cars were coming in opposite ways, and a boy with a bundle and a dog and a perambulator, and a few other things, got between the tracks—of course the cars would have taken off his head or his heels or his bundle, or something, and the dog would have been ready for his halo in three seconds. Jack jumped and picked up everything together and threw them before him and fell on his head. Wonder he wasn't killed or crippled—or both—no, I mean—here's a chance, Miss Lauderdale—come along before that van stops the way!"

There was not time to say anything as Katharine hastened across the broad street by his side, and by the time they had reached the pavement the blood had come back to her face. Her fears for Ralston's safety had been short-lived, thanks to Miner's quick way of telling the story, and in their place came the glow of pride a woman feels when the man she loves is praised by men for a brave action. Miner glanced at her as he landed her safely from the crossing and wondered whether Crowdie's portrait would do her justice. He doubted it, just then.

"It was just like him," she said quietly.

"And I suppose it was like him to say nothing about it, but just to go home and restore his shattered exterior and put on another pair of boots and go and see you. You said he looked as though nothing had happened to him?"

"Quite. We had a long talk together. I should certainly not have guessed that anything had gone wrong."

"Ralston's an unusual sort of fellow, anyhow," said Miner, enigmatically. "But then—so am I, so is Crowdie—do you like Crowdie? Rude question, isn't it? Well, I won't ask it, then. Besides, if he's to paint your picture you must have a pleasant expression—a smile that goes all round your head and is tied with a black ribbon behind—you know?"

"Oh, yes!" Katharine laughed again, as she generally did at the little man's absurd sayings.

"But Crowdie knows," he continued. "He's clever—oh, to any extent—big things and little things. All his lions roar and all his mosquitoes buzz, just like real things. The only thing he can't do is to paint children, and nobody can do that. By the bye, I'm repeating myself. It doesn't take long to get all round a little man like me. There are lots of things about Crowdie, though. He sings like an angel. I never heard such a voice. It's more like a contralto—like Scalchi's as it was, though she's good still,—than like a tenor. Oh, he's full of talent. I wish he weren't so queer!"

"Queer? How do you mean?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. There's something different from other people. Is he a friend of yours? I mean, a great friend?"

"Oh, no—not at all. I'm very fond of Mrs. Crowdie. She's a cousin, you know."

"Yes. Well—I don't know that I can make you understand what I mean, though. Besides, he's a very good sort of fellow. Never heard of anything that wasn't all right about him—at least—nothing particular. I don't know. He's like some kind of strange, pale, tropical fruit that's gone bad at the core and might be poisonous. Horrid thing to say of a man, isn't it?"

"Oh, I know just what you mean!" answered Katharine, with a little movement of disgust.

Miner suddenly became thoughtful again, and they reached the Crowdies' house,—a pretty little one, with white stone steps, unlike the ordinary houses of New York. Lafayette Place is an unfashionable nook, rather quiet and apparently remote from civilization. It has, however, three dignities, as the astrologers used to say. The Bishop of New York has his official residence on one side of it, and on the other is the famous Astor Library. A little further down there was at that time a small club frequented by the great publishers and by some of their most expensive authors. No amateur ever twice crossed the threshold alive.

Miner rang the bell, and the door was opened by an extremely smart old man-servant in livery. The Crowdies were very prosperous people. Katharine asked if Hester were at home. The man answered that Mrs. Crowdie was not receiving, but that he believed she would wish to see Miss Katharine. He had been with the Ralstons in the Admiral's lifetime and had known Katharine since she had been a baby. Crowdie was very proud of him on account of his thick white hair.

"I'll go in," said the young girl. "Good-bye, Mr. Miner—thank you so much for coming with me."

Miner trotted down the white stone steps and Katharine went into the house, and waited some minutes in the pretty little sitting-room with the bow-window, on the right of the entrance. She was just thinking that possibly Hester did not wish to see her, after all, when the door opened and Mrs. Crowdie entered. She was a pale, rather delicate-looking woman, in whose transparent features it was hard to trace any resemblance to her athletic brother, Hamilton Bright. But she was not an insignificant person by any means. She had the Lauderdale grey eyes like so many of the family, but with more softness in them, and the eyebrows were finely pencilled. An extraordinary quantity of silky brown hair was coiled and knotted as closely as possible to her head, and parted low on the forehead in heavy waves, without any of the ringlets which have been fashionable for years. There were almost unnaturally deep shadows under the eyes, and the mouth was too small for the face and strongly curved, the angles

of the lips being very cleanly cut all along their length, and very sharply distinct in colour from the ivory complexion. Altogether, it was a passionate face—or perhaps one should say impassioned. Imaginative people might have said that there was something fatal about it. Mrs. Crowdie was even paler than usual to-day, and it was evident that she had undergone some severe strain upon her strength.

“Oh, I’m so glad to see you, dear!” she said, kissing the young girl on both cheeks and leading her to a small sofa just big enough to accommodate two persons, side by side.

“You look tired and troubled, Hester darling,” said Katharine. “I met little Frank Miner and he told me that Mr. Crowdie had been taken ill. I hope it’s nothing serious?”

“No—yes—how can I tell you? He’s in his studio now, as though nothing had happened—not that he’s working, for of course he’s tired—oh, it has been so dreadful—I wish I could cry, but I can’t, you know. I never could. That’s why it hurts so. But I’m so glad you’ve come. I had just written a note to you and was going to send it, when Fletcher came up and said you were here. It was one of my intuitions—I’m always doing those things.”

It was so evidently a relief to her to talk that Katharine let her run on till she paused, before asking a question.

“What was the matter with him? Tell me, dear.”

Mrs. Crowdie did not answer at once, but sat holding the young girl’s hand and staring at the fire.

“Katharine,” she said at last, “I’m in great trouble. I want a friend—not to help me, for no one can—I must bear it alone—but I must speak, or it will drive me mad.”

“You can tell me everything if you will, Hester,” said Katharine, gravely. “It will be quite safe with me. But don’t tell me, if you are ever going to regret it.”

“No—I was thinking—”

Mrs. Crowdie hesitated and there was a short silence. She covered her eyes for an instant with one small hand—her hands were small and pointed, but not so thin as might have been expected from her face—and then she looked at her companion. The strong, well-balanced features apparently inspired her with confidence. She nodded slowly, as though reaching a conclusion within herself, and then spoke.

“I will tell you, Katharine. I’d much rather tell you than any one else, and I know myself—I should be sure to tell somebody in the end. You’re like a man in some things, though you are only a girl. If I had a man friend, I think I should go to him—but I haven’t. Walter has always been everything to me. Somehow I never get intimate with men, as some women do.”

“Surely—there’s your brother, Hester. Why don’t you go to him? I should, in your place.”

“No, dear. You don’t know—Hamilton never approved of my marriage. Didn’t you know? He’s such a good fellow that he wouldn’t tell any one else so. But he—well—he never liked Walter, from the first, though I must say Walter was very nice to him. And about the arrangements—you know I had a settlement—Ham insisted upon it—so that my little fortune is in the hands of trustees—your father is one of them. As though Walter would ever have touched it! He makes me spend it all on myself. No, dear—I couldn’t tell my brother—so I shall tell you.”

She stopped speaking and leaned forward, burying her face in her hands for a moment, as though to collect her thoughts. Then she sat up again, and looked at the fire while she spoke.

“It was last night,” she said. “He dined with you, and I stayed at home all by myself, not being asked, you see, because it was at a moment’s notice—it was quite natural, of course. Walter came home early, and we sat in the studio a long time, as we often do in the evening. There’s such a beautiful light, and the big fireplace, and cushions—and all. I thought he smoked a great deal, and you know he doesn’t usually smoke much, on account of his voice, and he really doesn’t care for it as some men do. I wish he did—I like the smell of it, and then a man ought to have some little harmless vice. Walter never drinks wine, nor coffee—nothing but Apollinaris. He’s not at all like most men. He never uses any scent, but he likes to burn all sorts of queer perfumes in the studio in a little Japanese censer. I like cigars much better, and I always tell him so,—and he laughs. How foolish I am!” she interrupted herself. “But it’s such a relief to talk—you don’t know!”

“Go on, dear—I’m listening,” said Katharine, humouring her, and speaking very gently.

“Yes—but I must tell you now.”

Katharine saw how she straightened herself to make the effort, and sitting close beside her, so that they touched one another, she felt that Hester was pressing back against the sofa, while she braced her feet against a footstool.

“It was very sudden,” she said in a low voice. “We were talking—I was saying something—all at once his face changed so—oh, it makes me shudder to think of it. It seemed—I don’t know—like—almost like a devil’s face! And his eyes seemed to turn in—he was all purple—and his lips were all wet—it was like foam—oh, it was dreadful—too awful!”

Katharine was startled and shocked. She could say nothing, but pressed the small hand in anxious sympathy. Hester smiled faintly, and then almost laughed, but instantly recovered herself again. She was not at all a hysterical woman, and, as she said, she could never cry.

“That’s only the beginning,” she continued. “I won’t tell you how he looked. He fell over on the divan and rolled about and caught at the cushions and at me—at everything. He didn’t know me at all, and he never spoke an articulate word—not one. But he groaned, and seemed to gnash his teeth—I believe it went on for hours, while I tried to help him, to hold him, to keep him from hurting himself. And then—after a long, long time—all at once, his face changed again, little by little, and—will you believe it, dear? He was asleep!”

“How strange!” exclaimed Katharine.

“Yes—wasn’t it? But it seemed so merciful, and I was so glad. And I sat by him all night and watched him. Then early, early this morning—it was just grey through the big skylight of the studio—he waked and looked at me, and seemed so surprised to find himself there. I told him he had fallen asleep—which was true, you know—and he seemed a little dazed, and went to bed very quietly. But to-day, when he got up—it was I who sent you word not to come, because he had told me about the sitting—I told him everything, and insisted upon sending for Doctor Routh. He seemed terribly distressed, but wouldn’t let me send, and he walked up and down the room, looking at me as though his heart would break. But he said nothing, except that he begged and begged me not to send for the doctor.”

“And he’s quite himself now, you say?”

"Wait—the worst is coming. At last he sat down beside me, and said—oh, so tenderly—that he had something to say to which I must listen, though he was afraid that it would pain me very much—that he had thought it would never be necessary to tell me, because he had imagined that he was quite cured when he had married me. Of course, I told him that—well, never mind what I said. You know how I love him."

Katharine knew, and it was incomprehensible to her, but she pressed the little hand once more.

"He told me that nearly ten years ago he had been ill with inflammatory rheumatism—that's the name of it, and it seems that it's excruciatingly painful. It was in Paris, and the doctors gave him morphia. He could not give it up afterwards."

"And he takes morphia still?" asked Katharine, anxiously enough, for she knew what it meant.

"No—that's it. He gave it up after five years—five whole years—to marry me. It was hard, he said, but he felt that it was possible, and he loved me, and he determined not to marry me while he was a slave to the poison. He gave it up for my sake. Wasn't that heroic?"

"Yes," said Katharine, gravely, and wondering whether she had misjudged Crowdie. "It was really heroic. They say it is the hardest thing any one can do."

"He did it. I love him ten times more for it—but—this is the result of giving it up, dear. He will always be subject to these awful attacks. He says that a dose of morphia would stop one of them instantly, and perhaps prevent their coming back for a long time. But he won't take it. He says he would rather cut off his hand than take it, and he made me promise not to give it to him when he is unconscious, if I ever see him in that state again. He's so brave about it," she said, with a little choking sigh. "I've told you my story, dear."

Her face relaxed a little, and she opened and shut her hands slowly as though they had been stiffened.

Katharine sat with her half an hour longer that afternoon, sympathizing at first and then trying to divert her attention from the subject which filled all her heart and mind. Then she rose to go.

As they went out together from the little sitting-room, the sound of Crowdie's voice came down to them from the studio in the upper story. The door must have been open. Katharine and Hester stood still and listened, for he was singing, alone and to himself, high up above them, a little song of Tosti's with French words.

"Si vous saviez que je vous aime."

It was indeed a marvellous voice, and as Katharine listened to the soft, silver notes, and felt the infinite pathos of each phrase, she wondered whether, with all his success as a painter, Crowdie had not mistaken his career. She listened, spell-bound, to the end.

"It's divine!" she exclaimed. "There's no other word for it."

Hester Crowdie was paler than ever, and her soft grey eyes were all on fire. And yet she had heard him hundreds of times. Almost before Katharine had shut the glass door behind her, she heard the sound of light, quick footsteps as Hester ran upstairs to her husband.

"It's all very strange," thought Katharine. "And I never heard of morphia having those effects afterwards. But then—how should I know?"

And meditating on the many emotions she had seen in others during the last twenty-four hours, she hurried homewards.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. LAUDERDALE had met with temptations in the course of her life, but they had not often appealed to her as they would have appealed to many women, for she was not easily tempted. A number of forms of goodness which are very hard to most people had been so easy to her that she had been good without effort, as, on the whole, she was good by nature. She had been brought up in an absolutely fixed religious belief, and had never felt any inclination to deviate from it, nor to speculate about the details of it, for her intellect was rather indolent, and in most positions in life her common-sense, which was strong, had taken the place of the complicated mental processes familiar to imaginative people like Katharine. Such imagination as Mrs. Lauderdale had was occupied with artistic matters.

Her vanity had always been satisfied quite naturally, without effort on her part, by her own great and uncontested beauty. She knew, and had always known, that she was commonly compared with the greatest beauties of the world, by men and women who had seen them and were able to judge. Social ambition never touched her either, and she never remembered to have met with a single one of those small society rebuffs which embitter the lives of some women. Nobody had ever questioned her right, nor her husband's right, nor that of any of the family, to be considered equal with the first. In early days she had suffered a little, indeed, from not being rich enough to exercise that gift of almost boundless hospitality which is rather the rule than the exception among Americans, and which is said, with some justice, to be an especial characteristic of Kentuckians. Such troubles as she had met with had chiefly arisen from the smallness of her husband's income, from peculiarities of her husband's character, and from her elder daughter's headstrong disposition. And with all these her common-sense had helped her continually.

She loved amusement and she had it in abundance, in society, during a great part of the year. Her talent had helped her to procure luxuries, and she had been generous in giving a large share of them to her daughters. She had soon learned to understand that society wanted her for herself, and not for what she could offer it in her own home, and she had been flattered by the discovery. As for Alexander, he had many good qualities which she appreciated when she compared him with the husbands of other women. Generosity with money was not his strong point, but he had many others. He loved her tenaciously, not tenderly, nor passionately, nor in any way that was at all romantic—if that word means anything—and certainly not blindly, but tenaciously; and his admiration for her beauty, though rarely expressed, found expression on such occasions in short, strong phrases which left no manner of doubt as to his sincere conviction. She had not been happy with him, as boys and girls mean to be happy—for the rigidity of very great strength, when not combined with a corresponding intellect, is excessively wearisome in the companionship of daily married life. There is a coldness, a lack of expression and of sympathy, a Pharaoh-like, stony quality about it which do not encourage affection, nor satisfy an expansive nature. And though not imaginative, Mrs. Lauderdale was

expansive. She had a few moments of despairing regret at first. She felt that she might just as well have married a magnificent, clean-built, iron-bodied, steel-jointed locomotive, as the man she had chosen, and that she could produce about as much impression on his character as she could have made upon such an engine. But she found out in time that, within certain limits, he was quite willing to do what she asked of him, and that beyond them he ran his daily course with a systematic and unvarying regularity, which was always safe, if it was never amusing. She got such amusement as she liked from other sources, and she often consoled herself for the dulness of the family dinner, when she dined at home, with the certainty that, during several hours before she went to bed, the most desirable men at a great ball would contest the honour of dancing with her. And that was all she wanted of them. She liked some of them. She took an interest in their doings, and she listened sympathetically to the story of their troubles. But it was not in her nature to flirt, nor to lose her head when she was flattered, and if she sometimes doubted whether she really loved her husband at all, she was quite certain that she could never love any one else. Perhaps she deserved no credit for her faithfulness, for it was quite natural to her.

On the whole, therefore, her temptations had been few, in reality, and she had scarcely noticed them. She had reached the most painful moment of her life with very little experience of what she could resist—the moment when she realized that the supremacy of her beauty was at an end. Of course, she had exaggerated very much the change which had taken place, for at the crucial instant when she had caught sight of her face in the mirror she had been unusually tired, considerably bored and not a little annoyed—and the mirror had a decidedly green tinge in the glass, as she assured herself by examining it and comparing it with a good one on the following morning. But the impression once received was never to be effaced; she might look her very best in the eyes of others—to her own, the lines of age being once discovered were never to be lost again, the dazzling freshness was never to come back to her skin, nor the gold to her hair, nor the bloom to her lips. And Crowdie, who was an artist, and almost a great portrait painter, could not take his eyes from Katharine, at whom no one would have looked twice when her mother had been at the height of her beauty. At least, so Mrs. Lauderdale thought.

And now, until Katharine was married and went away from home, the elder woman was to be daily, almost hourly, compared with her daughter by all who saw them together; for the first time in her life she was to be second in that one respect in which she had everywhere been first ever since she could remember, and she was to be second in her own house. When she realized it, she was horrified, and for a time her whole nature seemed changed. She clung desperately to that beauty of hers, which was, had she known it, the thing she loved best on earth, and which had reduced in her eyes the value of everything else. She clung to it, and yet, from that fatal moment, she knew that it was hopeless to cling to it, hopeless to try and recall it, hopeless to hope for a miracle which, even in the annals of miracles, had never been performed—the recall of youth. The only possible mitigation suggested itself as a spontaneous instinct—to avoid that cruel comparison with Katharine. In the first hours it overcame her altogether. She could not look at the girl. She could hardly bring herself to speak kindly to her; though she knew that she would willingly lay down her life for the child she loved best, she could not lay down her beauty.

She was terrified at herself when she began to understand that something had overcome her which she felt powerless to resist. For she was a very religious woman, and the idea of envying her own daughter, and of almost hating her out of envy, was monstrous. When Ralston had come, she had not had the slightest intention of speaking as she had spoken. Suddenly the words had come to her lips of themselves, as it were. If things went on as they were going, Katharine would wait for Ralston during years to come—the girl had her father's nature in that—and Katharine would be at home, and the cruel, hopeless comparison must go on, a perpetual and a keen torture from which there was to be no escape. It was simply impossible, intolerable, more than human endurance could bear. Ralston must be sent away, Katharine must be married as quickly as possible, and peace would come. There was no other way. It would be easy enough to marry the girl, with her position, and the hope of some of Robert Lauderdale's money, and with her beauty—that terrible beauty of hers that was turning her mother's to ugliness beside it. The first words had spoken themselves, the others had followed of necessity, and then, at the end, had come the overwhelming consciousness of what they had meant, and the breaking down of the overstrained nerves, and the sobs and the tears, gushing out as a spring where instant remorse had rent and cleft her very soul.

It was no wonder that Katharine did not understand what was taking place. Fortunately, being much occupied with her own very complicated existence, she did not attempt any further analysis of the situation, did not accidentally guess what was really the matter, and wisely concluded that it would be best to leave her mother to herself for a time.

On the morning after the events last chronicled, Mrs. Lauderdale returned to her work, and at a quarter before eleven Katharine was ready to go out and was watching for Ralston at the library window. As soon as she saw him in the distance she let herself out of the house and went to meet him. He glanced at her rather anxiously as they exchanged greetings, and she thought that he looked tired and careworn. There were shadows under his eyes, and his dark skin looked rather bloodless.

"Why didn't you tell me that you had an accident the day before yesterday?" she asked at once.

"Who told you I had?" he enquired.

"Mr. Miner. I went out alone yesterday, after you had gone, and I met him at the corner of Washington Square. He told me all about it. How can you do such things, Jack? How can you risk your life in that way? And then, not to tell me! It wasn't kind. You seem to think I don't care. I wish you wouldn't! I'm sure I turned perfectly green when Mr. Miner told me—he must have thought it very extraordinary. You might at least have given me warning."

"I'm very sorry," said Ralston. "I didn't think it was worth mentioning. Wasn't I all right when I came to see you?"

He looked at her rather anxiously again—for another reason, this time. But her answer satisfied him.

"Oh—you were 'dear'—even nicer than usual! But don't do it again—I mean, such things. You don't know how frightened I was when he told me. In fact, I'm rather ashamed of it, and it's much better that you shouldn't know."

"All right!" And Ralston smiled happily. "Now," he continued after a moment's thought, "I want to explain to you what I've found out about this idea of yours."

"Don't call it an idea, Jack. You promised that you would do it, you know."

"Yes. I know I did. But it's absolutely impossible to have it quite a secret—theoretically, at least."

"Why?" She slackened her pace instinctively, and then, seeing that they were just entering Fifth Avenue, walked

on more briskly, turning down in the direction of the Square.

Ralston told her in a few words what he had learned from the lawyer.

"You see," he concluded, "there's no way out of it. And, of course, anybody may go to the Bureau of Vital Statistics and look at the records."

"But is anybody likely to?" asked Katharine. "Is the Clerk of the Records, or whatever you call him, the sort of man who would be likely to know papa, for instance? That's rather important."

"No. I shouldn't think so. But everybody knows all about you. You might as well be the President of the United States as be a Lauderdale, as far as doing anything incognito is concerned."

"There's only one President at a time, and there are twenty-three Lauderdales in the New York directory besides ourselves, and six of them are Alexanders."

"Are there? How did you happen to know that?" asked Ralston.

"Grandpapa looked them up the other day. He's always looking up things, you know—when he's not asleep, poor dear!"

"That certainly makes a difference."

"Of course it does," said Katharine. "No doubt the Clerk of the Records has seen the name constantly. Besides, I don't suppose he does the work himself. He only signs things. He probably looks at the books once a month, or something of that sort."

"Even then—he might come across the entry. He may have heard my name, too—you see my father was rather a bigwig in the Navy—and then, seeing the two together—"

"And what difference does it make? It isn't really a secret marriage, you know, Jack—at least, it's not to be a secret after I tell uncle Robert, which will be within twenty-four hours, you know. On the contrary, I shall tell him that we meant to tell everybody, and that it will be an eternal disgrace to him if he does nothing for you."

"He'll bear that with equanimity, dear. You won't succeed."

"Something will have to be done for us. When we're married and everybody knows it, we can't go on living as if we weren't—indefinitely—it would be too ridiculous. Papa couldn't stand that—he's rather afraid of ridicule, I believe, though he's not afraid of anything else. So, as I was saying, something will have to be done."

"That's a hopeful view," laughed Ralston. "But I like the idea that it's not to be a secret for more than a day. It makes it look different."

"But I always told you that was what I meant, dear—I couldn't do anything mean or underhand. Didn't you believe me?"

"Of course—but somehow I didn't see it exactly as I do now."

"Oh, Jack—you have no more sense than—than a small yellow dog!"

At which very remarkable simile Ralston laughed again, as he caught sight of the creature that had suggested it—a small yellowish cur sitting on the pavement, bolt upright against the railing, and looking across the street, grinning from ear to ear and making his pink tongue shake with a perfectly unnecessary panting, the very picture of canine silliness.

"Yes—that's the dog I mean," said Katharine. "Look at him—he's behaving just as you do, sometimes. But let's be serious. What am I to do? Who is going to marry us?"

"Oh—I'll find somebody," answered Ralston, confidently. "They all say it's easy enough to be married in New York, but that it's awfully hard to be divorced."

"All the better!" laughed Katharine. "By the bye—what time is it?"

"Five minutes to eleven," answered Ralston, looking at his watch.

"Dear me! And at eleven I'm due at Mr. Crowdie's for my portrait. I shall be late. Go and see about finding a clergyman while I'm at the studio. It can't be helped."

Ralston glanced at her in surprise. Of her sitting for her portrait he had not heard before.

"I must say," he answered, "you don't seem inclined to waste time this morning—"

"Certainly not! Why should we lose time? We've lost a whole year already. Do you think I'm the kind of girl who has to talk everything over fifty times to make up her mind? When you came, day before yesterday, I'd decided the whole matter. And now I mean—yes, you may look at me and laugh, Jack—I mean to put it through. I'm much more energetic than you seem to think. I believe you always imagined I was a lazy, pokey, moony sort of girl, with too much papa and mamma and weak tea and buttered toast in her nature. I'm not, you know. I'm just as energetic for a girl as you are for a man."

"Rather more so," said Ralston, watching her with intense admiration of her strong and beautiful self, and with considerable indifference to what she was saying, though her words amused him. "Please tell me about Crowdie and the portrait."

"Oh—the portrait? Mr. Crowdie wants to paint it for Hester. I'm going to sit the first time this morning. That's all. Here we are at the corner. We must cross here to get over to Lafayette Place."

"Well, then," said Ralston, as they walked on, "there's only one more point, and that's to find a clergyman. I suppose you can't suggest anybody, can you?"

"Hardly! You must manage that. I'm sure I've done quite enough already."

They discussed the question as they walked, without coming to any conclusion. Ralston determined to spend the day in looking for a proper person. He could easily withhold his name in every case, until he had made the arrangements. As a matter of fact, it is not hard to find a clergyman under the circumstances, since no clergyman can properly refuse to marry a respectable couple against whom he knows nothing. The matter of subsequent secrecy becomes for him more a question of taste than of conscience.

They reached the door of the Crowdie house, and Katharine turned at the foot of the white stone steps to say good-bye.

"Say you're glad, Jack dear!" she said suddenly, as she put out her hand, and their eyes met.

"Glad! Of course I'm glad—no, I really am glad now, though I wasn't at first. It looks different—it looks all right

to-day."

"You don't look just as I expected you would, though," said Katharine, doubtfully. "And yet it seems to me you ought—" She stopped.

"Katharine—dear—you can't expect me to be as enthusiastically happy as though it really meant being married to you—can you?"

"But it does mean it. What else should it mean, or could it mean? Why isn't it just the same as though we had a big wedding?"

"Because things won't turn out as you think they will," answered Ralston. "At least, not soon—uncle Robert won't do anything, you know. One can't take fate and destiny and fortune and shuffle them about as though they were cards."

"One can, Jack! That's just it. Everybody has one chance of being happy. We've got ours now, and we'll take it."

"We'll take it anyhow, whether it's really a chance or not. Good-bye—dear—dear—"

He pressed her hand as he spoke, and his voice was tender and rang true, but it had not that quaver of emotion in it which had so touched Katharine on that one evening, and which she longed to hear again; and Ralston missed the wave of what had seemed like deep feeling, and wished it would come back. His nerves were perfectly steady now, though he had been late at his club on the previous evening, and had not slept much.

"I'll write you a note this afternoon," he said, "as soon as I've arranged with the clergyman. If it has to be very early, you must find some excuse for going out of the house. Of course, I'll manage it as conveniently as I can for you."

"Oh, there'll be no trouble about my going out," answered Katharine. "Nobody ever asks me where I'm going in the morning. You'll let me have the note as soon as you can, won't you?"

"Of course. Before dinner, at all events. Good-bye again, dear."

"Good-bye—until to-morrow."

She added the last two words very softly. Then she nodded affectionately and went up the steps. As she turned, after ringing the bell, she saw him walking away. Then he also turned, instinctively, and waved his hat once, and smiled, and was gone. Fletcher opened the door, and Katharine went in.

"How is Mr. Crowdie to-day—is he painting?" she asked of the servant.

"Yes, Miss Katharine, Mr. Crowdie's very well, and he left word that he expected you at eleven, Miss."

"Yes, I know—I'm late."

And she hurried up the stairs, for she had often been to the studio with Hester and with Crowdie himself, to see his pictures, and knew her way. But she knocked discreetly at the door when she had reached the upper story of the house.

"Come in, Miss Lauderdale," said Crowdie's silvery voice, and she heard his step on the polished floor as he left his work and came forward to meet her.

It seemed to her that his face was paler and his mouth redder than ever, and the touch of his soft white hand was exceedingly unpleasant to her, even through her glove.

He had placed a big chair ready for her, and she sat down as she was, with her hat and veil on, and looked about. Crowdie pushed away the easel at which he had been working. It ran almost noiselessly over the waxed oak, and he turned it with the face of the picture to the wall in a corner at some distance.

The studio was, as has been said, a very large room, occupying almost the whole upper story of the house, which was deeper than ordinary houses, though not very broad on the front. The studio was, therefore, nearly twice as long as its width, and looked even larger than it was from having no windows below, and only one door. There was, indeed, a much larger exit, by which Crowdie had his pictures taken out, by an exterior stair to the yard, but it was hidden by a heavy curtain on one side of the enormous fireplace. There were great windows, high up, on the north side, which must have opened above the roof of the neighbouring house, and which were managed by cords and weights, and could be shaded by rolling shades of various tints from white to dark grey. Over it was a huge skylight, also furnished with contrivances for modifying the light or shutting it out altogether.

So far, the description might answer for the interior of a photographer's establishment, but none of the points enumerated struck Katharine as she sat in her big chair waiting to be told what to do.

The first impression was that of a magnificent blending of perfectly harmonious colours. There was an indescribable confusion of soft and beautiful stuffs of every sort, from carpets to Indian shawls and Persian embroideries. The walls, the chairs and the divans were covered with them, and even the door which gave access to the stairs was draped and made to look unlike a door, so that when it was shut there seemed to be no way out. The divans were of the Eastern kind—great platforms, as it were, on which were laid broad mattresses, then stuffs, and then endless heaps of cushions, piled up irregularly and lying about in all directions. Only the polished floor was almost entirely bare—the rest was a mass of richness. But that was all. There were no arms, such as many artists collect in their studios, no objects of metal, save the great dull bronze fire-dogs with lions' heads, no plants, no flowers, and, excepting three easels with canvases on them, there was nothing to suggest the occupation of Walter Crowdie—nor any occupation at all. Even the little Japanese censer in which Hester said that he burned strange perfumes was hidden out of sight when not in use. There was not so much as a sketch or a drawing or a bit of modelled clay to be seen. There was not even a table with paints and brushes. Such things were concealed in a sort of small closet built out upon the yard, on the opposite side from the outer staircase, and hidden by curtains.

The total absence of anything except the soft materials with which everything was covered, produced rather a strange effect, and for some mysterious reason it was not a pleasant one. Crowdie's face was paler and his lips were redder than seemed quite natural; his womanish eyes were too beautiful and their glance was a caress—as warm velvet feels to the hand.

"Won't you let me help you to take off your veil?" he said, coming close to Katharine.

"Thank you—I can do it myself," she answered, with unnecessary coldness.

CHAPTER X.

CROWDIE stepped backward from her, as she laid her hat and veil upon her knee. He slowly twisted a bit of crayon between his fingers, as though to help his thoughts, and he looked at her critically.

"How are you going to paint me?" she asked, regretting that she had spoken so very coldly a moment earlier.

"That's one of those delightful questions that sitters always ask," answered the artist, smiling a little. "That's precisely what I'm asking myself—how in the world am I going to paint you?"

"Oh—that isn't what I meant! I meant—full face or side face, you know."

"Oh, yes,—of course. I was only laughing at myself. You have no idea what an extraordinary change taking off your hat makes, Miss Lauderdale. It would be awfully rude to talk to a lady about her face under ordinary circumstances. In detail, I mean. But you must forgive me, because it's my profession."

He moved about with sudden steps, stopping and gazing at her each time that he obtained a new point of view.

"How does my hat make such a difference?" asked Katharine. "What sort of difference?"

"It changes your whole expression. It's quite right that it should. When you have it on, one only sees the face—the head from the eyes downwards—that means the human being from the perceptions downwards. When you take your hat off, I see you from the intelligence upwards."

"That would be true of any one."

"No doubt. But the intelligence preponderates in your case, which is what makes the contrast so strong."

"I didn't know I was as intelligent as all that!" Katharine laughed a little at what she took for a piece of rather gross flattery.

"No," answered Crowdie, thoughtfully. "That is your peculiar charm. Do you mind the light in your eyes? Just to try the effect? So? Does that tire you?"

He had changed the arrangement of some of the shades so as to throw a strong glare in her face. She looked up and the white light gleamed like fire in her grey eyes.

"I couldn't stand it long," she said. "Is it necessary?"

"Oh, no. Nothing is necessary. I'll try it another way. So." He moved the shades again.

"What a funny speech!" exclaimed Katharine. "To say that nothing is necessary—"

"It's a very true speech. Nothing is the same as Pure Being in some philosophies, and Pure Being is the only condition which is really absolutely necessary. Now, would you mind letting me see you in perfect profile? I'm sorry to bother you, but it's only at first. When we've made up our minds—if you'd just turn your head towards the fireplace, a little more—a shade more, please—that's it—one moment so—"

He stood quite still, gazing at her side face as though trying to fix it in his memory in order to compare it with other aspects.

"I want to paint you every way at once," he said. "May I ask—what do you think, yourself, is the best view of your face?"

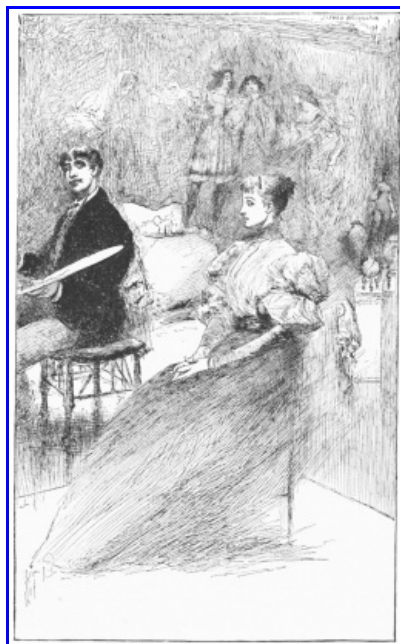
"I'm sure I don't know," answered Katharine, with a little laugh. "What does Hester think? As it's to be for her, we might consult her."

"But she doesn't know it's for her—she thinks it's for you."

"We might ask her all the same, and take her advice. Isn't she at home?"

"No," answered Crowdie, after a moment's hesitation. "I think she's gone out shopping."

Katharine was not naturally suspicious, but there was something in the way Crowdie hesitated about the apparently insignificant answer which struck



"What have you decided?" she enquired.—Vol. I., [p. 203](#).

her as odd. She had made the suggestion because his mere presence was so absurdly irritating to her that she longed for Hester's company as an alleviation. But it was evident that Crowdie did not want his wife at that moment.

He wanted to be alone with Katharine.

"You might send and find out," said the young girl, mercilessly.

"I'm pretty sure she's gone out," Crowdie replied, moving up an easel upon which was set a large piece of grey pasteboard. "Even if she is in, she always has things to do at this time."

He looked steadily at Katharine's face and then made a quick stroke on the pasteboard, then looked again and then made another stroke.

"What have you decided?" she enquired.

"Just as you are now, with your head a little on one side and that clear look in your eyes—no—you were looking straight at me, but not in full face. Think of what you were thinking about just when you looked."

Katharine smiled. The thought had not been flattering to him. But she did as he asked and met his eyes every time he glanced at her. He worked rapidly, with quick, sure strokes, using a bit of brown chalk. Then he took a long, new, black lead pencil, with a very fine point, from the breast-pocket of his jacket, and very carefully made a few marks with it. Instead of putting it back when he used the bit of pastel again, he held the pencil in his teeth. It was long and stuck out on each side of his bright red lips. Oddly enough, Katharine thought it made him look like a cat with black whiskers, and the straight black line forced his mouth into a wide grin. She even fancied that to increase the resemblance his eyes looked green when he gazed at her intently, and that the pupils were not quite round, but were turning into upright slits. She looked away for a moment and almost smiled. His legs were a little in-kneed, as those of a cat look when she stands up to reach after anything. There was something feline even in his little feet, which were short with a very high instep, and he wore low shoes of dark russet leather.

"There is a smile in your eyes, but not in your face," said Crowdie, taking the pencil from between his teeth. "I suppose it's rude to ask you what you are thinking about?"

"Not at all," answered Katharine. "I was thinking how funny you looked with that pencil in your mouth."

"Oh!" Crowdie laughed carelessly and went on with his work.

Katharine noticed that when he next wished to dispose of the pencil he put it into his pocket. As he had chosen a position in which she must look directly at him, she could not help observing all his movements, while her thoughts went back to her own interests and to Ralston. It was much more pleasant to think of John than of Crowdie.

"I'm discouraged already," said Crowdie, suddenly, after a long silence, during which he had worked rapidly. "But it's only a first attempt at a sketch. I want a lot of them before I begin to paint. Should you like to rest a little?"

"Yes."

Katharine rose and came forward to see what he had been doing. She felt at once a little touch of disappointment and annoyance, which showed that she was not altogether deficient in vanity, though of a pardonable sort, considering what she saw. To her unpractised eye the sketch presented a few brown smudges, through which a thin pencil-line ran here and there.

"You don't see any resemblance to yourself, I suppose," said Crowdie, with some amusement.

"Frankly—I hope I'm better looking than that," laughed Katharine.

"You are. Sometimes you're divinely beautiful." His voice grew exquisitely caressing.

Katharine was not pleased.

"I didn't ask for impossible compliments," she said coolly.

"Now look," answered Crowdie, taking no notice of the little rebuke, and touching the smudge with his fingers. "You mustn't look too close, you know. You must try and get the effect—not what you see, but what I see."

Without glancing at her face he quickly touched the sketch at many points with his thumb, with his finger, with his bit of crayon, with his needle-pointed lead pencil. Katharine watched him intently.

"Shut your eyes a little, so as not to see the details too distinctly," he said, still working.

The face began to stand out. There was very little in the sketch, but there was the beginning of the expression.

"I begin to see something," said Katharine, with increasing interest.

"Yes—look!"

He glanced at her for a moment. Then, holding the long pencil almost by the end and standing well back from the pasteboard, he drew a single line—the outline of the part of the face and head furthest from the eye, as it were. It was so masterly, so simple, so faultless, and yet so striking in its effect, that Katharine held her breath while the point moved, and uttered an exclamation when it stopped.

"You are a great artist!"

Crowdie smiled.

"I didn't ask for impossible compliments," he said, repeating her own words and imitating her tone, as he stepped back from the easel and looked at what he had done. "She's not so bad-looking, is she?" He fumbled in his pocket and found two or three bits of coloured pastels and rubbed a little of each upon the pasteboard with his fingers. "More life-like, now. How do you like that?"

"It's wonderful!"

"Wonderfully like?"

"How can I tell? I mean that it's a wonderful performance. It's not for me to judge of the likeness."

"Isn't it? In spite of proverbs, we're the only good judges of ourselves—outwardly or inwardly. Will you sit down again, if you are rested? Do you know, I'm almost inclined to dab a little paint on the thing—it's a lucky hit—or else you're a very easy subject, which I don't believe."

"And yet you were so discouraged a moment ago."

"That's always my way. I don't know about other artists, of course. It's only amateurs that tell each other their sensations about their daubs. We don't. But I'm always in a fit just before I'm going to succeed."

Katharine said nothing as she went back to her seat, but the expression he had just used chilled her suddenly. She had received a vivid impression from the account Hester had given her of his recent attack, and she had unconsciously associated the idea of a fit with his ailment. Then she was amused at her own folly.

Crowdie looked at her keenly, then at his drawing, and then seemed to contemplate a particular point at the top

of her head. She was not watching him, as she knew that he was not yet working again. There was an odd look in his beautiful eyes which would not have pleased her, had she seen it. He left the easel again and came towards her.

"Would you mind letting me arrange your hair a little?" he asked, stopping beside her.

Katharine instinctively raised one hand to her head, and it unexpectedly met his fingers, which were already about to touch her hair. The sensation was so inexpressibly disagreeable to her that she started, lowering her head as though to avoid him, and speaking sharply.

"Don't!" she cried. "I can do it myself."

"I beg your pardon," said Crowdie, drawing back. "It's the merest trifle—but I don't see how you can do it yourself. I didn't know you were so nervous, or I would have explained. Won't you let me take the end of my pencil and just lift your hair a little? It makes such a difference in the outline."

It struck Katharine that she was behaving very foolishly, and she sat up straight in her chair.

"Of course," she said, quite naturally. "Do it in any way you like. I've a horror of being touched unexpectedly, that's all. I suppose I really am nervous."

Which was not at all true in general, though as regards Crowdie it was not half the truth.

"Thank you," he answered, proceeding to move her hair, touching it very delicately with his pointed white fingers. "It was stupid of me, but most people don't mind. There—if you only knew what a difference it makes. Just a little bit more, if you'll let me—on the other side. Now let me look at you, please—yes—that's just it."

Katharine suffered intensely during those few moments. Something within her, of which she had never been conscious before, but which was most certainly a part of herself, seemed to rise up in fury, outraged and insulted, against something in the man beside her, which filled her with a vague terror and a positive disgust. While his soft and womanish fingers touched her hair, she clasped her hands together till they hurt, and repeated to herself with set lips that she was foolish and nervous and unstrung. She could not help the sigh of relief which escaped her lips when he had finished and went back to his easel. Perhaps he noticed it. At all events he became intent on his work and said nothing for fully five minutes.

During that time she looked at him and tried to solve the mystery of her unaccountable sensations. She thought of what her mother had said—that Crowdie was like a poisonous flower. He was so white and red and soft, and the place was so still and warm, with its masses of rich drapery that shut off every sound of life from without. And she thought of what Miner had said—oddly enough, in exactly the same strain, that he was like some strange tropical fruit—gone bad at the core. Fruit or flower, or both, she thought. Either was apt enough.

The air was perfectly pure. It was only warm and still. Possibly there was the slightest smell of turpentine, which is a clean smell and a wholesome one. Whatever the perfumes might be which he occasionally burned, they left no trace behind. And yet Katharine fancied they were there—unholy, sweet, heavy, disquieting, offending that something which in the young girl had never been offended before. The stillness seemed too warm—the warmth too still—his face too white—his mouth was as scarlet and as heavy as the blossom of the bright red calla lily. There was something repulsively fascinating about it, as there is in a wound.

"You're getting tired," he said at last. "I'm not surprised. It must be much harder to sit than to paint."

"How did you know I was tired?" asked Katharine, moving from her position, and looking at a piece of Persian embroidery on the opposite wall.

"Your expression had changed when I spoke," he said. "But it's not at all necessary to sit absolutely motionless as though you were being photographed. It's better to talk. The expression is like—" He stopped.

"Like what?" she asked, curious to hear a definition of what is said too often to be undefinable.

"Well—I don't know. Language isn't my strong point, if I have any strong point at all."

"That's an affectation, at all events!" laughed Katharine, becoming herself again when not obliged to look at him fixedly.

"Is it? Well—affectation is a good word. Expression is not expression when it's an affected expression. It's the tone of voice of the picture. That sounds wild, but it means something. A speech in print hasn't the expression it has when it's well spoken. A photograph is a speech in print. It's the truth done by machinery. It's often striking at first sight, but you get tired of it, because what's there is all there—and what is not there isn't even suggested, though you know it exists."

"Yes, I see," said Katharine, who was interested in what he said, and had momentarily forgotten his personality.

"That shows how awfully clever you are," he answered with a silvery little laugh. "I know it's far from clear. There's a passage somewhere in one of Tolstoi's novels—'Peace and War,' I think it is—about the impossibility of expressing all one thinks. It ought to follow that the more means of expression a man has, the nearer he should get to expressing everything in him. But it doesn't. There's a fallacy somewhere in the idea. Most things—ideas, anything you choose to call them—are naturally expressible in a certain material—paint, wood, fiddle-strings, bronze and all that. Come and look at yourself now. You see I've restrained my mania for oils a few minutes. I'm trying to be conscientious."

"I wish you would go on talking about expression," said Katharine, rising and coming up to the easel. "It seems very much improved," she added as she saw the drawing. "How fast you work!"

"There's no such thing as time when things go right," replied Crowdie. "Excuse me a moment. I'll get something to paint with."

He disappeared behind the curtain in the corner, to the out-built closet in which he kept his colours and brushes, and Katharine was left alone. She stood still for a few moments contemplating the growing likeness of herself. There was as yet hardly any colour in the sketch, no more, in fact, than he had rubbed on while she had watched him do it, when she had rested the first time. It was not easy to see what he had done since, and yet the whole effect was vastly improved. As she looked, the work itself, the fine pencil-line, the smudges of brown and the suggestions of colouring seemed all so slight as to be almost nothing—and yet she felt that her expression was there. She thought of her mother's laborious and minutely accurate drawing, which never reached any such effect as this, and she realized the almost impossible gulf which lies between the artist and the amateur who has tried too late to become one—in whom the evidence of talent is made unrecognizable by an excess of conscientious but wholly misapplied labour. The amateur who has never studied at all may sometimes dash off a head with a few lines, which

would be taken for the careless scrawling of a clever professional. But the amateur who, too late, attempts to perfect himself by sheer study and industry is almost certainly lost as an artist—a fact which is commonly interpreted to mean that art itself comes by inspiration, and that so-called genius needs no school; whereas it only means that if we go to school at all we must go at the scholar's age and get the tools of expression, and learn to handle them, before we have anything especial to express.

"Still looking at it?" asked Crowdie, coming out of his sanctum with a large palette in his left hand, and a couple of brushes in his right. "Now I'm going to begin by spoiling it all."

There were four or five big, butter-like squeezings of different colours on the smooth surface of the board. Crowdie stuck one of his brushes through the thumb-hole of the palette, and with the other mixed what he wanted, dabbing it into the paints and then daubing them all together. Katharine sat down once more.

"I thought painters always used palette-knives," she said, watching him.

"Oh—anything answers the purpose. I sometimes paint with my fingers—but it's awfully messy."

"I should think so," she laughed, taking her position again as he looked at her.

"Yes—thank you," he said. "If you won't mind looking at me for a minute or two, just at first. I want your eyes, please. After that you can look anywhere you like."

"Do you always paint the eyes first?" asked Katharine, idly, for the sake of not relapsing into silence.

"Generally—especially if they're looking straight out of the picture. Then they're the principal thing, you know. They are like little holes—if you look steadily at them you can see the real person inside. That's the reason why a portrait that looks at you, if it's like at all, is so much more like than one that looks away."

"How naturally you explain things!" exclaimed the young girl, becoming interested at once.

"Things are so natural," answered the painter. "Everything is natural. That's one of my brother-in-law's maxims."

"It sounds like a truism."

"Everything that is true sounds like a truism—and is one. We know everything that's true, and it all sounds old because we do know it all."

"What an extraordinary way of putting it—to say that we know everything! But we don't, you know!"

"Oh, yes, we do—as far as we ever can know at all. I don't mean little peddling properties of petroleum and tricks with telephones—what they call science, you know. I mean about big things that don't change—ideas."

"Oh—about ideas. You mean right and wrong, and the future life and the soul, I suppose."

"Yes. That's exactly what I mean. In a hundred thousand ages we shall never get one inch further than we are now. A little bit more to the right, please—but go on looking at me a moment longer, if you're not tired."

"I've only just sat down again. But what you were saying—you meant to add that we know nothing, and that it's all a perfectly boundless uncertainty."

"Not at all. I think we know some things and shan't lose them, and we don't know some others and never shall."

"What kind of things, for instance?" asked Katharine. "In the first place, there is a soul, and it is immortal."

"Lucretius says that there is a soul, but that it isn't immortal. There's something, anyhow—something I can't paint. People who deny the existence of the soul never tried to paint portraits, I believe."

"You certainly have most original ideas."

"Have I? But isn't that true? I know it is. There's something in every face that I can't paint—that the greatest painter that ever lived can't paint. And it's not on account of the material, either. One can get just as near to it in black and white as in colours,—just near enough to suggest it,—and yet one can see it. I call it the ghost. I don't know whether there are ghosts or not, but people say they've seen them. They are generally colourless, apparently, and don't stay long. But did you ever notice, in all those stories, that people always recognize the ghost instantly if it's that of a person they've known?"

"Yes. Now I think of it, that's true," said Katharine.

"Well, that's why I call the recognizable something about the living person his ghost. It's what we can't get. Now, another thing. If one is told that the best portrait of some one whom one knows is a portrait of some one else instead, one isn't much surprised. No, really—I've tried it, just to test the likeness. Most people say they are surprised, but they're not. They fall into the trap in a moment, and tell you that they see that they were mistaken, but that it's a strong resemblance. That couldn't happen with a real person. It happens easily with a photograph—much more easily than with a picture. But with a real person it's quite different, even though he may have changed immensely since you saw him—far beyond the difference between a good portrait and the sitter, so far as details are concerned. But the person—you recognize him at once. By what? By that something which we can't catch in a picture. I call it the ghost—it's a mere fancy, because people used to believe that a ghost was a visible soul."

"How interesting!" exclaimed Katharine. "And it sounds true."

"A thing must sound true to be interesting," said Crowdie. "Excuse me a moment. I want another colour."

He dived into the curtained recess, and Katharine watched the disagreeable undulation of his movements as he walked. She wondered why she was interested as soon as he talked, and repelled as soon as he was silent. Much of what he said was more or less paradoxical, she thought, and not altogether unlike the stuff talked by cynical young men who pick up startling phrases out of books, and change the subject when they are asked to explain what they mean. But there was something more in what he said, and there was the way of saying it, and there was the weight a man's sayings carry when he is a real master of one thing, no matter how remote from the subject of which he is speaking. Crowdie came back almost immediately with his paint.

"Your eyes are the colour of blue fox," he remarked, dabbing on the palette with his brush.

"Are they? They're a grey of some sort, I believe. But you were talking about the soul."

"Yes, I know I was; but I'm glad I've done with it. I told you that language wasn't my strong point."

"Yes—but you may be able to say lots of interesting things, besides painting well."

"Not compared with people who are good at talking. I've often been struck by that."

He stopped speaking, and made one or two very careful strokes, concentrating his whole attention for the

moment.

"Struck by what?" asked Katharine.

"By the enormous amount some men know as compared with what they can do. I believe that's what I meant to say. It wasn't particularly worth saying, after all. There—that's better! Just one moment more, please. I know I'm tiring you to death, but I'm so interested—"

Again he executed a very fine detail.

"There!" he exclaimed. "Now we can talk. Don't you want to move about a little? I don't ask you to look at the thing—it's a mere beginning of a sketch—it isn't the picture, of course."

"But I want to see it," said Katharine.

"Oh, of course. But you won't like it so much now as you did at first."

Katharine saw at once that he was right, and that the painting was not in a stage to bear examination, but she looked at it, nevertheless, with a vague idea of learning something about the art by observing its processes. Crowdie stood at a little distance behind her, his palette and brushes still in his hand. Indeed, there was no place but the floor where he could have laid them down. She knew that he was there, and she was certain that he was looking at her. The strange nervousness and sense of repulsion came over her at once, but in her determination not to yield to anything which seemed so foolish, she continued to scrutinize the rough sketch on the easel. Crowdie, on his part, said nothing, as though fearing lest the sound of his voice should disturb the graceful lines of her figure as she stood there.

At last she moved and turned away, but not towards him. Suddenly, from feeling that he was looking at her, she felt that she could not meet his eyes. She knew just what they would be like, long, languishing and womanish, with their sweeping lashes, and they attracted her, though she did not wish to see them. She walked a few steps down the length of the great room, and she was sure that those eyes were following her. An intense and quite unaccustomed consciousness overcame her, though she was never what is called shy.

She was positively certain that his eyes were fixed on the back of her head, willing her to turn and look at him; but she would not. Then she saw that she was reaching the end of the room, and that, unless she stood there staring at the tapestries and embroideries, she must face him. She felt the blood rush suddenly to her throat and just under her ears, and she knew that she who rarely blushed at all was blushing violently. She either did not know or she forgot that a blush is as beautiful in most dark women as it is unbecoming and even painful to see in fair ones. She was only conscious that she had never, in all her many recollections, felt so utterly foolish, and angry with herself, and disgusted with the light, as she did at that moment. Just as she reached the wall, she heard his footstep, and supposing that he had changed his position, she turned at once with a deep sense of relief.

Crowdie was standing before his easel again, studying what he had done, as unconcernedly as though he had not noticed her odd behaviour.

"I feel flushed," she said. "It must be very warm here."

"Is it?" asked Crowdie. "I'll open something. But if you've had enough of it for the first day, I can leave it as it is till the next sitting. Can you come to-morrow?"

"Yes. That is—no—I may have an engagement." She laughed nervously as she thought of it.

"The afternoon will do quite as well, if you prefer it. Any time before three o'clock. The light is bad after that."

"I think the day after to-morrow would be better, if you don't mind. At the same hour, if you like."

"By all means. And thank you, for sitting so patiently. It's not every one who does. I suppose I mustn't offer to help you with your hat."

"Thanks, I can easily manage it," answered Katharine, careful, however, to speak in her ordinary tone of voice. "If you had a looking-glass anywhere—" She looked about for one.

"There's one in my paint room, if you don't mind."

He led the way to the curtain behind which he had disappeared in search of his colours, and held it up. There was an open door into the little room—which was larger than Katharine had expected—and a dressing-table and mirror stood in the large bow-window that was built out over the yard. Crowdie stood holding the curtain back while she tied her veil and ran the long pin through her hat. It did not take more than a minute, and she passed out again.

"That's a beautiful arrangement," she said. "A looking-glass would spoil the studio."

"Yes," he answered, as he walked towards the door by her side. "You see there isn't an object but stuffs and cushions in the place, and a chair for you—and my easels—all colour. I want nothing that has shape except what is human, and I like that as perfect as possible."

"Give my love to Hester," said Katharine, as she went out. "Oh, don't come down; I know the way."

He followed her, of course, and let her out himself. It was past twelve o'clock, and she felt the sun on her shoulders as she turned to the right up Lafayette Place, and she breathed the sparkling air with a sense of wild delight. It was so fresh and pure, and somehow she felt as though she had been in a contaminating atmosphere during the last three quarters of an hour.

CHAPTER XI.

ALEXANDER LAUDERDALE Junior was a man of regular ways, as has been seen, and of sternly regular affections, so far as he could be said to have any at all. Most people were rather afraid of him. In the Trust Company which occupied his attention he was the executive member, and it was generally admitted that it owed something of its exceptional importance to his superior powers of administration, his cast-iron probity and his cold energy in enforcing regulations. The headquarters of the Company were in a magnificent granite building, on the second floor at the front, and Alexander Junior sat all day long in a spotless and speckless office, behind a highly polished table and before highly polished bookcases, upon which the light fell in the daytime through the most expensive and highly polished plate glass windows, and on winter afternoons from glittering electric brackets and chandeliers. He himself was not less perfect and highly polished in appearance than his surroundings. He was like one of those beautiful

models of machinery which work silently and accurately all day long, apparently for the mere satisfaction of feeling their own wheels and cranks go round, behind the show window of the shop where the patent is owned, producing nothing, indeed, save a keen delight in the soul of the admiring mechanician.

He was perfect in his way. It was enough to catch one glimpse of him, as he sat in his office, to be sure that the Trust Company could be trusted, that the widow's portion should yield her the small but regular interest which comforts the afflicted, and that the property of the squealing and still cradle-ridden orphan was silently rolling up, to be a joy to him when he should be old enough to squander it. The Trust Company was not a new institution. It had been founded in the dark ages of New York history, by just such men as Alexander Junior, and just such men had made it what it now was. Indeed, the primeval Lauderdale, whom Charlotte Slayback called Alexander the Great, had been connected with it before he died, his Scotch birth being counted to him for righteousness, though his speech was imputed to him for sin. Neither of his sons had, however, had anything to do with it, nor his sons' sons, but his great-grandson, Alexander the Safe, was predestined from his childhood to be the very man wanted by the Company, and when he was come to years of even greater discretion than he had shown as a small boy, which was saying much, he was formally installed behind the plate glass and the very shiny furniture of the office he had occupied ever since. With the appearance of his name on the Company's reports the business increased, for in the public mind all Lauderdales were as one man, and that one man was Robert the Rich, who had never been connected with any speculation, and who was commonly said to own half New York. Acute persons will see that there must have been some exaggeration about the latter statement, but as a mere expression it did not lack force, and pleased the popular mind. It mattered little that New York should have enough halves to be distributed amongst a considerable number of very rich men, of whom precisely the same thing was said. Robert the Rich was a very rich man, and he must have his half like his fellow rich men.

Alexander Junior had no more claim upon his uncle's fortune than Mrs. Ralston. His father was one of Robert's brothers and hers had been the other. Nor was Robert the Rich in any way constrained to leave any money to any of his relations, nor to any one in particular in the whole wide world, seeing that he had made it himself, and was childless and answerable to no man for his acts. But it was probable that he would divide a large part of it between his living brother, the philanthropist, and the daughter of his dead brother Ralph—the soldier of the family, who had been killed at Chancellorsville. Now as it was certain that the philanthropist, for his part, if he had control of what came to him, would forthwith attempt to buy the Central Park as an airing ground for pauper idiots, or do something equally though charitably outrageous, the chances were that his portion—if he got any—would be placed in trust, or that it would be paid him as income by his son, if the latter were selected to manage the fortune. This was what most people expected, and it was certainly what Alexander Junior hoped.

It was natural, too, and in a measure just. The male line of the Lauderdales was dying out, and Alexander Junior would be the last of them, in the natural succession of mortality, being by far the youngest as he was by far the strongest. It would be proper that he should administer the estate until it was finally divided amongst the female heirs and their children.

He was really and truly a man of spotless probity, in spite of the suspicion which almost inevitably attaches to people who seem too perfect to be human. On the surface these perfections of his were so hard that they amounted to defects. It is aggressive virtue that chastises what it loves—by its mere existence. But neither his probity, nor his exterior mechanical superiority, so to say, was connected with the mainspring of his character. That lay much deeper, and he concealed it with as much skill as though to reveal its existence would have ruined him in fortune and reputation, though it would probably have affected neither the one nor the other. The only members of the family who suspected the truth were his daughter Charlotte and Robert the Rich.

Charlotte, who was afraid of nothing, not even of certain things which she might have done better to respect, if not to fear, said openly in the family, and even to the face of her father, that she did not believe he was poor. Thereupon, Alexander Junior usually administered a stern rebuke in his metallic voice, whereat Charlotte would smile and change the subject, as though she did not care to talk of it just then, but would return to it by and by. She had magnificent teeth, and, when she chose, her smile could be almost as terribly electric as Alexander's own.

As for Robert Lauderdale, he had more accurate knowledge, but not much. Like many eminently successful men he had an unusual mastery of details, and an unflinching memory for those which interested him. He knew the exact figure of his nephew's salary from the Trust Company, and he was able to calculate with tolerable exactness, also, what the Lauderdales spent, what Mrs. Lauderdale earned and how much the annual surplus must be. He knew also that Alexander Junior's mother, who had thoroughly understood her husband, the philanthropist, had left what she possessed to her only son, and only a legacy to her husband. Her property had been owned in New England; the executor had been a peculiarly taciturn New England lawyer, and Alexander had never said anything to any one else concerning the inheritance. His mother had died after he had come of age, but before he had been married, and there were no means whatever of ascertaining what he had received. The philanthropist and his son had continued to live together, as they still did; but the old gentleman had always left household matters and expenses in his wife's charge, and had never in the least understood, nor cared to understand, the details of daily life. He had his two rooms, he had enough to eat and he spent nothing on himself, except for the large quantity of tobacco he consumed and for his very modest toilet. As for the cigars, Alexander had brought him down, in the course of ten years, by very fine gradations, from the best Havanas which money could buy to 'old Virginia cheroots,' at ten cents for a package of five,—a luxury which even the frugal inhabitant of Calabrian Mulberry Street would consider a permissible extravagance on Sundays. Alexander, who did not smoke, saw that the change had not had any ill effect upon his father's health, and silently triumphed. If the old gentleman's nerves had shown signs of weakness, Alexander had previously determined to retire up the scale of prices to the extent of one cent more for each cigar. In the matter of dress the elder Alexander pleased himself, and in so doing pleased his son also, for he generally forgot to get a new coat until the old one was dropping to pieces, and he secretly bought his shoes of a little Italian shoemaker in the South Fifth Avenue, as has been already noticed; the said shoemaker being the unhappy father of one of the philanthropist's most favourite and unpromising idiots.

But of old Mrs. Lauderdale's money, nothing more was ever heard, nor of several thousand dollars yearly, which, according to old Robert's calculations, Alexander Junior saved regularly out of his salary.

Yet the youngest of the Lauderdale men was always poor, and his wife worked as hard as she could to earn something for her own little pleasures and luxuries. Robert the Rich had once been present when Alexander Junior

had borrowed five dollars of his wife. It had impressed him, and he had idly wondered whether the money had ever been returned, and whether Alexander did not manage in this way to extract a contribution from his wife's earnings, as a sort of peace-offering to the gold-gods, because she wasted what she got by such hard work, in mere amusement and hats, as Alexander cruelly put it. But Robert, who had a broader soul, thought she was quite right, since, next to true love, those were the things by which a woman could be made most happy. It is true that Robert the Rich had never been married. As a matter of fact, Alexander Lauderdale never returned the small sums he succeeded in borrowing from his wife from time to time. But he kept a rigidly accurate account of them, which he showed her occasionally, assuring her that she 'might draw on him' for the money, and that he credited her with five per cent interest so long as it was 'in his hands'—which were of iron, as she knew—and further, that it would be to her advantage to invest all the money she earned in the same way, with him. A hundred dollars, he said, would double itself in fourteen years, and in time it would become a thousand, which would be 'a nice little sum for her.' He had a set of expressions which he used in speaking of money, wherewith he irritated her exceedingly. More than once she asked him to give her a trifle out of what she had lent him, when she was in a hurry, or really had nothing. But he invariably answered that he had nothing about him, as he always paid everything by cheque,—which was true,—and never spent but ten cents daily for his fare in the elevated road to and from his office. He lunched somewhere, she supposed, during the day, and would need money for that; but in this she was mistaken, for his strong constitution needed but two meals daily, breakfast at eight and dinner at half-past seven. At one o'clock he drank a glass of water in his office, and in fine weather took a turn in Broad Street or Broadway. He sometimes, if hard pressed by her, said that he would include what she wanted in the next cheque he drew for household expenses—and he examined the accounts himself every Saturday afternoon—but he always managed to be alone when he did this, and invariably forgot to make any allowance for the purpose of paying his just debts.

Robert Lauderdale knew, therefore, that there must be a considerable sum of money, somewhere, the property of Alexander Junior, unless the latter had privately squandered it. This, however, was a supposition which not even the most hopelessly moonstruck little boy in the philanthropist's pet asylum would have entertained for a moment. The rich man had watched his nephew narrowly from his boyhood to his middle age, and was a knower of men and a good judge of them, and he was quite sure that he was not mistaken. Moreover, he knew likewise Alexander's strict adherence to the letter of truth, for he had proved it many times, and Alexander had never said that he had no money. But he never failed to say that he was poor—which was a relative term. He would go so far as to say that he had no money for a particular object, clearly meaning that he would not spend anything in that direction, but he had never said that he had nothing. Now the great Robert was not the man to call a sum of several hundred thousands a nothing, because he had so much more himself. He knew the value of money as well as any man living. He used to say that to give was a matter of sentiment, but that to have was a matter of fact,—probably meaning thereby that the relation between length of head and breadth of heart was indeterminate, but that although a man might not have fifty millions, if he had half a million he was well enough off to be able to give something to somebody, if he chose. But Robert the Rich was fond of rather enigmatical sayings. He had seen the world from quite an exceptional point of view and believed that he had a right to judge it accordingly.

He had watched his nephew during more than thirty years, and one half of that period had sufficed to bring him to the conclusion that Alexander Junior was a thoroughly upright but a thoroughly miserly person, and the remaining half of the time had so far confirmed this judgment as to make him own that the younger man was not only miserly, but in the very most extended sense an old-fashioned miser in the midst of a new-fashioned civilization, and therefore an anachronism, and therefore, also, not a man to be treated like other men.

Robert had long ago determined that Alexander should have some of the money to do with as he pleased. His sole idea would be to hoard it and pile it up to fabulous dimensions, and if anything happened to it he would probably go mad, thought the great man. But the others were also to have some of it, more or less according to their characters, and it was interesting to speculate upon their probable actions when they should be very rich. None of them, Robert believed, were really poor, and certainly Alexander Junior was not. If they had been in need, the old gentleman would have helped them with actual sums of money. But they were not. As for Mrs. Lauderdale and her daughters, they really had all that was necessary. Alexander did not starve them. He did not go so far as that—perhaps because in his social position it would have been found out. His wife was an excellent housekeeper, and old Robert liked the simplicity of the little dinners to which he occasionally came without warning, asking for 'a bite,' as though he were a poor relation. He loved what was simple and, in general, all things which could be loved for their own sake, and not for their value, and which were not beyond his rather limited æsthetic appreciation.

It was a very good thing, he thought, that Mrs. Lauderdale should do a little work and earn a little money. It was an interest and an occupation for her. It was fitting that people should be willing to do something to earn money for their charities, or even for their smaller luxuries, though it was very desirable that they should not feel obliged to work for their necessities. If everybody were in that position, he supposed that every one would be far happier. And Mrs. Lauderdale had her beauty, too. Robert the Rich was fond of her in a fatherly way, and knowing what a good woman she was, he had determined to make her a compensation when she should lose her good looks. When her beauty departed, she should be made rich, and he would manage it in such a way that her husband should not be able to get hold of any of her wealth, to bury with what Robert was sure he had, in secret and profitable investment. Alexander Junior should have none of it.

As for his elder brother, the philanthropist, Robert Lauderdale had his own theories. He did not think that the old man's charities were by any means always wise ones, and he patronized others of his own, of which he said nothing. Robert thought that too much was done for the deserving poor, and too little for the undeserving poor, and that the starving sinner might be just as hungry as the starving saint—a point of view not popular with the righteous, who covet the unjust man's sunshine for themselves and accuse him unfairly of bringing about cloudy weather, though every one knows that clouds, even the very blackest, are produced by natural evaporation.

But it was improbable, as Robert knew, that his brother should outlive him, and he contributed liberally to the support and education of the idiots, and his brother was mentioned in the will in connection with a large annuity which, however, he had little chance of surviving to enjoy.

There were plenty of others to divide the vast inheritance when the time should come. There were Mrs. Lauderdale and her two daughters, and her baby grandson, Charlotte's little boy. And there was Katharine Ralston and there was John. And then there were the two Brights and their mother, whose mother had been a Lauderdale, so

that they were direct relations. And there were the Miners—the three old-maid sisters and little Frank Miner, who really seemed to be struggling hard to make a living by literature—not near connections, these Miners, but certainly included in the tribe of the Lauderdalees on account of their uncle's marriage with the millionaire's first cousin—whom he remembered as 'little cousin Meg' fifty years ago. Robert the Rich always smiled—a little sadly—when he reached this point in the enumeration of the family, and was glad that the Miners were in his will.

The Miners would really have been the poorest of the whole connection, for their father had been successively a spendthrift bankrupt, a drunkard and a lunatic,—which caused Alexander Junior to say severely that Livingston Miner had an unnatural thirst for emotions; but a certain very small investment which Frank Miner had made out of the remnants of the estate had turned out wonderfully well. Miner had never known that old Lauderdale had mentioned the investment to old Beman, and that the two great men had found the time to make it roll over and over and grow into a little fortune at a rate which would have astonished persons ignorant of business—after which they had been occupied with other things, each in his own way, and had thought nothing more about the matter. So that the Miners were comparatively comfortable, and the three old maids stayed at home and 'took care' of their extremely healthy brother instead of going out as governesses—and when they were well stricken in old-maidhood they had a queer little love story all to themselves, which perhaps will be told some day by itself.

The rich man made few presents, for he had few wants, and did not understand them in others. He was none the less on that account a generous man, and would often have given, had he known what to give; but those who expressed their wishes were apt to offend him by expressing them too clearly. The relations all lived in good houses and had an abundance of bread and a sufficient allowance of butter, and John Ralston was the only one in connection with whom he had heard mention of a tailor's bill—John Ralston was more in the old gentleman's mind than any one knew. What did the others all want? Jewels, perhaps, and horses and carriages and a lot of loose cash to throw out of the window. That was the way he put it. He had never kept a brougham himself until he was fifty years of age. It was true that he had no womankind and was a strong man, like all his tribe. But then, many of his acquaintances who might have kept a dozen horses, said it was more trouble than it was worth, and hired what they wanted. His relations could do the same—it was a mere curiosity on their part to experience the sensation of looking rich. Robert Lauderdale knew the sensation very well and knew that it was quite worthless. Of course, he thought, they all knew that at his death they would be provided for—even lazy Jack, as he mentally nicknamed Ralston. At least, he supposed that they knew it. They should have a fair share of the money in the end.

But he was conscious, and acutely conscious, that most of them wanted it, and he had very little belief in the disinterested affection of any of them. Even the old philanthropist, if he had been offered the chance by a playful destiny, would have laid violent hands on it all for his charities, to the exclusion of the whole family. His son would have buried it in his own Trust Company, and longed to have it for that purpose, and for no other. Jack Ralston wanted to squander it; Hamilton Bright wanted to do banking with it and to out-Rothschild the Rothschilds in the exchanges of the world. Crowdie, whom Robert the Rich detested, wanted his wife to have it in order that he might build marble palaces with it on the shores of more or less mythic lakes. Katharine Ralston would have liked some of it because she liked to be above all considerations of money, and her husband's death had made a great difference in her income. Mrs. Lauderdale wanted it, of course, and her ideal of happiness would be realized in having three or four princely establishments, in moving with the seasons from one to the other and in always having her house full of guests. She was born in Kentucky—and she would be a superb hostess. Perhaps she should have a chance some day. Charlotte Slayback wanted as much as she could get because her husband was rich, and she had nothing, and she had good blood in her veins, but an abundance of evil pride in her heart. There was Katharine Lauderdale, about whom the great man was undecided. He liked her and thought she understood him. But of course she wanted the money too—in order to marry lazy Jack—and wake up love's young dream with a jump, as he expressed it familiarly. She should not have it for that purpose, at all events. It would be much better that she should marry Hamilton Bright, who was a sensible fellow. Had not Ralston been offered two chances, at both of which he had pitifully failed? He had no idea of doing anything more for the boy at present. If he ever got any of the money it should be from his mother. The two Katharines were out and out the best of the tribe. He had a great mind to tear up his old will and divide the whole fortune equally between Katharine Ralston and Katharine Lauderdale. No doubt there would be a dispute about the will in any case—he might just as well follow his inclinations, if he could not prevent fighting.

And then, when he reached that point, he was suddenly checked by a consideration which does not present itself to ordinary men. As he leaned back in his leathern writing chair, while his knotted fingers played with the cork pen-holder he used, his great head slowly bowed itself, and he sat long in deep thought.

It was all very well for him to play at being just a capricious old uncle with some money to leave, as he pleased, to this one or that one, as old uncles did in story books, making everybody happy in the end. That was all very well. He had his little likes and dislikes, his attachments and his detestations, and he had a right to have them, as smaller men had. A little here and a little there would of course give pleasure and might even make happiness. But how much would it need to make them all rich, compared with their present position? Robert Lauderdale did not laugh as he answered the question to himself. One year's income alone, divided amongst them, would give each a fortune. The income of two years would give them wealth. And the capital would remain—the vast possession which in a few years he must lay down forever, which at any moment might be masterless, for he was an old man, over seventy years of age. If he had a son, it would be different. Things would follow their natural course for good or evil, and he would not himself be to blame for what happened. But he had no one, and the thing he must leave to some one was great power in its most serviceable form—money.

He had been face to face with the problem for years and had not solved it. It is a great one in America, at the present day, and Robert Lauderdale knew it. He was well aware that he and a score of others, some richer, some less rich than himself, were execrated by a certain proportion of the community and pointed out as the disturbers of the equal distribution of wealth. He was made personally sure of the fact by hundreds of letters, anonymous and signed, warning him of the approaching destruction of himself and his property. People who did not even know that he was a bachelor, threatened to kidnap his children and keep them from him until he should give up his wealth. He was threatened, entreated, admonished, preached at and held up to ridicule by every species of fanatic which the age produces. He was not afraid of any of them. He did not have himself guarded by detectives in plain clothes and athletes in fashionable coats, when he chose to walk in the streets, and he did not yield to the entreaties of women who wrote to him from Texas that they should be perfectly happy if he would send them grand pianos to the addresses they gave. He was discriminating, he was just according to his light and he tried to do good, while he took

no notice of those who raved and abused him. But he knew that there was a reason for the storm, and was much more keenly alive to the difficulties of the situation than any of his anonymous correspondents.

He had in his own hands and at his absolute disposal the wealth which, under a proper administration, would perpetually supply between seven and eight thousand families with the necessaries of life. He had made that calculation one day, not idly, but in the endeavour to realize what could really be done with so much money. He was not a visionary philanthropist like his brother, though he helped him in many of his schemes. He was not a saint, though he was a good man, as men go. He had not the smallest intention of devoting a gigantic fortune exclusively to the bettering of mankind, for he was human. But he felt that in his lonely wealth he was in a measure under an obligation to all humanity—that he had created for himself a responsibility greater than one man could bear, and that he and others like him had raised a question, and proposed a problem which had not before been dreamt of in the history of the world. He, an individual with no especial gifts besides his keen judgment in a certain class of affairs, with nothing but his wealth to distinguish him from any other individual, possessed the equivalent of a sum of money which would have seemed very large in the treasury of a great nation, or which would have been considered sufficient as a reserve wherewith to enter upon a great war. And there were others in an exactly similar position. He knew several of them. He could count half a dozen men who, together with himself, could upset the finances of the world if they chose. It needed no tortuous reasoning and but little vanity to show him that he and they did not stand towards mankind as other men stood. And the thought brought with it the certainty that there was a right course for him to pursue in the disposal of his money, if he could but see it in the right light.

This was the man whom all the Lauderdale tribe called uncle Robert, and to whom Katharine intended to appeal as soon as she had been secretly married to John Ralston, and from whom she felt sure of obtaining what she meant to ask. He was capable of surprising her.

'You have a good house, good food, good clothes—and so has your husband. What right have you, Katharine Lauderdale, or Mrs. John Ralston, to claim more than any member of each of the seven or eight thousand families whom I could support would get in the distribution?'

That was the answer she might receive—in the form of a rather unanswerable question.

CHAPTER XII.

THE afternoon which followed the first sitting in Crowdie's studio seemed very long to Katharine. She did all sorts of things to make the time pass, but it would not. She even set in order a whole drawer full of ribbons and gloves and veils and other trifles, which is generally the very last thing a woman does to get rid of the hours.

And all the time she was thinking, and not sure whether it would not be better to fight against her thoughts. For though she was not afraid of changing her mind she had a vague consciousness that the whole question might raise its head again and face her like a thing in a dream, and insist that she should argue with it. And then, there was the plain and unmistakable fact that she was on the eve of doing something which was hardly ever done by the people amongst whom she lived.

It was not that she was timid, or dreaded the remarks which might be made. Any timidity of that sort would have checked her at the very outset. If the man she loved had been any one but Jack Ralston, whom she had known all her life, she could never have thought of proposing such a thing. Oddly enough, she felt that she should blush, as she had blushed that morning at the studio, at the mere idea of a secret marriage, if Ralston were any one else. But not from any fear of what other people might say. Not only had the two been intimate from childhood—they had discussed during the last year their marriage, and all the possibilities of it, from every point of view. It was a subject familiar to them, the difficulties to be overcome were clear to them both, they had proposed all manner of schemes for overcoming them, they had talked for hours about running away together and had been sensible enough to see the folly of such a thing. The mere matter of saying certain words and of giving and receiving a ring had gradually sunk into insignificance as an event. It was an inevitable formality in Ralston's eyes, to be gone through with scrupulous exactness indeed, and to be carefully recorded and witnessed, but there was not a particle of romance connected with it, any more than with the signing and witnessing of a title-deed or any other legal document.

Katharine had a somewhat different opinion of it, for it had a real religious value in her eyes. That was one reason why she preferred a secret wedding. Of course, the moment would come, sooner or later, for they were sure to be married in the end, publicly or privately. But in any case it would be a solemn moment. The obligations, as she viewed them, were for life. The very words of the promise had an imposing simplicity. In the church to which she strongly inclined, marriage was called a sacrament, and believed to be one, in which the presence of the Divine personally sanctified the bond of the human. Katharine was quite willing to believe that, too. And the more she believed it, the more she hated the idea of a great fashionable wedding, such as Charlotte Slayback had endured with much equanimity. She could imagine nothing more disagreeable, even painful, than to be the central figure of such an exhibition.

That holy hour, when it came at last, should be holy indeed. There should be nothing, ever thereafter, to disturb the pure memory of its sanctity. A quiet church, the man she loved, herself and the interpreter of God. That was all she wanted—not to be disturbed in the greatest event of her life by all the rustling, glittering, flower-scented, grinning, gossiping crowd of critics, whose ridiculous presence is considered to lend marriage a dignity beyond what God or nature could bestow upon it.

This was Katharine's view, and as she had no intention of keeping her marriage to Ralston a secret during even so much as twenty-four hours, it was neither unnatural nor unjustifiable. But in spite of all the real importance which she gave to the ceremony as a fact, it seemed so much a matter of course, and she had thought of it so long and under so many aspects, that in the chain of future events it was merely a link to be reached and passed as soon as possible. It was not the ring, nor the promise nor the blessing, by which her life was to be changed. She knew that she loved John Ralston, and she could not love him better still from the instant in which he became her lawful husband. The difficulties began beyond that, with her intended attack upon uncle Robert. She told herself that she was sure of success, but she was not, since she could not see into the future one hour beyond the moment of her meeting with the old gentleman. That seeing into the future is the test of confidence, and the only one.

It struck her suddenly that everything which was to happen after the all-important interview was a blank to her.

She paused in what she was doing—she was winding a yellow ribbon round her finger—and she looked out of the window. It was raining, for the weather had changed quickly during the afternoon. Rain in Clinton Place is particularly dreary. Katharine sat down upon the chair that stood before her little writing table in the corner by the window, and watched the grey lace veil which the falling raindrops wove between her and the red brick houses opposite.

A feeling of despair came over her. Uncle Robert would refuse to do anything. What would happen then? What could she do? She was brave enough to face her father's anger and her mother's distress, for she loved Ralston with all her heart. But what would happen? If uncle Robert failed her, the future was no longer blank but black. No one else could do anything. Of what use would the family battle be? Her father could not, and would not, do anything for her or her husband. He was the sort of man who would take a stern delight in seeing her bear the consequences of her mistake—it could not be called a fault, even by him. To impose herself on Mrs. Ralston was more than Katharine's pride could endure to contemplate. Of course, it would be possible to live—barely to live—on the charity of her husband's mother. Mrs. Ralston would do anything for her son, and would sacrifice herself cheerfully. But to accept any such sacrifice was out of the question. And then, too, Katharine knew what extreme economy meant, for she had suffered from it long under her father's roof, and it was not pleasant. Yet they would be poorer still at the Ralstons, and she would be the cause of it.

If uncle Robert refused to help them, the position would be desperate. She watched the rain and tried to think it all over. She supposed that her father would insist upon—what? Not upon keeping the secret, for that would not be like him. He was a horribly virtuous man, Charlotte used to say. Oh, no! he would not act a lie on any account, not he! Katharine wondered why she hated this scrupulous truthfulness in her father and admired it above all things in Ralston. Jack would not act a lie either. But then, if there were to be no secret, and if the marriage were to be announced, what would happen? Would her father insist upon her living at home until her husband should be able to support her? What a situation! She cared less than most girls about social opinion, but she really wondered what society would say. Her father would say nothing. He would smile that electric smile of his, and hold his head higher than ever. 'This is what happens to daughters who disobey their parents,' he would seem to tell the world. She had always thought that he might be like the first Brutus, and she felt sure of it now.

It seemed like weakness to think of going to uncle Robert that very afternoon, before the inevitable moment was past. Yet it would be such an immense satisfaction to have had the interview and to have his promise to do something for Ralston. The thought seemed cowardly and yet she dwelt on it. Of course, her chief weapon with the old gentleman was to be the fact that the thing was done and could not be undone, so that he could have no good advice to give. And, yet, perhaps she might move him by saying that she had made up her mind and was to be married to-morrow. He might not believe her, and might laugh and send her away—with one of his hearty avuncular kisses—she could see his dear old face in her imagination. But if he did that, she could still return to-morrow, and show him the certificate of her marriage. He would not then be able to say that she had not given him fair warning. She wished it would not rain. She would have walked in the direction of his house, and when she was near it she knew in her heart that she would yield—since it seemed like a temptation—and perhaps it would be better.

But it was raining, and uncle Robert lived far away from Clinton Place in a house he had built for himself at the corner of a new block facing the Central Park. He had built the whole block and had kept possession of it afterwards. It was almost three miles from Alexander Lauderdale's house in unfashionable Clinton Place—three miles of elevated road, or of horse-car or of walking—and in any case it meant getting wet in such a rain storm. Moreover, Katharine rarely went alone by the elevated road. She wished it would stop raining. If it would only stop for half an hour she would go. Perhaps it was as well to let fate decide the matter in that way.

Just then a carriage drove up to the door. She flattened her face against the window, but could not see who got out of it. It was a cab, however, and the driver had a waterproof hat and coat. In all probability it came from one of the hotels. Any one might have taken it. Katharine drew back a little and looked idly at the little mottled mist her breath had made upon the window pane. The door of her room opened suddenly.

"Kitty, are you there?" asked a woman's voice.

Katharine knew as the handle of the latch was turned that her sister Charlotte had come. No one else ever entered her room without knocking, and no one else ever called her 'Kitty.' She hated the abbreviation of her name and she resented the familiarity of the unbidden entrance. She turned rather sharply.

"Oh—is that you? I thought you were in Washington." She came forward, and the two exchanged kisses mechanically.

"Benjamin Slayback of Nevada had business in New York, so I came up to get a breath of my native microbes," said Charlotte, going to the mirror and beginning to take off her hat very carefully so as not to disturb her hair. "We are at a hotel, of course—but it's nice, all the same. I suppose mamma's at work and I know papa's down town, and the ancestor is probably studying some new kind of fool—so I came to your room."

"Will you have some tea?" asked Katharine.

"Tea? What wild extravagance! I suppose you offer it to me as 'Mrs. Slayback.' I wonder if papa would. I can see him smile—just like this—isn't it just like him?"

She smiled before the mirror and then turned suddenly on Katharine. The mimicry was certainly good. Mrs. Slayback, however, was fair, like her mother, with a radiant complexion, golden hair and good features,—larger and bolder than Mrs. Lauderdale's, but not nearly so classically perfect. There was something hard in her face, especially about the eyes.

"It's just the same as ever," she said, seating herself in the small arm-chair—the only one in the room. "The same dear, delightful, dreary, comfortless, furnace-heated, gas-lighted, 'put-on-your-best-hat-to-go-to-church' sort of existence that it always was! I wonder how you all stand it—how I stood it so long myself!"

Katharine laughed and turned her head. She had been looking out of the window again and wondering whether the rain would stop after all. She and her sister had never lived very harmoniously together. Their pitched battles had begun in the nursery with any weapons they could lay hands on, pillows, moribund dolls, soapy sponges, and the nurse's shoes. Though Katharine was the younger, she had soon been the stronger at close quarters. But Charlotte had the sharper tongue and was by far the better shot with any projectile when safely entrenched behind the bed. At the first show of hostilities she made for both sponges—a rag-doll was not a bad thing, if she got a chance to dip it

into the basin, but there was nothing like a sponge, when it was 'just gooey with soap,' as the youthful Charlotte expressed it. She carried the art of throwing to a high degree of perfection, and on very rare occasions, after she was grown up, she surprised her adorers by throwing pebbles at a mark with an unerring accuracy which would have done credit to a poacher's apprentice.

Since the nursery days the warfare had been carried on by words and the encounters had been less frequent, but the contrast was always apparent between Katharine's strength and Charlotte's quickness. Katharine waited, collected her strength, chose her language and delivered a heavy blow, so to say. Charlotte, as Frank Miner put it, 'slung English all over the lot.' Both were effective in their way. But they had the good taste to quarrel in private and, moreover, in many things they were allies. With regard to their father, Katharine took an evil and silent delight in her sister's sarcasms, and Charlotte could not help admiring Katharine's solid, unyielding opposition on certain points.

"Oh, yes!" said Katharine, answering Charlotte's last remark. "There'll be less change than ever now that you're married."

"I suppose so. Poor Kitty! We used to fight now and then, but I know you enjoyed looking on when I made a row at dinner. Didn't you?"

"Of course I did. I'm a human being." Katharine laughed again. "Won't you really have tea? I always have it when I want it."

"You brave little thing! Do you? Well—if you like. You quiet people always have your own way in the end," added Mrs. Slayback, rather thoughtfully. "I suppose it's the steady push that does it."

"Don't you have your way, too?" asked Katharine, in some surprise at her sister's tone of voice.

"No. I'm ashamed to say that I don't. No—" She seemed to be recapitulating events. "No—I don't have my way at all—not the least little bit. I have the way of Benjamin Slayback of Nevada."

"Why do you talk of your husband in that way?" enquired Katharine.

"Shall I call him Mr. Slayback?" asked Charlotte, "or Benjamin—dear little Benjamin! or Ben—the 'soldier bold'? How does 'Ben' strike you, Kitty? I know—I've thought of calling him Minnie—last syllable of Benjamin, you see. There was a moment when I hesitated at 'Benjy'—'Benjy, darling, another cup of coffee?'—it would sound so quiet and home-like at breakfast, wouldn't it? It's fortunate that papa made us get up early all our lives. My dream of married happiness—a nice little French maid smiling at me with a beautiful little tea-tray just as I was opening my eyes—I had thought about it for years! Well, it's all over. Benjamin Slayback of Nevada takes his breakfast like a man—a regular Benjamin's portion of breakfast, and wants to feast his eyes on my loveliness, and his understanding on my wit, and his inner man on the flesh of kine—and all that together at eight o'clock in the morning—Benjamin Slayback of Nevada—there's no other name for him!"

"The name irritates me—you repeat it so often!"

"Does it, dear? The man irritates me, and that's infinitely worse. I wish you knew!"

"But he's awfully good to you, Charlie. You can't deny that, at all events."

"Yes—and he calls me Lottie," answered Charlotte, with much disgust. "You know how I hate it. But if you are going to lecture me on my husband's goodness—Kitty, I tell you frankly, I won't stand it. I'll say something to you that'll make you—just frizzle up! Remember the soapy sponge of old, my child, and be nice to your sister. I came here hoping to see you. I want to talk seriously to you. At least—I'm not sure. I want to talk seriously to somebody, and you're the most serious person I know."

"More so than your husband?"

"He's grave enough sometimes, but not generally. It's almost always about his constituents. They are to him what the liver is to some people—only that they are beyond the reach of mineral waters. Besides—it's about him that I want to talk. You look surprised, though I'm sure I don't know why. I suppose—because I've never said anything before."

"But I don't even know what you're going to say—"

Mrs. Slayback looked at her younger sister steadily for a moment, and then looked at the window. The rain was still falling fast and steadily; and the room had a dreary, dingy air about it as the afternoon advanced. It had been Charlotte's before her marriage, and Katharine had moved into it since because it was better than her own. The elder girl had filled it with little worthless trifles which had brightened it to a certain extent; but Katharine cared little for that sort of thing, and was far more indifferent to the aspect of the place in which she lived. There were a couple of dark engravings of sacred subjects on the walls,—one over the narrow bed in the corner, and the other above the chest of drawers, and there was nothing more which could be said to be intended for ornament. Yet Charlotte Slayback's hard face softened a little as her eyes wandered from the window to the familiar, faded wall paper and the old-fashioned furniture. The silence lasted some time. Then she turned to her sister again.



“ ‘Kitty—don’t do what I’ve done,’ she said earnestly.”—Vol. I., [p. 257](#).

“Kitty—don’t do what I’ve done,” she said, earnestly.

She watched the girl’s face for a change of expression, but Katharine’s impassive features were not quick to express any small feeling beyond passing annoyance.

“Aren’t you happy, Charlie?” Katharine asked, gravely.

“Happy!”

The elder woman only repeated the single word, but it told her story plainly enough. She would have given much to have come back to the old room, dreary as it looked.

“I’m very sorry,” said Katharine, in a lower voice and beginning to understand. “Isn’t he kind to you?”

“Oh, it’s not that! He’s kind—in his way—it makes it worse—far worse,” she repeated, after a moment’s pause. “I hadn’t been much used to that sort of kindness before I was married, you know—except from mamma, and that was different—and to have it from—” She stopped.

Katharine had never seen her sister in this mood before. Charlotte was generally the last person to make confidences, or to complain softly of anything she did not like. Katharine thought she must be very much changed.

“You say you’re unhappy,” said the young girl. “But you don’t tell me why. Has there been any trouble—anything especial?”

“No. You don’t understand. How should you? We never did understand each other very well, you and I. I don’t know why I come to you with my troubles, either. You can’t help me. Nobody can—unless it were—a lawyer.”

“A lawyer?” Katharine was taken by surprise now, and her eyes showed it.

“Yes,” answered Charlotte, her voice growing cold and hard again. “People can be divorced for incompatibility of temper.”

“Charlotte!” The young girl started a little, and leaned forward, laying her hand upon her sister’s knee.

“Oh, yes! I mean it. I’m sorry to horrify you so, my dear, and I suppose papa would say that divorce was not a proper subject for conversation. Perhaps he’s right—but he’s not here to tell us so.”

“But, Charlie—” Katharine stopped short, unable to say the first word of the many that rushed to her lips.

“I know,” said Charlotte, paying no attention. “I know exactly what you’re going to say. You are going to argue the question, and tell me in the first place that I’m bad, and then that I’m mad, and then that I’m a mother,—and all sorts of things. I’ve thought of them all, my dear; and they’re very terrible, of course. But I’m quite willing to be them all at once, if I can only get my freedom again. I don’t expect much sympathy, and I don’t want any good advice—and I haven’t seen a lawyer yet. But I must talk—I must say it out—I must hear it! Kitty—I’m desperate! I never knew what it meant before.”

She rose suddenly from her seat, walked twice up and down the room, and then stood still before Katharine, and looked down into her face.

“Of course you can’t understand,” she said, as she had said before. “How should you?” She seemed to be waiting for an answer.

“I think I could, if you would tell me more about yourself,” Katharine replied. “I’m trying to understand. I’d help you if I knew how.”

“That’s impossible.” Mrs. Slayback seated herself again. “But it’s this. You must have wondered why I married him, didn’t you?”

“Well—not exactly. But it seemed to me—there were other men, if you meant to marry a man you didn’t love.”

“I don’t believe in love,” said Charlotte. “But I wanted to be married for many reasons—most of all, because I couldn’t bear the life here.”

“Yes—I know. You’re not like me. But why didn’t you choose somebody else? I can’t understand marrying without love; but it seems to me, as I said, that if one is going to do such a thing one had better make a careful choice.”

“I did. I chose my husband for many reasons. He is richer than any of the men who proposed to me, and that’s a great thing. And he’s very good-natured, and what they call ‘an able man.’ There were lots of good reasons. There were things I didn’t like, of course; but I thought I could make him change. I did—in little things. He never wears a green tie now, for instance—”

"As if such things could make a difference in life's happiness!" cried Katharine, contemptuously.

"My dear—they do. But never mind that. I thought I could—what shall I say?—develop his latent social talent. And I have. In that way he's changed a good deal. You've not seen him this year, have you? No, of course not. Well, he's not the same man. But it's in the big things. I thought I could manage him, by sheer force of superior will, and make him do just what I wanted—oh, I made such a mistake!"

"And because you've married a man whom you can't order about like a servant, you want to be divorced," said Katharine, coldly.

"I knew you couldn't understand," Charlotte answered, with unusual gentleness. "I suppose you won't believe me if I tell you that I suffer all the time, and—very, very much."

Katharine did not understand, but her sister's tone told her plainly enough that there was real trouble of some sort.

"Charlie," she said, "there's something on your mind—something else. How can I know what it is, unless you tell me, dear?"

Mrs. Slayback turned her head away, and bit her lip, as though the kind words had touched her.

"It's my pride," she said suddenly and very quickly. "He hurts it so!"

"But how? Merely because he does things in his own way? He probably knows best—they all say he's very clever in politics."

"Clever! I should think so! He's a great, rough, good-natured, ill-mannered—no, he's not a brute. He's painfully kind. But with that exterior—there's no other word. He has the quickness of a woman in some ways. I believe he can be anything he chooses."

"But all you say is rather in his favour."

"I know it is. I wish it were not. If I loved him—the mere idea is ridiculous! But if I did, I would trot by his side and carry the basket through life, like his poodle. But I don't love him—and he expects me to do it all the same. I'm curled, and scented, and fed delicately, and put to sleep on a silk cushion, and have a beautiful new ribbon tied round my neck every morning, just like a poodle-dog—and I must trot quietly and carry the basket. That's all I am in his life—it wasn't exactly my dream," she added bitterly.

"I see. And you thought that it was to be the other way, and that he was to trot beside you."

"You put it honestly, at all events. Yes. I suppose I thought that. I did not expect this, anyhow—and I simply can't bear it any longer! So long as there's any question of social matters, of course, everything is left to me. He can't leave a card himself, he won't make visits—he won't lift a finger, though he wants it all properly and perfectly done. Lottie must trot—with the card-basket. But if I venture to have an opinion about anything, I have no more influence over him than the furniture. I mustn't say this, because it will be repeated that his wife said it; and I mustn't say that, because those are not his political opinions; and I mustn't say something else, because it might get back to Nevada and offend his constituents—and as for doing anything, it's simply out of the question. When I'm bored to death with it all, he tells me that his constituents expect him to stay in Washington during the session, and he advises me to go away for a few days, and offers to draw me a cheque. He would probably give me a thousand dollars for my expenses if I wanted to stay a week with you. I don't know whether he wants to seem magnificent, or whether he thinks I expect it, or if he really imagines that I should spend it. But it isn't that I want, Kitty—it isn't that! I didn't marry for money, though it was very nice to have so much—it wasn't for that, it really, really wasn't! I suppose it's absurd—perfectly wild—but I wanted to be somebody, to have some influence in the world, to have just a little of what people call real power. And I haven't got it, and I can't have it; and I'm nothing but his poodle-dog, and I'm perfectly miserable!"

Katharine could find nothing to say when her sister paused after her long speech. It was not easy for her to sympathize with any one so totally unlike herself, nor to understand the state of mind of a woman who wanted the sort of power which few women covet, who had practically given her life in exchange for the hope of it, and who had pitifully failed to obtain it. She stared out of the window at the falling rain, and it all seemed very dreary to her.

"It's my pride!" exclaimed Charlotte, suddenly, after a pause. "I never knew what it meant before—and you never can. It's intolerable to feel that I'm beaten at the very beginning of life. Can't you understand that, at least?"

"Yes—but, Charlie dear,—it's a long way from a bit of wounded pride to a divorce—isn't it?"

"Yes," answered Charlotte, disconsolately. "I suppose it is. But if you knew the horrible sensation! It grows worse and worse—and the less I can find fault with him for other things, the worse it seems to grow. And it's quite useless to fight. You know I'm good at fighting, don't you? I used to think I was, until I tried to fight my husband. My dear—I'm not in it with him!"

Katharine rose and turned her back, feeling that she could hardly control herself if she sat still. There was an incredible frivolity about her sister at certain moments which was almost revolting to the young girl.

"What is it?" asked Charlotte, observing her movement.

"Oh—nothing," answered Katharine. "The shade isn't quite up and it's growing dark, that's all."

"I thought you were angry," said Mrs. Slayback.

"I? Why should I be angry? What business is it of mine?" Katharine turned and faced her, having adjusted the shade to her liking. "Of course, if you must say that sort of thing, you had better say it to me than to any one else. It doesn't sound well in the world—and it's not pleasant to hear."

"Why not?" asked Charlotte, her voice growing hard and cold again. "But that's a foolish question. Well—I've had my talk out—and I feel better. One must sometimes, you know." Her tone softened again, unexpectedly. "Don't be too hard on me, Kitty dear—just because you're a better woman than I am." There was a tremor in her last words.

Katharine did not understand. She understood, however, and for the first time in her life, that a frivolous woman can suffer quite as much as a serious one—which is a truth not generally recognized. She put her arm round her sister's neck very gently, and pressed the fair head to her bosom, as she stood beside her.

"I'm not better than you, Charlie—I'm different, that's all. Poor dear! Of course you suffer!"

"Dear!" And Charlotte rubbed her smooth cheek affectionately against the rough grey woollen of her sister's frock.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE rain continued to fall, and even if the weather had changed it would have been too late for Katharine to go and see Robert Lauderdale after her sister had left her. On the whole, she thought, it would probably have been a mistake to speak to him beforehand. She had felt a strong temptation to do so, but it had not been the part of wisdom. She waited for Ralston's note.

At last it came. It was short and clear. He had, with great difficulty, found a clergyman who was willing to marry them, and who would perform the ceremony on the following morning at half-past nine o'clock. The clergyman had only consented on Ralston's strong representations, and on the distinct understanding that there was to be no unnecessary secrecy after the fact, and that the couple should solemnly promise to inform their parents of what they had done at the earliest moment consistent with their welfare. Ralston had written out his very words in regard to that matter, for he liked them, and felt that Katharine should.

John had been fortunate in his search, for he had accidentally come upon a man whose own life had been marred by the opposition of a young girl's family to her marriage with him. He himself had in consequence never married; the young girl had taken a husband and had been a most unhappy woman. He sympathized with Ralston, liked his face, and agreed to marry Ralston and Katharine immediately. His church lay in a distant part of the city, and he had nothing to do with society, and therefore nothing to fear from it. If trouble arose he was justified beforehand by the fact that no clergyman has an absolute right to refuse marriage to those who ask it, and by the thought that he was contributing to happiness of the kind which he himself had most desired, but which had been withheld from him under just such circumstances as those in which Ralston and Katharine were placed. The good man admired, too, the wisdom of the course they were taking. When he had said that he would consider the matter favourably, provided that there was no legal obstacle, Ralston had told him the whole truth, and had explained exactly what Katharine and he intended to do. Of course, he had to explain the relationship which existed between them and old Robert Lauderdale, and the clergyman, to Ralston's considerable surprise, took Katharine's view of the possibilities. He only insisted that the plan should be conscientiously carried out as soon as might be, and that Katharine should therefore go, in the course of the same day, and tell her story to Mr. Robert Lauderdale. Ralston made no difficulty about that, and agreed to be at the door of the clergyman's house on the following morning at half-past nine. The latter would open the church himself. It was very improbable that any one should see them at that hour, and in that distant part of the city.

There is no necessity for entering upon a defence of the clergyman's action in the affair. It was a case, not of right or wrong, nor of doing anything irregular, but possibly excusable. Theoretically, it was his duty to comply with Ralston's request. In practice, it was a matter of judgment and of choice, since if he had flatly refused, as several others had done without so much as knowing the names of the parties, Ralston would certainly have found it out of the question to force his consent. He believed that he was doing right, he wished to do what was kind, and he knew that he was acting legally and that the law must support him. He ran the risk of offending his own congregation if the story got abroad, but he remembered his own youth and he cheerfully took that risk. He would not have done as much for any two who might have chanced to present themselves, however. But Ralston impressed him as a man of honour, a gentleman and very truthful, and there was just enough of socialistic tendency in the good man, as the pastor of a very poor congregation, to enjoy the idea that the rich man should be forced, as a matter of common decency, to do something for his less fortunate relation. With his own life and experience behind him, he could not possibly have seen things as Robert Lauderdale saw them.

So the matter was settled, and Katharine had Ralston's note. He added that he would be in Clinton Place at half-past eight o'clock in the morning, on foot. They might be seen walking together at almost any hour, by right of cousinship, but to appear together in a carriage, especially at such an hour, was out of the question.

It would have been unlike her to hesitate now. She had made up her mind long before she had spoken to Ralston on Monday evening, and there was nothing new to her in the idea. But she could not help wondering about the future, as she had been doing when Charlotte Slayback had unexpectedly appeared in the afternoon. Meanwhile the evening was before her. She was going to a dinner-party of young people and afterwards to the dance at the Thirlwalls', of which she had spoken to Ralston. He would be there, but would not be at the dinner, as she knew. At the latter there were to be two young married women who were to chaperon the young girls to the other house afterwards.

At eight o'clock Katharine sat down to table between two typical, fashion-struck youths, one of whom took more champagne than was good for him, and talked to her of college sports and football matches in which he had not taken part, but which excited his enthusiasm, while the other drank water, and asked if she preferred Schopenhauer or Hegel. Of the two, she preferred the critic of athletics. But the dinner seemed a very long one to Katharine, though it was really of the short and fashionable type.

Then came another girls' talk while the young men smoked furiously together in another room. The two married women managed to get into a corner, and told each other long stories in whispers, while the young girls, who were afraid of romping and playing games because they were in their ball-dresses, amused themselves as they could, with a good deal of highly slangy but perfectly harmless chaff, and an occasional attempt at a little music. As all the young men smoked the very longest and strongest cigars, because they had all been told that cigarettes were deadly, it was nearly ten o'clock when they came into the drawing-room. They were all extremely well behaved young fellows, and the one who had talked about athletics to Katharine was the only one who was a little too pink. The dance was an early affair, and in a few moments the whole party began to get ready to go. They transferred themselves from one house to another in big carriages, and all arrived within a short time of one another.

Ralston was in the room when Katharine entered, and she saw instantly that he had been waiting for her and expected a sign at once. She smiled and nodded to him from a distance, for he had far too much tact to make a rush at her as soon as she appeared. It was not until half an hour later that they found themselves together in the crowded entrance hall, and Ralston assured himself more particularly that everything was as she wished it to be.

"So to-morrow is our wedding day," he said, looking at her face. Like most dark beauties, she looked her best in the evening.

"Yes—it's to-morrow, Jack. You are glad, aren't you?" she asked, repeating almost exactly the last words she had spoken that morning as he had left her at the door of the Crowdies' house.

"Do you doubt that I'm as glad as you are?" asked Ralston, earnestly. "I've waited for you a long time—all my life, it seems to me."

"Have you?"

Her grey eyes turned full upon him as she put the question, which evidently meant more to her than the mere words implied. He paused before answering her, with an over-scrupulous caution, the result of her own earnestness.

"Why do you hesitate?" she asked, suddenly. "Didn't you mean exactly what you said?"

"I said it seemed to me as though I had waited all my life," he answered. "I wanted to be—well—accurate!" He laughed a little. "I am trying to remember whether I had ever cared in the least for any one else."

Katharine laughed too. He sometimes had an almost boyish simplicity about him which pleased her immensely.

"If it takes such an effort of memory, it can't have been very serious," she said. "I'm not jealous. I only wish to know that you are."

"I love you with all my heart," he answered, with emphasis.

"I know you do, Jack dear," said Katharine, and a short silence followed.

She was thinking that this was the third time they had met since Monday evening, and that she had not heard again that deep vibration, that heart-stirring quaver, in his words, which had touched her that first time as she had never been touched before. She did not analyze her own desire for it in the least, any more than she doubted the sincerity of his words because they were spoken quietly. She had heard it once and she wanted to hear it again, for the mere momentary satisfaction of the impression.

But Ralston was very calm that evening. He had been extremely careful of what he did since Monday afternoon, for he had suffered acutely when his mother had first met him on the landing, and he was determined that nothing of the sort should happen again. The excitement, too, of arranging his sudden marriage had taken the place of all artificial emotions during the last forty-eight hours. His nerves were young and could bear the strain of sudden excess and equally sudden abstinence without troubling him with any physical distress. And this fact easily made him too sure of himself. To a certain extent he was cynical about his taste for strong drink. He said to himself quite frankly that he wanted excitement and cared very little for the form in which he got it. He should have preferred a life of adventure and danger. He would have made a good soldier in war and a bad one in peace—a safe sailor in stormy weather and a dangerous one in a calm. That, at least, was what he believed, and there was a foundation of truth in it, for he was sensible enough to tell himself the truth about himself so far as he was able.

On the evening of the dance at which he met Katharine he had dined at home again. His mother was far too wise to ask many questions about his comings and goings when he was with her, and it was quite natural that he should not tell her how he had spent his day. He wished that he were free to tell her everything, however, and to ask her advice. She was eminently a woman of the world, though of the more serious type, and he knew that her wisdom was great in matters social. For the rest, she had always approved of his attachment for Katharine, whom she liked best of all the family, and she intended that, if possible, her son should marry the young girl before very long. With her temper and inherited impulses it was not likely that she should blame Ralston for any honourable piece of rashness. Having once been convinced that there was nothing underhand or in the least unfair to anybody in what he was doing, Ralston had not the slightest fear of the consequences. The only men of the family whom he considered men were Katharine's father and Hamilton Bright. The latter could have nothing to say in the matter, and Ralston knew that his friendship could be counted on. As for Alexander Junior, John looked forward with delight to the scene which must take place, for he was a born fighter, and quarrelsome besides. He would be in a position to tell Mr. Lauderdale that neither righteous wrath nor violent words could undo what had been done properly, decently and in order, under legal authority, and by religious ceremony. Alexander Junior's face would be a study at that moment, and Ralston hoped that the hour of triumph might not be far distant.

"I wonder whether it seems sudden to you," said Katharine, presently. "It doesn't to me. You and I had thought about it ever so long."

"Long before you spoke to me on Monday?" asked John. "I thought it had just struck you then."

"No, indeed! I began to think of it last year—soon after you had seen papa. One doesn't come to such conclusions suddenly, you know."

"Some people do. Of course, I might have seen that you had thought it all out, from the way you spoke. But you took me by surprise."

"I know I did. But I had gone over it again and again. It's not a light matter, Jack. I'm putting my whole life into your hands because I love you. I shan't regret it—I know that. No—you needn't protest, dear. I know what I'm doing very well, but I don't mean to magnify it into anything heroic. I'm not the sort of girl to make a heroine, for I'm far too sensible and practical. But it's practical to run risks sometimes."

"It depends on the risk, I suppose," said Ralston. "Many people would tell you that I'm not a safe person to—"

"Nonsense! I didn't mean that," interrupted the young girl. "If you were a milksop, trotting along at your mother's apron strings, I wouldn't look at you. Indeed, I wouldn't! I know you're rather fast, and I like it in you. There was a little boy next to me at dinner this evening—a dear little pale-faced thing, who talked to me about Schopenhauer and Hegel, and drank five glasses of Apollinaris—I counted them. There are lots of them about nowadays—all the fittest having survived, it's the turn of the unfit, I suppose. But I wouldn't have you one little tiny bit better than you are. You don't gamble, and you don't drink, and you're merely supposed to be fast because you're not a bore."

Ralston was silent, and his face turned a little pale. A violent struggle arose in his thoughts, all at once, without the slightest warning nor even the previous suspicion that it could ever arise at all.

"That's not the risk," continued Katharine. "Oh, no! And perhaps what I mean isn't such a very great risk after all. I don't believe there is any, myself—but I suppose other people might. It's that uncle Robert might not, after all—oh, well! We won't talk about such things. If one only takes enough for granted, one is sure to get something in the end. That isn't exactly Schopenhauer, is it? But it's good philosophy."

Katharine laughed happily and looked at him. But his face was unusually grave, and he would not laugh.

"It's too absurd that I should be telling you to take courage and be cheerful, Jack!" she said, a moment later. "I feel as though you were reproaching me with not being serious enough for the occasion. That isn't fair. And it is

serious—it is, indeed.” Her tone changed. “I’m putting my very life into your hands, dear, as I told you, because I trust you. What’s the matter, Jack? You seem to be thinking—”

“I am,” answered Ralston, rather gloomily. “I was thinking about something very, very important.”

“May I know?” asked Katharine, gently. “Is it anything you should like me to know—or to ask me about, before to-morrow?”

“To-morrow!” Ralston repeated the word in a low voice, as though he were meditating upon its meaning.

They were seated on a narrow little sofa against the lower woodwork of the carved staircase. The hall was crowded with young people coming and going between the other rooms. Katharine was leaning back, her head supported against the dark panel, her eyes apparently half closed—for she was looking down at him as he bent forward. He held one elbow on his knee and his chin rested in his hand, as he looked up sideways at her.

“Katharine”—he began, and then stopped suddenly, and she saw now that he was turning very pale, as though in fear or pain.

“Yes?” She paused. “What is it, Jack dear? There’s something on your mind—are you afraid to tell me? Or aren’t you sure that you should?”

“I’m afraid,” said Ralston. “And so I’m going to do it,” he added a moment later. “Did you ever hear that I was what they call dissipated?”

“Is that it?” Katharine laughed, almost carelessly. “No, I never heard that said of you. People say you’re fast, and rather wild—and all that. I told you what I thought of that—I like it in you. Perhaps it isn’t right, exactly, to like a dash of naughtiness—is it?”

“I don’t know,” answered Ralston, evidently not comprehending the question, but intent upon his own thoughts. In the short pause which followed he did not change his position, but the veins swelled in his temples, and his eyelids drooped a little when he spoke again. “Katharine—I sometimes drink too much.”

Katharine trembled a little, but he did not see it. For some seconds she did not move, and did not take her eyes from him. Then she very slowly raised her hand and passed it over her brow, as though she were confused, and presently she bent forward, as he was bending, resting one elbow on her knee and looking earnestly into his face.

“Why do you do it, Jack? Don’t you love me?” She asked the two questions slowly and distinctly, but in the one there was all her pity—in the other all her love.

Again, as more than once lately, Ralston was almost irresistibly impelled to make a promise, simple and decisive, which should change his life, and which at all costs and risks he would keep. The impulse was stronger now, with Katharine’s eyes upon his, and her happiness on his soul, than it had been before. But the arguments for resisting it were also stronger. He was calm enough to know the magnitude of his temptations and his habitual weakness in resisting them. He said nothing.

“Why don’t you answer me, dear?” Katharine asked softly. “They were not hard questions, were they?”

“You know that I love you,” he answered—then hesitated, and then went on. “If I did not love you, I should not have told you. Do you believe that?”

He guessed that she only half realized and half understood all the meaning of what he had said. He had no thought of gaining credit in her opinion for having done what very few men would have risked in his position. The wish to speak had come from the heart, not from the head. But he had not foreseen that it must appear very easy to her for him to overcome a temptation which seemed insignificant in her eyes, compared with a life’s happiness.

“Yes—I know that,” she answered. “But, Jack dear—yes, it was brave and honest of you—but you don’t think I expected a confession, do you? I daresay you have done many things that weren’t exactly wrong and that were not at all dishonourable, but which you shouldn’t like to tell me. Haven’t you?”

“Of course I have. Every man has, by the time he’s five and twenty—lots of things.”

“Well—but now, Jack—now, when we are married, you won’t do such things—whatever they may be—any more—will you?”

“That’s it—I don’t know,” answered Ralston, determined to be honest to the very end, with all his might, in spite of everything.

“You don’t know?” As Katharine repeated the words her face changed in a way that shocked him, and he almost started as he saw her expression.

“No,” he answered, steadily enough. “I don’t—in regard to what I spoke of. For other things, for anything else in the world that you ask me, I can promise, and feel sure. But that one thing—it comes on me sometimes, and it gets the better of me. I know—it’s weak—it’s contemptible, it’s brutal, if you like. But I can’t help it, every time. Of course you can’t understand. Nobody can, who hasn’t felt it.”

“But, Jack—if you promised me that you wouldn’t?”

Her face changed again, and softened, and her voice expressed the absolute conviction that he would and could do anything which he had given his word that he would do. That perfect belief is more flattering than almost anything else to some men.

“Katharine—I can’t!” Ralston shook his head. “I won’t give you a promise which I might break. If I broke it, I should—you wouldn’t see me any more after that. I’ll promise that I’ll try, and perhaps I shall succeed. I can’t do more—indeed, I can’t.”

“Not for me, Jack dear?” Her whole heart was in her voice, pleading, pathetic, maidenly.

“Don’t ask me like that. You don’t know what you’re asking. You’ll make me—no, I won’t say that. But please don’t—”

Once more Katharine’s expression changed. Her face was quite white, and her grey eyes were light and had a cold flash in them. The small, angry frown that came and went quickly when she was annoyed, seemed chiselled upon the smooth forehead. Ralston’s head was bent down and his hand shaded his eyes.

“And you made me think you loved me,” said Katharine, slowly, in a very low voice.

“I do—”

“Don’t say it again. I don’t want to hear it. It means nothing, now that I know—it never can mean anything again. No—you needn’t come with me. I’ll go alone.”

She rose suddenly to her feet, overcome by one of those sudden revulsions of the deepest feelings in her nature, to which strong people are subject at very critical moments, and which generally determine their lives for them, and sometimes the lives of others. She rose to leave him with a woman's magnificent indifference when her heart speaks out, casting all considerations, all details, all questions of future relation to the winds, or to the accident of a chance meeting at some indefinite date.

There were many people in the hall just then. A dance was beginning, and the crowd was pouring in so swiftly that for a moment the young girl stood still, close to Ralston, unable to move. He did not rise, but remained seated, hidden by her and by the throng. He seized her hand suddenly, as it hung by her side. No one could have noticed the action in the press.

"Katharine—" he cried, in a low, imploring tone.

She drew her hand away instantly. He remembered afterwards that it had felt cold through her glove. He heard her voice, and, looking past her, saw Crowdie's pale face and red mouth—and met Crowdie's languorous eyes, gazing at him.

"I want to go somewhere else, Mr. Crowdie," Katharine was saying. "I've been in a draught, and I'm cold."

Crowdie gave her his arm, and they moved on with the rest. Ralston had risen to his feet as soon as he saw that Crowdie had caught sight of him, and stood looking at the pair. His face was drawn and tired, and his eyes were rather wild.

His first impulse was to get out of the house, and be alone, as soon as he could, and he began to make his way through the crowd to a small room by the door, where the men had left their coats. But, before he had succeeded in reaching the place, he changed his mind. It looked too much like running away. He allowed himself to be wedged into a corner, and stood still, watching the people absently, and thinking over what had occurred.

In the first place, he wondered whether Katharine had meant as much as her speech and action implied—in other words, whether she intended to let him know that everything was altogether at an end between them. It seemed almost out of the question. After all, he had spoken because he felt that it was a duty to her. He was, indeed, profoundly hurt by her behaviour. If she meant to break off everything so suddenly, she might have done it more kindly. She had been furiously angry because he would not promise an impossibility. It was true that she could not understand. He loved her so much, even then, that he made excuses for her conduct, and set up arguments in her favour.

Was it an impossibility, after all? He stood still in his corner, and thought the matter over. As he considered it, he deliberately called the temptation to him to examine it. And it came, in its full force. Men who have not felt it no more know what it means than Katharine Lauderdale knew, when she accused John Ralston of not loving her, and left him, apparently forever, because he would not promise never to yield to it again.

During forty-eight hours he had scarcely tasted anything stronger than a cup of coffee, for the occurrence of Monday had produced a deep impression on him—and this was Wednesday night. For several years he had been used to drinking whatever he pleased, during the day, merely exercising enough self-control to keep out of women's society when he had taken more than was good for him, and enough discretion in the matter of hours to avoid meeting his mother when he was not quite himself. There are not so many men in polite society who regulate their lives on such principles as there used to be, but there are many still. Men know, and keep the matter to themselves. Insensibly, of course, John Ralston had grown more or less dependent on a certain amount of something to drink every day, and he had very rarely been really abstemious for so long a time as during the last two days. He had lived, too, in a state of considerable anxiety, and had scarcely noticed the absence of artificial excitement. But now, with the scene of the last quarter of an hour, the reaction had come. He had received a violent shock, and his head clamoured for its accustomed remedy against all nervous disturbances. Then, too, he was very thirsty. He honestly disliked the taste of water—as his father had hated it before him—and he had not really drunk enough of it. He was more thirsty than he had been when he had swallowed a pint of champagne at a draught on Monday afternoon. That, to tell the truth, was the precise form in which the temptation presented itself to him at the present moment. It was painfully distinct. He knew that the Thirlwalls, in whose house he was, always had Irroy Brut, which chanced to be the best dry wine that year, and he knew that he had only to follow the crowd to the supper room and swallow as much of it as he desired. Everybody was drinking it. He could hear the glasses faintly ringing in the distance, as he stood in his corner. He let the temptation come to see how strong it would be.

It was frightfully vivid, as he let the picture rise before his eyes. He was now actually in physical pain from thirst. He could see clearly the tall pint-glass, foaming and sparkling with the ice-cold, pale wine. He could hear the delicious little hiss of the tiny bubbles as thousands of them shot to the surface. He could smell the aromatic essence of the lemon peel as the brim seemed to come beneath his nostrils. He could feel the exquisite sharp tingle, the inexpressible stinging delight of the perfect liquid, all through his mouth, to his very throat—just as he had seen and smelt and tasted it all on Monday afternoon, and a thousand times before that—but not since then.

It became intolerable, or almost intolerable, but still he bore it, with that curious pleasure in the pain of it which some people are able to feel in self-imposed suffering. Then he opened his eyes wide, and tried to drive it away.

But that was not so easy. That diabolical clinking and ringing of distant glasses, away, far away, as it seemed, but high and distinct above the hum of voices, tortured him, and drew him towards it. His mouth and throat were actually parched now. It was no longer imagination. And now, too, the crowd had thinned, and as he looked he saw that it would be very easy for him to get to the supper room.

After all, he thought, it was a perfectly legitimate craving. He was excessively thirsty, and he wanted a glass of champagne. He knew very well that in such a place he should not take more than one glass, and that could not hurt him. Did he ever drink when there were women present, in the sense of drinking too much? On Monday the accident had made a difference. Surely, as he had often heard, the manly course was to limit himself to what he needed, and not go beyond it. All those other people did that—why should not he? What was the difference between them and him? How the thirst burned him, and the ring of the glasses tortured him!

He moved a step from the corner, in the direction of the door, fully intending to have his glass of wine. Then something seemed to snap suddenly over his heart, with a sharp little pain.

"I'll be damned if I do," said Ralston, almost audibly.

And he went back to his corner, and tried to think of something else.

CHAPTER XIV.

CROWDIE'S artistic temperament was as quick as a child's to understand the moods of others, and he saw at a glance that something serious had happened to Katharine. He had not the amateur's persistent desire to feel himself an artist at every moment. On the contrary, he had far more of the genuine artist's wish to feel himself a man of the world when he was not at his work. What he saw impressed itself upon his accurate and retentive memory for form and colour, but he was not always studying every face he met, and thinking of painting it. He was fond of trying to read character, and prided himself upon his penetration, which was by no means great. It is a common peculiarity of highly gifted persons to delight in exhibiting a small talent which seems to them to be their greatest, though unappreciated by the world. Goethe thought himself a painter. Michelangelo believed himself a poet. Crowdie, a modern artist of reputation, was undoubtedly a good musician as well, but in his own estimation his greatest gift was his knowledge of men. Yet in this he was profoundly mistaken. Though his reasoning was often as clear as his deductions were astute, he placed the centre of human impulses too low, for he judged others by himself, which is an unsafe standard for men who differ much from the average of their fellow-men. He mistook his quickness of perception for penetration, and the heart of men and things escaped him.

He looked at Katharine and saw that she was very angry. He had caught sight of Ralston's face, and he supposed that the latter had been drinking. He concluded that Ralston had offended Katharine, and that there was to be a serious quarrel. Katharine, too, had evidently been in the greatest haste to get away, and had spoken to Crowdie and taken his arm merely because of the men she knew he had been nearest to her in the crowd. The painter congratulated himself upon his good fortune in appearing at that moment.

"Will you have some supper?" he asked, guiding his companion toward the door.

"It's too early—thanks," answered the young girl, almost absently. "I'd rather dance, if you don't mind," she added, after a moment.

"Of course!" And he directed his course towards the dancing room.

In spite of his bad figure, Crowdie danced very well. He was very light on his feet, very skilful and careful of his partner, and, strange to say, very enduring. Katharine let herself go on his arm, and they glided and swayed and backed and turned to the right and left to the soft music. For a time she had altogether forgotten her strong antipathy for him. Indeed, she had almost forgotten his existence. Momentarily, he was a nonentity, except as a means of motion.

As she moved the colour slowly came back to her pale face, the frown disappeared and the cold fire in her eyes died away. She also danced well and was proud of it, though she was far from being equal to her mother, even now. With Katharine it was an amusement; with Mrs. Lauderdale it was still a passion. But now she did not care to stop, and went on and on, till Crowdie began to wonder whether she were not falling into a dreamy and half-conscious state, like that of the Eastern dervishes.

"Aren't you tired?" he asked.

"No—go on!" she answered, without hesitation.

He obeyed, and they continued to dance till many couples stopped to look at them, and see how long they would keep it up. Even the musicians became interested, and went on playing mechanically, their eyes upon the couple. At last they were dancing quite alone. As soon as the young girl saw that she was an object of curiosity, she stopped.

"Come away!" she said quickly. "I didn't realize that they were all looking at us—it was so nice."

It was not without a certain degree of vanity that Crowdie at last led her out of the room. He remembered her behaviour to him that morning and on former occasions, and he thought that he had gained a signal success. It was not possible, he thought, that if he were still as repulsive to her as he undoubtedly had been, she should be willing to let him dance with her so long. Dancing meant much to him.

"Shall we sit down somewhere?" he asked, as they got away from the crowd into a room beyond.

"Oh, yes—if there's a place anywhere. Anything!" She spoke carelessly and absently still.

They found two chairs a little removed from the rest, and sat down side by side.

"Miss Lauderdale," said Crowdie, after a momentary pause, "I wish you'd let me ask you a question. Will you?"

"If it's not a rude one," answered Katharine, indifferently, and scarcely looking at him. "What is it?"

"Well—you know—we're relations, or connections, at least. Hester is your cousin, and she's your most intimate friend. Isn't she?"

"Yes. Is it about her? There she is, just over there—talking to that ugly, thin man with the nice face. Do you see her?"

Crowdie looked in the direction indicated, though he did not in the least wish to talk about his wife to Katharine.

"Oh, yes; I see her," he answered. "She's talking to Paul Griggs, the writer. You know him, don't you? I wonder how he comes here!"

"Is that Paul Griggs?" asked Katharine, with a show of interest. "I've always wished to see him."

"Yes. But it has nothing to do with Hester—"

"What has nothing to do with Hester?" asked Katharine, with despairing absence of mind, as she watched the author's face.

"The question I was going to ask you—if you would let me."

Katharine turned towards him. He could produce extraordinarily soft effects with his beautiful voice when he chose, and he had determined to attract her attention just then, seeing that she was by no means inclined to give it.

"Oh, yes—the question," she said. "Is it anything very painful? You spoke—how shall I say?—in such a pathetic tone of voice."

"In a way—yes," answered Crowdie, not at all disturbed by her manner. "Painful is too strong a word, perhaps—but it's something that makes me very uncomfortable. It's this—why do you dislike me so much? Or don't you know why?"

Katharine paused a moment, being surprised by what he asked. She had no answer ready, for she could not tell him that she disliked his white face and scarlet lips and the soft sweep of his eyelashes. She took refuge in her

woman's right to parry one question with another.

"What makes you think I dislike you?" she enquired.

"Oh—a thousand things—"

"I'm very sorry there are so many!" She laughed good-humouredly, but with the intention of turning the conversation if possible.

"No," said Crowdie, gravely. "You don't like me, for some reason which seems a good one to you. I'm sure of that, because I know that you're not capricious nor unreasonable by nature. I should care, in any case—even if we were casual acquaintances in society, and only met occasionally. Nobody could be quite indifferent to your dislike, Miss Lauderdale."

"No? Why not? I'm sure a great many people are. And as for that, I'm not so reasonable as you think, I daresay. I'm sorry you think I don't like you."

"I don't think—I know it. No—please! Let me tell you what I was going to say. We're not mere ordinary acquaintances, though I don't in the least hope ever to be a friend of yours, exactly. You see—owing to Hester—and on account of the portrait, just now—I'm thrown a good deal in your way. I can't help it. I don't want to give up painting you—"

"But I don't wish you to! I'll come every day, if you like—every day I can."

"Yes; you're very good about it. It's just because you are, that I'm more sensitive about your dislike, I suppose."

"But, my dear Mr. Crowdie, how—"

"My dear Miss Lauderdale, I'm positively repulsive to you. You can't deny it really, though you'll put it much more gently. To-day, when I wanted to help you to take off your hat, you started and changed colour—just as though you had touched a snake. I know that those things are instinctive, of course. I only want you to tell me if you have any reason—beyond a mere uncontrollable physical repulsion. There's no other way of putting it, I'm afraid. I mean, whether I've ever done anything to make you hate the sight of me—"

"You? Never. On the contrary, you're always very kind, and nice in every way. I wish you would put it out of your head—the whole idea—and talk about something else. No, honestly, I've nothing against you, and I never heard anything against you. And I'm really very much distressed that I should have given you any such impression. Isn't that the answer to your question?"

"Yes—in a way. It reduces itself to this—if you never looked at me, and never heard my voice, you wouldn't hate me."

"Oh—your voice—no!" The words escaped her involuntarily, and conveyed a wrong impression; for though she meant that his voice was beautiful, she knew that its mere beauty sometimes repelled her as much as his appearance did.

"Then it's only my looks," he said with a laugh. "Thanks! I'm quite satisfied now, and I quite agree with you in that. You noticed to-day that there were no mirrors in the studio." He laughed again quite naturally.

"Really!" exclaimed Katharine, as a sort of final protest, and taking the earliest opportunity of escaping from the difficult situation he had created. "I wish you would tell me something about Mr. Griggs, since you know him. I've been watching him—he has such a curious face!"

"Paul Griggs? Oh, yes—he's a curious creature altogether." And Crowdie began to talk about the man.

Katharine was in reality perfectly indifferent, and followed her own train of thought while Crowdie made himself as agreeable as he could, considering that he was conscious of her inattention. He would have been surprised had he known that she was thinking about him.

Since Hester had told her the story of his strange illness, Katharine could not be near him without remembering her cousin's vivid description of his appearance and condition during the attack. It was but a step from such a picture to the question of the morphia and Crowdie's story, and one step further brought the comparison between slavery to one form of excitement and slavery to another; in other words, between John Ralston and the painter, and then between Hester's love for Crowdie and Katharine's for her cousin. But at this point the divergence began. Crowdie, who looked weak, effeminate and anything but manly, had found courage and strength to overcome a habit which was said to be almost unconquerable. Katharine would certainly never have guessed that he had such a strong will, but Hester had told her all about it, and there seemed to be no other explanation of the facts. And Ralston, with his determined expression and all his apparently hardy manliness, had distinctly told her that he did not feel sure of keeping a promise, even for the sake of her love. It seemed incredible. She would have given anything to be able to ask Crowdie questions about his life, but that was impossible, under the circumstances. He might never forgive his wife for having told his secret.

Her sudden and violent anger had subsided, and she already regretted what she had said and done with Ralston. Indeed, she found it hard to understand how she could have been so cruelly unkind, all in a moment, when she had hardly found time to realize the meaning of what he had told her. Another consideration and another question presented themselves now, as she remembered and recapitulated the circumstances of the scene. For the first time she realized the man's loyalty in thrusting his shortcomings under her eyes before the final step was taken. It must have been a terrible struggle for him, she thought. And if he was brave enough to do such a thing as that,—to tell the truth to her, and the story of his shameful weakness,—what must that temptation be which even he was not brave enough to resist? No doubt, he did resist it often, she thought, and could do so in the future, though he said that he could not be sure of himself. He was so brave and manly. Yet it was horrible to think of him in connection with something which appeared to be unspeakably disgusting in her eyes.

The vice was one which she could not understand. Few women can; and it would be strange, indeed, if any young girl could. She had seen drunken men in the streets many times, but that was almost all she knew of it. Occasionally, but by no means often, she had seen a man in society who had too much colour, or was unnaturally pale, and talked rather wildly, and people said that he had taken too much wine—and generally laughed. Such a man was making himself ridiculous, she thought, but she established no connection between him and the poor wretch reeling blind drunk out of a liquor shop, who was pointed out to her by her father as an awful example. She had even seen a man once who was lying perfectly helpless in the gutter, while a policeman kicked him to make him get up—and it had made a strong impression upon her. She remembered distinctly his swollen face, his bloodshot blue eyes

and his filthy clothes—all disgusting enough.

That was the picture which rose before her eyes when John Ralston, putting his case more strongly than was necessary in order to clear his conscience altogether, had told her that he could not promise to give up a bad habit for her sake. In the first moment she had thought merely of the man in society who behaved a little foolishly and talked too loud, but Ralston's earnest manner had immediately evoked the recollection of her father's occasional discourses upon what he called the besetting sin of the lower classes in America, and had vividly recalled therewith the face of the besotted wretch in the gutter. She knew of no intermediate stage. To be a slave to drink meant that and nothing else. The society man whom she took as an example was not a slave to drink; he was merely foolish and imprudent, and might get into trouble. To think of marrying a man who had lain in the gutter, half blind with liquor, to be kicked by a policeman, was more than she could bear. The inevitable comic side to things is rarely discernible to those brought most closely into connection with them. It was not only serious to Katharine; it was horrible, repulsive, sickening. It was no wonder that she had sprung from her seat and turned her back on Ralston, and that she had done the first thing which presented itself as a means of distracting her thoughts.

But now, matters began to look differently to her calmer judgment. It was absurd to think that Ralston should make a mountain of a mole-hill, and speak as he had spoken of himself, if he only meant that he now and then took a glass of champagne more than was good for him. Besides, if he did it habitually, she must have seen him now and then behaving like her typical young gentleman, and making a fool of himself. But she had never noticed anything of the kind. On the other hand, she could not believe that he could ever, under any circumstances, turn into the kind of creature who had been held up to her as an example of the habitual drunkard. There must be something between the two, she felt sure, something which she could not understand. She would find out. And she must see John again, before she left the dance. Her eyes began to look for him in the crowd.

There are times when the processes of a girl's mind are primitive in their simplicity. Katharine suddenly remembered hearing that men drank out of despair. She had seen Ralston's face when she had risen and left him, and it had certainly expressed despair very strongly. Perhaps he had gone at once to drown his cares—that was the expression she had heard—and it would be her fault.

Such a sequence of ideas looks childish in this age of profound psychological analysis, but it is just such reasoning which sometimes affects people most when their hearts are touched. We have all thought and done very childish things at times.

Katharine forgot all about Crowdie and what he was saying. She had given a sort of social, mechanical attention to his talk, nodding intelligently from time to time, and answering by vague monosyllables, or with even more vague questions. Crowdie had the sense to understand that she did not mean to be rude, and that her mind was wholly absorbed—most probably with what had taken place between her and Ralston a quarter of an hour earlier. He talked on patiently, since he could do nothing else, but he was not at all surprised when she at last interrupted him.

"Would you mind looking to see if my cousin—Jack Ralston, you know,—is still in the hall?" she asked, without ceremony.

"Certainly," said Crowdie, rising. "Shall I tell him you want him, if he's there?"

"Do, please. It's awfully good of you, Mr. Crowdie," she added, with a preoccupied smile.

Crowdie dived into the crowd, looking about him in every direction, and then making his way straight to Ralston, who had not left his corner.

"Miss Lauderdale wants to speak to you, Ralston," said the painter, as he reached him. "Hallo! What's the matter? You look ill."

"I? Not a bit!" answered Ralston. "It's the heat, I suppose. Where is Miss Lauderdale?" He spoke in a curiously constrained tone.

"I'll take you to her—come along!"

The two moved away together, Ralston following Crowdie through the press. Through the open door of the boudoir Ralston saw Katharine's eyes looking for him.

"All right," he said to Crowdie, "I see her. Don't bother."

"Over there in the low chair by the plants," answered the painter, in unnecessary explanation.

"All right," said Ralston again, and he pushed past Crowdie, who turned away to seek amusement in another direction. Katharine looked up gravely at him as he came to her side, and then pointed to the chair Crowdie had left vacant.

"Sit down. I want to talk to you," she said quickly, and he obeyed, drawing the chair a little nearer.

"I thought you never meant to speak to me again," he said bitterly.

"Did you? You thought that? Seriously?"

"I suppose most men would have thought very much the same."

"You thought that I could change completely, like that—in a single moment?"

"You seemed to change."

"And that I did not love you any more?"

"That was what you made me think—what else? You're perfectly justified, of course. I ought to have told you long ago."

"Please don't speak to me so—Jack."

"What do you expect me to say?" he asked, and with a weary look in his eyes he leaned back in his low chair and watched her.

"Jack—dear—you didn't understand when I told Mr. Crowdie to call you—you don't understand now. I was angry then—by the staircase. I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

Ralston's face changed instantly, and he leaned forward again, so as to be able to speak in a lower tone.

"Darling—don't say such things! I've nothing to forgive—"

"You have, Jack! Indeed, you have—oh! why can't we be alone for ten minutes—I'd explain it all—what I thought

"But there's nothing to explain, if you love me still—at least, not for you."

"Yes, there is. There's ever so much. Jack, why did you tell me? You frightened me so—you don't know! And it seemed as though it were the end of everything, and of me, myself, when you said you couldn't be sure of keeping a promise for my sake. You didn't mean what you said—at least, not as I thought you meant it—you didn't mean that you wouldn't try—and of course you would succeed in the end."

"I think I should succeed very soon, with you to help me, Katharine. But that's not what a man—who is a man—accepts from a woman."

"Her help—not her help, Jack? How can you say so!"

"Yes, I mean it. Suppose that I should fail, what sort of life should you lead—tied to a man who drinks? Don't start, dear—it's the truth. We shall never talk about it again, after this, perhaps, and I may just as well say what I think. I must say it, if I'm ever to respect myself again."

Katharine looked at him, realized again what his courage had been in making the confession, and she loved him more than ever.

"Jack—" she began, and hesitated. "Since we are talking of it, and must talk of it—can't you tell me what makes you do it—I mean—you know! What is it that attracts you? It must be something very strong—isn't it? What is it?"

"I wish I knew!" answered Ralston, half savagely. "It began—oh, at college, you know. I was vain of being able to stand more than the other fellows and of going home as steady as though I'd had nothing."

"But a man who can walk straight isn't drunk, Jack—"

"Oh, isn't he!" exclaimed Ralston, with a sour smile. "They're the worst kind, sometimes—"

"But I thought that a man who was really drunk—was—was quite senseless, and tumbled down, you know—in a disgusting state."

"It's not a pretty subject—especially when you talk about it, dear—but it's not always of that description."

It shocked Ralston's refined nature to hear her speak of such things. For he had all the refinement of nervous natures, like many a man who has been wrecked by drink—even to men of genius without number.

"Isn't it quite—no, of course it's not. I know well enough." Katharine paused an instant. "I don't care if it's not what they call refined, Jack. I'm not going to let that sort of squeamishness come between you and me. It's not as though I'd come upon it as a subject of conversation—and—and I'm not afraid you'll think any the worse of me because I talk about horrid things, when I must talk about them—when everything depends on them—you and I, and our lives. I must know what it is that you feel—that you can't resist."

Ralston felt how strong she was, and was glad.

"Go on," she said. "Tell me all about it—how it began."

"That was it—at college, I suppose," he answered. "Then it grew to be a habit—insensibly, of course. I thought it didn't hurt me and I liked the excitement. Perhaps I'm naturally melancholic and depressed."

"I don't wonder!"

"No—it's not the result of anything especial. I've not had at all an unhappy life. I was born gloomy, I suppose—and unlucky, too. You see the trouble is that those things get hold of one's nerves, and then it becomes a physical affair and not a mere question of will. Men get so far that it would kill them to stop, because they're used to it. But with me—no, I admit the fact—it is a question of will and nothing else. Just now—oh, well, I've talked enough about myself."

"What—'just now'? What were you going to say? You wanted to go and drink, just after I left you?"

"How did you guess that?"

"I don't know. I was sure of it. And—and you didn't, Jack?"

"No, I didn't."

"Why not? What stopped you? It was so easy!"

"I felt that I should be a brute if I did—so I didn't. That's all. It's not worth mentioning—only it shows that it is a question of will. I'm all right now—I don't want it any more. Perhaps I shan't, for days. I don't know. It's a hopeless sort of thing, anyway. Sometimes I'm just on the point of taking an oath. But if I broke it, I should blow my brains out, and I shouldn't be any better off. So I have the sense not to promise myself anything."

"Promise me one thing," said Katharine, thoughtfully. "It's a thing you can promise—trust me, won't you?"

"Yes—I promise," answered Ralston, without hesitation.

"That you will never bind yourself by any oath at all, will you?"

Ralston paused a moment.

"Yes—I promise you that," he said. "I think it's very sensible. Thank you, dear."

There was a short silence after he had spoken. Then Katharine laughed a little and looked at him affectionately.

"How funny we are!" she exclaimed. "Half an hour ago I quarrelled with you because you wouldn't promise, and now I've got you to swear that you never will promise, under any circumstances."

"Yes," he answered. "It's very odd. But other things are changed, too, since then, though it's not long."

"You're mistaken, Jack," she said, misunderstanding him. "Haven't I said enough? Don't you know that I love you just as much as I ever did—and more? But nothing is changed—nothing—not the least little bit of anything."

"Dear—how good you are!" Ralston's voice was very tender just then. "But I mean—about to-morrow."

"Nothing's changed, Jack," said Katharine, leaning forward and speaking very earnestly.

But Ralston shook his head, sadly, as he met her eyes.

"Yes, dear, it's all changed. That can't be as you wanted it—not now."

"But if I say that I will? Oh, don't you understand me yet? It's made no difference. I lost my head for a moment—but it has made no difference at all, except that I respect you ever so much more than I did, for being so honest!"

"Respect me!" repeated Ralston, with grave incredulity. "Me! You can't!"

"I can and I do. And I mean to be married to you—to-morrow, just as we said. I wonder what you think I'm made of, to change and take back my word and promise! Don't you see that I want to give you everything—my whole life—"

much more than I did this morning? Yes, ever so much more, for you need me more than I knew or guessed. You see, I didn't quite understand at first, but it's all clear now. You're much more unhappy—and much more foolish about it—than I am. I don't want to go back over it all again, but won't it be much easier for you when you have me to help you? It seems to me that it must be, because I love you so! Won't it be much easier? Tell me!"

"Yes—of course it would. I don't like to think of it, because I mustn't do it. I should never have asked you to marry me at all, until I was sure of myself. But—well, I couldn't help it. We loved each other."

"Jack—what do you mean?"

"That I love you far too much to tie myself round your life, like a chain. I won't do it. I'll do the best I can to get over this thing and if I do—I shan't be half good enough for you—but if you will still have me then, we'll be married. If I can't get over it—why then, that means that I shall go to the devil, I suppose. At all events, you'll be free."

He spoke very quietly, but the words hurt him as they came. He did not realize until he had finished speaking that the resolution had been formed within the last five minutes, though he felt that he was right.

"If you knew how you hurt me, when you talk like that!" said Katharine, in a low voice.

"It's a question of absolute right and wrong—it's a question of honour," he continued, speaking quickly to persuade himself. "Just put yourself in the position of a third person, and think about it. What should you say of a man who did such a thing—who accepted such a sacrifice as you wish to make?"

"It isn't a sacrifice—it's my life."

"Yes—that's it! What would your life be, with a man on whom you couldn't count—a man you might be ashamed of, at any moment—who can't even count on himself—a fellow who's good for nothing on earth, and certainly for nothing in heaven—a failure, like me, who—"

"Stop! You shan't say any more. I won't listen! Jack, I shall go away, as I did before—"

"Well—but isn't it all true?"

"No—not a word of it is true! And if it were true twenty times over, I'd marry you—now, in spite of everybody. I—I believe I'd commit a sin to marry you. Oh, it's of no use! I can't live without you—I can't, indeed! I called you back to tell you so—"

She stopped, and she was pale. He had never seen her as she was now, and she had never looked so beautiful to him.

"For that matter, I couldn't live without you," he said, in a rather uncertain voice.

"And you shall not!" she answered, with determination. "Don't talk to me of sacrifice—what could anything be compared with that—with giving you up? You don't know what you're saying. I couldn't—I couldn't do it—not if it meant death!"

"But, dear—Katharine dear—if I fail, as I shall, I'm sure—just think—"

"If you do—but you won't—well, if you should think you had—oh, Jack! If you were the worst man alive, I'd rather die with you than live for any one else! God knows I would—"

"It's very, very hard!" Ralston twisted his fingers together and bowed his head, still trying to resist her.

She bent forward again.

"Dear—tell me! A little while ago—out there—when you wanted it—wasn't that hard?"

Ralston nodded silently.

"And didn't you resist because it was a little—just a little for my sake? Just at that moment when you said to yourself that you wouldn't, you know, or just before, or just afterwards—didn't you think a little of me, dear?"

"Of course I did. Oh, Katharine, Katharine—" His voice was shaking now.

"Yes. I know now," she answered. "I don't want anything but that—all my life."

Still Ralston bent his head again, looking down at his hands and believing that he was still resisting. He could not have spoken, had he tried, and Katharine saw it. She leaned still nearer to him.

"Dear—I'm going home now. I shall be walking in Clinton Place at half-past eight to-morrow morning, as we arranged. Good-night—dear."

Before he realized what she meant to do, she had risen and reached the door. He sprang to his feet and followed her, but the crowd had closed again and she was gone.

CHAPTER XV.

KATHARINE LAUDERDALE slept sweetly that night. She had, as she thought, at last reached the crisis of her life, and the moment of action was at hand. She felt, too, that almost at the last moment she had avoided a great risk and made a good resolution—she felt as though she had saved John Ralston from destruction. Loving him as truly as she did, her satisfaction over what she had done was far greater than her pain at what he had told her of himself.

But this was not insignificant, though she wilfully made it seem as small as she could. It was quite clear that it was not a matter to be laughed at, and that Ralston did not deserve to be called quixotic because he had thought it his duty to tell her of his weakness. It was not a mountain, she was sure, but she admitted that it was not a mole-hill either. Men who exaggerated the golden letter of virtue at the expense of the gentle spirit of charity, as her father did, exaggerated also, as a rule, those forms of wickedness to which they were themselves least liable. She knew that. But she was also aware that drinking too much was not by any means an imaginary vice. It was a matter of fact, with which whole communities had to deal, and about which men very unlike her father in other ways spoke gravely. Nevertheless, though a fact, all details connected with it were vague. It seemed to her a matter of certainty that John Ralston would at once change his life and become in that respect, as in all others, exactly what her ideal of a man always had been since she had loved him.

Her mistake, if it were one, was pardonable enough. Had she become aware of his fault by accident, and when, having succumbed to his weakness, she could have seen him not himself, the whole effect upon her mind would have been very different. But she had never seen him, as she believed, in any such condition. It was as though he had told it as of another man, and she found it impossible really to connect any such ideas of inebriety as she had with the

man she loved. It was as vague as though he had told her that he had once had the scarlet fever. She would have known very well what the scarlet fever was like, but she could not have associated it with him in any really distinct way. It was because it had seemed such a small matter at first sight that she had been suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of bitter disappointment when he had refused to give his promise for her sake. As soon as she had begun to understand even a little of what he really felt, she had been as ready and as determined to stand by him through everything as though it had been a question of a bodily illness, for which he was not responsible, but in which she could really help him. When she had been angry, and afterwards, when, in spite of him, she had so strongly insisted upon the marriage, she had been alike under a false impression, though in different degrees. She had not now any idea of what she had really undertaken to do.

With her nature she would probably have acted just as she did in the last case, even had she understood all, by actual experience. She was capable of great sacrifices—even greater than she dreamed of. But, not understanding, it did not seem to her that she had done or promised anything very extraordinary, and she was absolutely confident of success. It was natural to her to accept wholly what she accepted at all, and it had always seemed to her that there was something mean in complaining of what one had taken voluntarily, and in finding fault with details when one had agreed, as it were, to take over the whole at a moral valuation.

It has seemed necessary to dwell at great length on the events which filled the days preceding Katharine's marriage. Her surroundings had made her what she was, and justified, if anything could justify, the extraordinary step she was about to take, and which she actually took on the morning after the dance at the Thirlwalls'. It is under such circumstances that such things are done, when they are done at all. The whole balance of opinion in her family was against her marrying John Ralston. The whole weight of events, so far as she was concerned, was in favour of the marriage.

That she loved him with all her heart, there was no doubt; and he loved her with all that his nature could give of love, which was, indeed, less than what she gave, but was of a good and faithful sort in its way. Love, like most passions, good and bad, flourishes under restraint when it is real and perishes almost immediately before opposition when it has grown out of artificial circumstances—to revive, sometimes, in the latter case, if the artificiality is resuscitated. Katharine had found herself opposed at every turn in her love for Ralston. The result was natural and simple—it had grown to be altogether the dominant reality of her life.

Even those persons who did not actively do their best to hinder her marriage, contributed, by their actions and even by their existence, to the fortifying of her resolution, as it seemed to her, but in reality to the growth of the passion which needed no resolutions to direct it. For instance, Crowdie's repulsive personality threw Ralston's undeniable advantages into higher relief. His wife's devotion to him made Katharine's devotion to John seem ten times more reasonable than it was. Charlotte Slayback's wretchedly petty and miserable life with a man whom she had not married for love, made a love match seem the truest foundation for happiness. Old Robert Lauderdale's solitary existence was itself an argument in favour of marriage. The small, daily discomfort which Alexander Junior's miserly economy imposed upon his household, and which Katharine had been forced to endure all her life, made Ralston's careless generosity a virtue by contrast. Even Mrs. Lauderdale had turned against her daughter at last, for reasons which the young girl could not understand, either at the time or for a long time afterwards.

She felt herself very much alone in the world, in spite of her position. And yet, since her mother had begun to lose her supreme beauty, Katharine was looked upon as the central figure of the Lauderdale tribe, next to Robert the Rich himself. 'The beautiful Miss Lauderdale' was a personage of much greater importance than she herself knew, in the eyes of society. She had grown used to hearing reports to the effect that she was engaged to be married to this man, or that, and that her uncle Robert had announced his intention of wrapping his wedding present in a cheque for a million of dollars. Stories of that sort got into the papers from time to time, and Alexander Junior never failed to write a stern denial of the report to the editor of the journal in which the tale appeared. Katharine was used to seeing the family name in print on all possible occasions and paid little attention to it. She did not know how far people must have become subjects of general conversation before they become the paragraphist's means of support in the dull season of the year. The paragraphists on a great daily paper have an intimate knowledge of the public taste, for which they get little credit amongst the social lights, who flatter themselves that the importance of the paper in question depends very largely on their opinion of it. Society is very much like a little community of lunatics, who live in an asylum all by themselves, and who know nothing whatever about the great public that lives beyond the walls, whereas the public knows a good deal about the lunatics, and takes a lively interest in their harmless, or dangerous, vagaries. And in the same way society itself forms a small public for its own most prominent individuals, —for its own favourite lunatics, so to say,—and watches their doings and talks about them with constant interest, and flatters them when it thinks they are agreeable, and abuses them bitterly behind their backs when it thinks they are not. The daily dinner-party conversation is society's imprinted but widely circulated daily paper. It is often quite ignorant of state secrets, but it is never unacquainted with social events, and generally has plenty of sound reasons with which to explain them. Society's comparative idleness, even in America, gives it opportunities of conversation which no equally large body of men and women can be said to possess outside of its rather elastic limits. It talks the same sort of matter which the generally busy great public reads and wishes to read in the daily press—and as talking is a quicker process than controversy in print, society manages to say as much for and against the persons it discusses, in a day, as the newspapers can say in a week, or perhaps more. As a mere matter of statistics, there is no doubt that a couple of talkative people spending an evening together can easily 'talk off' ten thousand words in an hour—which is equal to about eight columns of an ordinary big daily paper, and they are not conscious of making any great effort. It is manifestly possible to say a great many things in eight columns of a newspaper, especially if one is not very particular about what one says.

Katharine realized, no doubt, that there would some day be plentiful discussion of her rashness in marrying Ralston against the wishes of the family, and she knew that the circumstances would to some extent be regarded as public property. But she was far from realizing her own social importance, or that of the whole Lauderdale tribe, as compared with that of many people who spent enormous sums in amusing their friends, consciously and unconsciously, but who could never be Lauderdals, though it was not their fault.

At the juncture she had now reached, such considerations would have had little weight with her, but the probability is that, had she known exactly what she was doing, and how it would be regarded should others know of it, she would have vastly preferred to rebel openly and to leave New York with John Ralston on the day she married

him, in uncompromising defiance of her family. Most people have known in the course of life of one or two secret marriages and must have noticed that the motives to secrecy generally seem inadequate. As a rule, they are, if taken by themselves. But in actual fact they have mostly acted upon the persons concerned through a medium of some sort of ignorance and in conjunction with an impatient passion. It is common enough, even in connection with more or less insignificant matters, to hear some one say, 'I wonder why I did that—I might have known better!' Humanity is never wholly logical, and is never more than very partially wise, even when it is old enough to 'know better.' In nine cases out of ten, when it is said of a man that 'a prophet is without honour in his own country,' the reason is that his own country is the best judge of what he prophesies. And similarly, society judges the doings of all its members by its own individual knowledge of its own customs, so that very few who do anything not sanctioned by those customs get any credit, but, on the contrary, are in danger of being called fools for believing that anything not customary can be done at all.

At half-past eight on Thursday morning Katharine left the house in Clinton Place, and turned eastward to meet John Ralston. Her only source of anxiety was the fear lest her father should by some accident go out earlier than usual. There was no particular reason to expect that he should be irregular on that particular day of all others, and she had left him over his beefsteak, discussing the relative amounts of the nutriment—as compared with the price per pound—contained in beef and mutton. He had never been able to understand why any one who could get meat should eat anything else, and the statistics of food consumption interested his small but accurate mind. His wife listened quietly but without response, so that the discussion was very one-sided. The philanthropist generally shuffled down to breakfast when everything was cold, a point about which he was utterly indifferent. He had long ago discovered that by coming down late he could always be the last to finish his meal, and could therefore begin to smoke as soon as he had swallowed his last mouthful which was a habit very important to his enjoyment and very destructive to that of any one else, especially since his son had reduced him to 'Old Virginia Cheroots' at ten cents for five.

But Alexander Junior was no more inclined than usual to reach his office a moment before his accustomed time. Katharine generally left the dining-room as soon as she had finished breakfast, and often went out immediately afterwards for a turn in Washington Square, so that her departure excited no remark. The rain had ceased, and though the air was still murky and the pavements wet, it was a decently fine morning. Ralston was waiting for her, walking up and down on a short beat, and the two went away together.

At first they were silent, and the silence had a certain constraint about it which both of them felt, but did not know how to escape from. Ralston was the first to speak.

"You ought not to have come," he said rather awkwardly, with a little laugh.

"But I told you I was coming," she answered demurely. "Didn't I?"

"I know. That's just it. You told me so suddenly that I couldn't protest. I ran after you, but you were gone to get your things, and when you came downstairs there were a lot of people, and I couldn't speak to you."

"I saw you," said Katharine. "It was just as well. You had nothing to say to me that I didn't know, and we couldn't have begun the discussion of the matter all over again at the last instant. And now, please, Jack dear, don't begin and argue. I've told you a hundred times that I know exactly what I'm doing—and that it's I who am making you do it. And remember that unless we are married first uncle Robert will never make up his mind to do anything for us. It's never of any use to try and overcome people's objections. The only way is to ignore them, which is just what we're doing."

"There's no doubt about that," answered Ralston. "There's one thing I look forward to with pleasure, in the way of a row, though—I mean when your father finds it out. I hope you'll let me tell him and not spoil my fun. Won't you?"

"Oh, yes, if you like. Why not? Not that I'm at all afraid. You don't know papa. When he finds that the thing is done, that it's the inevitable course of events, in fact, he'll be quite different. He'll very likely talk of submission to the Divine will and offer to speak to Beman Brothers about letting you try the clerkship again. I know papa! Providence has an awfully good time with him—but nobody else does."

At which piece of irreverence Ralston laughed, for it exactly expressed his idea of Alexander Junior's character.

"And there's one other thing I don't want you to speak of, Jack," pursued Katharine, more gravely. "I mean what you told me last night. I don't intend ever to mention it again—do you understand, dear? I've thought it all over since then. I'm glad you told me, and I admire you for telling me, because it must have been hard, especially until I began to understand. A woman doesn't know everything, you see! Indeed, we don't know much about anything. We can only feel. And it did seem very hard at first—only for a moment, Jack—that you should not be willing to promise what I asked, when it was to make such a difference to me, and I was willing to promise you anything. You see how I felt, don't you?"

"Of course," answered Ralston, looking down at the pavement as he walked on and listened. "It was natural."

"Yes. I'm so glad you see it. But afterwards, when I thought of things I'd heard—why, then I thought a great deal too much, you know—dreadful things! But I understood better what it all meant. You see, at first, it seemed so absurd! Just as though I had asked you not to—not to wear a green tie, for instance, as Charlotte asked her husband. Absurd, wasn't it? So I was frightfully angry with you and got up and went away. I'm so ashamed of myself for it, now. But then, when it grew clearer—when I really knew that there was suffering in it, and remembered hearing that it was something like morphia and such things, that have to be cured by degrees—you know what I mean—why, then I wanted you more than ever. You know I'd give anything to help you—just to make it a little easier for you, dear."

"You do! You're doing everything—you're giving me everything," said Ralston, earnestly.

"Well—not everything—but myself, because that's all I have to give—if it's any use to you."

"Dear—as if you weren't everything the world has, and the only thing and the best thing altogether!"

"And if I didn't love you better than anything—better than kings and queens—I wouldn't do it. Because, after all, though I'm not much, I'm all I have. And then—I'm proud—inside, you know, Jack. Papa says I'm not, because mamma and I sometimes go to the theatre in the gallery, for economy. But that's hardly a test in real life, I think—and besides, I know I am. Don't you think so?"

"Yes—a little, in the right way. It's nice. I like it in you."

"I'm so glad. It's because I'm proud that I don't want to talk about that matter any more. It just doesn't exist for

me. That's what I want you to feel. But I want you to feel, too, that I'm always there, that I shall always understand, and that if I can help you the least little bit, I mean to. I've turned into a woman all at once, Jack, in the last twenty-four hours, and now in an hour I shall be your wife, though nobody will know about it for a day or two. But I don't mean to turn into your grandmother, too, and be always lecturing you and asking questions, and that sort of thing. You wouldn't like it either, would you?"

"Hardly!"

Ralston laughed again, for everything she said made him feel happier and helped to destroy the painful impression of the previous night.

"Why do you laugh, Jack? Oh, I suppose it's my way of putting it. But it's what I mean, and that's the principal thing. I'd rather die than watch you all the time, to see what you do. Imagine if I were always asking questions—'Jack, where did you go last night?' And—'Jack, is that your third or fourth glass of wine to-day?' The mere idea is disgusting. No. You must just do your best, and feel that I'm always there—even when I'm not—and that I'm never watching you, even when I look as though I were, and that neither you nor I are ever going to say a word about it—from this very minute, forever! Do you understand? Isn't that the best way, Jack? And that I'm perfectly sure that it will be all right in the end—you must remember that, too."

"I think you're right," said Ralston. "You've suddenly turned into a woman, and into a very clever one. Those are just the things which most women never will understand. They'd be much happier if they did."

The two walked on rapidly, talking as they went, and assuredly not looking at all like a runaway couple. But though it was very early, they avoided the streets in which they might easily meet acquaintances, for it was the hour when men who had any business were going to it in various ways, according to their tastes, but chiefly by the elevated road. They had no difficulty in reaching unobserved the house of the clergyman who had promised to marry them.

He was in readiness, and at his window, and as they came in sight he left the house and met them. All three walked silently to his church, and he let them in with his own key, followed them and locked the door behind them.

In ten minutes the ceremony was over. The clergyman beckoned them into the vestry, and immediately signed a form of certificate which he had already filled in, and handed it to John without a word. John took a new treasury note from his pocket-book and laid it upon the oak table.

"I'm sure you must have many poor people in your parish," he said, in explanation.

"I have," said the clergyman. "Thank you," he added, placing the money in his own pocket-book, which was an old black one, much the worse for wear.

"It is we who have to thank you," answered John, "for helping us out of a very difficult situation."

"Hm!" ejaculated the elder man, rubbing his chin with his hand and fixing a penetrating glance on Ralston's face. "Perhaps you won't thank me hereafter," he said suddenly. "Perhaps you think it strange that a man in my position should be a party to a secret marriage. But I do not anticipate that you will ask me for a justification of my action. I had reasons—reasons—old reasons." He continued to rub his chin thoughtfully. "I should like to say a word to you, Mrs. Ralston," he added, turning to Katharine.

She started and blushed a little. She had not expected to be addressed by what was now her name. But she held up her head, proudly, as though she were by no means ashamed of it.

"I shall not detain you a moment," continued the clergyman, looking at her as earnestly as he had looked at John. "I have perfect confidence in Mr. Ralston, as I have shown by acceding to his very unusual request. He has told you what I said to him yesterday, and I do not wish him to doubt that I am sure that he has done so. It is merely as a matter of conscience, to satisfy my own scruples in fact, that I wish to repeat, as nearly as possible, the same words, 'mutatis mutandis,' which I said to him. I have married you and have given you my certificate that the ceremony has been duly and properly performed, and you are man and wife. But I have married you thus secretly and without witnesses—none being indispensable—on the distinct understanding that your union is not to be kept a secret by you any longer than you shall deem secrecy absolutely necessary to your future happiness. Mr. Ralston informed me that it was your intention to acknowledge what you had done to a near relation, the head of your family, in fact, without any delay. I am sure that it is really your intention to do so. But let me entreat you, if it is possible, to lose no time, but to go, even at this hour, to the person in question and tell your story, one or the other of you, or both together. I am an old man, and human life is very uncertain, and human honour is rightly held very dear, for if honour means anything, it means the social application of that truth which is by nature divine. To-morrow I may no longer be here to testify that I signed that document with my own hand. To-day the person in whom you intend to confide can come and see me and I will answer for what I have done, or he can acknowledge your marriage without question, whichever he chooses to do; it will be better if it be done quickly. It always seems to me that to-morrow is the enemy of to-day, and lies in ambush to attack it unawares. Therefore, I entreat you to go at once to him you have chosen and tell him what you have done. And so good-bye, and may God bless you and make you happy and good."

"I shall go now," said Katharine. "And we thank you very much," she added, holding out her hand.

The clergyman let them out and stood looking after them for a few seconds. Then he slowly nodded twice and re-entered the church. Ralston and Katharine walked away very slowly, both looking down, and each inwardly wondering whether the other would break the silence. It was natural that they should not speak at first. The words of the service had brought very clearly before them the meaning of what they had done, and the clergyman's short speech, made as he said for the sake of satisfying his own scruples of conscience, had influenced them by its earnestness. They reached a crossing without having exchanged a syllable. As usual in such cases, a chance exclamation broke the ice.

"Take care!" exclaimed Ralston, laying his hand on Katharine's arm, and looking at an express wagon which was bearing down on them.

"It's ever so far off still," said Katharine, smiling suddenly and looking into his face. "But I like you to take care of me," she added.

He smiled, too, and they waited for the wagon to go by. The clouds had broken away at last and the low morning sun shone brightly upon them.

"I'm so glad it's fine on our wedding day, Jack!" exclaimed Katharine. "It was horrid yesterday afternoon. How

long ago that seems! Did you hear him call me Mrs. Ralston? Katharine Ralston—how funny it sounds! It's true, that's your mother's name."

"You'll be Mrs. John Ralston—to distinguish." John laughed. "Yes—it does seem long ago. What did you do with yourself yesterday?"

"Yesterday? Let me see—I sat for my portrait, and then I went home, and then late in the afternoon Charlotte suddenly appeared, and then I dined with the Joe Allens—the young couple, you know, don't you? And then I went to the dance. I hardly knew what I was doing, half the time."

"And I hardly know why I asked the question. Isn't it funny? I believe we're actually trying to make conversation!"

"You are—I'm not," laughed Katharine. "It was you who began asking. I was talking quite sentimentally and appropriately about yesterday seeming so long ago, you know. But it's true. It does—it seems ages. I wonder when time will begin again—I feel as though it had stopped suddenly."

"It will begin again, and it will seem awfully long, before this afternoon—when uncle Robert has refused to have anything to do with us."

"He won't refuse—he shan't refuse!" Katharine spoke with an energy which increased at every syllable. "Now that the thing is done, Jack, just put yourself in his position for a moment. Just imagine that you have anywhere between fifty and a hundred millions, all of your own. Yes—I know. You can't imagine it. But suppose that you had. And suppose that you had a grand-niece, whom you liked, and who wasn't altogether a disagreeable young person, and whom you had always rather tried to pet and spoil—not exactly knowing how to do it, but out of sheer good nature. And suppose that you had known ever so long that there was only one thing which could make your nice niece perfectly happy—"

"It's all very well, Katharine," interrupted Ralston, "but has he known that?"

"I've never failed to tell him so, on the most absurdly inadequate provocation. So it must be his fault if he doesn't know it—and I shall certainly tell him all over again before I bring out the news. It wouldn't do to be too sudden, you know. Well, then—suppose all that, and that the young gentleman in question was a proper young gentleman enough, as young gentlemen go, and didn't want money, and wouldn't take it if it were offered to him, but merely asked for a good chance to work and show what he could do. That's all very simple, isn't it? And then realize—don't suppose any more—just what's going to happen inside of half an hour. The devoted niece goes to the good old uncle, and says all that over again, and calmly adds that she's done the deed and married the young gentleman and got a certificate, which she produces—by the bye, you must give it to me. Don't be afraid of my losing it—I'm not such a goose. And she goes on to say that unless the good uncle does something for her husband, she will simply make the uncle's life a perfectly unbearable burden to him, and that she knows how to do it, because if he's a Lauderdale, she's a Lauderdale, and her husband is half a Lauderdale, so that it's all in the family, and no entirely unnecessary consideration is to be shown to the victim—well? Don't you think that ought to produce an effect of some sort? I do."

"Yes," laughed Ralston, "I think so, too. Something is certainly sure to happen."

END OF VOL. I.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KATHERINE LAUDERDALE; VOL. 1 OF 2 ***

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