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Title: According to Plato

Author: Frank Frankfort Moore

Release date: May 2, 2016 [EBook #51969]
Most recently updated: February 25, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Widger from page images generously
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ACCORDING TO PLATO ***

ACCORDING TO PLATO

By Frank Frankfort Moore

Dodd, Mead & Company

1900

ACCORDING
TO PLATO



F. FRANKFORT MOORE



According to Plato

BY
F. FRANKFORT MOORE

*Author of "The Jessamy Bride,"
"Phyllis of Phillistia," "The
Fatal Gift," et cetera.*



New York
Dodd, Mead & Company
1901



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CHAPTER I

No one who has not been bankrupt at least twice could afford to be so careful about his dress as Mr. Richmond is," said Josephine.

"He admits a solitary bankruptcy," said Amber. "Bankruptcy is the official recognition of genius."

"It certainly is the shortest way to distinction," said Josephine. "Bankruptcy's a sort of English Legion of Honour, isn't it?—a kind of *bourgeois* decoration."

"To genius," said Amber, with the nod of one who completes a quotation that some one else has begun. "Mr. Richmond is really very clever."

"Now you contradict yourself—a moment ago you said he was a genius—and being a genius is just the opposite to being clever," laughed Josephine. "Is this your syllogism: Geniuses become bankrupt, Mr. Richmond becomes bankrupt, therefore he is a genius?"

"Well, that wasn't quite what was in my mind. I suppose that to have the Homeric attribute of nodding scarcely makes one a Homer?"

"If it did there would be no need for people to learn Greek, But you must forgive me for distrusting your Mr. Richmond—no, I shouldn't make use of so strong a word—I don't distrust him. What I mean to say is that I am rarely convinced by a man who is so scrupulous about his coats. Genius—in man—is rarely found in association with silk linings where silk linings are not imperative."

"Now you are becoming commonplace, my dear Joe; you give one the idea that you cannot imagine genius without a darn. A darn—maybe a patch—and a soft hat have floated many a mediocrity upon the public under the name of a genius. But brains can work just as actively within the drum of a silk hat as within the bowl of a bowler."

"Just as a true heart may beat beneath a silk lining as fervently as under a moleskin waistcoat. Well, I'll approach Mr. Richmond with an open mind. After all it's only a universal genius who is a man that has failed in everything; and no man has yet hinted that Mr. Richmond is a universal genius. By the way, I heard of an adroit Irishman who got a great name as a poet solely by reason of his wearing an old cloak and turning up at awkward hours for dinner."

"Mr. Richmond is—well, perhaps I had better say, a bit of a genius."

"That sounds more companionable. I like the nodding of Homer—it makes him more human."

"If you wish I'll withdraw the genius altogether and merely say that he is a man of ideas."

"I think I shall like him: a man of ideas is a man of ideals. I am nearly sure that I shall like him. There must be something good about a man who can be praised by his friends in *diminuendo*."

"In *diminuendo*? Oh, I understand: yes, I began by calling him a man of genius and now I am perfectly satisfied to hear you say that you think you will like him. Well, that's not a *crescendo* of praise anyhow. Oh, really, he's not half a bad sort of man when you come to know him."

"Now you are becoming *crescendo*, my Amber. One only says of the best men what you have said of Mr.

Richmond. I know that it represents the flood-tide of one man's praise of another. Personally I don't see why the papers should have made such fun of Mr. Richmond."

"Oh, my dear Joe, that wasn't his doing, believe me. Oh, no; that was Willie Bateman's idea. He's becoming the great authority on advertising, you know. Yes, he said that you can ridicule any man into success."

"I fancy he's not far wrong in that. You remember the horrid man who got on—for a time—by pretending that he was the original of one of Mr. du Maurier's pictures in *Punch*?"

"I have heard of him. He was a sort of painter, only he had a habit of dabbing in the eyes outside the face. Mr. Richmond is not an impostor, however; he is only a theorist."

"Now you are hair-splitting, Amber, the Sophist." Amber frowned and then laughed—freely—graciously—not the laugh of Ananias and Sapphira his wife, who kept back part of their possessions.

"Well, I admit that—no, I admit nothing. I say that Mr. Richmond deserves to succeed on his own merits, and that he would succeed even without being ridiculed in the papers. His theories are thoroughly scientific—papa admits so much."

"He not only admits the theorist but the theories as well, into his house. And yet Sir Creighton is a practical man."

"And a scientific man. It is because Mr. Richmond works on such a scientific basis and in such a practical manner we are so anxious to do all we can for him. Why shouldn't there be a Technical College of Literature as well as one of Wool-combing, or one of Dyeing, or one of Turning?"

"Why shouldn't there be one? You have reason and analogy on your side. I suppose it needs quite as much skill to turn a Sonnet as to turn a Sofa-leg, and yet it is thought necessary to serve an apprenticeship to the one industry and not to the other."

"That's exactly what I say—exactly what Mr. Richmond says. He once edited a magazine, and he would have made it pay too, if the people who wrote for him had been able to write. But they didn't. It was reading the fearful stuff he used to get by every post that caused him to think of the great need there was for a Technical School of Literature. Now, suppose you want to write a History of any period, how would you set about it?"

"I haven't the remotest idea of writing a history of even the remotest period, Amber."

"Yes, that's because you are unfortunate enough to be the daughter of so wealthy a man as Mr. West, the Under Secretary for the Arbitration Department. You have no need to do anything for a living—to do anything to distinguish yourself in the world. But take the case that you were dependent upon writing histories of certain periods for your daily bread, wouldn't you like to have some place to go in order to learn the technicalities of history-writing?"

"There's no doubt in my mind that I would. The writing of histories of periods has long ago been placed among the great industries of the country, I know."

"I was appalled the other day when I began to think how utterly at sea I should be if I had to write a history, or for that matter, a biography; and history and biography, mind you, are the branches that do not need any imagination for their working up."

"Oh, do they not?"

"Well, of course—but I mean that if one has to write a play—"

"What, is there a play department too? What on earth have plays got to do with literature?"

"The connection just now is faint enough, I admit. And why?—why, I ask?"

"Let me guess. Is it because up to the present there has not been a Technical School of Literature?"

"Of course it is. But at one time plays formed a very important part of the literature of the day."

"Undoubtedly. The author of Shakespeare's plays, whoever he was, was certainly a literary man. I wonder, by the way, if there was a Technical School in his time."

"There wasn't. That's how it comes that he knew so little about the technicalities of the modern stage. Take my word for it, Josephine, Mr. Richmond will prevent the possibility of a recurrence of such mistakes as those Shakespeare made. And then there are the departments of fiction and poetry. Could anything be worse than the attempts at fiction and poetry which one meets nowadays?"

"Impossible, I admit."

"The poor things who make those poor attempts are really not to be blamed. If they were set down to make a pair of boots should any one blame them if they failed? Now I hear it said that there is no market for poetry in these days. I don't believe it."

"I believe that if a paper pattern were to be given away with every volume the public would buy as many volumes of poetry as could be printed, if only the patterns were of a high class."

"The public would buy poetry if a first-class article were offered to them, but as only one first-class volume appears for every five hundred of a second-class or a third-class or no class at all, the public are content to go mad over the merest doggerel, provided it is technically good doggerel."

"Mr. Richmond will guarantee that his third year pupils will turn out good doggerel, I'm sure. And what department do you mean to graduate in, my Amber?"

Amber paused before replying. A line—a delicate little crayon line—appeared across her forehead, suggesting earnest thought as she said:

"I have a great hope to graduate in every department. But I think for the present I shall confine myself to the 'Answers to Correspondents.'"

"Oh, the school is actually so technical as that?" cried Josephine.

"It is nothing if not practical, Joe; and I think you will agree with Mr. Richmond that there's no branch of magazine literature that requires to be more practical than the 'Answers to Correspondents.' The 'Aunt Dorothy' branch is also one that demands considerable technical skill to be exercised if it is to be done

properly. Mr. Richmond thinks I might begin upon the Aunt Dorothy branch and work my way up to the true Petrarchian Sonnet Department, through the Rondel, Rondeau, Vilanelle, and Triolet classes."

"It's a far cry from Aunt Dorothy to Petrarch. And pray what does Mr. Galmyn think of the scheme?"

"He wasn't very enthusiastic at first, but I fancy that I have persuaded him to look at it in its true light. But you see, being a poet, he is hardly open to reason."

"That is what it is to be a poet. A poet does not reason: he sings. And has Mr. Overton any ideas on the subject: he cannot be accused of singing."

"He has an open mind, he says."

"Oh, a man with an open mind is just as disagreeable as a man without prejudices. And Willie Bateman—ah, I forgot; you said that he had had something to do with pushing the school."

"Yes; he took care that the scheme was properly ridiculed in the papers. Oh, yes; he has been extremely useful to us."

"What, you have actually come to talk of the school as 'us'? I had no idea that you meant to hang up the scalp of this Mr. Richmond in your wigwam."

"I do not even want his scalpet, Josephine; at the same time..."

"I see. You don't want his scalp, but if he insists on sending you a tuft of his hair, you will not return it to him."

"Well, perhaps that is what is in my mind. Though really I am sincerely anxious to see what will come of so daring, and at the same time, so scientific an experiment."

"You are a child of science, and to be a child of science is to be the parent of experiments. It was a child of science who modelled toys in dynamite, was it not? Pretty little clay pigs and elephants and poets and millionaires, but one day she thought she would try the experiment of putting a light to the cigar that she had struck into the mouth of the dynamite figure that she was playing with."

"And what happened?"

"Let me think. Oh, nothing happened because a live man appeared on the scene and quickly dropped all the little toys of the scientific little girl into a bucket of water."

"And then?"

"Well, then the scientific little girl cried for a while but when she grew up she married the live little man and they lived happily ever after."

Amber was blushing like a peony before her friend had finished her parable. When Josephine had begun to speak Amber was beginning to fold her serviette, and now she continued folding it as if she were endeavouring to carry out one of the laborious designs of napkin folding given in the Lady's columns of some weekly paper. Suddenly, while her friend watched her, she pulled the damask square out of its many folds and tossed its crumpled remains on the tablecloth.

"Psha!" she cried, "there's not a grain of dynamite among all my little boys."

"Is there not? You just ask your father to give you an analysis of any little boy, and you'll find that the result will be something like this:"

(She wrote with her chatelaine pencil on the back of the *menu* card.)

"Self-esteem	8.00	} Analysis of the father to the man."
"Curiosity	5.00	
"Desire to cut the others out	12.00	
"Explosive matter temporarily held in solution	75.00	
	<hr/> 100.00	



Amber read the card with blushes and laughter.

"It's very good fun," she said. "And there is my motor at the door. You will come with me and see how things are managed?"

"Why should I go?"

"Why should not you go?"

"Oh, I'll go: whatever it may be it is still a topic."

"It is much more than a topic: it is a revolution."

"Then I shall go if only to see it revolve."

CHAPTER II

The two girls left Sir Creighton Severn's house in Kensington Palace Gardens, and the dainty little motor Victoria made its way eastwards under the skilful guidance of a young coachman engineer trained by Sir Creighton himself.

Every one has heard of Sir Creighton Severn, the great inventor. A large number of people, if asked what Sir Creighton had invented, would reply "Electricity," so closely has his name become associated with the development of this power and its adaptation to the various necessities of modern life.

Some time ago there was a general feeling throughout the country that he had gone too far in this direction. There should surely be a limit, people said, to the many humiliations to which scientific men were subjecting that power which after all was nothing less than lightning made captive, and under that name, the most imposing attribute of great Jove himself. It was not so bad to ask it to light a well-appointed drawing-room or to annihilate distance when applied to the end of a few thousand miles of telegraph cable—there was a heroic aspect of its employment in such ways: there was something of the dignity of an international treaty in the relationship existing between civilisation and electricity up to a certain point; but it was going quite too far to set it to cook chump chops for the servants' dinner, or to heat the irons in the laundry.

People began to feel for electricity, just as they did when they heard the story of King Alfred in the swineherd's cottage. If the nations had ceased to offer oblations to the leaven of Jove that was no reason why it should be degraded to the level of a very scullion.

But when Sir Creighton, after inventing the electric kitchener, and the electric ironer, brought out an electric knife cleaner, an electric boot-black, and an electric mouse trap—nay, when he destroyed the very black-beetles in the kitchen by electricity, people ceased to protest. They only shook their heads and said no good could come of such things.

Of course, these adaptations of the power of which Sir Creighton was looked upon as the legitimate owner in succession to Jupiter (deceased), represented only his hours of relaxation. They were the gleanings, so to speak, of his electric harvest—the heel-taps of his electric banquet: they only brought him in about five thousand a year in royalties. The really great adaptations for which he was responsible filled the world with admiration and his own pockets with money. He had lived so long in close association with electricity that he had come to know every little phase of its nature just as a man—after thirty years or so of married life—comes to have an inkling of his wife's character. He had invented the electric ship that picked up broken cables at sea by merely passing over where they were laid. He had invented the air purifier which instantly destroyed every injurious element in the atmosphere of large manufacturing towns, making them as pleasant to live in as London itself. He had also produced a fog disperser; but he was not sufficiently satisfied with its operation to give it to the public. It was quite equal to the duty of giving fresh air and sunshine to his own house and gardens, at times when people outside were choking with sulphur and knocking their heads against lamp posts, but this was not enough for Sir Creighton, and he withheld his discovery until he should have so perfected it as to make it applicable to the widest areas.

He had sufficient confidence in his powers and in the ductility of his partner—he had long ago come to allude to electricity as his *conjux placens*—to feel certain that in the course of a year or two, he would be in a position to clear the Atlantic Ocean of fogs and even to do something with London itself.

But there was another discovery which Sir Creighton hoped he was on the eve of perfecting—the greatest of all the long list already standing to his credit—this was the Electric Digester. He had proved to the satisfaction of every one except himself the possibility of treating not only flesh meat but every form of diet in such a way as practically to obviate the necessity for it to undergo the various tedious processes of digestion before it became assimilated with the system.

He had early in life become impressed with the need of making a departure from the old-fashioned methods of preparing food for human consumption. In the early days of man—he put the date roughly at 150000 b. c., though he admitted that the recent discovery of a fossil scorpion in the Silurian rocks left him about a million years to come and go upon—there was probably no need for an Artificial Digestive. The early man had plenty of exercise. It is quite conceivable that, with such things as the Mammoth, the Mastodon, the Pterodactyl and the Ichtheosaurus roaming about with empty stomachs, the human race should have a good deal of exercise (Scoffers said that the human race was properly so called). But the human race had won the race, and had then settled down for a period of well-earned repose.

This was all very well, but their doing so had changed the most important of the conditions under which they had lived, until, as civilisation strengthened the human digestion had weakened. But instead of openly acknowledging this fact and acting accordingly, physicians had kept trying to tinker up the obsolete machinery with, naturally, the most deplorable results. Instead of frankly acknowledging that man's digestion had gone the way of the tail, the supplemental stomach, and the muscle that moved the ears, attempts were daily made to stimulate the obsolete processes of digestion, but the result was not stimulating.

Sir Creighton Severn, however, frankly assumed that man had got rid of his digestion to make way for his civilisation, and set about the task of accommodating his diet to his altered conditions of life.

He had not yet succeeded in satisfying himself that his invention of the Electric Digester would do all that he meant it to do; so, in spite of the bitter cry that came from the great pie regions of North America, imploring him to help them, he withheld it from the world for the present.

Sir Creighton was wise enough to make a fool of himself every now and again, and the fools said in their haste that his daughter was the agency which he usually employed for effecting his purpose in this direction. But while some said that it was his daughter who made a fool of him others said that it was he who made a fool of his daughter.

No one seemed to fancy that it was quite possible for both statements to be correct.

However this may be it may at once be said that Sir Creighton treated his daughter as if she were a rational person, capable of thinking for herself and of pronouncing a moderately accurate judgment of such minor

problems of life as were suggested to her. Without knowing why—though her father could have told her all about it—she was most pleased when she was trying certain experiments—not in electricity, but in sociology.

And yet people said, simply because they saw that she was invariably well dressed, that she had no scientific tendencies.

She had a certain indefinite beauty of her own that made people—some people: mostly men—wonder where they had seen a flower like her—a lily, they were nearly sure it was—or perhaps it was a white clematis—the one with the star centre that swung so gracefully. They continued looking at her and thinking of flowers, and happy is the girl who makes people think of flowers when they see her!

Having very few delusions she knew that there was something of a flower about her nature. And being well aware that flowers are the most practical things in Nature, she had aspirations as boundless as those of a lily.

That was why she was delighted when she attracted to her various forms of idle insect life, male and female. Her aspirations were to attract rather than to retain, for she had the lily's instincts as well as the lily's industry. She knew that when youth made a bee-line to her (speaking in a phrase of the garden) they did so for their own advantage. And she awaited their departure with interest, knowing as she did that it is when the insect leaves the lily that the latter is most benefited; but without prejudice to the possibilities of the insect being also benefited. She had no sympathy with the insectivorous plants of womankind, though at the same time she knew that she was born with a passion for experiments. She hoped, however, that her curiosity was founded on a scientific basis.

She had, as it were, taken Love into her father's laboratory, and with his assistance subjected it to the most careful analysis. She was able to assign to it a chemical symbol, and so she fancied that she knew all there was to be known about love.

She knew a good deal less about it than does the flower of the lily when the summer is at its height.

And now this offspring of the most modern spirit of investigation and the most ancient femininity that existed before the scorpion found his way into the Silurian rocks to sting, after the lapse of a hundred thousand years, the biologists who had nailed their faith to a theory—this blend of the perfume of the lily and the fumes of hydrochlorate of potassium, was chatting to her friend Josephine West as her motor-victoria threaded its silent way through the traffic of Oxford Street to that region where Mr. Richmond had established his Technical School of Literature.

Josephine West was the daughter of the right honourable Joseph West, Under Secretary of State for the Department of Arbitration.

CHAPTER III

The "forced draught" conversation—the phrase was Sir Creighton's—which the two girls exchanged at lunch and which has been in some measure recorded, formed excellent exercise for their wits, Sir Creighton thought, though he had not the privilege of listening to their latest battledore and shuttlecock in this direction, the fact being that he and Lady Severn were partaking of a more exciting meal aboard the new electric turbine yacht which Sir Creighton had just perfected. It was certainly a stimulating reflection that for the first time since the waters were spread over a portion of the surface of the earth, a meal was partaken of in comfort aboard a vessel moving at the rate of forty-two miles an hour. Even the conversation of the two girls in the dining-room at home could scarcely beat that Sir Creighton remarked to his wife as she clutched at her cap on the hurricane deck and gasped. (There was a pretty fair amount of cap clutching and gasping aboard that boat while it was flying over the measured mile.)

But when the girls were being motored to the Technical School of Literature, their chat was of such commonplaces as the new evening dress bodice with the lace up to the throat, and the future of the Khaki dresses which every one was wearing as a token of respect to the Colonial office. They had not exhausted the latter question when they arrived at the school.

It was located in an interesting house in Hanover Square for the present, Amber explained to her friend; and her friend cordially opined with her that it would be foolish to enter into possession of an important building before the school had taken a sure hold upon the affections of the people of Great Britain.

Mr. Richmond was just opening the fiction class in the largest room when Miss Severn and Miss West entered. Mr. Richmond, who represented the latest of Amber's experiments, had met Miss West a few days before. He knew that her father was a member of the Government and he hoped to be able to squeeze a grant out of the Government with his assistance, therefore—the logic was Mr. Richmond's and thoroughly sound—he thought it well to pay as little attention as was consistent with good manners to Miss West, and even to her friend and his friend, Miss Severn. He had a pretty fair working knowledge of a world in which woman has at all times played a rather prominent part, and he knew that while some young women are affected by flattery, those who are most potent in getting grants from their fathers in favour of certain enterprises resent being singled out for attention.

He paid no attention to the entrance of the two girls, but commenced his lesson—he refused to make use of the commonplace word "lecture": the mention of such a word should be enough to frighten people away from the school, he said; and on the same principle he chose to call his undertaking a school, not a college.

Josephine and Amber took seats at one of the desks, with paper and pens in front of them, and the former glanced round the class. It was composed of some interesting units. At a desk well to the front sat bolt upright a gentleman of rather more than middle-age. Half-pay was writ large all over him. There was not a

wrinkle in his coat that did not harbour a little imp that shrieked out "half pay—half pay!" for all the world to hear. His hair was thin in places, but at no place was it too thin to afford cover to half a dozen of those frolicsome demons with their shriek of "half pay!" His over-brushed frock coat (of the year before last), his over-blackened boots, and the general air of over-tidiness that he carried about with him proclaimed the elderly officer of correct habits who after trying for a year or two to obtain congenial employment as the secretary to a club and for another year or two to persuade people to drink the wines of Patagonia, for the sale of which he had been appointed sole agent for Primrose Hill, had resolved to commence life again as a popular novelist.

Not far off sat a youth with receding forehead and chin, and a face like a marmot of the Alps. He kept his small eyes fixed upon the head of a drowsily pretty girl, with towzled hair of an orange tint unknown to nature but well known to art—the art of the second class coiffure. She did the reviews for a humble paper but hoped to qualify to be herself the reviewed one some day. It was clear that she would not ruin her chances by a *misalliance* with the well-balanced scheme of retrocession observable in his profile.

Two interested young girls sat at another desk guarded by a governess—they, at any rate, Josephine thought, possessed the first qualification for success in fiction, for they observed every one about them, and made rude remarks to each other respecting their fellow-creatures. The governess took notes by the aid of a stumpy pencil the blunt end of which she audibly touched with the tip of her tongue after every few words; and Josephine perceived that she was anaemic.

Her simple methods contrasted with the elaborate *batterie d'écriture* of a young lady who sat at the desk next to that at which Josephine and Amber had placed themselves; for she had placed in front of her a silver-mounted case, monstrously monogrammed, with double ink-bottles, each containing something under half a pint. A rack holding half a dozen pens of varying shapes and sizes, stood imposingly at one side, and on the other lay a neat ream of letter paper, crested and monogrammed, and a pronouncing dictionary. The apparatus certainly seemed quite adequate to the demands of the occasion; and as it turned out, it contained a good deal that was absolutely unnecessary, for the young lady slipped into an unobtrusive doze, the moment the lecturer began to address his class.

A young woman who had removed her hat in order to show that she had a brow with generous bumps scattered about it, resembling Kopjes above a kloof, lounged with an ungracefulness that a plebiscite had pronounced to have a distinct literary flavour about it, half across her desk. It was understood that she had once written a column in a lady's paper on something and so could afford to be careless.

A youth with a cloak and a yellow smile was understood to be a poet. People said that his smile would work off. But he had never tried.

A well-dressed man of middle age looked, Josephine thought, as if he were something in the city; but that was just where she was mistaken. It was only when he was out of the city that he was something; in the city he was nothing. He was on the eve of drafting a prospectus; and so had joined the fiction class to gain the necessary finish.

Two or three younger men and a few young women who seemed to have come straight from the hands of a confectioner's artist in frosting and almond icing, had taken up positions of prominence. They looked as if they were anxious to be commented on, and they were commented on.

Mr. Owen Glendower Richmond, the founder of the school was not a well-dressed man, only an expensively dressed man. He was young but not so very young as to be able to disregard the tendency to transparency in that portion of his hair which covered (indifferently) the crown of his head. He had the art of making one hair do duty for two over this area.

He had also a very persuasive voice.

Many men have gone with success through life with fewer endowments. But Mr. Richmond had never been quite successful in anything that he had attempted, and at thirty-four he had occasional regrets that earlier in life he had not let his hair grow curiously, or acquired a reputation for a profile—a profile like that of Dante in the picture.

He had published a book or two; but people about him were good-natured and had agreed to ignore the incident and to give him another chance. He proved that their benevolence had not been misplaced by becoming bankrupt over a scheme for regulating the output of fiction. The public had subscribed generously to his bureau, and it might possibly have succeeded but for the discovery of the new element to which the name of neurosis was given.

Taking advantage of his position on the summit of a base of bankruptcy, he had no difficulty in finding a sufficient number of friends to assist him in the realisation of his scheme for establishing on a permanent basis a School of Literature; and among his friends he would have permission to include Sir Creighton Severn and his daughter. He knew that their appetite for experiments was insatiable, and he had at one time taught Archie Severn—Amber's only brother—all that he knew on the subject of exotic forms of verse—a science in which the young man had been greatly interested at one period of his life. He was not altogether free from a suspicion that his claims upon the family were somewhat attenuated; but when he had an interview with them he felt that such a suspicion was unworthy of him. Sir Creighton told his daughter that she was free to experiment with the experimenter, and Mr. Richmond found that his year's rent was guaranteed.

Although the school had only been established for six months it was already a paying concern and Mr. Richmond was in such prosperous circumstances that he felt at liberty to dress less expensively, so he bought a frock coat at seven pounds instead of the one at seven guineas—the one which Josephine West had first seen him wear: the one with the silk quilted lining where most men were quite contented to have a material bearing the trade name of satinette.

It was the cheaper garment that he was wearing on the afternoon of this first visit of Josephine's to the school, and being an observant young woman, she had really no trouble in perceiving that his aspirations for the moment were to assume that pose which offered the greatest chance of permanency to the impression that he carried his frock coat as easily as a Greek god carried his drapery.

She was a very observant young woman and she admired the adroitness of Mr. Owen Glendower Richmond in associating himself, even though he did so only through the agency of a crease that began at the waist and ended short of the knee, with classical tradition.

And then she admired herself for the subtlety of her observation, and thus was in a psychological frame of mind to yield to the persuasive charm of Mr. Richmond's voice.

CHAPTER IV

It has been suggested to the Council," said Mr. Richmond—the name Council was the one by which he desired to be known to the pupils of the school upon occasions—"that, as the Slum Novel is that branch of fiction by which it is easiest to make a reputation for profound thought, at the least expenditure of thought, I should deal with the technicalities of such a composition.

"I think the suggestion an excellent one, and I trust that I shall succeed in enabling you to produce, after a little practice, such a book as will certainly be reviewed to the extent of a full column in more than one of the leading newspapers."

There was a general movement of attention throughout the class at this point. The lady with the two ink bottles, who lived in an atmosphere strongly impregnated with monograms done in silver, carefully chose a pen from her rack.

"In addition to the novel receiving a lengthy review or two, it may even sell," continued Mr. Richmond. "But if it should not sell, the writer will, in the estimation of a certain circle—a circle which I do not say it is impossible to 'square'—I speak paradoxically—have constituted a still stronger claim to be regarded as a profound thinker.

"Now at the outset I ask you to write at the head of your notes the word '*Dulness*.' This is the goal to which you must press forward in the Slum Novel. You must be dull at all hazards. No matter what you have to sacrifice to produce this impression you must aim at being dull. Now it is not generally recognised that there are many ways of being dull. There is genial dulness and there is jocular dulness. There is dulness of diction and dulness of characterisation. There is dulness of morality and dulness of criminality. There is dulness of Socialism and dulness of Suburbanism. Now, if you succeed in making a blend of all these forms of dulness you will have gone far in making a successful Slum Novel.

"The next note which I will beg of you to make is this: 'The Slum Novel must neither embody lessons nor suggest Remedies.'

"You must invent your characters, add if you will, a plot, but the latter is by no means essential, and then you must get up your topography. Too great emphasis cannot be laid upon the necessity for a minute topographical scheme—with a map, if possible. I must remind you that a map in a work of fiction imparts to it an aspect of dulness which even the most brilliant writer might fail to achieve in a dozen pages.

"Next in importance to imaginary topography is imaginary dialect. I will ask you to write the word Dialect large in your notes. The *Argot* of the Slums cannot be made too unintelligible, nor can its inconsistency be over-emphasised. An excellent recipe for true Cockney is to mix with the broadest Lancashire a phrase or two of Norfolk, a word or two of stage Irish, and all the oaths in daily use in the mining districts. The result will be pure Cockney. But you must be very careful of your oaths. Swearing is to a Slum Novel what vinegar is to salad—what the sulphur tip is to the lucifer match. On the whole I think that those ladies who are desirous of writing dialogue that can scarcely fail to receive the heartiest recognition from critics, would do well to allow no character to make even the simplest remark without intruding at least two of those words which a few years ago a printer would refuse to print. The effect will be startling at first, more especially if the coarsest words are put into the mouths of women and children; but you must remember that the object of a Slum Novel is to startle a reader without interesting a reader. It is in furtherance of this aim that you must so disguise the everyday words spoken by your characters as to make them quite unintelligible to the most adroit of readers. If the least clue is obtainable to the simplest words you may be sure that there is something wrong in your *technique*.

"Now I come to the important element known as Cruelty. Will you kindly write down the word *Cruelty*. Respecting the technicalities of this element a good deal of advice might be given. But I shall have said enough on this point to give you a good working acquaintance with its place in the Slum Novel when I assure you that you cannot make it too revolting, and that you cannot describe the details of any revolting act too closely. Your blood stains cannot be too large or dark or damp—you must be careful that the blood stains are kept damp.

"The entire technique of the plot may be included in this precept: Make your heroine a woman with fists like those of a man and let her be murdered by the man whom she loves and let her die in the act of assuring the policeman that she did it herself. Her last words must be 'S'elp me Gawd.' This is understood to be genuine pathos. It is not for me to say that it is otherwise. When I shall have the honour of dealing with the technicalities of pathos you may depend on my not neglecting the important branch of Slum Pathos."

Mr. Owen Glendower Richmond paused and took a glass of water with the air of a connoisseur of vintages. He seemed to trust that it would be understood that the water was of a delicate *crû*. There was another distinct movement among his audience that almost suggested relief. There were whispers. It seemed to be understood that the relaxing of the strain put upon the members of the class meant a period of complete repose.

"He kept it up wonderfully, did he not?" remarked Josephine.

"Kept it up?" cried Amber, assuming the wrinkle of the one who is puzzled.

"Yes; the tennis ball of satire and the shuttlecock of irony," said Josephine. "Do these folks take him seriously?"

"We do," replied Amber with a touch of dignity. "We do. He will prevent a good many of us from making fools of ourselves."

"But I thought that you had only reached the Aunt Dorothy stage of machine-made literature," said Josephine. "Have you already mastered the *technique* of Aunt Dorothy?"

"I am occasionally allowed to join the higher fiction class as a treat," said Amber. "You see, Mr. Overton comes to this class."

"I see. You are leading him to higher things by the primrose path of technical literature," said Josephine. "This primrose path seems to me to resemble the mule track through the valley from Stalden to Saas Fée. It does not admit of much independence of travelling."

"Hush! Mr. Richmond is going to set us our home exercise," said Amber as the teacher gave a little tap to his desk with the stem of a quill pen, holding it by the feather end. The sound that it made was curious and its effect was electrical: all faces were instantly turned toward him.

"Last week I made you acquainted with the *technique* of the Historical Novel," said Mr. Richmond, "and I am naturally anxious to learn to what extent you have availed yourselves of suggestions. I will therefore offer you for home exercise the following problem: 'Given Richelieu and a dark alley in a Seventeenth Century Continental city, with a cold damp wind blowing through it when the hero of the story takes shelter in one of the doorways, describe the fight in the cellar when he descends on hearing the shrieks of a girl with fair hair and a curious cross set with pearls and sapphires on her breast, proceeding from that portion of the building.'

"You may do me the honour to recollect that I made you acquainted with the *technique* of the brawl of the historical romance, with its three motives—Cardinal Richelieu, the marked pack of cards, and the girl with fair hair and the cross with pearls and sapphires on her breast. You are at perfect liberty in the exercise to make the young woman either haughty or humble, but I need scarcely remind you, I hope, that she must be either the one or the other to an extravagant degree, but Richelieu must always be old. Now I will read out the terms of the problem once more: 'Given a dark alley—a dark alley—have you got that down?'"

Mr. Richmond repeated slowly with praiseworthy distinctness, the terms of the problem and the members of the class scratched away at their notes with pencils of varying shapes and sizes—all except the young lady with the big silver monograms and the blotter inside them: she used a pen which she dipped alternately into the bottle of red and the bottle of black ink, such is the absent-mindedness of authorship even in the jelly-fish period of its evolution.

"Is it possible that you are taking it all down?" asked Josephine of Amber.

"It is only to encourage the others," replied Amber. "If Guy Overton did not see me taking it all down he wouldn't write a line."

"And will you make the attempt to work out the problem at home?" asked Josephine.

"Perhaps I may have a shot at it. After all it's no more difficult than an ordinary equation: given the hero, the cold damp wind and the shrieks, to find the girl—I think I shall make her simple, not haughty; the haughty ones are a little boring, are they not?"

"And now we shall proceed to the dialect lesson," said Mr. Richmond. "Having dealt with Somersetshire during the past week I will now offer you for translation a few sentences containing the fundamental words necessary to the dialogue of the Lowland Scotch novel. You will observe that these words are really not numerous. But, as you can ring some thousands of changes upon a peal of eight bells so by the free use of a dozen dialect words you can impart a strong local colour to any commonplace story. Of course it ceases to be commonplace when the characters speak in the dialect of the Lowlands." He then wrote a few sentences on the black board embodying such words as "muckle," "mickle," "hoot awa'," "bonnie—bonnie—bonnie"—"you cannot have too many 'bonnies,'" he remarked—"wee" in its direct application, and "wee" when combined with another diminutive, such as "wee bit." He explained the significance of every phrase and pointed out how directly it appealed to the heart of a reader. He applied a critical stethoscope, as it were, to every phrase, showing the strong manly heart of a sturdy people beating through such sentences as he had placed before his class.

"I will now, with your permission," said Mr. Richmond, "conclude the business of the class with a time study. A short time ago I brought under your notice the technicalities of the novel of phrases. You will, I hope, recollect that I laid considerable emphasis upon the effect capable of being produced by a startling definition of something that, in common acceptance, in no way stands in need of being defined. Now, you all know what Platonic Love means; well, a definition or a series of definitions of Platonic Love, will form the ten minutes time study for to-day. Ladies and gentlemen, Platonic Love—a definition for the purpose of the Novel of Phrases."

There was nothing like a smile on Mr. Richmond's face at any part of his lecture. He treated every technical point which he suggested in the most serious way. He handled every portion of the subject with the freedom and the gravity of a surgeon in the dissecting room. There was a certain frankness in his assumption that any one could be taught how to make the great mass of the people smile or laugh or weep or feel—that the production of certain effects in prose was as entirely a matter of machinery as the effects produced by the man at the throttle-valve of the locomotive when he jerks the piece of metal with the handle. Some people might have called this frankness cynicism; but Josephine could not see that there was anything cynical about it.

She had attended for some years a life-class at the studio of a painter of distinction and he had lectured to his pupils on the technical aspects of the art of painting, referring occasionally to what he called the depth of feeling in certain chromatic combinations. He had also showed them how to produce the effect of tears on a face, by making a little smudge on the cheeks. If it was possible to teach such technicalities why should not

one do as Mr. Richmond was doing, and teach a crowd of students how to write so as to draw tears or compel smiles?

"I don't think that I will trouble myself with the time-study," said Amber.

Josephine looked at her and gave a laugh.

"Platonic affection," she said musingly. "I wonder why you should shirk a paper on that question. You are supposed to be an exponent of that virtue. I should like to know what Mr. Guy Overton thinks about it. I should like to know what Mr. Galmyn thinks about it. The definition of Mr. Willie Bateman's opinion might also possess some element of interest."

"Write down what you think of it," cried Amber, pushing the paper towards her.

Josephine shook her head at first, smiling gently. Then she made a sudden grab at the pencil that hung to one of the chains of her chatelaine.

"I'll define Platonic affection for you, my dear," she whispered, "for you—not for Mr. Richmond: he needs no definition of that or anything else."

She began to write a good deal more rapidly than the others in the class-room. So rapidly did she write that she was unable to see how great was the interest in Mr. Richmond's face while he watched her and how great was the interest in the face of a young man who sat at the most distant desk while he watched Amber.

CHAPTER V

Platonic affection is the penalty which one pays in old age for procrastination in one's youth. It is the phrase that one employs to restore one's self-respect when suffering from the watchful care of a husband. It is the theory of a Greek Sophist to define the attitude of a sculptor in regard to his marble. It defines the attitude of the marble in regard to the sculptor. It was the attribute of Galatea just before she began to live, and it is the attitude of the moralist just before he begins to die. It is the triumph of Logic over Love. It is the consolation of the man who is content with roses cut out of tissue paper. It is the comfort of the woman who thinks that a quill and a glass of water make an entirely satisfactory substitute for a nightingale in June. It is the banquet of the Barmecides. It is the epitaph on the grave of manhood. It is the slab on the grave of womanhood. It is the phrase that is shrieked out every hour from the cuckoo clock. It is an ode by Sappho written in water. It is the egg-shell that is treasured by a man when some one else is eating the omelette. It is the affection of the Doge of Venice for the Adriatic. It is a salad without vinegar. It is the shortest way to the Divorce Court. It is a perpetual menace to a man and the severest threat that one can hold over the head of a woman. It is a lion with the toothache. It is the Sword of Damocles. It is Apollo in pyjamas. It is the fence upon which a man sits while he waits to see which way the cat will jump. It is a song the words of which have been lost and the music mislaid. It is entering on a property the title deeds of which are in the possession of some one else. It is offering a woman a loaf of bread when she is dying of thirst. It is offering a man a cup of water when he is dying of hunger. It is the smoke of an extinct volcano. It is the purchase price paid by a fool for the fee-simple of a Castle in Spain. It is the fraudulent prospectus of a bogus company. It is the only thing that Nature abhors more than a vacuum. It is the triumph of the Vacuum over Nature. It is the last refuge of the *roue*. It is presenting a diet of confectionery for carnivora. It is the experiment which my dear friend Amber Severn is trying in order that every one who knows her may be warned in time."

She folded up the paper carefully and handed it to Amber saying:

"There is not only a definition but a whole treatise for you, my dear Amber. It is for you alone, however, and it is not written to dissuade you from your experiment."

"My experiment? What is my experiment?" cried Amber.

Josephine looked at her and smiled vaguely, benevolently.

"The experiment of feeding *carnivora* on confectionery," said she.

"You mean that—that— Oh, no; you cannot say that, whatever happens, I have not improved them all."

"I would not dare even to think so. If, however, you succeed in convincing any two of them that you are quite right in marrying the third you will have proved conclusively that confectionery is a most satisfactory diet."

"I don't believe that any one of the three wishes to marry me. Not one of them has even so much hinted at that. Oh, no; we are far too good friends ever to become lovers. They are all nice and are getting nicer every day."

"I really think that they are. At any rate you were born to try experiments. You can no more avoid experimenting than your father can. Here comes an elementary principle with an empty notebook in his hand."

A youth of twenty-four or twenty-five with a good figure and a pleasantly plain face and unusually large hands and feet sauntered up—the members of the class were trooping out, some of them handing in their time studies to Mr. Richmond who stood at the head of the room.

"How do you do, Miss West? How are you, Amber?" he said. "I saw you working like a gas-engine, Miss West. What on earth could you find to say on that subject?"

"What subject, Mr. Guy Overton?" said Josephine.

The young man looked puzzled—pleasantly puzzled.

"The subject you were writing about," he replied cautiously.

"You don't even remember the title of the time study," said Amber severely.

"I don't," he cried defiantly. "What would be the good of remembering it? I saw at once that it was all Thomas."

"All Thomas?" said Amber enquiringly.

"All Thomas—all Tommy rot. You didn't bother yourself writing a big heap Injin about it yourself, my fine lady."

"That was because she is really scientific in her methods, Mr. Overton," said Josephine. "She doesn't write out the result of an experiment until she has analysed the residuum in the crucible."

The young man looked into her face very carefully. He was never quite sure of this particular girl. She required a lot of looking at, and even then he was never quite certain that she had not said something that would make him look like a fool if any one clever enough to understand her was at hand. Luckily for him there were, he knew, not many such people likely to be about.

He looked at her very carefully and then turned to Amber saying:

"I came across a chippie of a cornstalk yesterday who says his dad used to know Sir Creighton before he went to Australia. May I bring him with me one day?"

"Of course you may," cried Amber, her face brightening. Josephine knew that her face brightened at the prospect of acquiring some fresh materials for her laboratory. "What is his name?"

"His name is Winwood—Pierce Winwood, if it so please you."

"I'll ask the pater, and keep him up to the date," said Amber. "I suppose his father's name was Winwood too."

"Why shouldn't it be? Oh, there's nothing the matter with him. My dad used to know his dad out there. They were in the same colony and pretty nearly cleaned it out between them. But Winwood died worth a good bit more than my poor old dad. Oh, he's all right."

"I'm sure you have said enough to convince any one that the son is all right," said Josephine.

"Three-quarters of a million at least," remarked Guy Overton with the wink of sagacity.

"What, so right as all that?" exclaimed Josephine with the uplifted eyebrows of incredulity.

"Every penny," said the youth with the emphasis of pride.

"Oh, money is nothing!" said Amber with the head shake of indifference.

"Nothing in the world," acquiesced Guy, with a heartiness that carried with it absolute conviction of insincerity to the critical ears.

"Have you made any progress, Guy?" enquired Amber.

"Among this racket?" he asked. "Not much. I think if I've made any progress it's backwards. Two months ago I could read a novel—if it was the right sort—without trouble. But since I have been shown the parts of the machine that turns them out, blest if I can get beyond the first page."

"That's a good sign; it shows that you are becoming critical," cried Amber.

"Does it? Well... I don't know. If attending a Technical School of Novel-writing makes a chippie incapable of reading a book, I don't think the show can be called a success. Anyway I don't believe that prose fiction—that's how it's called—is the department for me. I believe that the poetry shop is the one I'm meant to shine in. You see, there's only one sort of poetry nowadays, and it's easily taught; whereas there are a dozen forms of prose fiction—I never guessed that the business was so complicated before I came here. Oh, yes, I'll join the poetry shop next week."

"You'll do nothing of the sort: it's twice as complicated as this," said Amber severely.

"Don't tell me that," he retorted. "I've heard the best poetry of the day—yes, in the Music Halls, and I believe that with a little practice I could turn it out by the web. All the people want is three verses and a good kick in the chorus—something you remember easily, with a good word about Tommy Atkins and two for good old Mother England. I know the swing of the thing. Oh, yes; I'll get seconded to the poetry shop. Here comes Barnum himself."

His final words were delivered in a furtive whisper while Mr. Richmond strolled across the room to the group—it was the last group that remained.

When he had come up Mr. Guy Overton was extremely respectful in his attitude to Mr. Richmond and called him "Sir." He looked at his watch, however, a moment later and said he was an hour late for a particular appointment that he had, so he reckoned he should make himself distant.

Mr. Richmond smiled socially, not officially, and added a nod, before turning to greet the girls. He was not very impressive while saying that he felt greatly honoured to see Miss West in the class-room. He was sure that she understood his aims. Then Miss West said she was certain that it must be a great pleasure to him to lecture before a sympathetic audience. He evaded her evasion and enquired of Miss Severn if he might include her among the sympathetic members of his audience, and Miss Severn declared that she had learned more in ten minutes from him respecting the literary value of certain Scotch words than she had acquired by reading the two novels in the Scotch tongue which she had mastered in the previous four years of her life, and she hoped Mr. Richmond considered the attendance satisfactory. He assured her that sanguine though he had been as to the number of persons anxious to write novels the attendance at the fiction class amazed him.

"And many who were present to-day were actually attentive," remarked Josephine.

"And one of the ladies defines Platonic Friendship as the reason why Brutus killed Cæsar—I hold the document in my hand," said the master.

Both girls cried "How funny!" and smiled their way to the door, which Mr. Richmond held open for them.

On the way to Kensington Palace Gardens they agreed that the Khaki frocks then so popular would not survive another season.

CHAPTER VI

Lady Severn had survived the measured mile. Sir Creighton was jubilant. His daughter flew to him. How did the electric turbine work? What was the coefficient of energy developed over the measured mile? Was forty miles actually touched and what about the depression in the stern? Did the boat steer all right on the progressive principle? Did the Admiral grumble as usual?

Her father gave her a detailed account of the strong points of the new system of propulsion, which every one had recognised, and of the weak points, which he alone had detected, and then she was able to drink her tea, and so was Sir Creighton.

Lady Severn said the lunch was excellent; only when travelling by water at the rate of forty-two knots every one seemed inclined to eat at the rate of fifty knots.

After drinking a cup of tea Sir Creighton looked at the clock and sighed.

"The day is gone before one gets any work done," he said. "I have not been in my room since yesterday afternoon, Joe," he added, looking at Josephine as if hoping to find in her a sympathetic audience.

"You'll get no sympathy from me, Sir Creighton," she laughed. "You have done more to-day than all the men of your craft—I suppose that a turbine boat may be called a craft—have succeeded in accomplishing during the past hundred years—forty knots!—just think of it!—and yet you complain of not being able to get anything done! Oh, no; you'll get no sympathy from me."

Sir Creighton went across the room to her and his scientific skill enabled him to squeeze between his finger and thumb that part of her arm where all the sensitive nerves meet.

She shrieked.

"I will force you to sympathise with me," he said. "You have still another arm. What! they are actually taking your part?"

Sir Creighton had a pretty wit. It was most exuberant when he had discovered a new torture founded on a purely scientific basis. That was how he kept himself young.

"Oh, by the way," said Amber, when he was going once more towards the door, "Guy has picked up with some one from New South Wales whose father said he had once known you. His name is—now what on earth did he say his name was?"

"Wasn't it Mr. Winwood?" said Josephine.

"Of course. Pierce Winwood. Do you remember any man of that name—long ago—it must have been long ago. He made a big fortune in the meantime?"

"Winwood—Winwood? No, I don't remember any one bearing that name," said Sir Creighton. "Better tell Guy to bring him out and I dare say he'll draw the threads together."

"I told Guy I was sure that you would like to have a chat with him—the son, I mean; he said the father, who claimed to know you, was dead."

"There's cause and effect for you," said Sir Creighton. "Better ask him to dinner with Guy—the son, I mean."

He spoke with his hand on the handle of the door, and then went whistling down the corridor to his study which opened out upon the garden of roses at the back of the house. The long table was covered with scale drawings and the smell of the tracing paper filled the room. Sir Creighton stood for a few moments looking down at those tracings of the sections of wheels—wheels within wheels—and the profiles of pinions.

"What the Nightingale sang to the Rose," said the man of science. "Pah, what can any one say about the Nightingale and the Rose that has not been said before?"

He turned over several of the drawings critically, and counted the leaves of one of the pinions.

"He has made no allowance for end-shake," he muttered. "A sixteenth on each pivot. Was it in the Garden of Gulistan? I rather think not. An English rose-garden—why not within the four-mile radius?"

He stood at the glass door leading out to his own garden, and remained there for some minutes looking out upon the great clusters of mixed blooms. Then he turned to one of the desks and unlocking one of the drawers and, drawing it out some way, slipped his hand inside, relieving the spring of a secret compartment that seemed to be a fixture. He drew out a sheaf of papers, covered with verses with many erasures and those countless corrections which commonly occur in the manuscripts of poets who are not only inspired but who add to the original impulse of inspiration a fastidiousness of phrase quite unknown to the older poets.

The topmost leaf of the sheaf contained a stanza and a half of a poem in an original metre describing how a nightingale came nightly to visit a certain rose, but the rose being only a bud, failed to understand what was the meaning of the music, until on the evening of a burning day, when the Star of Love shed the only light that came from the sky through the heavy scented air that hovered on the rose-garden, "The faithful nightingale sang this song: "....

That was where the manuscript ended. There was space enough on the paper for two more stanzas. All that was needed was to put into words the song that the nightingale sang to stir the rosebud into the bloom of passion.

That was the reflection of the man of science as he read the ambitious prelude which he had written the previous day just when the leader writers on all the newspapers in England were pointing out how the adaptation of electricity to the turbine boat marked the most important epoch in the history of marine engineering.

"That's all I have got to do," he muttered now, when the cables were carrying to all parts of the world the news that Sir Creighton Severn's electric turbine had just been tested over the measured mile with the most surprising results, a record speed of forty-two knots having been noted. "Only the song of the nightingale," said the man of science, seating himself at the desk with the unfinished poem in front of him.

He wrote for two hours, completing the poem entitled "What the Nightingale sang to the Rose," which when published above the name "*Alençon Hope*" in a magazine three months later was so widely commented on, some critics going so far as to declare with that confidence which is the chief part of the equipment of the critic, that in all the recently published volume by the same author nothing more exquisite could be found.

It was Sir Creighton's little fun to publish, unknown to any one in the world, a volume of verse that had achieved a brilliant success in the world and even in his own household where its apt lines were frequently quoted both by Amber and her brother. That was how it came about that Sir Creighton smiled quite vaguely when people remarked how strange it was that young Severn had shown an early taste for writing verse. Who was it that he took after, they enquired. They felt that the exigencies of the theory of heredity were fully satisfied when Lady Severn explained that there was a tradition in her family that her father had once sent a valentine to her mother. Still it was funny, they said, to find the son of a father who was a practical "scientist"—that was what they called Sir Creighton: a "scientist"—having a tendency to write verse.

Sir Creighton, when he had finished writhing at the word "scientist," smiled quite vaguely; for no one seemed to entertain the idea that the inspiration which had enabled the man of science to look into the future and see ships moving silently over the water at a speed of forty-two knots an hour was precisely the same quality which permitted of his translating into English metre the passionate song sung by the Nightingale to the Rose.

No one knew how refreshed he felt on returning to his electrical designs after spending an hour or two over those exquisite fabrics of verse which appeared in the volume by "*Alençon Hope*" Rhythm and arithmetic seem to many people to be the positive and negative poles of a magnet, but both mean the same thing in the language from which they are derived.

"Poor old pater!" said Amber when the girls were left alone with Lady Severn. "He is back again at one of those problems which he has set himself to solve for the good of the world. Poor old pater!"

"Old!" cried Josephine. "I never met any one so young in the whole course of my life. In his presence I feel quite mature."

"The greatest problem that he has solved is the science of living," said Lady Severn. "If he has not discovered the secret of perpetual youth, he has mastered the more important mystery of perpetual happiness."

"He knows that it is best seen through another's eye," said Josephine.

At this point a young man with a very shiny hat in his hand was shown in. He was greeted by Amber by the name of Arthur and by the others as Mr. Galmyn. He was a somewhat low-sized youth with very fair hair breaking into curls here and there that suggested the crests of a wave blown by the wind. It was not his curls, however, but his eyes that attracted the attention of most people; for his eyes were large and delicately blue. Sentimentalists who sat opposite him in an omnibus—an omnibus is full of sentimental people, six on each side—were accustomed to see a certain depth of sadness in Arthur Galmyn's eyes. He would have felt greatly disappointed if they had failed to think them sad. He had long ago formed a definite opinion about their expression. They had caused him a great deal of thought and some trouble in his time, but he had long ago come to feel every confidence in their sadness. It was his aim to see that his life was congenially tinged with a mild melancholy.

He quoted from "*The Lotus Eaters*" and tried to realise a life "in which it always seemed afternoon."

He took tea punctually at five.

"If you please," he said. "I know that the tea leaves are never allowed to remain in your tea-pot. I have no disquieting recollection of your tea-pot, Amber. And a cake—one of the hot ones, Miss West. They have no currants. I know that I shall never run the chance of coming in personal contact with a currant, change you your cakes never so often. I found myself confronted with a currant without a moment's warning a few days ago at Lady March's. I was saddened. And I thought I knew her tea-cakes so well. I felt for some days as if I had heard of a dear friend's committing a forgery—as if I had come across you suddenly in the Park wearing mauve, instead of pink, Amber."

"It does tinge one's life with melancholy. Have you made any money to-day?" said Amber in one breath.

He drank his cup of tea and bit off a segment from the circle of the tea cake, then he looked earnestly at the tips of his fingers. Two of them were shiny.

"I've not done badly," he said. "I made about eight pounds. It doesn't seem much, does it? But that eight pounds is on the right side of the ledger, and that's something."

"It's excellent," said Lady Severn.

"I consider it most praiseworthy if you made it by fair dealing," said Josephine.

"Oh, Joe, don't discourage him so early in his career," cried Amber.

Arthur Galmyn finished the tea in his cup and laid it thoughtfully before Amber to be refilled.

"It's quite delicious," he said. "Quite delicious. I wonder if anything is quite fair in the way of making money—except the tables at Monte Carlo: there's no cheating done there."

"That's what I wonder too," said Josephine.

"Anyway I've only made eight pounds to-day—there's not much cheating in eight pounds, is there, Miss West?" said Mr. Galmyn.

"Everything must have a beginning," said Miss West.

"Don't be discouraged, Arthur," said Amber. "If you only continue on this system I've laid down for you you'll make plenty of money, and what's better still you will become reformed."

"I've given up poetry already," said he, in the sad tone that one adopts in speaking of one's pleasant vices which one is obliged to relinquish through the tyranny of years.

"That's a step in the right direction," said Amber. "Oh, I've no doubt as to your future, Arthur. But you must study hard—oh, yes, you must study hard."

"So I do: I can tell you the closing price of all Home Rails to-day without referring to a list."

"Really? Well, you are progressing. What about Industrials?" said Amber.

"I'm leaving over Industrials for another week," he replied. "I've given all my attention to Home Rails during the past fortnight. I dare say if I don't break down under the strain I shall go through a course of Industrials inside another week, and then go on to Kaffirs."

"It's at Industrials that the money is to be made, you must remember," said Amber. "Let me enforce upon you once more the non-speculative business—don't think of *coups*. Aim only at a half per cent, of a rise, and take advantage of even the smallest rise."

"That's how I made my eight pounds to-day," said he. "You see when things were very flat in the morning there came the report of a great British victory. I knew that it wasn't true, but half a dozen things went up ten shillings or so and I unloaded—unloaded. It's so nice to have those words pat; it makes you feel that you're in the swim of the thing. If I only knew what *contango* meant, I think I could make an impressive use of that word also."

At this point another visitor was announced. His name was Mr. William Bateman. He was a bright looking man of perhaps a year or two over thirty, and though he was close upon six feet in height he probably would have ridden under ten stone, so earnest was the attention that he had given to his figure.

He would not take any tea.

CHAPTER VII

We have been talking shop as usual, Mr. Bateman," said Lady Severn. "I wonder if there's another drawing-room in London where shop and shop only is talked!"

"To say that shop is talked in a drawing-room is only another way of saying that the people in that drawing-room never cease to be interesting," said Amber. "So long as people talk of what they know they are interesting and shop is the shortest way of describing what people understand. So how is your shop, Mr. Bateman?"

"Flourishing," said Mr. Bateman, with something of a Scotch accent. "Miss Amber, I bless the day when you suggested that I should take up the advertising business. I had no idea that it was a business that required the exercise of so much imagination."

"Have you made much money to-day?" enquired Amber.

"I think I must hurry away," said Josephine. "We have a political party to-night, and I'm tired of seeing Amber's friends flaunting their wealth before us. If Mr. Galmyn made eight pounds in the course of the morning and he is a poet, what must Mr. Bateman have made?"

"And he is a Scotchman," said Mr. Bateman pleasantly.

"Yes, that finish was in my mind I must confess," said Josephine. "Do not be led into dishonesty by any one, Mr. Galmyn; you will be far happier as a humble lyric poet with the consciousness of being honest than as a great financier with an imaginary mine up your sleeve."

"Go away, before you do any further mischief," cried Amber. "Don't believe her, Arthur. If you ever have a gold mine up your sleeve, we'll float it between us."

"And we'll let Miss West in on the ground floor," said Arthur. "That's another good phrase that I've got hold of already. The 'ground floor.'"

"What does it mean?" asked Lady Severn, when Josephine had left the room. "Does it mean anything in particular?"

"It means joining a thing at par," replied Arthur sadly. "Oh, yes! I'm getting into the swing of the thing. Perhaps I may know what *contango* means before another week has gone by."

"I should dearly like to know what *contango* means," said Amber sympathetically. It was her sympathetic manner that made a word or two from her change the whole course of certain young lives—for a time. "I was asking you about your prospects, Mr. Bateman," she added, turning to the latest addition to her circle. "I do hope that you are making your way."

"Making my way?" said he gravely, and then he gave a little laugh—a cautious little laugh, as of feeling his way to ascertain how far he might safely go in the direction of hilarity. "Making my—oh, yes; I can't complain. I see a great future for my business if it is developed on the right lines, and if too many adventurers do not take it up."

"It requires too much imagination to turn out a success in everybody's hands," said Amber.

"Imagination," said he. "My dear Miss Amber, it requires nothing but imagination. In these days advertising

is the greatest power that exists. It is, counting all its branches, the most important British industry. There's nothing that cannot be accomplished by discreet advertising."

"You can sell a soap by it at any rate," said Lady Severn.

"Oh, soap selling and pill selling are too easy to need any of the more delicate methods," said Mr. Bateman. "Everybody—nearly everybody—wants soap and no one can live without medicine—some people live on nothing else. Of course I don't trouble myself over the rough and tumble advertising of drugs. As I told you last week I intend to proceed on a higher plane. I leave posters and sandwich men and other antediluvian methods for others. I am determined never to forget that I am an artist and that I was once in a cavalry regiment."

"Have you struck out anything new since you told us of your scheme for pushing things on by holding them up to ridicule?" asked Amber.

"Oh, you allude to what I did for the Technical School of Literature. You know, of course, that I only got that ridiculed into notice because of the interest you took in it, Miss Amber. But I've undertaken to see a young chap into Parliament by the same means. He is really such a foolish young man I believe that nothing could keep him out of Parliament in the long run; but he wants to get in at the next General Election, so we haven't much time to spare. I got him to make a Vegetarian Speech a fortnight ago, and then I arranged with a number of excellent newspapers to ridicule all that he had said. They are at it to-day, all over the country."

"His name is Thornleigh and he said that no one could wear leather boots and remain a Christian," cried Amber.

"There, you see," said Mr. Bateman proudly. "He has already become known to you—yes, and he shall be known to every man, woman and child in England. The Vegetarians are taking him up and he'll become more ridiculous every day until his name is a by-word. You can't keep a man out of Parliament whose name is a by-word throughout the length and breadth of the country. Then I've a young woman who simply wants to get her name into the papers. It's marvellous how universal this aspiration is. Anyhow I think I can promise her a good move."

"She has only to kill a baby," suggested Mr. Galmyn in a flash of inspiration.

"No more brilliant suggestion could be made," said Mr. Bateman. "But it does more credit to your heart than to your head, Galmyn, my friend. If you sit down and give the matter that thoughtful consideration it deserves, I think you will agree with me that the goal aimed at can be reached by equally legitimate means and with less risk. I am going to put up the young woman at the next meeting of the County Council's Licensing Committee to oppose the renewal of any singing and dancing licenses whatsoever. That is the least expensive and most effective way of pushing forward a nonentity with aspirations. She will soon come to be looked upon as an intelligent woman, and the newspapers will publish her opinion upon the conduct of the recent campaign as well as upon the management of children."

"You don't think that you are too sanguine, Mr. Bateman," suggested Lady Severn.

"I prefer to understate rather than exaggerate the possibilities of such a step as I have suggested, Lady Severn," said Mr. Bateman. "And moreover I will do my best to prevent my client from writing a novel. Writing a novel rather gives away the show. Then another client whom I have just secured to-day is the mother of two very ordinary daughters. The mother is vulgar and wealthy, and the daughters wear birds in their toques. They know no one in Society and yet before six months have gone by you will find that no column of society gossip will be considered complete that does not contain some reference to their movements, and they will probably marry baronets—perhaps peers. I have also got on my books a young American lady, who has set her heart on a peer, poor thing!"

"Poor thing? does that refer to the lady or to the peer?" asked Amber.

"Possibly to both, Miss Amber. Anyhow I'm going to start the campaign by denying on authority that any engagement exists between the young lady and a still younger Duke. Now I need scarcely say that the desire to know more about a young lady who is not engaged to marry a Duke is practically universal. Well, I'll take good care to let the public know more about my client, and she may be engaged to marry the Duke after all—perhaps she may even marry a member of the Stock Exchange itself. But you mustn't suppose that my clients are exclusively ladies."

"Ladies? ladies? oh, no, Mr. Bateman, I am sure we should never suppose that they were ladies," said Lady Severn.

"They are not," said Mr. Bateman. "Only a few days ago an honest but obscure tradesman placed himself in my hands. The fact is that he has laid in an absurdly large stock of High Church literature as well as ornaments, and he cannot get rid of them. The stupid man has not acumen enough to perceive that all he has got to do in order to get his name into every paper in the Kingdom, with a portrait in the Weeklies and a stereo-block in the Evening editions, is to disturb a Low Church congregation, and insist on being prosecuted as a brawler. If he succeeds in getting prosecuted into popularity he may double his already large stock and yet be certain of getting rid of it all within a week of his first appearance at the Police Court."

"You are certainly making an art of the business, Mr. Bateman," said Amber. "I had no idea when I suggested to you the possibilities of an advertising agency that you would develop it to such an extent."

"Nor had I, Miss Amber. But I have really only reported progress to you in a few of the cases I have now before me. I have said nothing about the lady manicurist to whom I am giving a show by means of an action for libel; nor have I told you of the tooth paste to which I am going to give a start through the legitimate agency of a breach of promise case. The falling out between the two litigants—whom I may mention incidentally—"

"Dentally," suggested Mr. Galmyn in a low tone.

"I beg your pardon. Oh, yes, of course. Well, dentally—to be sure, it's a tooth paste—yes, and incidentally, are the proprietors of the article—their difference arose not upon the actual merits of the tooth paste, for every love letter that will be read in court will contain a handsome acknowledgment of the fact that the article is superior to any in the market—no, the misunderstanding arose through—as the counsel for the

defence will allege—the lady's head having been completely turned by the compliments which she received from her friends upon the marvellous change in her appearance since she was induced to use the *Tivoli Toothicum*, the new preparation for the teeth and gums. Oh, believe me, the ordinary system of advertising is obsolete. By the way, I wonder if you know any one who is acquainted with a young Australian lately come to London. His name is Mr. Winwood—Pierce Winwood."

"Why, Guy Overton was talking to us to-day about this very person," said Amber. "Is it possible that he has placed himself in your hands, Mr. Bateman?"

"Not yet—not yet. I only heard about him yesterday. I hope that he will enter his name on my books. I am very anxious to get a good Colonial *Clientele*. The way the chances of first-class Colonials have been frittered away in this country makes the heart of any one with the true feelings of an Imperialist to bleed. I know that I can do everything for this Mr. Winwood, but, of course, though I can advertise others, I cannot advertise myself—no, I can only trust to my friends to do that for me."

"So that on the whole you have your hands pretty full just now?" said Amber.

"Pretty full? My dear Miss Amber, if I were engaged in no other branch of my business but the complete prospectus list, I should still have my hands full. I did not mention this list, by the way. Well, I think it will place in my hands at once the largest prospectus addressing business in the Kingdom. Good heavens! when one thinks of the thousands upon thousands of pounds at present being squandered in promiscuous prospectus posting, one is led to wonder if there is any real knowledge of this business on the part of company promoters. At present they allow their prospectuses to be thrown broadcast around; so that on an average it may be said that nine-tenths of these documents fall into the hands of intelligent—that is to say, moderately intelligent people who, of course, see at once through the schemes. Now it is clear that to let the prospectuses fall into the hands of intelligent people does positive harm."

"Not if they decline to be drawn," suggested Mr. Galmyn.

"I am discussing the question from the standpoint of the promoters, you forget, my dear Galmyn. It is plain that if the intelligent people who see through the schemes talk to their friends about the flotations, they will do the promoters' position harm. Now, with the list which I am compiling it will be impossible for a prospectus to go astray, for my list will contain only the names of widows left with small means which they are anxious to increase, orphans left without trustees, small shopkeepers, governesses, half-pay officers, clerks and clergymen—in short only such people as know nothing about business, and who invariably skip all the small print in a prospectus, whereas, I need scarcely say, the small print is the only part of a prospectus that an intelligent person reads. The list that I am compiling is taking up a great deal of time; but I will guarantee that it does not contain half a dozen names of intelligent people. The only surprising thing is that such a list was not compiled long ago. Oh, you must pardon my egotism; I have bored you to a point of extinction, but I knew that you would be interested in hearing of my progress. I can never forget that it was you who told me that I should not waste my time but take up some enterprise demanding the exercise of such talents as I possess. I hope should you meet this Mr. Pierce Winwood, you will mention my name to him—casually, of course—as casually as possible. Good-afternoon, Lady Severn. Good-afternoon, Miss Amber. Are you coming my way, Galmyn—I can give you a lift?"

"No, I'm going in just the opposite direction," said Mr. Galmyn.

Then Mr. Bateman smiled his way to the door. "What a bounder!" murmured the other man. "He has found congenial employment certainly," said Lady Severn. "Oh, Amber, Amber, your name is Frankenstein."

CHAPTER VIII

Some days had actually passed before Amber Severn read the "time-study" on the subject of Platonic Friendship which had been confided to her by her friend Josephine. She read the quickly written and vaguely worded treatise with alternate smiles and frowns, and the last words that it contained called for a very becoming rose mantle of blushes.

"It is so like Joe!" she muttered. "So very like Joe. And it's all wrong—all wrong!"

She had thrown herself in her dressing-gown on the sofa in her dressing-room hoping to have half an hour's doze before dressing to go out to dinner; and she had found the document in the pocket of the luxurious garment of quilted satin and lace which suited her so well that her maid had often lamented the fact that the *convenances* of modern English Society precluded her being seen within its folds by any one except her mother and her maid.

"It is so like Joe! And it is meant as a commentary upon my friendships. But it is wrong—wrong!" This was her thought as she lay back upon the sofa, until the pillows among which she had thrown herself surged up all about her as though they were billows of the sea.

And then, instead of going asleep, she began to review three or four of the friendships which she had formed during the past few years—friendships which might easily have degenerated into quite another feeling, if they had not been built on a foundation very different from that which Josephine West had assumed to be the basis of friendship according to Plato.

There was Arthur Galmyn for instance. He and she had become very friendly when they had first met the year before. He had been at Oxford with her brother and had won one of those pernicious prizes which are offered for the best poem of the year—to be more exact, for the poem which is most highly approved of by the adjudicating authorities of the University. She quickly perceived that the effect of winning this prize was,

upon young Mr. Galmyrn, most disquieting; for he had actually settled down as a poet on the strength of winning it.

Instead of saying, "I have written the poem which has met with the approval of the most highly graduated pedants in the world, therefore I am no poet," he assumed that pedant was another word for prophet, and that their judgment had conferred immortality upon him and perhaps even upon themselves; for whenever his name came to be spoken in the awful whisper which people employ in mentioning the name of a poet, the names of the adjudicators of the prize would also be mentioned.

He hoped to go through life writing poetry—not the poetry which appears on a Christmas card or imprinted on the little ship which never loses the curl that is originally gained by being enwound about the almond in the after dinner cracker—not even the poetry which is sung, when wedded to melody, by the light of a piano candle,—no; but that form of poetry which is absolutely an unsalable commodity in the public market—unless it was of that high quality which appeared over the signature of Alençon Hope to which Amber had frequently called the inattention of her father.

It was just when he was in this critical position that he came under the influence of Amber Severn. They had become ostentatiously Platonic friends. To be sure he had, after their second meeting, addressed to her a sonnet written in exquisite accordance with the true Petrarchian model, embodying a fervent hope in the last line of the sextett—the two quatrains (each ending with a semicolon) had been mainly descriptive—but she had explained to him that she would take a lenient view of this action on his part, if he would promise to do his best to resist in the future the inspiration which had forced him into it.

He had promised her all that she asked; but he gave her to understand that he did so only through fear of alienation from her.=

"I shrink from life from Amber alienate,"=

was the last line of the sonnet which he promptly composed after she had lectured him; and then he had settled down into that graceful philosophical friendship with her, which had sent him on the Stock Exchange before three months had elapsed.

It took three months to convince him that she was quite right in her suggestion that instead of spending the best years of his life writing poetry, having nothing to look forward to beyond the perpetual struggle of trying to live within the four hundred pounds a year which represented all his private means, he should endeavour to make a career for himself in some direction where his undoubted gifts of imagination would be appreciated—say the Stock Exchange.

"My dear Arthur," she had said, "what I fear most for you is the possibility of your making a mercenary marriage. You know as well as I do that it would be ridiculous for you to marry on your present income, and I know your nature sufficiently well to be convinced that you would never be happy so long as you felt that your wife's fortune was supporting you. Don't you agree with me?"

He thought that she took too narrow a view of the conditions under which he could be happy; but he thought it better to nod his acquiescence in the flattering estimate which she had formed of his nature.

"I knew you would agree with me," she said. "And that's why I urge upon you this step." (The step she urged upon him was the Stock Exchange Steps.) "You will have to study hard at first, and I believe that you must begin by trusting nobody—especially avoiding every one who wants to be your friend; but by this means you will eventually gain not only a competence—not only complete independence, but such a Fortune as will make you a Power in the world, and then—well, then you can marry any one you please."

Although the poem which he considered the best that he had ever written was one in praise of a young woman who had remained true to her love for a poet without a penny, in the face of the opposition of her parents who wished her to wed a very rich person in a good paying business, he said he was sure that she was right, and he would give her his promise to buy a twenty-five shilling silk hat the very next day: that being, as he was informed, the first step necessary to be taken by any one with aspirations after financial success.

He had an idea that, after all, he had underrated the practical outlook of the modern young woman. Could it be possible, he asked himself, that after all the penniless poet who wrote on the Petrarchian model, was a less attractive figure in the eyes of a girl—even of a girl who could not be seen by any one without suggesting the thoughts of a flower—perhaps a lily—than the man with a million invested in various excellent securities?

He feared that it was impossible for him to arrive at any other conclusion than this one which was forced upon him; and the worst of the matter was that he found that all his sympathies were on the side of the modern young woman, although he would have died sooner than withdraw a single line of the poem which he had written holding up to admiration the young woman who refused to leave her penniless poet for the man of millions.

He bought a fine silk hat the next day, and forthwith wrote a series of rondeaux bidding farewell to the Muse. He felt that such an act of renunciation on his part demanded celebration on the analogy of the Lenten Carnival. But when his days of riotous indulgence in all the exotic forms of French verse had come to an end, he gave himself up to a consideration of his bank book and found to his amazement that his accumulations including a legacy of two thousand pounds which he had received from the executors of his godmother, amounted to close upon four thousand pounds.

For over two years his account had been increasing, the trustees of the estate of his father (deceased) having been in the habit of lodging the quarterly payments of his income (less expenses) to his credit, and yet he was receiving no penny of interest on all this money.

He was innocent enough to ask the young man at the bank how it was that no circular had been sent to him letting him know that his account was overgrown. If it had been overdrawn he would have been informed of the fact.

The young man had only smiled and said that he was sure the matter had been overlooked; for there was nothing that the bank found so embarrassing as large balances bearing no interest.

In the course of a few weeks he would have blushed to ask such a question as he had put to the clerk. He

began to study the methods of finance for the first time and had almost mastered the art embodied in a gold mine prospectus—it is the Petrarchian Sonnet of the money market—before he had been a month at the work. By a rigid attention to Amber's precept of placing the most implicit distrust in every one connected with finance, he had made a very good start for himself.

His principle was an excellent one. He made several friends among those disinterested financiers who give advice gratis as to what stocks to buy and he had never failed to act contrary to the tips which they had given him; so that when a few days later, they came to him with assumed long faces and frank admissions of fallibility in the past but of promises of certainty for the future, he had shown them that he was made of the stuff that goes to the composition of a real financier by being in no way put out; and disdaining to level a single reproach at them.

"Distrust your best friend," was the motto which he placed in a conspicuous place on his mantelpiece, and by observing it he had made some hundreds of pounds in the course of a few weeks.

And then he made a stroke; for on hearing from a great authority on the Stock Exchange that there was going to be no war in the Transvaal, and that those rumours regarding strained relations between that State and Great Britain were simply due to the fact that some members of the Cabinet had given orders to their brokers to buy up for them all South African Stock the moment that it fell to a certain figure—on hearing this on so excellent an authority, Mr. Galmyn had felt so sure that war was imminent that he did not hesitate for a moment in joining a syndicate for the purchase of the full cinematograph rights in the campaign.

When the war became inevitable he sold out his shares at a profit of two hundred per cent., and the next week he learned that the War Office had prohibited all cinematographers from joining the troops ordered to South Africa.

He rubbed his hands and felt that he was a born financier.

For some months after, he had been content, Amber knew, with very small earnings, consequently his losses had been proportionately small; and yet now, as she lay back upon her sofa she recalled with pride (she fancied) that he had never written to her a single sonnet. He had never once given expression to a sentiment that would bear to be construed into a departure from the lines of that friendship which was the ideal of Plato.

And yet Josephine could write that "time-study" suggesting that such an ideal was impracticable if not absolutely unattainable!

She lost all patience with her friend.

CHAPTER IX

Before her maid came to her Amber had reflected also upon the cases of Mr. Guy Overton and Mr. Willie Bateman, and the consciousness of the fact that neither of these young men had tried (after the first attempt) to make love to her was a source of the greatest gratification to her. (To such a point of self-deception may the imagination of a young woman born in an atmosphere of science lead her.)

Guy Overton was a young man who was certainly in no need to try the Stock Exchange as a means of livelihood. He was the only son of Richard Overton, the once well-known Australian, who had been accidentally killed when acting as his own Stevedore beside the hold of one of his steamers. Guy had inherited from this excellent father a business which he had speedily sold for a trifle over half a million, and a spirit of thrift which was very unusual, people said, on the part of the idle son of a self-made man—a self-made man is a man who has made himself wealthy at the expense of others.

It was a great disappointment to his many friends to find out, as they did very soon after his father's death, that young Mr. Overton was in no way disposed to fling his money about in the light-hearted way characteristic of the youth who becomes a prodigal by profession. He could not see, he said, why he should buy spavined horses simply because he was half a millionaire. Of course he knew it was an understood thing that spavined horses were to be got rid of upon light-hearted aspiring sons of fathers with humble beginnings in life; but he rather thought that, for the present at least, he would try to pass his time apart from the cheering companionship of the spavined horse.

And then as regards the purchase of that couple of cases of choice Manila cigars—the hemp yarn which entered largely into their composition undoubtedly did come from Manila—he expressed the opinion to the friend who had thoughtfully suggested the transaction, that, until he felt more firmly on his feet in carrying out the rôle of the complete prodigal he would struggle to repress his natural tendency to smoke the sweepings of the rope walks of the Philippine Islands.

In short young Mr. Overton was fortunate enough to obtain, not by slow degrees, but in a single month after his father's death, a sound practical reputation for being a skinflint.

It was his study to justify all that was said of him by his disappointed friends in respect of the closeness of his pockets.

He lived in chambers and kept no manservant.

Why should he pay a hundred a year—sixty pounds in wages and, say, forty in board and lodging—for having his trousers properly stretched, he asked of those friends of his who were ready to recommend to him several trustworthy menservants. He rather thought that it would pay him better to buy a new pair of trousers every week. He knew a place where you could buy a capital pair of trousers for thirteen and six. He

jobbed a horse.

He couldn't see why he should have a horse eating its head off in a rack-rented stable necessitating the keeping of a groom at twenty-five shillings a week, when he could hire a horse for all the riding that was necessary for his health for five shillings the two hours.

He knew of a good restaurant (Italian) in a back street where the maximum charge for dinner was half a crown, and it was to this establishment he invited his particular friends when the prodigal's desire to feast became irresistible, overwhelming his better nature which lent him promptings towards frugality.

He recommended the Chianti of this secluded dining-hall. It was a good sound wine, with a distinct tendency towards body, and not wholly without flavour—a flavour that one got accustomed to after a period of probation. Only it was not well to eat olives with it.

He was on the whole a pleasant, shrewd, unaffected man of twenty-eight, when he was presented to Amber, and, on her acceptance of a pretty little imitation Italian enamel from him, he yielded to her influence.

She remembered with pleasure (she thought) that he had only upon one occasion spoken of love in her presence. Her recollection was not at fault. Only once had he hinted at certain aspirations on his part, and then he and she had become good friends. He had submitted to her influence sufficiently far to promise her that he would cease to live a life of idle frugality. A course of practical literature was what she prescribed for him and he at once joined the Technical School just started by Mr. Owen Glen-dower Richmond.

This was, she reflected, a great triumph for Platonic friendship, and yet Guy Overton was only at the other end of the room when Josephine had written that paper of hers in dispraise of this very sentiment!

Amber was inclined to be impatient in thinking of her friend's scarcely veiled sneers. And then she began to think if it might not be possible that her friend had in her mind her own case—the case of Josephine West and Ernest Clifton—rather than the cases of Amber Severn and Guy Overton, Amber Severn and Arthur Galmyn, Amber Severn and—yes, it was quite possible that the cynicism—if it was cynicism—in the "time study" was prompted by the real feeling of the writer in regard to her relations with Mr. Ernest Clifton.

The reflection had its consolations; but Amber thought she loved her friend Josephine too dearly to be consoled at her expense. Though she herself was, she fancied, perfectly happy in experimentalising, so to speak, in the science of friendship she was too wise to assume that her friend would be equally well satisfied to attain such results as she, Amber, had achieved.

She was led to ask herself if it was possible that Josephine was actually in love with Mr. Ernest Clifton.

And then she went on to ask herself if it was possible that Mr. Ernest Clifton was in love with Josephine West.

Without coming to a conclusion in her consideration of either question, she knew that if Josephine really loved that particular man, her views on the subject of Platonic friendship might be pretty much as she had defined them—precipitating the acid of cynicism at present held in solution in the series of phrases written down on the paper.

Amber had now and again suspected that between Josephine and Mr. Clifton there existed a stronger feeling than that of mere friendship. But Josephine had said no word to her on this subject, and certainly none of their common friends had said anything that tended to strengthen her suspicions. Still the announcement of the engagement of some of her acquaintance had invariably come upon her with surprise, a fact which proved to her—for she was thoroughly logical and always ready to draw faithful deductions even to her own disadvantage—that she had not observed with any great care the phenomena of love in the embryotic state and its gradual growth towards the idiotic state. Things had been going on under her very eyes without her perceiving them, in regard to other young men and maidens, so that it was quite possible that Josephine had come, without Amber's knowing anything of the matter, to entertain a feeling of tenderness for Ernest Clifton, and had written in that spirit of cynical raillery on the subject of Platonic friendship. Of course if this were so and if at the same time Ernest Clifton had given her no sign that he was affected towards her in the same way, that circumstance would not of itself be sufficient (Amber knew) to prevent Josephine's taking a cynical view of the question that had formed the subject of the "time study" at the Technical School.

It was at this point in her consideration of the whole question that her maid opened the door gently and began to make preparations for her toilet. Her father had not yet perfected his machinery to discharge the offices of a maid. Where was the electrical device that would lace up a dress behind?

"I shall keep my eyes upon Joe and Mr. Clifton this evening, and perhaps I shall learn something," was the thought of Amber, while her hair was being teased into the bewitching simplicity of form which gave her a distinction of her own at a period when some artificiality was making itself apparent in the disposal of the hair. (It took a great deal more time to achieve Amber's simplicity than it did to work out the elaborate devices of the young women who had studied the fashion plate for the month.)

In less than an hour she was driving with her mother to Ranelagh where they were to dine with one Mr. Shirley, a member of Parliament who was known to have aspirations after a place in the Government and who was fully qualified to aspire, being a bachelor. Amber knew that Josephine would be of the party, and she was nearly sure that Mr. Clifton would also be present. When people talked of Mr. Clifton they invariably alluded to him as a long-headed fellow. Some of the men went so far as to say that he knew what he was about. Others said that he might be looked on as the leading exponent of the jumping cat.

Amber, however, knew nothing of his ability, that of all the acquaintance which Josephine and she had in common, Mr. Clifton was the man of whom Josephine spoke most seldom. It was on this account she had a suspicion that he might be held in some manner responsibly accountable for the tone of Josephine's "time study."

The lawn at Ranelagh was crowded on this particular Sunday, for the June gloom that had prevailed during the three preceding days had vanished, and the evening sunshine was making everything lovely. The general opinion that prevailed was that the pretty way in which the guests of the sun had dressed themselves to greet him made it worth his while, so to speak, to shine, on the same principle that a host and hostess cannot but be put into a smiling state of mind when their friends have arrived to do them honour in their very best.

The brilliant green of the lawn reflected the greatest credit, people thought, upon the good taste of Nature in providing a background for all the tints of all the fabrics that glowed upon it. And the consciousness that their efforts to clothe themselves tastefully were reciprocated by the sun and the summer was very gratifying to a considerable portion of the crowd, who perhaps had their own reasons for thinking of themselves as included in the general scheme of Nature. They could not imagine any scheme of Nature independent enough to ignore a display of the shimmer of satin or a flutter of muslin.

And this was why Amber thought she had never seen together so many well-satisfied faces as those among which she moved down the lawn to the soft music of the band. And amongst all the well-satisfied faces not one wore this expression more airily than the face of Guy Overton—yes, when she appeared. The face of Mr. Randolph Shirley, in welcoming his guests, also glowed with satisfaction—self-satisfaction. An aspiring politician used long ago to be satisfied when he got his foot on the first rung of the ladder; but the lift system has long ago superseded the outside ladder. A politician of to-day has no idea of climbing up rung by rung, he expects to enter the lift in the lobby and taking a seat among cushions, to be rumbled up to the top floor by pulling a rope.

The correct working of this system is altogether dependent upon one's knowledge of the right rope to pull; but Mr. Shirley was beginning to know the ropes; so he was pleased to welcome Miss West, the daughter of an under secretary who was almost certain of a chief secretaryship before the end of the year.

It was while Mr. Shirley was welcoming Miss West and her mother that Guy Overton brought up to Amber a man with a very brown face, saying:

"I want to present to you my friend Pierce Winwood, whom I was speaking of a while ago—the cornstalk, you know."

"I know. I shall be delighted," said Amber.

He brought the man forward; he looked about the same age as Guy himself, and Amber expressed to his face something of the delight which she felt to meet him. He was not quite so fluent when he opened his lips: as a matter of fact he seemed to be shy almost to a point of embarrassment, and to find that the act of changing his stick from one hand to the other and then treating it as a pendulum not only failed to relieve his embarrassment, but was actually a source of embarrassment to people on each side of him.

Amber wondered if it might not be possible for her to add this young man to her already long list of those whom she was influencing for their own good, through the medium of a colourless friendship.

CHAPTER X

I am so glad to meet you, Mr. Winwood," she said. "Mr. Overton mentioned that he thought your father was acquainted with mine long ago."

"I was under that impression—in fact, I am nearly sure—however——"

Amber gave him a chance of finishing his sentence; but he did not take advantage of her offer.

"You think that it is possible he may have made a mistake?" she said.

He did not answer immediately. He followed with his eyes the irritating sweep of his Malacca cane.

"I should like you to ask Sir Creighton if he has any recollection of my father before I make any further claims," he said, suddenly looking at her straight in the face.

"I have already done so," said Amber.

He was so startled that he coloured beneath the brown surface of his skin. The effect was a picturesque one.

"And he said that he remembered—that——"

"He said that we should ask you to dinner."

"Then that's all right," put in Guy Overton, for he could not but notice the expression of disappointment on the face of the Australian. And when he noticed that expression, of course Amber noticed it.

"We hope that you will come and dine with us, Mr. Winwood," she said.

"That is how things begin—and end, in England, I think," cried Winwood with a laugh that had a note of contempt in its ring. "A dinner is supposed to do duty for welcome as well as for *cong *. I am always wondering which of the two every invitation that I get is meant to be—a welcome or the other. I knew a man who used to say that an invitation to dinner in England is the height of inhospitality."

"I say, that's a bit of freehand drawing, isn't it?" said Guy. "You seem to have left your manners in the unclaimed luggage department, Winwood. Besides—well, I give a little dinner to my friends now and again—yes, in the Frangipanni: the only place where you get the real macaroni in London. Their Chianti is really not half bad, when you get——"

"I understand exactly what Mr. Winwood means, and I quite agree with him: a dinner is the most cordial form of inhospitality," said Amber. "But if——"

"I really must ask your pardon, Miss Severn," interposed Winwood. "I did not mean quite that—"

"You meant that you gathered from what I said that my father had no recollection of yours."

"Exactly."

"Then you were—not quite right. My father said he was sure that—that—yes, that you were certain to be able to convince him that he knew your father."

"Ah!"

"I shall ask my mother to send you a card for—but I suppose you are like the rest of us: you need at least a month's notice?"

"I only need a day's notice, Miss Severn."

"You shall have a week at the least."

"And you can get up your affidavits in the meantime," suggested Mr. Overton.

"I think I shall convince Sir Creighton of my identity without the adventitious aid of affidavits," said Winwood.

"My solicitor—an excellent chap, and so cheap!—says that it is only people who know nothing about the law courts who say that there is no other form of perjury except an affidavit. He once knew a man who made an affidavit that turned out to be true, though no one believed it at the time."

It was at this point that Mr. Shirley came up and took away Winwood to present him to Miss West, explaining that he had arranged his table so that he was to sit next to Miss West.

"I hope that he is putting me beside you," said Mr. Overton with a look of longing that is not strictly according to Plato. He now and again made these lapses. They were very irritating to Amber (she thought).

But his hope in regard to the regulation of the table was not destined to be realised for Mr. Shirley brought up to her a young man who was the son of a marquis and a member of the Cabinet as well—Mr. Shirley knew how to choose his guests and how to place them so well.

"I have asked Lord Lullworth to sit beside you, Miss Severn," he said, and immediately went off to welcome the last two of his guests who were coming down the lawn.

So that it was to a certain Miss Craythorpe—she was the daughter of the under secretary of the annexation department (Mr. Shirley had reduced the disposal of his guests to an exact science)—that Guy had an opportunity of the remarkable chance offered to him the day before—the chance of backing at a theatre a comedy by a dramatist who had made fourteen consecutive failures at London theatres alone. But although the agent of the actor manager who had just acquired for a considerable sum of money the rights of the new comedy had pointed out to him that it was almost sure to be a success, the fact being that it was beyond the bounds of possibility for any dramatist to make fifteen consecutive failures, he had decided to decline the offer.

"I prefer to spend my money myself," this possible patron of art explained to the young woman as soon as he had settled down in his chair beside her.

Miss Craythorpe thought him very amusing and even went the length of saying so: she had been told that Mr. Overton had at least half a million of a fortune. She had also heard it mentioned casually that he was not given to spending his money. This information was stimulating.

And all the time that Amber Severn was pretending to give all attention to the description of the polo match of the day before which was given to her by the young man next to her, she was looking across the table at Ernest Clifton wondering if he was wishing that, instead of being by the side of Josephine's mother, he were by the side of Josephine herself. She also looked down the table to where Josephine was sitting and wondered if she was wishing that she were by the side of Ernest Clifton instead of that rather abrupt Mr. Pierce Winwood.

She was of the opinion, being something of a philosopher with more than the average philosopher's experience, that society is usually made up of people who are evermore longing to be by the side of other people; and that what is meant by good manners is trying to appear content with the people who have been placed beside you.

Josephine certainly had good manners; she seemed to be more than content with Mr. Winwood. She seemed actually to be interested in his conversation—nay absorbed; and as for Ernest Clifton—well, Amber knew enough of men and women to be well aware of the fact that if Ernest Clifton was full of longing to be by the side of Josephine his first impulse would be to make himself as agreeable as possible to Josephine's mother.

And this was just what Ernest Clifton was doing. He was one of those clever people who are actually better pleased to have a chance of being agreeable to the mother than to the daughter, knowing that the mother may be captured by the art of being agreeable, whereas the daughter is rarely influenced by this rarest of the arts.

And then Amber, somewhat to her own surprise, ceased to give any attention to the people at the other side of the table or at the other end of the table, for she found herself constrained to give all her attention to Lord Lullworth, and his polo. She found that he had at his command a phraseology which without being highly scientific was extremely picturesque, and besides that, he hated Mr. Cupar. Mr. Cupar was the novelist who wrote with the shriek of a street preacher, and was for one season widely discussed.

A common enemy constitutes a bond of friendship far more enduring than any other the wit of man, money, or woman, can devise; so that after Lord Lullworth had pointed out to her some of the ridiculous mistakes which Mr. Cupar had made with all the ostentation of a great teacher—mistakes about horses that a child would never have fallen into, and mistakes about the usages of society that no one who had ever seen anything decent would ever fall into—she found herself more than interested in Lord Lullworth, and by no means felt inclined to share Guy Overton's regret that he, Guy Overton, had not been beside her.

She began to wonder if it might not be possible to annex Lord Lullworth for his own good as she had annexed Guy Overton, Arthur Galmyn, Willie Bateman and a few others, with such profitable results—to them all. She thought, after he had agreed with her on some points that were usually regarded as contentious, that

he was perhaps the nicest of all the men in whom she had interested herself—for their own good.

Before the glacial period of the dinner had arrived, they had become friendly enough to quarrel.

It was over the Technical School of Literature. She wondered if she could induce him to join, and he assured her that she needn't allow the question to occupy her thoughts for a moment; for there wasn't the slightest chance of his joining so ridiculous a scheme. She replied warmly on behalf of the system of imparting instruction on what was undoubtedly one of the arts; and he said he did not believe in machine-made literature.

Of course she could not be expected to let this pass, and she asked him if he did not believe in machine-made pictures, or machine-made statues.

He told her that he did; and then laughed. She gave him to understand that she was hurt by his declining to take her seriously; and she became very frigid over her ice, an attitude which, he assured her, was one that no girl anxious to do her best for her host would assume. A right-minded girl approached her ice with geniality, thereby allowing that particular delicacy to "earn its living"—that was the phrase which he employed and Amber thought it so queer that she allowed herself to glow once more and so to give the ices a chance—a second phrase which originated with him when he heard her laugh.

By the time the strawberries arrived she was surprised to find that she was actually in the position of being under the influence of a man instead of finding the man drawn under her influence. This was a position to which she was not accustomed; therefore it had a certain fascination of its own and by thinking of the fascination of the position she was foolish enough to confound the man with the position and to feel ready to acknowledge that the man was fascinating.

The babble of the large dining-room almost overcame the soft melody of the band playing on the terrace while the dinner was proceeding, but when the soft hour of cigarettes had come, there seemed to be a general feeling that the music was worthy of more attention than had yet been given to it. A movement was made to the Terrace by Mr. Shirley's party and at first there was some talk of wraps. When, however, one got opposite the door and felt the warm breath of the perfect evening upon one's face no suggestion that a wrap was needed was heard.

There was a scent of roses and mignonette in the air, and now and again at unaccountable intervals a whiff of the new made hay from the paddock. The lawns were spread forth in the softest of twilights, and the trees beyond looked very black, for the moonlight was too faint to show even upon the edge of the burgeoning June foliage.

"I have got a table for our coffee," said Mr. Shirley, "also some chairs; try if you can pick up a few more, Lord Lullworth—and you, Overton—get a couple of the easiest cane ones and we shall be all right."

Thus it was that the sweet companionship of the dinner-table was broken up. Mr. Shirley was too well accustomed to dinner-giving to fancy that one invariably longs to retain in the twilight and among the scent of roses the companion one has had at the dinner-table. And thus it was that Mr. Ernest Clifton found that the only vacant chair was that beside Josephine—it took him as much manoeuvring to accomplish this as would have enabled him, if he had been a military commander, to convince the War Office that he was the right man to conduct a campaign.

And thus it was that Pierce Winwood found himself by the side of Amber, while Lord Lullworth had fallen quite naturally into pony talk with a young woman who, having been left pretty well off at her father's death the year before, had started life on her own account with a hunting stable within easy reach of the Pytchley.

And then the coffee came, with the sapphire gleam of green Chartreuse here and there, and the topaz twinkle of a Benedictine, and the ruby glow of cherry brandy. It was all very artistic.

CHAPTER XI

There was a different note in the chat on the terrace in the twilight from that which had prevailed in the dining-room. In the dining-room people had seemed to be trying to talk down the band, now they were talking with it. The band was making a very sympathetic accompaniment to their chat—nay, it even suggested something of a possible topic, for it was playing the dreamy strains of the "Roses of Love" Valse. People could not talk loud when that delicious thing was wafting its melody round them—ensnaring their hearts with that delicate network of woven sounds—breathing half hushed rapture at intervals and then glowing as the June roses glow in a passion that is half a dream.

"I suppose you have lovelier places than Ranelagh in Australia," said Amber as she leant back in her chair. Pierce Winwood was leaning forward in his.

"Oh, yes, I dare say there are lovelier places in Australia," he replied. "You see there's a pretty fair amount of room in Australia for places lovely and the opposite. But there's no place out there that's just the same as this place here on such an evening as this. I used to wonder long ago if I should ever see Ranelagh under such conditions as these—distinguished men—there are some distinguished men here—and beautiful women—music and moonlight and the scent of roses, and above all, the consciousness that this is Home—Home—in Australia we think a good deal about this England of ours. People in England have great pride in thinking of Australia as their own, but their pride is nothing compared to that of the Australians in thinking of England as their Home."

"Of course we are all one," said Amber. "But your father could scarcely have told you about Ranelagh: it did

not exist in its present form in his day—that is to say—oh, you see that I am assuming that he was in Australia for a good many years.”

“I heard about Ranelagh first from a stock rider on one of my father’s farms. He was one of the best chaps in the world. He showed me a prize or two that he had won here in the old days,—his old days could not have been more than five or six years ago. I had also a groom who used to play polo here.”

“And people talk about the days of romance being past!” said Amber. “I dare say you could furnish our school—I wonder if Guy mentioned it to you——”

“Oh, yes; he told me all about it.”

“You could furnish the romance class with some capital plots to work out, could you not?”

“I dare say I could if I knew all the circumstances that led up to the fragments that came under my notice. But I could not ask the stock rider or the groom how they came to sell their horses and settle down to live on thirty shillings a week in a colony. I could not even ask either of them what was his real name.”

“I suppose that almost every romance begins by a change of name?”

He was silent for some moments. Then he threw away the end of the cigar which he had been smoking and drank the few drops of liqueur which remained in his glass. He drew his chair an inch or two closer to hers saying in a low tone:

“It was only a short time before I left the colony that I had brought under my notice the elements of a curious romance. Would you care to hear it?”

“I should like very much. If it is unfinished it might make a good exercise for Mr. Richmond to set for one of his classes at the school—‘given the romance up to a certain point, required the legitimate and artistic ending—that would be the problem.”

“A capital notion, I think. I should like very much myself to know what the legitimate ending should be. But I have noticed now and again that Fate is inclined to laugh at any scheme devised by the most astute of men. That is to say when we have in our possession what seems the beginning of a real romance Fate steps in and brings about the most disastrous ending to the story.”

“That is nearly always what happens. It only proves that romance writers know a great deal better than Fate how to weave the threads of a story into a finished fabric.”

“Ah! those ‘accursed shears’!... I wonder if... never mind, I will tell you the romance as far as it came under my notice and you or your literary adviser—or perhaps your father—but I don’t suppose that Sir Creighton would trouble himself over a miniature romance.”

“Oh, wouldn’t he just? He reads nearly every novel that comes out—especially the French ones.”

“Oh, then I need not hesitate to ask you to place before him the fragment which I acquired in the colony less than a year ago.”

“It will be a capital exercise for him—working out the close artistically. The story begins in England, of course?”

“Of course. Let me think how it does begin. Yes, it begins in England—at a seaport town. There is a shipbuilding yard. The head of it is, naturally, a close-fisted, consequently a wealthy man—one of those men who from insignificant beginnings rise by their own force of character to position of wealth and influence. He has a son and the son has a friend. The son has acquired extravagant habits and his father will not sanction them, nor will he pay his debts a second time, he declares—he has already paid them once. When the relations between the father and the son are in this way strained, the son’s friend is suddenly taken sick, and after a week or two the doctors in attendance think it their duty to tell him that he cannot possibly recover—that they cannot promise him even a month’s life. The man—he must have been a young man—resigns himself to his fate and his friend, the son of the shipbuilder comes to bid him farewell. In doing so, he confesses that in what he calls a moment of madness, he was induced to forge the name of the firm on certain documents on which he raised money, but that the discovery of the forgery cannot be avoided further than another fortnight, and that will mean ruin to him. The dying man suggests—he is actually magnanimous enough—idiotic enough—to suggest that he himself should confess that he committed the crime. That will mean that his friend will be exculpated and that he himself will go to the grave with a lie on his lips and with the stigma of a crime on his memory.”

“And the other man—he actually accepted the sacrifice? Impossible!”

“It was not impossible. The impossibility comes in later on. You see, Miss Severn, the scheme appears feasible enough. One man has only a day or two to live, the other has the chance of redeeming the past and of becoming a person of influence and importance in the world. Yes, I think the scheme sounded well, especially as the real criminal solemnly swore to amend his life. Well, the confession is made in due form; and then,—here is where Fate sometimes becomes objectionable—then—the dying man ceases to die. Whether it was that the doctors were duffers, or that a more skilful man turned up I cannot say—but the man recovered and was arrested on his own confession. The other man being a kind-hearted fellow did his best to get his father to be merciful; but he was not kind-hearted enough to take the place in the dock where his friend stood a month later to receive the judge’s sentence for the crime which he had taken on his own shoulders.”

“You mean to say that he was base enough to see his friend sentenced for the forgery which he had committed?”

“That is what happened. And to show how Fate’s jests are never half-hearted, but played out to the very end in the finest spirit of comedy, it also happened that the man who was the real criminal not only saw that his friend fulfilled his part of the compact which they had made by suffering the penalty of his confession, but he himself was determined to act up to his part in the compact, for he so rigidly kept his promise to amend his life, that when his friend was released from gaol where he had been confined for more than a year, he refused to see him; the fellow had actually come to believe that he was innocent and that the other had been properly convicted!”

“That is a touch of nature, I think. And what happened then? Surely Nemesis——”

"Nemesis is one of the most useful properties of the man who weaves romances; but sometimes Nature dispenses with Nemesis. And do you know, Miss Severn, I really think that the introduction of Nemesis would spoil this particular story. At any rate I know nothing about the part that Nemesis played in this romance."

"What, you mean to say that you know no more of the story than what you have told me?"

"Don't you think that the story is complete in itself?"

"Not at all; it must have a sequel."

"Oh, everybody knows—your master of the *technique* of romance weaving will bear me out, I am sure—that the sequel to a romance is invariably tame and quite unworthy of the first part. That is why I would rather that Mr. Richmond—or your father tried his hand at the sequel than I—yes, I would like very much to know what your father thinks the sequel should be."

"But surely you know something more of the lives of the two men, Mr. Winwood."

"Yes. I know that the man who suffered went out to Australia and married there—as a matter of fact I got the story from him—it was among his papers when he died; but I never found out what his real name was, and his papers failed to reveal the name of the other man; they only said that he had prospered in every undertaking to which he set his hand; so that you see he was not so unscrupulous a man as one might be led to suppose; he was most scrupulous in adhering to his part of the contract which was, of course, to lead a new life. And this shows the danger that lies in *ex-parte* stories: if one only heard that the man had accepted the sacrifice of his friend on his behalf, one would assume that he was certainly without scruples; whereas you see, he was as a matter of fact most careful to carry out the terms of his compact. I never heard his name either."

There was a pause of considerable duration before Amber said:

"The story is a curious one; but I don't think I should do well to submit it to Mr. Richmond with a view of making a class exercise out of it."

"Well, perhaps... But I should like you to ask your father if he, ever heard a similar story before. If he is so earnest a novel reader as you say he is, the chances are that he has come across such a plot as this, and so will be able to let us know what the artistic finish should be. Here is Overton. I dare say when he has attended Mr. Richmond's classes for a year or two, he will be in a position to say at a moment's notice what the artistic conclusion to my story should be."

It was only when Guy Overton dropped obtrusively into the chair nearest to her that Amber became aware of the fact that only three or four members of Mr. Shirley's party remained on the Terrace. Josephine was still seated in one of the cane chairs and Ernest Clifton had come beside her. Lord Lull-worth and another man were standing together a little way off, still smoking.

"Good gracious! Where are the others?" cried Amber.

"They are taking a final stroll on the lawn," said Guy. "Somebody suggested that it was a bit chilly, and so to prevent the possibility of catching cold they are walking about on the damp grass. You must have been absorbed not to notice them going. Has Miss Severn caught you for the Technical School, Pierce?"

"Miss Severn is just thinking that I am a possible candidate for the next vacant chair," said Pierce.

"A vacant chair? You don't want another chair, do you?" said Guy. "You're not so important as the chap that was told by Lord Rothschild or somebody to take two chairs if he was so big an Injin as he wanted to make out."

Pierce laughed. The story was an old one even in the Australian colonies and every one knows that the stories that have become threadbare in England are shipped off to the colonies with the shape of hat that has been called in and the opera mantle of the year before last.

"I was thinking of the chair of Romance at the School of Literature," said he, "but I should be sorry to interfere with your prospects if you have an eye on it also."

He rose as Lady Severn came up by the side of Mr. Shirley.

Mr. Shirley expressed the hope that Miss Severn had not been bored. She looked so absorbed in whatever tale of the bush Mr. Winwood had been telling her that he felt sure she was being bored, he said. (The people to whom Mr. Shirley was obliged to be polite were so numerous that he felt quite a relaxation in being impolite—when he could be so with impunity—now and again.)

"I never was bored in my life, Mr. Shirley," said Amber. "Bores are the only people that are ever bored. When I hear a man complain that he has been bored I know perfectly well that what he means is that he hasn't had all the chances he looked for of boring other people."

"I think we must look for our wraps," said Lady Severn.

"It's quite time: they're beginning to light the Chinese lanterns," said Guy.

CHAPTER XII

It was while the Australian was telling Amber the story which had interested her so greatly that Ernest Clifton was listening to something that Josephine had to say to him—something that caused him a good deal of spare thought all the time he was driving to his rooms in St. James's Street, and even after he had settled himself in his chair with a small tumbler half filled with Apollinaris on a table at his elbow.

The words that she had spoken to him at that time of soft sounds and lights and garden scents were not

such as he had been accustomed to hear from her; though he could not but acknowledge to himself—he now and again acknowledged something to himself; never to any one else—that he had noticed signs of readiness on her part to say those very words. It had needed all his adroitness—and he had usually a pretty fair share at his command—to prevent her from saying them long ago.

“I wonder if you know how great a strain it is upon me to adhere to the compact which we made last year.”

Those were the words that she had spoken in his ear when the Terrace had become almost deserted, only Amber and Pierce Winwood remaining in the seats they had occupied while drinking their coffee, and she had spoken in so low a tone that, even with the band playing so soft and low as it was, no word could be heard by any one passing their chairs.

He had been slightly startled by her words—he thought now that he had time to think over the matter, that perhaps he should have seemed when in her presence to have been more startled than he actually was. But the fact was that he had been so startled as to be unable to discriminate exactly how startled he should seem.

It required a trained intelligence such as his to appreciate so delicate a train of thought as this. He felt that it would have been more flattering to her if he had seemed more surprised when she had spoken. It would have allowed her to feel that his confidence in her fidelity was absolute and therefore—the logic was his—she would have felt flattered. When a young woman has secretly promised eventually to marry, and in the meantime to love, a certain man, and when in the cool of the evening of a delightful day and a tranquillising dinner she confesses to him that the keeping of the “meantime” clause in her compact subjects her to a great strain, the man should of course seem greatly surprised. If he were to seem otherwise, he would in effect be saying to the girl, “I took it for granted that the strain upon you would be great.”

He could not accuse himself of any deficiency of cleverness in his attitude towards her after she had spoken that surprising sentence. He knew that there was a proper amount of feeling in the way he breathed a sibilant “H’sh—h’sh!” while turning wondering eyes upon her—their expression of surprise being not without a certain element of pain.

“H’sh—for heaven’s sake—my dearest! Oh, Josephine! But... ah, you cannot mean that—that...”

He reflected now that those jerked-out words—those unfinished sentences could scarcely have been surpassed in effect. He hoped that she felt that the hand which he had then laid upon hers, was trembling. He had meant that it should tremble. And yet now when he came to think over it, he was not quite sure that his hand should have trembled. It was just possible that a girl after speaking as she had spoken, would have been more impressed by a thoroughly firm hand touching hers—a hand whose firmness would have given her confidence, compelling her to realise the confidence which he had—well, in himself.

(He was certainly a man of exquisite judgment in subtle shades of expression.)

She had, however, not withdrawn her hand for some seconds—several seconds: the dusk had cast its friendly and fascinating shade over them: the seeming incaution of his attitude was purely imaginary. No one could see the direction taken by his hand or hers.

“I tell you, it is the truth,” she had said, withdrawing her hand. “It is a great strain that you have put upon me, Ernest. I sometimes feel like a criminal—exactly like a criminal—in the presence of my father and my mother.”

“Ah, I thought that you saw with my eyes,” he said, and the pained expression in his voice increased. “I thought that we agreed that it would be madness—your father—he would never give his consent—you yourself said so.”

“I said so—I admit; but—please don’t think that I want to—to—break it off—oh, no; I only mean to say that—that—well, I have said all that I mean to say—it is a great strain upon me and I sometimes feel very miserable about it. You can understand that it should be so, Ernest.”

“I can understand, dearest—heaven knows that I feel how—”

“I don’t know how I ever came to agree to—to all that you put upon me—I really don’t.” She had actually interrupted him with her vehemence. It seemed as if she had not heard that he had begun to speak.

And her eyes were turned, he could see, in the direction of Pierce Winwood—the man who had sat beside her at dinner and who was now sitting beside Amber Severn.

“You agreed to my suggestion because—well, because you knew what you still know—that is, that you loved a man whose hope it is to become worthy of you, Josephine. I admit that I had no right to ask you to listen to me—to hear me tell you that I loved you—when I had nothing to offer you—nothing but years of waiting—years of struggle—years of hope. And now... Josephine, do you wish to be released from your part in the compact which we made a year ago?”

“No, no; I do not wish to be released. What, can it be possible that you have so misunderstood me—that you fancy I am the sort of woman who does not know her own mind—her own heart from one day to another?”

“I know that you are steadfastness itself—only—if I have placed you in an equivocal position—if you feel that the years of waiting... what I feel exactly, my dearest, is that it would be better for both of us to separate now than for—”

“You cannot understand much of my nature if you think for a moment that, after giving you my promise, I would ask you to free me from all that the giving of that promise entailed. But I was thinking that it might be better for us to be frank.”

“Have I ever kept anything from you?”

“I mean that it might be better if you had gone to my father and told him what were your hopes—your prospects—told him that I had given you my promise, and that we meant that nothing should come between us.”

“That would have separated us in a moment—you agreed with me.”

“It might have prevented our meeting and corresponding; but if we were sure of ourselves, would it have separated us in reality? The only separation possible would be brought about by either of us loving some one else; and that we know would be impossible.”

"Dearest, that is the confession which comes from my heart daily—hourly—giving me strength to annihilate time and space, so that the years of our waiting seem no more than hours."

"Oh, I know my own heart, Ernest; and that is why I feel that what I say is true: even though my father should refuse to listen to us, we should still not be separated. In fact I really feel that there would not be so great a barrier between us as there is now when we meet."

"I think I know how you feel," he said; but he had not the smallest notion of how she felt. Barrier? What barrier was she thinking of? He had not the smallest notion of what was in her mind—or for that matter, her heart.

And it seemed that she knew this for she made an attempt to explain herself.

"I mean that the secret which we share together forms a barrier between us—a sort of barrier. I feel every time that I see you, with my mother sitting by not knowing the compact which we have made—every one else too sitting by, having no idea that we are otherwise than free—I feel that I am treating them badly—that I am mean—underhanded—deceitful."

"Ah, my Josephine... Do you fancy that any one suspects?—your friend, Miss Severn?—she is clever—she has been saying something that has frightened you?"

"Oh, cannot you even see that it would be a positive relief if any one was to suspect anything—if any one were to speak out?"

"Good heavens! What a state of nervousness you must have allowed yourself to fall into when you would feel ruin to be a relief to you."

"Ruin?"

"Ruin, I say; because I know that in such a case I should have no chance of getting your father's consent—yes, and not only so: when he came to learn the truth—to be made aware of my presumption he would turn his party against me, and my career would be ruined. Do you think that I am not capable of doing something in the world, Josephine, that you would stand by and see my career ruined?"

"I have every belief in your ability, only—I am not sure that a man should think so much of his career—no, I don't mean that—I only mean that prudence and—and a career may be bought too dearly."

"Prudence—bought too dear?"

"I wonder if, after all, I am so very different from other women in thinking that love is more to be preferred than a career."

"Of course it is, my dearest; but—heavens above, Josephine, would you do me the injustice to believe that I would ask you to make what all the world would call an idiotic match—well, at least an imprudent match?"

"Imprudence? Who is there that can say what is a prudent marriage or what is an imprudent! If people love each other truly... psha! I have actually fallen into the strain of that detestable person—the Other Woman. I dare say that you are right and I am wrong. You see, you are a man and can reason these things out—prudent marriages and so forth; whereas I am only a woman—I cannot reason—I cannot even think—I can only feel."

"Thank heaven for that, Josephine. Ah, believe me, I have looked at this matter from every standpoint, and I long ago came to see that there was nothing for it but to do as we are doing. Believe me, my dear girl, if you were content to marry me to-morrow just as I am, I would not be content to accept such a sacrifice on your part. And for heaven's sake, dearest, do not let any one suspect that there exists between us this—this understanding. Ah, Josephine, you will agree with me in thinking that prudence is everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything—next, of course, to love. But above all, no one must be led to have the least suspicion—"

"Oh, have I not been prudence itself up to the present?" There was a suspicion in her voice—a suspicion of scorn,—he remembered that distinctly as he sat in his rooms recalling the whole scene an hour after it had been enacted. With that note—that half tone of scorn—their little chat ceased, for Guy Overton had come up and after him Lady Severn and Mr. Shirley, so that all that remained for him to do was to give a tender pressure with a look of courteous carelessness that was meant to prevent the possibility of any one with eyes fancying that there was tenderness in his pressure of Miss West's fingers.

And now he was asking himself the question:

"Who is the Other Man?"

Ernest Clifton had a pretty good working acquaintance with the motives of men and women—not perhaps, quite so complete an acquaintance with these motives as he fancied he had, but still a very fair knowledge; and therefore he was asking himself that question:

"Who is the Other Man?"

He had had a good deal of trouble persuading Josephine during the preceding autumn to agree to engage herself to marry him. It had not been done in a minute. He had never before had such difficulty persuading a girl to give him such a promise. She was what physicians call "an obstinate case." Hers was psychologically an obstinate case; but she had yielded at last to his treatment, and had given him her promise.

He flattered himself that it was his own cleverness—his own cleverness of argument—his own personality, for was not cleverness part of his personality?—that had brought her to perceive that she would be doing well to promise to marry him and at the same time to keep that promise a secret from her own father and mother and all the world besides. He remembered how he had impressed her by his story of his early struggles. He had appealed to her imagination by telling her how humble his career had been in its beginning—how, being the third son of a doctor in a village in Warwickshire, he had been thrown on the world to shift for himself when he was sixteen years of age—how he had, while working as a reporter on the staff of a Birmingham newspaper, starved himself in order to have money enough to pass University examinations and take a degree and, later on, to get called to the Bar. He told her how he had given up much of his time when practically behind the scenes at Birmingham to the study of the political machinery of a great party, with the result that he had worked himself into the position of the Secretary of the Organisation, becoming a power in his political party—a man with whom in critical times, the Head of the Cabinet had conferred before

venturing upon legislation that might have a tendency to alienate a considerable proportion of his friends.

And Josephine had listened to him, and had fully appreciated his contention that for such a man as he hoped to become, the choice of a wife was a matter of supreme importance. He had given her to understand that his ideal woman was one to whom her husband would apply for counsel when he needed it—one who would be her husband's right hand in all matters. He had seen enough, he said, to make him aware of the fact that those men who were willing to relegate their wives to a purely domestic position were the men who were themselves eventually relegated by their party to a purely domestic position: they became the domestics of their party mainly, he believed, because they had been foolish enough—conceited enough, for there is no such fool as your conceited politician—to fancy that nowadays—nay, that at any time in the history of the country, the wife of the political leader should occupy a humbler place than the political leader himself.

He had prevailed upon her, first, by stimulating her interest in himself, and secondly, by stimulating her ambition—he knew that she had ambition—and she had agreed, but only after considerable difficulty on his part, to accept his assurance that for some time at least, it would be well for their engagement to remain a secret, even from her father and mother. He had reason for knowing, he told her, that her father was antagonistic to him, on account of his alleged interference—"interference" was the word that Mr. West had freely employed at the time—with the constituency which he represented at a rather critical time. He knew, he said, that it would require time to clear the recollection of this unhappy incident from her father's mind, so that to ask him for his consent to their engagement would be hopeless.

Well, she had, after great demur, consented to give him her promise, and to preserve the matter a secret.

And now he was sitting in his chair asking himself the question:

"Who is the Other Man?"

He was unable to answer the question; all that he could do was to keep his eyes open.

But as this was the normal state of his eyes he knew that he was not subjecting them to any condition that threatened astygia.

CHAPTER XIII

While Mr. Ernest Clifton was thinking over the question, the answer to which he believed to be vital to his interests, Amber Severn was hanging on the arm of her father as they strolled together about their rose-garden under the cool stars of the summer night. She was keeping the promise she had made to Pierce Winwood and was telling him the story—it struck her as being curious—which Pierce Winwood had told to her.

It seemed too that she had not overestimated the element of the curious which it contained, for before she had gone very far with it her father who had been, when she begun the narrative, stooping down every now and again to smell the roses as he moved from bed to bed, was standing still, quite as engrossed in hearing the story from her as she had been in hearing it from the Australian.

When she came to the end, he put his hands in his pockets, and drew a long breath, gazing, not at her face, but in an abstracted way, over her head into the distance of the shrubbery. There was a silence of considerable duration before he said,—and once again he seemed to draw a long breath:

"What did you say is the name of the man—the Australian—I was paying so little attention to you, I regret to say, when you began your story, I have actually forgotten it?"

"Pierce Winwood," replied Amber. "I mentioned the name to you a few days ago when I told you that I had met him. You said you did not recollect hearing it before, but I now see that you recall it."

"You are wrong, my dear; I do not recall anyone of that name," said her father. And then he turned away from her, looking up to the topmost windows of the house, which were glowing one by one, as the servants switched on the lights in turn, preparing the rooms for the night.

Amber was a little struck at his way of taking the story. It appeared to her that he must have heard it all before, for he had not given any exclamation of surprise while she dwelt on some of the details that seemed to her rather marvellous. His attitude on hearing it to its close, was, she thought, that of a person whose distant memories have been awakened.

"What did he say was the name of the man—the man to whom the thing happened?" he asked, after another and a longer pause.

"He was unable to give me any name—either the name of the man who was falsely imprisoned or the one who allowed himself to be saved by the falsehood," replied Amber.

"Ah... I wonder if he is anxious to find out either of those names."

"He said nothing about that. He only told me the story because we had been talking about the romance of the colonies," said Amber.

"Ah..."

"But now that I come to think of the way he dwelt on some of the details in the story he must take a more than ordinary amount of interest in the people of that little drama—the story would make a very good play, I think."

"That is just what I have been thinking—a very good play. You really fancy that he took a personal interest in some of the details?"

"Well, it did not seem so to me at the moment, I must confess; but as I said just now, the more I think of it the more I feel... but perhaps I exaggerate... I can only tell you what is my impression now."

"That is almost certain to be accurate, my dear. I am sure that you have been led to believe that I heard the story before. Of course I heard it before. What surprised me was becoming aware of the fact that I was not alone in my acquaintance with the details of the story—the man who was innocent suffering for the one who was guilty."

"The strangest part seems to me to be that of the guilty man being content to see the innocent suffer. Is it possible that such a man could exist?"

"There are few men in existence possessing sufficient strength of mind to stand silently by while some one else—their closest friend—is suffering in their place."

"Strength of mind? Strength of—well, they may have strength of mind,—but what about their hearts? Oh, such men could have no hearts."

"When men set out in life with a determination that their ambition shall be realised they find that their best ally is that process of nature known as atrophy, my dear: they get rid of their hearts to make way for their ambition. At the same time you should remember that atrophy is as much a process of nature as those other processes which we associate with the action of the heart."

"Oh, yes; I acknowledge that; and our abhorrence of the man with the atrophied heart is quite as natural as the process known as atrophy."

Sir Creighton laughed.

"And you will be able to tell Mr. Winwood the names of the people—the two men: the man with the heart and the man with the ambition?" continued Amber.

"I could tell him both names; but I am not certain that I should tell him so much as one of them," said her father. "At any rate, you are going to ask him to dinner. By the way, who did you say sat with him at the little feast to-night—you said he told you the story after dinner?"

"Josephine sat beside him. I think mother mentioned it when we returned," said Amber.

"Of course she did," said her father. "I had forgotten for the moment. And I suppose one may take it for granted that Josephine and he got on all right?"

"I'm sure they did. I hadn't a chance of asking her. Oh, of course, they got on all right; Joe isn't the girl to let a stranger feel 'heavy and ill at ease,' as the song says."

"That occurred to me. And the man—would he tell her the story too? Oh, I don't suppose that he would have the chance at the dinner table. He isn't in the position of the Ancient Mariner."

"I don't suppose he would have told me if we hadn't begun to talk about Australian romances. He had a groom who used to play polo at Ranelagh—and a stock rider too. Funny, isn't it?"

"Very funny. You came to the conclusion that he was a good sort of chap?"

"You mean Mr. Winwood? Oh, yes, he is very nice."

"I think you might ask Josephine to come on whatever night you invite him. Make it a small party, Amber."

"I'll make it as small as you please, if you want to talk to him afterwards. Why should not I ask him to drop in to lunch? that will be more informal, and besides, we really haven't a spare evening for three weeks to come."

"A capital idea! Yes, ask him to lunch. Only he may not have a spare morning for as many weeks. Don't forget Josephine: meantime we'll go to our beds and have a sleep or two. Who sat beside you at dinner?"

"Lord Lullworth. A nice—no, he might be nice only that he's pig-headed. He ridiculed the school."

They had walked towards the house, and now they were standing together at the foot of the flight of steps leading to the door by which they meant to enter.

"He ridiculed the school, did he? Well, your friend Willie Bateman will tell us that he could not do more for the school than that. By the way, did this Mr. Winwood bind you down to secrecy in regard to his story?"

"On the contrary he asked me to tell it to you; but now that I come to think of it he said he would rather that I didn't tell it to Mr. Richmond: you see I suggested before he told it to me that it would serve—possibly—as an exercise for one of the classes."

"I think he was right. I would advise you to refrain from telling it to Mr. Richmond or in fact to any one. I would even go the length of refraining from telling it to Josephine."

"What! oh, he did not tell me to keep it such a secret as all that. Why shouldn't I tell it to Joe?"

"Why should you tell it to her. It may concern this Mr. Winwood more closely than you think. You remember what the knowing man says in one of Angler's comedies?—'When any one tells me a story of what happened to a friend of his, I know pretty well who that friend is.'"

"You mean to say that it is—that it was—"

"I mean to say nothing more, and I would advise you to follow my example. Good-night, my dear. Don't give too much of your thought to the question of who Mr. Winwood's friend is—or was. He told you he was dead, didn't he?"

"Yes, he said that he was dead and that he didn't even know what his name was."

"Ah, well, I have the better of him there. Goodnight."

He kissed her, and she suffered herself to be kissed by him, but was too far lost in thought to be able to return his valediction.

She went to her dressing-room; but she heard her father go down the corridor to his study before she had reached the first lobby. She could not, however, hear the way he paced the floor of his study for some minutes before throwing himself upon his sofa, or she might have come to the conclusion that the story which she had repeated to him concerned him much more closely than it did.

But he was a scientific man and his methods of thought were scientific.

"A coincidence—a coincidence!" he muttered. "Yes, one of those coincidences that are carefully arranged for. He never would have told her the story but for the fact of his hearing that I knew all about it. It would have been a coincidence if he had told her the story without knowing who she was."

He resumed his pacing of the room for some minutes longer, but then, with an impatient word, he extinguished the lights.

"Psha!" he said. "What does it amount to after all? Not much, only I never thought it possible that all that old business would ever be revived. I fancied that it was dead and buried long ago. It's a pity—a great pity. Yes, that's what I think now. But..."

He remained for a minute or two in the dark, but whatever his thoughts were he did not utter them. He went silently upstairs to his room.

When Amber saw Josephine a couple of days later and asked her to drop in to lunch on the following Friday, Josephine said she would be delighted; but when Amber mentioned immediately afterwards, that Pierce Winwood would probably be the only stranger of the party she was rather surprised to notice a little flush upon Josephine's face followed by a little drawing down of the corners of her mouth, and the airiest shadow of a frown—perhaps a pout.

"Did you say Friday?" Josephine asked in a tone that suggested a vocal sequence to the tiny frown that might have been a pout.

"Yes, I said Friday and you said you would come. Don't try to make out now that you misunderstood me," cried Amber.

"I'm not going to try. Only——"

"Only what? Why should you dislike meeting Mr. Winwood? Did you expect me to ask Guy Overton or Mr. Richmond—or was it Arthur you had set your heart on? Didn't you find Mr. Winwood entertaining?"

"Entertaining? Entertaining?" Josephine looked at her strangely for a few moments and then gave a laugh. "Entertaining?" she said again. "I really never gave a thought to the question as to whether he was entertaining or the reverse. The men who entertain one are not always the people one wants to meet again. I think that there's hardly any one so dull as the man who tries to be entertaining."

"Then what have you against Mr. Winwood?" asked Amber.

"Did I say that I had somewhat against him?" cried Josephine quickly and with quite unnecessary vehemence. "Now, don't say that I suggested to you that I disliked this Mr. Winwood. I was only—only surprised. Why should you ask me to meet him again? There was no need for me ever to meet him again. People come together at dinner or at a dance and separate and—and—that's all right. Why shouldn't this Mr. Winwood be allowed to drift away after this comfortable and accommodating manner?"

Amber stared at her. Her face was almost flushed with the vehemence of her words, and there was a strange sparkle in her eyes. Amber stared at this inexplicable display of feeling. She wondered what on earth had come over her friend Josephine, and had opened her mouth to say so, when Josephine prevented her speaking.

"Now, don't say—what you're going to say," she cried, lifting up both her hands in an exaggerated attitude of protest which, however, but imperfectly concealed the increased flush upon her face. "Don't say that I'm an idiot, my beloved girl, because I happen to have—to have taken an unaccountable dislike to your Mr. Winwood. I haven't—I give you my word I haven't in reality—as a matter of fact I think that I could almost like him, if I did not—that is to say, *if* I did not—do the other thing. There you are now."

"What's the other thing?" asked Amber.

"Good gracious! what's the opposite to liking a man?"

"Loving a man," cried Amber.

Josephine's flush vanished. It was her turn to stare. She stared as a cold search-light stares.

Then she said coldly:

"I dislike your Mr. Winwood—I—I—I wonder if I don't actually hate him. Yes, I feel that I must actually hate him or I shouldn't be looking forward to meeting him so eagerly as I do. That's the truth for you, my dear Amber—the truth—whatever that may mean."

"I wish you were not coming on Friday," said Amber, after a long, thoughtful and embarrassing pause.

"So do I. But I swear to you that nothing shall prevent my lunching with you on Friday," cried Josephine.

And then after a moment of gravity which Amber thought might be simulated in a kind of spirit of parody of her own gravity, Josephine burst out laughing and then hurried away.

Amber felt completely puzzled by her attitude. She did not know what to make of her flushing—of her frowning—of her pouting—least of all of her outburst of laughter.

She thought over what Josephine had said; but, of course, that was no assistance to her.

If one cannot arrive at any satisfactory interpretation of a girl's flushing and frowning and laughing one is not helped forward to any appreciable extent by recalling her words.

Amber wished with all her heart that her father had not suggested to her the asking of Josephine to this confidential little lunch which he had projected.

CHAPTER XIV

If Josephine came with great reluctance to lunch with her dearest friend because of her precipitate dislike to Mr. Winwood, she was of course sufficiently a woman of the world to avoid betraying in any way that might cause her friend to feel uncomfortable, her antipathy to him—perhaps antipathy was too strong a word to *think*, Amber thought; but she felt that if she did Josephine an injustice in letting so strong a word come into her mind in this connection, the mystic manner—the absurd and inexplicable contradictoriness of Josephine was alone accountable for it.

Amber felt a little nervous in observing the attitude of Mr. Winwood in respect of Josephine. If he were to give any sign of returning Josephine's—well, not antipathy—uncongeniality would be a better word, Amber felt that she should have just cause for annoyance.

The result of her observation of him was to relieve her mind of its burden of doubt. He looked more than pleased when he found himself face to face with Miss West.

And then it was that Amber first came to perceive that Pierce Winwood was a very good-looking man. He had a frank way of standing in front of one that somehow suggested a schoolboy thirsting for information from his betters.

"I thought that London was a place where one never found out the name of one's next door neighbour and never met the same person twice, but I am glad to discover my mistake," said he when Josephine had shaken hands with him.

And then Amber breathed freely.

And Josephine treated him with positive cordiality—"How amazingly well a woman can conceal her real feelings," was Amber's thought when she noticed how pleasantly her friend smiled looking straight into Mr. Winwood's face while she said:

"I think our life here quite delightful: we need only meet a second time the people whom we like. In the country one is compelled to take the goats with the sheep: one has no choice in the matter."

"A second time?" said he. "What about a third time? Is a third time possible?"

"Almost inevitable—if one passes the second time," said Josephine.

"You are building up my hopes," he said, turning away from her.

She was petting the Persian cat, Shagpat by name.

And at this moment Sir Creighton entered the room and his daughter noticed the quick scrutiny that he gave to the face of the younger man. She also noticed the return of that nervous awkwardness which the younger man had displayed on meeting her on the Sunday afternoon. It never occurred to her that the man who called himself Pierce Winwood and who said that his father had once known hers might be an impostor.

Sir Creighton shook hands with him and said he was glad that he was able to come.

"There are so many things going on just now, are there not?" he said. "And I suppose you are anxious to attend everything, Mr. Winwood."

"One must lunch somewhere," said Amber. "Lunch is a sort of postscript to one's breakfast in London town," said Sir Creighton. "I don't suppose that any one except we working men can get over breakfast before eleven. What time does your father breakfast on the morning after a late sitting of the House, Josephine?"

"He is invariably the first one of the household to be in the breakfast room," said Josephine.

"I find people in London the earliest to bed and the earliest to rise of any I have ever known," remarked Winwood. "I was led into Bohemia the other evening. I found it the most orderly and certainly the earliest of communities. The greater number of the revellers drank nothing but Apollinaris and hurried off to catch suburban trains."

"I heard some one say the other day that the Underground Railway has done more to advance the cause of temperance than all the lecturers in the world," said Lady Severn.

"I am afraid that even the once potent magic-lantern must take a second place as a reforming agent," said Sir Creighton.

"I believe that there is still one real Bohemian alive in London to-day," said Josephine. "He is one of the aborigines and he is as carefully looked after as if he were a Maori or a Pitcairn Islander."

"He was pointed out to me," said Winwood. "He is, I hear, the sole survivor of a once dilapidated community. He forms an excellent example to those who may fancy that there was anything fascinating in mediocrity combined with potatoes." And all this time Amber perceived that her father was scrutinising the face of Pierce Winwood, but giving no indication that he recalled in the face of the son any of the features of the father, whom her father was supposed to know.

The conversation which was being eked out until the meal should be announced became too attenuated even to serve this purpose, but just at the right moment the relief came; and of course when the little party had settled down at the table topics were not wanting, and also as a matter of course every topic had to be general: there was no possibility of Sir Creighton and Winwood discussing between themselves any matter that they might have to discuss. Amber, who gave herself up to observing everything, came to the conclusion that on the whole her father was favourably impressed by the personality of the Australian; but somehow the latter did not succeed in inducing Josephine to talk as she usually could talk. She was not so silent as to call for remark; but there was at the table none of that "forced draught" conversation which Sir Creighton usually found so stimulating.

When the two men were left together, and had lighted cigars, the younger did not wait for his host to lead

up to the question of his identity.

"I have been wondering, with some anxiety, Sir Creighton, if I have yet suggested any person to your memory."

"I am a scientific man, and therefore not quite so liable as most people to accept fancies on the same basis as real evidence," said Sir Creighton. "It would be impossible for me to say that your features suggested to me those of any man with whom I was acquainted years ago—how many years ago?"

Winwood shook his head.

"I cannot say how many years ago it was that you were acquainted with my father," he said. "I thought that perhaps—no one has ever suggested a likeness between my father and myself, still I thought—well, one often sees transmitted some personal trait—some mannerism that recalls an individuality. That is a scientific truth, is it not, Sir Creighton?"

"It is highly scientific," said Sir Creighton with a laugh. "Yes, on that basis, I admit that—once or twice, perhaps—a recollection seemed to be awakened; but—what is in my mind at this moment, is the imitation of well-known actors to which one is treated in unguarded moments by popular entertainers. I dare say that you have noticed also that it is only when the entertainer has announced the name of the well-known actor whom he imitates that the imitation becomes plausible. Now, although I occasionally boast of being influenced only by scientific methods, still I fancy that if I knew the name of your father I should have less difficulty recalling the man whose personalities—that is some of them—a few—are echoed by you. I knew no one bearing the name Winwood."

"You ask me the question which I was in hopes you could answer, Sir Creighton," said Winwood. "I had no idea that the name by which my father was known during the forty years or so that he lived in the colony was an assumed one. I never found out what was his real one. To say the truth, it is only recently that my curiosity on this point has been aroused. In a young colony there is a good deal of uncertainty with regard to names."

"I dare say. You told my daughter a curious and an almost incredible story, however, and she repeated it to me," said Sir Creighton.

"You will not tell me that you never heard that story before," cried the younger man, half rising from his seat. "If you tell me so, I shall feel uncommonly like an impostor."

"Oh, no; I heard all the details of that story long ago," replied Sir Creighton. "Only, as it was told to me I fail to see what bearing it has upon your identity."

"The man who suffered in the place of his friend was my father, Sir Creighton," said Winwood. "Now you know the name of the original actor of whose personality I have been giving you imitations—faint imitations, I dare say."

"Yes, now I know; and I admit that I see the original much more clearly," said Sir Creighton laughing. But his listener was not laughing. He was leaning his head on his hand, his elbow being on the table, and seemed to be lost in thought. There was no elation in his expression at Sir Creighton's admission.

Sir Creighton became equally grave in a moment.

"It was the cruellest thing and the most heroic thing ever done in the world," said he in a low voice. "It was to me your father told the truth about that confession of his, and he did so only on my promising in the most solemn way that I would keep the matter a secret. I often wonder if I was justified in adhering to my promise."

"When he told me the story he rather prided himself on his judgment in selecting you as his confidant," said Winwood. "Yes; he said that he knew he could trust you to keep his secret."

"I don't think that I would have kept it if he had entrusted it to me before he had suffered his imprisonment," said Sir Creighton. "He did not do so, however, until his release and when he was on the point of sailing for South America—it was for South America he sailed, not Australia."

"He remained for nearly five years in Rio Janeiro," said Winwood. "The training which we received at the engineering works he was able to turn to good account at Rio, and so far as I could gather he made enough money to give him a start in Australia. He succeeded and I think he was happy. It was not until he had reached his last year that he told me the story."

"He did so without any bitterness in regard to the other man, I am sure," said Sir Creighton.

"Without a single word of reproach," said Winwood. "He really felt glad that the other man had prospered—he told me that he had prospered and that he had reached a high position in the world."

"You see your father rightly thought of himself as having saved the man from destruction; not merely from the disgrace which would have been the direct result of his forgery being discovered, but from the contemptible life which he was leading. I don't know if your father told you that one of the conditions of the strange compact between them was that he would change his life; and for once the man fulfilled that part of his compact. Your father saved him."

Winwood nodded in assent, while he still allowed his head to rest on his hand, as if he were lost in thought.

Suddenly he turned his eyes upon Sir Creighton, then drew his chair closer to him, and leaning forward, said:

"Sir Creighton, will you tell me what is the name of that man?"

Sir Creighton was awaiting this question. He had been considering for the previous two days what answer he should return to this question, and yet he felt taken somewhat unawares for he did not expect that his conversation with Winwood would lead to a view of his father's act from the standpoint from which it now seemed that he regarded it.

"It appears to me that your father had his own reasons—very excellent reasons too—for refraining from telling you either his own name or the name of the man whom he saved from destruction," he said. "I wonder if I have any right to make you acquainted with what he withheld. What is your opinion on this matter?"

"I asked you to tell me the man's name, Sir Creighton," replied Winwood.

"I have no doubt that you are intensely interested in the search for his name," said Sir Creighton. "But do you really think that I should be justified in telling you what your father clearly meant to remain a secret? Just at present I feel very strongly that I have no right to do this. If any one would be happier for my telling you the man's name I dare say that I might, at least, be tempted to do so; but no one would be the happier for it. On the contrary, you yourself would, I know, be sorry that I told you the name of the man, and as for the man—as I am acquainted with him to-day and have some respect for him—"

"Some respect?"

"Some respect—in fact, in spite of my knowing all that I do, a good deal of respect—as, I repeat, I have no desire to make him unhappy, I shall not tell you what is his name—I shall not tell him that the son of the man whom he allowed to suffer for his crime, is alive and anxious to know all about him."

"You mean that you will not tell me—just yet."

"That is exactly what is in my mind at this moment. I should have added those words of yours 'just yet,' to what I said regarding both you—and the man. I may think it due to you to tell you some day; and I may also think it due to—the man to tell him. Meantime—not just yet—I hope you are not unsatisfied, my boy?"

Sir Creighton put out his hand with more than cordiality—absolute tenderness, and the younger man took it, and was deeply affected.

"I am satisfied—more than satisfied," he said in a low voice. "I shall try to be worthy of such a father as I had."

"You are worthy, my boy—I know it now," said Sir Creighton. "You do not shrink from self-sacrifice. I hoped to find that my old friend had such a son as you. I may be able to do something for you—to help you in a way that—that—oh, we need not lay plans for the future; it is only such plans that are never realised. Now I think we can face the drawing-room."

CHAPTER XV

Josephine was saying good-bye to Lady Severn and Amber was doing her best to induce her to stay. As the two men paused outside the drawing-room door there was a *frou-frou* of laughter within the room—the rustle of the drapery of a flying jest at Amber's insistence.

"You will not go, please," said Pierce when Amber appealed to him to stand between the door and Josephine. "You cannot go just at the moment of my return, especially as Miss Severn has promised to show me the roses."

"The argument is irresistible," said Josephine with a little shrug following a moment of irresolution. "But that was not Amber's argument, I assure you."

"I merely said that I expected some of my friends to come to me to report their progress," said Amber.

"That seems to me to be an irresistible reason for a hurried departure," said Sir Creighton.

"Oh, I wouldn't suggest that they were so interesting as that," said Josephine, with a laugh, a laugh that made one—some one—think of the laughter of a brook among mossy stones.

"Interesting enough to run away from?" said Pierce. "Well, any one who is interesting enough for Miss West to run away from is certainly interesting enough for an ordinary person to stay for—but for that matter, I did not suggest that I was going away."

"You saved us the trouble of insisting on your staying—for some time, at any rate," said Lady Severn.

"As long as you can after the arrival of the objects of interest," said Sir Creighton.

"And now I think we may go among the roses without reproach," said Josephine.

She led the way out to the terrace and then down the steps into the garden, and was followed by Amber and Pierce, and for half an hour they strolled about the rose beds, Amber being every minute more amazed at the self-repression of Josephine in regard to Mr. Winwood. Although she had frankly acknowledged that she had formed a dislike to Mr. Winwood, she had not only come to lunch when she knew that he would be the only other guest, but she had allowed herself to be easily persuaded to stay on after the hour when without being thought impolite, she might have gone away.

And she was not even content with these tokens of self-abnegation, for here she was after the lapse of half an hour, still conversing with Mr. Winwood when really she had no need to remain for longer than ten minutes in the garden!

And she was actually pretending to take an interest in all that he was saying, an interest so absorbing as to give Amber herself an impression of being neglected.

She had always felt that Josephine was indeed a true friend, but she had never before had offered to her so impressive a series of tokens of her friendship. The friendship that dissembles a rooted dislike for a fellow-visitor is of sterling quality Amber felt; and with this feeling there was joined one of admiration for the way in which her friend played her part.

Poor Mr. Winwood! He might really have believed from her manner that he had favourably impressed Josephine. Once or twice Amber fancied that she saw on his face a certain look that suggested that he was gratified at his success in holding the attention of the fair dissembler by his side.

Poor Mr. Winwood!

Perhaps Josephine was carrying the thing too far—perhaps she was over-emphasising her attitude of polite

attention. It would, the kind-hearted young woman felt, be a very melancholy thing if so good a sort of man as this Mr. Winwood were led to fancy that—that—oh, well, no doubt in the colonies young men were more simple-minded than those at home—more susceptible to the charming manners of a beautiful girl, being less aware of the frequency with which charming manners are used—innocently perhaps—to cloak a girl's real feelings. It would, she felt, be truly sad if this man were to go away under the belief that he was creating a lasting impression upon Josephine; whereas, all the time, it was only her exquisite sense of what was due to her host and hostess—it was only her delicate appreciation of what her friendship for Amber herself demanded of her, that led her to simulate a certain pleasure from associating with Mr. Winwood.

The kind thoughtfulness of Miss Severn not merely for the present but for the future comfort of at least one of her guests was causing her some slight uneasiness. She became aware of the fact that her mother was making a sign to her from one of the windows of the drawing-room that opened upon the terrace walk.

"Some of my visitors must have arrived already," she cried. "Oh, yes, it is Guy. You must not run away. He would feel that you were rude."

"And he would be right: he has his sensitive intervals," said Winwood. "We should not hurt his feelings."

"You will not run away at once?" said Amber tripping towards the house. "Oh, thank you."

They showed no sign of having any great desire to run away.

"I never felt less inclined to run away than I do just now," said Winwood, looking at the girl who remained by his side.

"You are so fond of roses—you said so."

She was holding up to her face a handful of crimson petals that she had picked off one of the beds.

"Yes, I am fond of—of roses," he said. "Somehow England and all things that I like in England are associated in my mind with roses."

"It is the association of the East with the West," said she. "The rose that breathes its scent through every eastern love song is still an English emblem; just as that typical Oriental animal, the cat, suggests no more of its native jungle than is to be found in the Rectory Garden."

"And the turtle of the tropics does not send one's thoughts straying to Enoch Arden's island and the coral lagoon but only to the Mansion House and a city dinner."

She laughed.

"I am sorry I mentioned the cat," she said. "The first English rose I ever saw was when we were in camp with Methuen at the Modder River," he said.

He had taken her by surprise. "You went through the campaign?" she cried and he saw a new interest shining in her eyes. "I did not hear that you had been a soldier. You did not mention it when you sat beside me at Ranelagh. You were one of the Australians?"

"We were talking of roses," said he. "It was out there I saw an English rose at Christmas. It had been sent out to a trooper who had been at Chelsea Barracks, by his sweetheart. Her brother was a gardener and the rose had evidently been grown under glass to send out to him."

"There is one English love-story with the scent of the rose breathing through it," she cried. "'My luv is like a redde redde rose' is an English song—the rose you speak of was red, of course."

"Yes," he replied after a little pause; "it was red—red when I found it—under his tunic."

She caught her breath with the sound of a little sob in her throat.

"The pity of it! the pity of it! she had sent it out for his grave."

She put her face once again down to the crimson petals which remained in her hands; and when she let them drop to the grass he saw that two of them were clinging together.

"That was the first time I saw an English rose," he said, "and I have never seen one since without thinking of what it symbolised. The love that is stronger than death."

"Yes," she said, "yes."

And, curiously enough, it seemed that that word was the most complete commentary upon the little story that he had told to her in so few sentences. It also seemed to suggest something of the nature of a comment upon his last remark—a confidential comment.

He nodded, repeating the word, but with a longer interval between the repetition of it:

"Yes—yes."

For a few moments they stood together in silence. The sound of voices—a faint murmur—came from the open window of the drawing-room. The note of a blackbird from Kensington Gardens thrilled through the air.

As if under the influence of the one impulse, Josephine and her companion walked once more down the garden—slowly—musingly—silently. It was not until they had made a complete circuit of the rose beds and had returned to the parterre where they had been standing, that he said:

"Yes—yes: I know that I shall never see a rose again without thinking that—that—I have been among the roses with you."

He noticed that she gave a little start—was it a shudder?—and then glanced quickly towards him. She made a motion with one of her hands—she drew a sudden breath and said quickly in a low tone:

"Mr. Winwood—I think—that is—oh, let us go into the house. I never wish to walk in a garden of roses again."

He knew that whatever she had meant to say when she drew that long breath, she had not said it: she had broken down and uttered something quite different from what had been on her mind—on her lips.

Already she was half way to the terrace steps, and she had run up them and was within the room before he moved.

She was greeting some one in the room. How loud her laugh was!

And yet he had thought half an hour before that he had never heard so low a laugh as hers!—the laughter of a brook among mossy stones.

But a spate had taken place.

He went down once more to the end of the garden alone thinking his thoughts.

And when, five minutes later, he went slowly up the terrace steps he found that Josephine had gone away.

“She said good-bye to you before she left the garden, did she not?” cried Amber, while he glanced round the room.

“Oh, yes, she said good-bye,” he replied.

And then he cried out, seeing Guy Overton on a stool:

“Hullo, you here? Why, I thought that this was one of your school days.”

Amber had never before heard him speak in so boisterous a tone. He usually spoke in a low voice.

And she had also noticed that Josephine had laughed much louder than was her wont.

But she was sure that Josephine had not been rude to him. Josephine was not one of those horrid girls who cannot be clever without being rude.

CHAPTER XVI

Guy has been telling me all about his great investment,” cried Amber. “You never mentioned it to us, Mr. Winwood. But perhaps you didn’t hear of it?”

“You were the first one to whom I told it,” said Guy looking at her sentimentally. His tone was syrupy with sentimentality.

Pierce laughed quite boisterously. “What has he been doing?” he said. “I certainly heard nothing of it. It hasn’t yet been put into the hands of that Mr. Bateman, the advertiser whom I have been eluding for the past fortnight. Have you bought the Duke’s racers or what?”

“Not much,” said Guy. “I’ve got something more solid for my money.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” said Pierce. “I saw one of the Duke’s racers and in the matter of solidity—but what have you bought?”

“The Gables—I’ve just bought The Gables. You must come down and see me, Pierce, old chap—you really must.”

He had the air of the old-fashioned proprietor—the owner of broad acres and so forth.

“I can see you quite well enough from where I stand—that is, when you keep still. Don’t wriggle about, sonny, but tell me what are The Gables? Whose gables have you been buying?”

“What are The Gables? What are—oh, he has just come from Australia. He has never heard of the historic mansion—see the agent’s catalogue—The historic mansion known as The Gables. Why, don’t you know enough of the history of your native land to be aware of the fact that it was at The Gables that King Charles the First—or was it Henry the First?—signed something or other.”

“Magna Charta?” suggested Pierce blandly.

“No, not Magna Charta,” said Guy with the natural irritation of a great scholar who, on forgetting for a moment an important name or date, hears the haphazard prompting of a tyro. “Not Magna Charta—that was somewhere else. Never mind, Nell Gwyn once lived at The Gables,” he added proudly. “You’ve heard of Nell Gwyn, I suppose?”

“Not in connection with the history of my native land, Mr. Overton. You will search in vain the history of Australia from the earliest date to find any allusion there to a visit from Nell Gwyn,” said Pierce. “But I’ve had fifteen houses pointed out to me within the four-mile radius, in each of which Nell Gwyn lived. And yet the greatest authority on the subject says she never lived in any but two.”

“Well, The Gables was one of them,” said Guy. “I should know it for the place is mine. I’ve just bought it.”

“The dearest old house by the river that was ever seen,” said Amber. “You must have seen it, Mr. Winwood. On the way to Hurley—you told us you went to Hurley. The river is at the bottom of the lawn.”

“Yes, in summer; but in the winter the lawn is at the bottom of the river—why it was Guy himself who told me that some friend of his had said that,” laughed Pierce. “Anyhow you’ve bought the place. Bravo, Guy! You got it cheap?”

“Not so cheap as I meant when I set out to do it,” said Guy. “But another chap was in the running for it too—a brewer chap! Disgusting, isn’t it, that all these fine old places are getting into the hands of that sort of man?”

“It is revolting to the old stock like you and me, Guy,” responded Pierce with great solemnity.

“I got the historic mansion, the grounds with the wreck of three boats and two boathouses—the stables and a piggery—a decent sized piggery—accommodate a family of seventeen. I don’t suppose that I’ll ever want more than seventeen pigs at one time. The piggery is the only part of the place that has been occupied for the past two years. I got the furniture at a valuation too.”

“And the pigs?” suggested Pierce.

“Oh, I won’t need the pigs. I’m going to ask a crowd of you chaps down some Saturday,” said Guy, and he

could not for the life of him understand why Lady Severn as well as Amber and Winwood burst out laughing. He thought it as well to allow himself to be persuaded that he had said something witty, so he too began to laugh; but he laughed so entirely without conviction that every one else in the room roared.

"Why shouldn't I have a crowd down to keep me company?" he enquired blandly. "What's the good of having a country house unless to entertain one's friends. I'm going down as soon as I can. I'm not such a fool as to keep up two establishments. I have been paying two pounds a week for my rooms in town up to the present. That's a lot of money, you know."

"You'll be able to save something now," said Pierce.

"Not so much in the beginning. The house is not more than a couple of miles from your place, Lady Severn," said Guy, and at this further suggestion of cause and effect there was another laugh.

He felt that he had joined a merry party.

"I don't believe that it can be more than four miles from The Weir," said Amber, "so that we shall be constantly meeting."

"Yes—yes—I foresaw that," acquiesced Guy. "And I hope the first Sunday that you are at The Weir, you will come up to my place and give me a few hints about the furniture and things. Shouldn't I have a cow? I've been thinking a lot about a cow. And yet I don't know. If I get a cow I must have some one to look after it. And yet if I don't get a cow I'm sure to be cheated in my milk and butter."

"Yes, you are plainly on the horns of a dilemma," said Pierce, going across the room to say good-bye to Lady Severn, and then returning to shake hands with Amber.

"I hope that you and papa had a satisfactory chat together," she said with a note of enquiry in her voice.

"A most satisfactory chat: I think that I convinced him that I was not an impostor."

And so he went away, narrowly watched by Guy, especially when he was speaking to Amber. Guy did not at all like that confidential exchange of phrases in an undertone. Pierce was clearly worth having an eye on.

"I knew you'd be interested in hearing of my purchase," he remarked to Amber, assuming the confidential tone that Pierce had dropped.

"Oh, yes; we are both greatly interested, mother and I," said Amber. "But what about your work at the school? I hope you don't intend to give up your work at the school."

There was something half-hearted in his disclaimer. He cried:

"Oh, no—no—of course not!" but it was plain that his words did not carry conviction with them to Amber, for she shook her head doubtfully.

"I'm afraid that if you give all your time up to considering the question of cows and things of that type you'll not have much time left to perfect yourself in literature," she said.

There was a kind of hang-literate expression on his face when she had spoken, and she did not fail to notice it; she had shaken her head once more before he hastened to assure her that he had acquired his new possession mainly to give himself a chance of doing some really consecutive literary work.

"The fact is," said he, "I find that the distractions of the town are too great a strain on me. I feel that for a man to be at his very best in the literary way he should live a life of complete retirement—far from the madding crowd and that, you know. Now, I've been a constant attender at the school for the past three weeks—ask Barnum himself if I haven't—I mean Richmond—Mr. Richmond. Why, only a few days ago he complimented me very highly on my purpose. He said that if I persevered I might one day be in a position to enter the Aunt Dorothy class. Now, when I've settled down properly at The Gables I mean to write an Aunt Dorothy letter every week. That's why I want to be at my best—quite free from all the attractions of the town—I should like to have your opinion about the cow."

But he was not fortunate enough to be able to learn all that she thought on this momentous question, for Arthur Galmyn was shown in and had a great deal to say regarding his progress in the city. He had learned what contango really did mean and he hoped that he was making the best use of the information which he had acquired. He was contemplating a poetical guide to the Stock Exchange, introducing the current price of the leading debenture issues; and, if treated lyrically, a Sophoclean Chorus dealing with Colonial securities; or should it be made the *envoi* of a ballade or a Chaunt Royal? He was anxious to get Amber's opinion on this point, there was so much to be said for and against each scheme.

Amber said she was distinctly opposed to the mingling of poetry and prices. She hoped that Mr. Galmyn was not showing signs of lapsing once again into the unprofitable paths of poetry. Of course she wished to think the best of every one, but she really felt that he should be warned in time. Would it not be a melancholy thing if he were to fall back into his old habits? she asked him.

And while he was assuring her that she need have no apprehension on this score, as he felt that he was completely cured of his old disorder, through six months contact with the flags of the Stock Exchange, Mr. Willie Bateman and Mr. Owen Glendower Richmond were announced, and each of them had a good deal to say to Amber.

What all these young men had to say to her was in the nature of reporting progress. Mr. Galmyn, whom she had turned from the excitement of poetry to the academic quietude of the Stock Exchange, had to tell her how thoughtfully he had made use of some fictitious information which he had disseminated for the purpose of "bulling" a particular stock; Mr. Bateman had a great deal to say regarding the system which he had perfected for bringing American heiresses under the notice of the old county families; he had also come to her for sympathy in respect of one of his failures. He had been entrusted with the indelicate duty of obtaining a knighthood for a certain gentleman of no conspicuous ability—a gentleman who was quite down to the level of the usual candidates for Knighthood. He had advised this gentleman to offer, through the public prints, to present his valuable collection of Old Masters to the Nation; and he had done so. For some reason or other—possibly because all the pictures were the most genuinely spurious collection ever brought together by one man—there was really no knowing why—the Nation had refused the gift.

This was one of his failures, Mr. Bateman said; and it was but indifferently compensated for by his success

in obtaining a popular preacher to deliver a sermon on a novel lately published by a lady whom he had been making widely conspicuous for some months back as being the most retiring woman in England. The preacher had consented, and the novel, which was the most characteristic specimen of Nineteenth Century illiterature, was already in its sixth edition.

"But on the whole, I have no reason to complain of my progress in my art,—the art which is just now obtaining recognition as the most important in all grades of society," said Mr. Bateman. "The Duchesses—well, just see the attitude of the various members of a Ducal House to-day. Her Grace is reciting for an imaginary charity on the boards of a Music Hall, and hopes by that to reach at a single bound the popularity of a Music Hall *artiste*; another member is pushing herself well to the front as the head of the committee for supplying the British army with Tam o' Shanter caps, another of the ladies is writing a book on the late war and the most ambitious of all is, they say, going to see what the Divorce Court can do for her. Oh, no, the Duchesses don't need my help; I sometimes envy them their resources. But think of the hundreds of the aristocracy—the best families in England, Miss Severn, who are falling behind in the great struggle to advertise themselves not from any longing after obscurity; but simply because they don't know the A B C of the art. Yes, you'll hear next week of a well-known and beautiful Countess—in personal advertising 'Once beautiful always beautiful' is an axiom, as you'll notice in every Society Column you glance at—the beautiful Countess, I say, will occupy the pulpit of a high-class Conventicle."

"Following your advice?" said Amber.

"I arranged every detail," said Mr. Bateman proudly. And then came the turn of Mr. Owen Glendower Richmond, to report the progress of the Technical School of Literature.

His report was not a long one.

"Miss Turquoise B. Hoskis, of Poseidon, in the State of Massachusetts, has joined the Historical Romance class," said Mr. Richmond.

"What, the daughter of the Pie King?" cried Amber.

"The daughter of Hannibal P. Hoskis, the Pie King," said Mr. Richmond.

Before the suspiration of surprise which passed round the drawing-room at this piece of news had melted into silence, the servant announced Lord Lullworth.

This was certainly a greater surprise for Amber than the news that the daughter of the great American, the head of the Pumpkin Pie Trust who was making his way rapidly in English society, had become a member of one of Mr. Richmond's classes. And that was possibly why she was slightly put out by the appearance of the young man who had sat beside her at the Ranelagh dinner. She did not know that he had asked Lady Severn for permission to call upon her, and that Lady Severn had mentioned Friday afternoon to him.

She could not quite understand why she should feel pleased at his coming—pleased as well as flushed. She was acquainted with peers by the dozen and with the sons of peers by the score, and yet somehow now she felt as if she were distinctly flattered.

That was why she asked him how he was and apologised for the absence of her mother.

(Lady Severn had left her daughter in possession of the drawing-room when Mr. Bateman was talking about his Duchesses: she pretended that she had an appointment which it was necessary to keep.)

CHAPTER XVII

Lord Lullworth, while he was drinking his tea and admiring to the full the exquisite electrical apparatus by which it was prepared, was giving some attention to the other young men—Mr. Richmond might possibly still be thought of by some people as a young man—who occupied chairs or stools around Miss Severn's seat. Guy Overton he knew pretty well, and he had never pretended that he thought highly of his talents—by talents Lord Lullworth meant his seat on a pony something between twelve and thirteen hands high—or of his disposition. (He had heard of his habitually dining at a greasy Italian restaurant and drinking Chianti in half flasks.)

He knew nothing about the other men, but he knew instinctively that he would never think much of them.

And then they began to talk, and she actually listened to them and pretended that she was interested in what they were talking about—he was anxious to think the best of her, so he took it for granted that her attention to what they were saying was only simulated. He was not fond of hearing himself talk, so he did not feel all left out in the cold while the others were—well, the exact word that was in his mind as he listened to them was the word "jabbering." They were jabbering, the whole racket of them, weren't they?

"We really can't spare you another week, Miss Severn," one of the racket was saying—the eldest of them, he was as high-toned as to his dress as a shopwalker in a first-class establishment; a *figurant* whom he greatly resembled in Lord Lullworth's judgment. "Oh, no; we cannot spare you so soon. I am holding a special class on The Novel With A Purpose. I think you may find it interesting, though doubtless you are acquainted with some points in the *technique* of this class of fiction. The title, for instance; the title must be sharp, quick, straightforward, like the bark of a dog, you know: 'The Atheist,' 'The Nigger,' 'The Haggis,' 'The Bog-trotter,' 'The Humbug'—all these are taking titles; they have bark in them. And then in regard to the Purpose—in The Novel With A Purpose, no one should have the least idea of what the Purpose is, but one must never be allowed to forget for a moment that the Purpose is there. It is, however, always as well for a writer of such a novel to engage the services of an interviewer on the eve of the publication of the novel to tell the public how

great are his aims, and then he must not forget to talk of the sea—that sea, so full of wonder and mystery beside which *The Novel With A Purpose* must be written and a hint must be dropped that all the wonder and mystery of the sea, and the sound of the weeping of the women and the wailing of the children, and the strong true beating hearts of great men anxious to strangle women and to repent grandly in the last chapter, will be found in the book, together with a fine old story—as old as the Bible—if you forget to drag the Bible into the interview no one will know that you have written *The Novel With A Purpose*—one story will do duty for half a dozen novels: two women in love with one man—something Biblical like that. But doubtless you have studied the *technique* of this class of fiction, Miss Severn.”

“I have never studied it so closely,” replied Amber. “I have always read books for pleasure, not for analysis.”

And Lord Lullworth kept staring away at Mr. Richmond, and then at Amber. What the mischief were they talking about anyway?

And then Willie Bateman chipped in.

“I have always regarded the Interview as obsolete,” said he. “It does not pay the photographer’s expenses. Even the bulldog as an advertising medium for an author has had his day—like every other dog. A publisher told me with tears in his eyes that he saw the time when the portrait of an author’s bull pup in a lady’s weekly journal would have exhausted a large edition of his novel—even a volume of pathetic poems has been known to run into a second edition of twenty-five copies after the appearance in an evening paper of the poet’s black-muzzled, pig-tailed pug. I’m going to give the Cat a trial some of these days. I believe that the Manx Cat has a brilliant future in store for it, and the Persian—perhaps a common or garden-wall cat will do as well as any other—I wouldn’t be bound with the stringency of the laws of the Medes and Persians as to the breed—I’d just give the Cat a chance. Properly run I believe that it will give an author of distinction as good a show as his boasted bull terrier.”

And Lord Lullworth stared away at the speaker. Great Queen of Sheba! What was he talking about anyway?

And then Amber, who had been listening very politely to both of the men who had been trying to impart their ideas to her, turned to Lord Lullworth and asked him if he had heard that Mr. Over-ton had purchased The Gables, and when he replied with a grin that he hoped Over-ton hadn’t paid too much money for it, Over-ton hastened to place his mind at ease on this point. The purchase of the place had involved an immediate outlay of a considerable sum of money, he admitted, but by giving up his chambers in town and the exercise of a few radical economies he hoped to see his way through the transaction. Would Lord Lullworth come down some week’s end and have a look round?

Lord Lullworth smilingly asked for some superficial information regarding the Cellar.

And then Mr. Owen Glendower Richmond and Arthur Galmyn went off together, and when Guy Overton found that he had to hurry off—the *cuisine* at the Casa Maccaroni was at its best between the hours of six and seven—Willie Bateman, who wanted to have a quiet word with him went away by his side. (He wondered if Guy would think it worth his while to pay a hundred pounds to have a stereo-block made of the river view of The Gables for an evening paper, to be inserted with a historical sketch of the house and some account of the family of the new purchaser.)

Lord Lullworth laughed pleasantly—confidentially, when he and Amber were left alone together.

“They are all so clever,” said Amber apologetically. She had really quite a faculty interpreting people’s thoughts.

“Yes,” said he, “they are, as you say, a rummy lot.”

Then she too laughed.

“That’s your way of putting it,” she said.

“I suppose so. What fun chaps can find in jabbering away like that beats me. They’re a bit pinkeyed, aren’t they now?”

Amber evaded a question which might possibly be enigmatical, she thought.

“But they are really very clever,” said she. “Arthur Galmyn was a poet, but I saw that he had not patience enough to wait for fame to come to him.”

“Why couldn’t he buy a practice in a populous suburban district?” asked Lord Lullworth. “If a chap can’t succeed as a specialist in town he should set up as a general practitioner in the suburbs or in the provinces.”

“I suppose a poet is a sort of literary specialist,” said Amber. “Never mind,—he is all right now: he is making money on the Stock Exchange.”

“You made him go on the Stock Exchange?”

“Oh, yes; we talked it over together. And I got Guy Overton to join the Technical School of Literature, and I believe he is improved by doing so already.”

“And you got the other chap to set up the school, I suppose?”

“It was an old idea of mine. When people have a Conservatoire of Music, and the Academy School of Painting, why should the art of Literary Composition be allowed to struggle on as best it can without instruction or advice?”

“That’s just what I should like to know. And the other bounder—I mean the chap who talked that about bulldogs and the cats and things—a bit of a rotter he was, wasn’t he? Did you advise him in any direction? I didn’t quite make out what his line was.”

“Yes, it was I who suggested to him the splendid possibilities there were in the way of advertising things. I showed him in what a haphazard way people advertised just now, and persuaded him that there was money in any systematic scheme of advertising, and he has gone far ahead of anything I ever imagined to be possible.”

“I should think he has. And what are they up to, the lot of them, can you guess, Miss Severn?”

“Up to?—what are they up to? Why, haven’t I just explained that each of them is making a profession—”

“Oh, yes; but do you fancy that they’re doing it for love of the profession or for—for—any other reason?”

"I don't quite see what you mean, Lord Lullworth."

"It's a bit rough to be frank with a girl; and it's rarely that a chap has to say just what he means, but there are times..."

He spoke apologetically and paused, allowing his smile to rest upon her for a moment. It was the smile of a man who hopes he hasn't gone too far, and trusts to get out of an untenable position by the aid of a temporising smile.

She returned his smile quite pleasantly. She knew that the sentences over the utterance of which men hesitate are invariably the most interesting that they have to speak.

"What is it?" she asked. "Everybody speaks frankly to me: they don't treat me as they do other girls, you know."

"It's a dangerous experiment talking frankly to a girl," said he. "But if it comes to that, it's not so dangerous an experiment as a girl talking frankly to a man—leading him to do things that he hasn't a mind to do—may be that he hates doing."

"I was born in an atmosphere of experiments," said she. "I delight in having dealings with new forces, and making out their respective coefficients of energy."

"Oh; then you don't happen to think that these chaps who were here just now are in love with you? That's frank enough, isn't it?"

Her face had become roseate, but she was not angry. Whatever she may have been she was sufficiently like other girls to be able to refrain from getting angry at the suggestion that four young men were in love with her at the same time.

"It's nonsense enough," she said. "You have quite misunderstood the situation, Lord Lullworth. I like Guy Overton and all the others greatly, and I hope they like me. But they are no more in love with me than I am in love with them."

"Do you fancy that a chap allows himself to be led about by a girl all for the fun of the thing?" he asked.

"Why should a man think it ridiculous for a woman to be his friend and to give him the advice of a friend—the advice that he would welcome if it were to come from a brother?" she enquired.

"I don't know why, but I know that he does," said Lord Lullworth. "Anyhow, you don't think of any of the chaps who were here as a lover?"

"I do not," she cried emphatically—almost eagerly.

"That's all right," he said quietly—almost sympathetically.

"It is all right," she said. "I believe in the value of friendship according to Plato."

"Have you ever thought of calculating its coefficient of energy, or its breaking strain?" said he.

"I do not like people who make fun—who try to make fun of what I believe, Lord Lullworth," said she.

"Do you dislike alarum clocks?" he asked blandly.

"Alarum clocks?" She was puzzled.

"Yes; I'm an alarum clock—one of the cheap make, I admit, but a going concern and quite effective. I want to rattle in your ears until your eyes are opened."

"You certainly do the rattling very well. But I'm not asleep. I know what you mean to say about my friends."

"I don't mean to say anything about them. I don't want to try to make them out to be quite such soft roes as you would have me think they are. I don't want to talk of them; I want to talk of you."

"Of me? Well?"

"Yes, and of me."

"Excellent topics both."

"Yes; but the two of us only make up one topic, and this is it. Now listen. Your mother asked me to call and have tea some afternoon. If she hadn't asked me I would have asked her permission to do so. I came pretty soon after her invitation, didn't I?"

"I'm so sorry that she has a Committee meeting this afternoon."

"It doesn't make any difference to me—that is, in what I have to say to you. And what I have to say to you is this; I came early to see you and I'm coming often—very often—you have no notion how often—I don't believe I quite know it myself. Now no matter how often I come I want you to understand distinctly from the first that I disclaim all intention of using Plato as an umbrella to sit under with you. I am coming in a strictly anti-Platonic spirit."

He had grown a bit red and she had flushed all over.

"Go on—go on; tell me all you have to say; it's quite—quite—funny—yes, funny," she said, and there was something of bewilderment in her voice. "I never—never—heard anything so—so queer—so straightforward. Go on."

"I have really said all that I came to say—maybe a trifle more," he said. "I'm not going to make an ass of myself leading you to fancy that I'm coming here as a casual acquaintance having no designs in my heart against you—I mean, for you. I don't want you to fancy that I'm coming here to talk to you about books, or pictures, for the sake of exchanging opinions in a strictly platonic way. No, I want you to know from the outset that I'm coming as a possible lover."

"I understand—oh, quite clearly—you have made the position quite clear to me; only let me tell you at once, Lord Lullworth that—that—"

"Now there you go treating me as disdainfully as if I had actually declared myself to be your lover. I'm nothing of the sort, let me tell you. I'm only the rough material out of which a lover may be formed. I'm a possible lover, so I should be treated very gently—just the way that you would treat a baby feeling that it may one day grow up to be a man. At the same time nothing may really come of the business. Cupid, the god of love is always shown as a child, because the people who started the idea had before them the statistics of

infant mortality; so many little Loves die when they are young and never grow up at all."

"They do—they do. Isn't it a blessing? You have only seen me twice and yet you——"

"My dear Miss Severn, I've seen you very often. I have been looking at you for the past eighteen months, and I thought you the nicest girl I had ever seen. I found out who you were, and it was I who got old Shirley to get up his dinner to give me a chance of meeting you; and I found you nicer even than I allowed myself to hope you would be. So I'm coming to see you very often on the chance that something may come of it. If after a while—a year or so—you find me a bit of a bore, you just tell me to clear off, and I'll clear without a back word. Now you know just what my idea is. I'm not a lover yet but I may grow up to be a lover. You may tell Lady Severn all this—and your father too, if you think it worth while—if you think anything will come of the business."

"I won't trouble either of them. It's not worth while."

"I dare say you are right—only... Well, you are forewarned anyway. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said she. "This is the second time I have seen you in my life. I don't care how soon you come again, but if you never do come again I promise you that my pillow will not be wet with bitter tears of disappointment."

"Same here," he cried briskly, when he was at the door. He laughed and went out and closed the door. In a moment, however, he opened the door, and took a step towards her.

"No; I find that I was wrong—I should not have said 'same here.' As a matter of fact, I find that I'm more of a lover than I thought. Since I have been with you here I am twice the lover that I was when I entered this room. No, I should be greatly disappointed if you were to tell me that I must not return."

"Then I won't; only... oh, take my advice and hurry away before I have time to say what I have on my mind to say."

"I know it already; and I also know that you'll never tell it to me. Good-bye again."

CHAPTER XVIII

When she was quite sure that he had gone—quite gone, beyond the likelihood of another return to say something that he had omitted to say or to take back something that he had already said, she threw herself back on a sofa and yawned ostentatiously—almost insultingly at her own reflection in a mirror that hung in the centre of one of the silk panels—and then it seemed that it was for the first time in her life that she perceived how curious was the design of the mirror. The silvered glass was a Florentine one and at one curved edge it was cut with a charming intaglio of a boy chasing a butterfly. On the opposite curve there was a girl with a bird on her finger. Butterflies and birds were cut all over the glass except in the centre. The frame of the mirror was of beaten silver, and the design was that of a number of cupids bending, as it were, over the brink of the glass to see the face that it reflected. And some were fixing their arrows in their little silver bows to shoot at the glass and its reflection.

She lay back and laughed quite merrily at the thought that often as she had looked at that charming work of art, she had never before noticed the significance of the design. It interested her so greatly just now that she actually rose from her sofa and stood before it, examining its infinity of detail for several minutes. Then she threw herself once again back among her cushions and laughed.

She had never before had such a funny interview with any one in all her life, she thought, and the funny part of it all was to be found in the seriousness of the man. If he had meant to be jocular he would have been a dead failure. But he had been desperately serious from the moment he had entered the room, and had gone on talking gravely as if he had been talking sense and not nonsense.

That was the funny part of the business.

The aid of Mr. Richmond had never been needed to make her aware of the fact that the novel writers who produce the greatest amount of nonsense are those who write seriously—who take themselves seriously and talk about having a message to deliver. Such, she was well aware, are the novel writers who perish after a year or two, for the only imperishable quality in a novel is wit. Wit is the boric acid that makes a novel "keep," she knew. But here was a live man coming to her with a message to deliver to her ears, and although he took himself quite seriously she had not found him dull—certainly not dull as the novels with the "message" are dull. What he had to say to her had surprised her at the outset of his interview with her and had kept her excited until he had gone away—nay, longer, for what he had said to her on his return after an absence of perhaps ten seconds, was, she thought, the most exciting part of her afternoon.

But after all he had talked such nonsense as a child who knew nothing of the world would talk. All the time that he was talking to her she felt that she was listening to the prattle of a boy child asking her if she would play at being sweethearts, and laying down certain rules of the game—decreeing that if he were to get tired of having her for a sweetheart, she must not get cross with him for leaving her, and at the same time, with a high sense of fairness, affirming that if she tired of him and told him to go back to the nursery he would not beat her with his fists.

Yes, he had talked just as any little boy in a sailor suit, and with a little bucket in one hand and a little spade in the other might talk while the day was young, and his gravity had made the scene very funny to her.

But then the fact of her thinking of the resemblance between him and the little boy, caused her to recall what he had said about treating him as gently as a baby should be treated. Yes, he was not to be looked on as

a lover, but only as the rough material that might eventually shape itself into a lover. This was one of the rules of the game at which he wanted her to play, and it was quite worthy of him.

At first she had felt angry with him—slightly angry; but then she felt that she would be a fool if she were to be seriously angry with a little boy for asking her to play at being grown up and selling tea and sugar with him in a shop made of oyster-shells. She had then only become amused at the way he talked—she was amused at it still, as she lay back among her cushions.

She was glad on the whole that she had not snubbed him—that she had even taken him seriously; and she thought that it was this reflection upon the extent of her consideration for his feelings—that *amour propre* which children hold so dear—that made her feel so pleased as she did.

Although she knew that the young man had talked nonsense—making an absurd proposal to her, and making it too on a purely unintellectual basis; as if she, a girl born in an atmosphere of intellectuality and breathing of this atmosphere into her life, could listen for a moment to a proposal made to the emotional and not to the intellectual side of her nature!—although he had talked this nonsense, still she could not deny that she felt pleased at the thought of it all. The air somehow seemed fresher about her, and she breathed more freely. Had none of those writers with a message suggested that an atmosphere saturated with intellectuality is like Rimmel's shop on a spring day: one longs to get out once more into the pure scentless air of Nature's own breathing?

She felt all the first sweet satisfaction which comes from a good romp on the sands with a child who, though it has not conversed on intellectual topics, has brought one into the open air—into the air that blows across the sands from the sea.

And she was glad that she had not snubbed him when he sneered at that triumph of the intellect known as Platonic friendship. She was happy to think that she was an exponent of that actuality of intellectuality, and that in his hands it had become a great force tending towards the civilisation of man.

To be sure civilisation has always been opposed to Nature in its operations, and the best civilisation is that which forms the most satisfactory compromise with Nature. She knew all this, and a good deal more in the same line of elementary biology, and it was just because she had proofs of the success of her plans of Platonic friendship she was disposed to regard it as one of the greatest of civilising forces.

All the same she felt glad that she had refrained from severity towards him when he had sneered at this force. She knew that if she had done so, she would now feel ill at ease. If a baby boy jeers at the precession of the Equinoxes—a phrase which it cannot even pronounce—an adult would surely feel ill at ease at rebuking it for its ignorance. But Amber Severn felt that she had no reason for self-reproach in the matter of her interview with young Lord Lull-worth.

But then she was led to do a foolish thing, for she began comparing Lord Lullworth with the other young men who had been visiting her in the fulness of their disinterested friendship for her. He was the best looking of them all, she knew. He stood up straighter and he looked at her straighter in the face than the best of them had done. If it came to a fight....

And hereupon this young woman who had been born in, and who had lived in, an atmosphere of intellectuality was led to think of the chances that the young man who had just gone from her would have in a rough and tumble tussle with the three others. She felt herself, curiously enough, taking his part in this hustle and tussle—she actually became his backer, and was ready to convince any one who might differ from her that he could lick three of them—that horrid word of the butcher's boy was actually in her mind as she thought over the possible contest, though why she should think over anything of the sort she would have had difficulty in explaining to the satisfaction even of herself. But somehow thinking of the men altogether—they were five of them all told—made a comparison between them inevitable, and as Lord Lullworth had frankly admitted that he was not intellectual she had, out of a sense of fair play to him, drawn the comparison from an unintellectual standpoint.

This explanation—it is not wholly plausible—never occurred to her and she was therefore left in a condition bordering on wonderment when she pulled herself up, so to speak, in her attempt to witness the exciting finish of the contest which had suggested itself to her when she involuntarily compared the young man who had lately stood before her, with the other four.

She was startled, and gave a little laugh of derision at the foolish exuberance of her own fancy; and then she became angry, and because she felt that she had made a fool of herself, she called Lord Lullworth a fool—not in a whisper, but quite out loud.

"He is a fool—a fool—and I never want to see him again!" she said.

And then the servant opened the door and announced Mr. Pierce Winwood, and withdrew and closed the door.

She sat upright on the sofa, staring at him, her left hand pressing the centre of a cushion of Aubusson tapestry, and her right one a big pillow of amber brocade.

She stared at him.

He gave a rather sheepish laugh, and twirled his cane till the handle caught his gloves which he held in his hand, and sent them flying. He gave another laugh picking them up.

She was bewildered. Matters were becoming too much for her. Had he actually been lunching in the house that day or had she dreamt it? It seemed to her that only an hour had passed since she had said good-bye to him, and yet here he was entering as a casual visitor might enter.

She rose and mechanically held out her hand to him.

"How do you do?" she said. "How do you do? A warm afternoon, is it not? You look warm."

And so he did. He looked extremely warm.

"I am afraid that I have surprised you," said he. "I'm so sorry. But when a chap is bound on making an ass of himself there's really no holding him back."

She felt her face becoming as warm as his appeared to be; for the terrible thought flashed upon her:

"This man too has come to me to offer himself as the rough material from which a lover may one day be made."

It seemed to her that there was any amount of rough material of lovers available within easy reach this particular afternoon.

"After leaving here an hour ago," he said, "I had a rather important call to make, so I didn't make it but went for a long walk instead—I think I must have walked four or five miles and I don't think I kept my pace down as I should have, considering the day it is."

"Well?" she said when he paused. "Well, Mr. Winwood?"

"Well, you see I was bent on thinking out something, and I thought it out, and I have come back to you, you see, because you are, I think, disposed to be friendly to me and I know that you are her closest friend—that is why I ventured to come back to you."

"Yes—yes," she said slowly and with a liberal space between each utterance of the word. "Yes; but—what is the matter? What have I to say to—to—whatever it is?"

"I must really try to tell you," said he. "Yes, the fact is, I hope you will not think me impudent, but it is a serious matter to me. I have—that is, I wish to—Miss Severn, I am, as you know, a stranger here. I do not know many people, and I have no means of finding out—except through you—what I should very much like to know. You see I don't want to make too great a fool of myself altogether; that is why I hope you will not think me impudent when I ask you if you can tell me if—if—Miss West is engaged to marry some one. You can well believe, I am sure, that when I saw her for the first time—when I saw her here to-day, it seemed to me quite impossible that such a girl—so beautiful—so gracious—so womanly, should remain free. It seemed quite impossible that no one should wish—but of course though every one who sees her must feel how—how she stands alone—she would not lightly think of giving her promise—in short—I— Yes, I believe that I have said all that I wished to say. I have said it badly, I know; but perhaps I have made myself moderately clear to you—clear enough for you to give me an answer."

He had seated himself close to her and had bent forward, turning his hat over and over between his hands and showing himself to be far from self-possessed while stammering out his statement.

But Amber, although she had never before been made the *confidante* of a man, and although she had just passed through a curious experience of her own, felt, so soon as it dawned on her that the man beside her was in love with Josephine, both interested and became more than sympathetic.

The pleasure she experienced so soon as she became aware of the fact that it was not to herself he was about to offer himself as the rough material of a lover, after the fashion of the day, caused her to feel almost enthusiastic as she said:

"You have expressed yourself admirably, Mr. Winwood; and I can tell you at once that Josephine West is not engaged to marry any one—that is—well, I think I am justified in speaking so decidedly, for if she had promised to marry any one I am certain that she would tell me of it before any one else in the world."

He rose and held out his hand to her, saying:

"Thank you, Miss Severn—thank you. I knew that I should be safe in coming to you in this matter, you have shown yourself to be so kind—so gracious. You can understand how my position in this country is not quite the same as that of the men who have lived here all their lives—who are in your set and who hear of every incident as it occurs. I thought it quite possible that she might... well, I hope you don't think me impudent."

"I do not indeed," she said, "I feel that you have done me great honour, and I think that you are—you are—manly. I think, you know, that there is a good deal of manliness about men—more than I thought, and I tell you that I always did think well of men. I believe that there is a great future awaiting them."

"I hope that your optimism will be rewarded," said he. "Of one thing I am sure, and that is that a great future awaits one man: the man who is lucky enough to be loved by you. Good-bye. You have placed me in such a position as makes it inevitable for me to take the rosier view of all the world."

"Even of the man whom I shall love? Well, you are an optimist. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XIX

Mr. Ernest Clifton had a good deal to think about; but, as he was usually in this condition, he did not feel greatly inconvenienced. He was well aware of the fact that when one man insists on doing all the thinking for a large and important organisation, he cannot expect to have a vacant mind for many hours together. He had, however, so managed matters in connection with the great political machine of which he was secretary that he had become the sole Intelligence of the organisation. He was not only the man who controlled the driving power of the engine, he also had command of the brakes; and every one is aware of the fact that to know when to slacken speed and when to stop is a most important part of the duties of the man who is running any machine. Any inferior person can pitch the coal into the furnace to keep up the steam, but it requires an Intelligence to know when to shut it off.

He had determined from the outset that he would not allow himself to be hampered by the presence of another thinking man on the foot plate of his engine; it is the easiest thing in the world to obtain for any political organisation a president and a committee utterly devoid of intelligence, and Ernest Clifton resolved that though he might be forced to make seek for such a committee among the most notable men in the Party, he would secure it somehow.

He found it the easiest thing in the world to get an ideal President, Vice-President, Honorary Secretary and Committee. They were all men whom he could implicitly trust to abstain from thought on any vexed question, but he took care that no question of this type remained in a condition of suspense: he himself supplied the thinking power necessary for its solution.

The result of several years' adherence to this system was that Ernest Clifton, without a seat in Parliament, without a name that carried weight with it outside his own Party, had become a Power in the political world.

It was rumoured that upon one occasion he had been consulted by the Prime Minister in regard to a matter involving a considerable change in the domestic policy of the Government, and that his counsel had been accepted although it differed materially from the view of some important members of the Cabinet.

It was this Ernest Clifton who, after dictating to his private secretary half a dozen letters of a more or less ambiguous phraseology, sat with a letter of his own in front of him—a letter which he had received that morning—a letter which added in no inconsiderable degree to his burden of thought. The letter was from Josephine West and it notified to him the fact that the writer found it impossible any longer to maintain the policy of secrecy which he had imposed upon her.

"When I agreed for your sake to keep our engagement a secret," Josephine wrote, "I did not foresee the difficulties in the situation which that secrecy has already created. Daily I feel myself to be in a false position, and hourly I feel humiliated by the consciousness of being concerned in an underhand act. I know that I was wrong in giving you my promise at first; there was really no reason why you should not have gone to my father and if he refused his consent we should be placed in no worse position than that of numbers of other men and women who are separated by cruel circumstances, but are still happy relying on each other's fidelity. Surely we could bear up by the same means, against a much greater adversity than the refusal of my father to give his consent to our engagement being made public. I must therefore ask of you, my dear Ernest, to release me from the promise which I made to you—to release me nominally is all that I beg of you—until my father has given his consent to our engagement. Of course I need hardly say to you who know me so well, that your releasing me would not interfere with my present affection which is quite unchanged and not likely to change. But I must be released."

This was the part of the letter which added so materially to his burden of thought, though the letter really could not be said to go more than a little step in advance of the situation created by the writer by her interview with him at Ranelagh, a fortnight ago.

The question which he had then formulated to himself was one that could not by any possibility be regarded as flattering to that assumption of constancy upon which she now laid some stress.

"Who is the man?" was, it may be remembered the question to the solution of which he had addressed himself, and now he was not deterred by the paragraph in the letter just received from her—the paragraph which was meant to give him assurance of the immobility of her affections—from once again asking himself that question:

"Who is the man?"

He had been unable to find any plausible answer to that question during the weeks that had elapsed since Mr. Shirley's dinner, though in the meantime he had met Josephine twice and upon each occasion had shown the utmost adroitness in the enquiries he put to her quite casually, and without premeditation, with a view to approaching a step nearer to the solution of the question.

He could not hear that she had met any man whom he could feel justified in regarding as a possible rival; but in spite of this fact he could not bring himself to believe that her sudden appreciation of the falseness of her position was due to a sudden access of sensitiveness. His long and close connection with a political association had made him take a cynical view of the motives of men. When he heard at any time of the conscience of a politician being greatly perturbed in regard to any question, he had never any difficulty in finding out exactly what that particular gentleman wanted—whether it was a Knighthood, a recognition of his wife at a Foreign office reception, or a chat for five minutes with a Cabinet Minister on the Terrace on a day when the Terrace is crowded. He flattered himself that he could within twenty-four hours diagnose the most obstinate case of that insidious malady Politician's Conscience, and prescribe for it a specific that never failed if applied according to his instructions.

Thus it was that he was led to take what he called a practical view of any psychological incident that came under his notice. He regarded psychology as rather more of an exact science than meteorology. It was altogether a question of so many atmospheric pressures, he thought; even the force of spiritual cataclysms could be calculated, if one only took the trouble to use one's experience as a scisometer.

Thus it was that although he had not yet discovered the identity of the man who, in his opinion, had caused that excess of sensitiveness on the part of Josephine, he was as certain of his existence as the astronomer was of the planet known as Uranus, through observing certain aberrations on the part of the planet Saturn, due to attraction.

He hoped one day before long to be able to calculate the position of the attractive but unknown man and to be able to see him without the aid of a telescope.

Meantime, however, he knew that he would have to answer that letter which lay before him, and for the moment he scarcely knew how it should be replied to.

While he was giving all his consideration to this question, a clerk knocked at the door of his room and entered with a card, bearing the name of Sir Harcourt Mortimer, the Minister for the Arbitration Department.

He directed the visitor to be shown upstairs: it was no new thing for a Cabinet Minister to pay a visit to the Central Offices of the Great Organisation, and while Sir Harcourt was coming up crimson-carpeted stairs, the Secretary slipped the letter which he had been reading into the breast pocket of his coat, and wondered if he could by any possibility bring the presence of the Chief to his Department to bear upon the Under-Secretary, Mr. Philip West, to induce him to consent to his daughter marrying so obscure, but powerful a man as the Secretary of the Argus Organisation.

The smile that came over his face as the fantastic idea occurred to him had not passed away before the

Minister was shaking hands with him, discussing the possibility of a thunderstorm occurring within the next twenty-four hours.

Mr. Clifton knew perfectly well that his visitor had not come to him solely for the purpose of discussing electrical phenomena; so he broke off suddenly waiting for—was it a bolt out of the blue that was coming?

"I want to get your opinion on a few matters of importance to us, Clifton," said the Minister the moment this pause was made.

Clifton bowed.

"My opinion," said he, "my opinion—well, as you know, Sir Harcourt, it amounts to nothing more than a simple equation. If $a+b=c$, it follows that $c-b=a$."

"That is just what makes your opinion of such practical value," said the Minister. "We wish to know from you in this case the value of $x-x$ represents the unknown quantity to us—that is to say, the whim of a constituency. The fact is that Holford is anxious for me to take his place at the Annexation Department while he goes to the Exchequer—you know, of course, that Saxeby is resigning on account of his deafness."

"Yes, on account of his deafness," said Mr. Clifton smiling the strictly political smile of Sir Harcourt.

"Yes; deafness is a great infirmity," sighed the Minister—his sigh was strictly ministerial, "and his resignation cannot be delayed much longer. Now we think that if Eardley is returned for the Arbroath Burghs he will expect a place in the Cabinet."

"He did very well, in the last, and of course he would be in the present Cabinet if he had not lost his seat at the General Election," remarked Clifton.

"That is just the point. Now, do you think you could find a safe seat for him if the Arbroath Burghs will have nothing to say to him?"

"You would have to give a Baronetcy—perhaps a Barony to the man who resigns in his favour."

"Of course. What is a Baronetcy—or a Barony for that matter?"

"I think it might be managed," said Clifton, but not without a pause—a thoughtful pause. An inspiration came to him immediately after his visitor had said:

"Ah, you think so? That is just the point."

"There is another way out of the difficulty, though it may not have occurred to you," continued Clifton slowly.

"What is that?"

"I don't know whether I should suggest it or not, Sir Harcourt—but it may have occurred to you. Mr. Philip West is your Under Secretary. He has always been a useful man. I know that in the country the opinion is very general that he has done very well."

"For himself?" asked the Minister with a certain amount of dryness.

The Argus Secretary gave a very fair imitation of an Englishman's imitation of a Frenchman's shrug.

"He won his seat for us and I doubt if there's another man in England who could have won it. I'm certain there's not another who could hold it," remarked Clifton.

"He is not very popular with the Cabinet," said Sir Harcourt, after another interval of thought.

"It might be a case of the Cabinet against the Country, in which case we all know which would have to give in," said Clifton. "I don't say that it is so, mind, only—I shall have to think the whole thing over, Sir Harcourt. I can do nothing without facts and figures. There are the Arbroath Burghs to take into account. I shall have to hunt up the results of the last revision. Eardley might be able to pull through after all."

"What, do you mean to suggest that his return is as doubtful as all that? We took it for granted that it was a pretty safe thing," said the Minister, and there was a note of alarm in his voice.

If Clifton had not recognised this note he would have been greatly disappointed.

He shook his head.

"Just at the present moment," said he, "it is difficult to feel absolute confidence in any seat. It would be unsafe to predict the return of Mr. Girdlestone himself were he to hold on to the General Election, and he is a local man. Oh, the Arbroath Burghs have always been a bit skittish."

"Then perhaps after all it might be as well to face the possibility of West's promotion to the Cabinet," remarked the Minister. "After all he stands very close to it at present. In all probability we couldn't keep him out very much longer."

"Of course Eardley would be the better man," said the Secretary, "and it is quite likely that when I get more information regarding Arbroath I shall be able to make your mind easy about him. Still I don't think that West's promotion would be a case of the worst coming to the worst."

"Oh, no, no; of course not," acquiesced Sir Harcourt. "Oh, not by any means. He has put himself into the front rank by his treatment of the Gaspard Mine affair, and, as you say, the county—"

"Quite so. He is not altogether an outsider," said Clifton. "At the same time..."

"I agree with you—yes, I fully appreciate the force of what you say, Clifton," cried Sir Harcourt. "You will be adding to your innumerable services to the party if you collect the figures bearing upon this little matter and let me know the result. Of course, if Eardley's seat were sure... but in any case we have an excellent man to fall back on."

"I think I understand how the matter rests, and I will lose no time in collecting my figures," said the Secretary; while the Minister straightened out his gloves and got upon his feet.

"I am sure you have a complete grasp of the business," said Sir Harcourt. "Perhaps in a week—there is no immediate hurry."

"Possibly in a week I shall have enough to go upon."

He opened the door for his visitor and Sir Harcourt thanked him, and departed.

"It was an inspiration," said Clifton below his breath when he was alone. He walked across the thick Turkey carpet—offices furnished at the expense of an organisation invariably have thick Turkey carpets—and stood with his back to the empty grate. "An inspiration," he murmured once more.

He smiled rather grimly, took the letter out of his breast pocket, read it thoughtfully and smiled again. Then he went to a window and looked out.

The day was gloomy but the rain was still keeping off. He tapped the barometer that hung at one side of the window. He felt certain that there would be thunder before night.

CHAPTER XX

Josephine had at one time—and it was not so very long ago—been accustomed to send little missives to Mr. Ernest Clifton giving him some information as to the entertainments to which she was going from week to week so that their accidental meetings were frequent. A good deal of fortuitous coming together can be arranged for by two persons of ordinary enterprise. Since she had, however, become sensitive on the subject of her duty to her parents, and had come to the conclusion that her attitude in regard to Mr. Clifton was not one that any girl with a right appreciation of what was due to herself as well as to her father and mother would adopt, she had dropped this illicit correspondence—after giving him due notice—so that their meetings were altogether the result of chance.

Still, even trusting only to this fickle power, they had a good many opportunities of exchanging hand clasps and of sitting in the same drawing-room. Since that momentous dinner at Ranelagh, however, neither of them had had an opportunity of reverting to the subject of her conversation when alone with him on the terrace; hence she had been compelled to write to him that letter which he had read and upon which he had pondered before the arrival of Sir Harcourt Mortimer, and some time too after the departure of that minister.

(By the way, that thunderstorm came on all right before the evening.)

Two days later, he was fortunate enough (so he said) to find himself in a group of which she was a member, in the grounds of an historic house in Kensington—not South Kensington: it will be a hundred years or more before there are historic houses in South Kensington. But in this house a great statesman had once lived—a century has passed since there was a great statesman in England—and before the birth of the statesman, a great Man of Letters had, by a singular mischance of marriage, also lived in the same house—according to some critics a hundred years have passed since there was a great Man of Letters in England.

Josephine was once again on a terrace—one with an Italian balustrade overlooking a lawn and the little park that surrounded the historic house—when Clifton saw her. He had no difficulty getting into the group of dull celebrities, to whom she had been introduced by her father—dull peers whose names figured largely on the first page—the title page it should properly be called—of prospectuses; and deadly dull representatives of county families who had never done anything but represent the county; a moderately dull judge or two, an immoderately dull Indian lieutenant-governor (retired), and a representative of literature. (The last named had been invited in sympathy with the traditions of the house; and indeed it was a matter of tradition that this literary link with the past had written the most illiterate volume of verse that had ever remained unread by the public.)

Josephine suffered herself to be detached from this fascinating group after a time, but resisted the temptations of a tent with moselle cup and *pâté de foie gras* sandwiches which Ernest held before her dazzled eyes.

They stood together at the top of the steps leading from the terrace to the lawn, and they talked, not of the Great Statesman but of the Great Literary Man. His writings have the boracic quality of wit to keep them ever fresh.

"To think that he stood here, just where we are standing," said Josephine. "To think that he looked at those very trees. He went to live on the Fulham Road afterwards. Why did he not remain here, I wonder?"

"You see his wife was here," said Mr. Clifton with the air of the one who explains.

"Ah—perhaps," laughed Josephine. "I came upon a letter of his the other day in a magazine—a letter written from his cottage on the Fulham Road to his stepson, who lived here, asking him to come to hear the nightingale that sung every night in one of the lanes."

"There are other places besides the lanes off the Fulham Road where one may listen to the song of the nightingale nowadays," said Mr. Clifton.

"His example should be a warning to a man not to marry beneath him," remarked Josephine.

"Yes, it was rather a come down for him, wasn't it?" said her companion. "He lived in a garret off the Haymarket, didn't he?—and his wife brought him here."

"He was the greatest writer of his time, and she was only a Countess," said Josephine.

"Quite so. But they lived very happily apart, so that it was not such a *misalliance* after all," said Clifton. "I suppose it was one of Dr. Johnson's customary brutalities to say that the man died from that insidious form of heredity known in recent diagnoses as habitual alcoholism."

"The notion is horrid—quite worthy of Dr. Johnson," said Josephine, making a move as if to rejoin another sparkling group.

"Don't let us separate for a minute yet," said Clifton. "Though I admit that you are very properly cautious, still there are limits: we have not been together, so that we could talk, for some weeks. Since then I got a

letter from you."

"I have been very unhappy, Ernest," said she, gazing into the distance of the lovely woodland.

"Not more unhappy than I have been, my dearest," said he. "Was that letter of yours calculated to allay my unhappiness, do you think? It made me doubly unhappy because it made me aware of your unhappiness."

"I felt that I could not avoid writing it, Ernest. It would have been impossible for me to remain any longer in the position I was in: I could not carry on the course of deception into which you led me—no, that is going too far; I did not quite mean to say so much."

"Then it was only your own kind heart that restrained you; for you might have meant all that you said and a great deal more. I admit that I was to blame in leading you to make me the promise that has caused you all this unhappiness."

"You were not more to blame than I was. In these matters it is decreed that the blame is not to be laid at the door of one person only. You are a man with ambition—you could not be expected—that is to say, the world does not expect that you should feel the same way as a woman does over such a point as the one which I dwelt on. A secret such as ours was is, I know, a very little matter in the life of such a man as you are. You are, I have heard, the guardian of some of the most important secrets in the world. But in any case a man's life contains innumerable secrets that are never revealed until he is dead."

"That is quite true."

"A man with a career to—to—cultivate—men cultivate a career as gardeners do their roses——"

(They were standing beside a rose bed now.)

"And not unfrequently by the same agents of fertilisation."

"Such a man must of necessity come to think more of the great issues of certain incidents than of the incidents themselves."

"That is perfectly true." He shook his head with a mournfulness that was precisely in keeping with the sadness which could be seen in his expression. "Too true—too true!" he murmured. "Yes, a man loses a sense of perspective——"

"Not he," cried Josephine. "A man's sense of perspective is fairly accurate. It is a woman who is wanting in this respect. We have so accustomed ourselves to see only what is under our noses that we become shortsighted and are utterly unable to perceive the size and significance of everything at a distance. That is how it comes that something beneath our eyes seems so enormous when after all, it is quite insignificant. Oh, men do not take such narrow—such shortsighted views of the incidents of life."

"I am not so sure of that."

"What, would you say that any man takes the same narrow view of an incident like love as a woman takes of it? Oh, no. He is too wise. He has his career in the world to think about—to shape; it is a matter of impossibility with him to distort out of all proportion to its importance that incident in his life known as love. That is how it comes, I know, that you think I am very foolish to lay so much emphasis as I have done upon so simple a thing as my giving you my promise and keeping it hidden from my father and mother. You think that it is making a fuss about nothing. You cannot understand how it should be the means of making me suffer tortures—tortures!"

"On the contrary," said the man, "I have myself suffered deeply knowing that you were suffering and recognising as I do, that my want of consideration for you—my selfishness—my want of appreciation for the purest soul of woman that ever God sent on earth, was the direct cause of your burden. I am glad that you wrote to me as you did, and I rejoice that I am not selfish enough to hold you to the promise you made to me."

She turned her eyes upon him and looked at him in more than surprise—in actual amazement.

"You mean to say that you—you release me from my promise," she said.

"I release you freely," he replied. "Until I receive your father's consent to an engagement I will not think that there is any engagement between us—there may be an understanding between us; but there is nothing between us that need cause you uneasiness through its concealment from your father and mother. When the day comes on which I can ask your father's consent to our engagement with some hope of success, I shall not be slow to go to him, you may be sure; but till then—you are free—you need not feel any self-reproach on the score of concealing anything: there is nothing to conceal."

She was dumb. She thought that she would have to fight for her freedom; but lo, he had knocked the shackles off before she had uttered more than a petulant complaint—she had no need to make any impassioned appeal to him; the rhetoric on the subject of Freedom with which she was fully acquainted she had no chance of drawing on. He had set her free practically of his own free will.

She was too surprised to be able to do more than thank him in the baldest way.

"I am sure that it is for the best," she said, "I feel happy already—happy feeling that a great burden has been lifted from me—that I need no longer fear to look my own people in the face. Thank you—thank you."

There was gratitude in her face as she looked at him. She could scarcely put out her hand to him considering the number of people who were about the terrace, or she would, he felt assured, have done so.

But there was undoubtedly gratitude in her face.

He would have given a good deal to know if she was grateful by reason of being released from the pressing care of the secret which he had imposed upon her or because she now considered herself free to listen to the other man, the man whose identity he had not been able to discover.

She herself would have given a good deal to know so much.

"I admit that I was in error from the very first," said he. "I had no right to place you in a false position. I did not know—but I had no excuse for not knowing—how a sensitive creature such as you are could not but feel deeply—as I do now—that you were not one who needed to be held in the bondage of a promise. I know now how that the real bond that exists between us is one that is not dependent for its endurance upon any formal promise—upon any formal engagement. I trust you, my Josephine, and I know that you can trust me."

And then he took off his hat to Sir Digby and Lady Swan, and there was something in his action, Josephine thought, that compelled them to stop and shake hands with him and with her also, for she was acquainted with the great ex-Solicitor General and his wife.

Curiously enough that little movement on his part—a movement which suggested that he expected something more than a formal recognition—imparted to her an element of distrust. But it was not until several other fellow-guests had come up and joined her group separating her effectually from Ernest Clifton, that she began to be dimly conscious of the truth—that she became aware of the fact that while he had been ostentatiously knocking off her shackles of iron he had been gently imposing on her shackles of gold. He had so contrived, by the adroitness of his words, that she should remain bound to him by a tie far stronger than that from which he had just released her.

He had spoken quite truly: in telling her that he trusted her completely he had put upon her a bondage from which she would not try to escape. He had, so to speak, torn up her I O U before her eyes and had thereby turned the debt for which he held security into a debt of honour.

She felt that she had a right to resent this, and her feeling was that of a person who has been got the better of by another in a bargain, and who has come to be aware of this fact. She resented his cleverness of attitude in regard to her. There is no love strong enough to survive a display of cleverness on the part of either the man or the woman, and in her irritation of the moment she felt very bitterly regarding the man. "Trickster" was actually the word that was in her mind at the moment. It never occurred to her that a liberal allowance should be made for any man who has attained to a foremost position as a political organiser.

She should have known that to judge a professional politician by the ordinary standards that one instinctively employs in estimating the actions of people whom one meets in social life is scarcely fair. She should have known that there is honour among politicians just as there is honour—its existence has been proverbial, among the representatives of a mode of living whose affiliation with the profession of politics has not yet been fully recognised in England, though it is in America; but the standard of honour among either is not just the same as that which prevails at a public school or even in a public house. The art of jerrymandering is scarcely one that would be practised by the Chevalier Bayard; but it is an art that statesmen have studied with great advantage to themselves, without fear and without reproach—except, of course, the reproach of the opposing statesman.

Josephine West had talked a good deal about the point of view, and the sense of perspective and other abstractions; and yet she could feel irritated because she fancied that a man who had reduced dissimulation to a science had not been quite frank with her.

She was still suffering from this irritation when Amber Severn came up to her accompanied by Pierce Winwood.

"I thought that as I would see you here I need not write to remind you that you are to come to us at The Weir to-morrow week," cried Amber.

"Is to-morrow week one of the dates that we agreed upon last month?" asked Josephine.

"Yes; you have got it all properly noted in your book. We shall be a quiet little party. Mr. Winwood is coming."

"That is a sufficient guarantee," said Josephine nodding to Mr. Winwood. They had reached these confidential terms, having met frequently since they had had their little chat together in the rose-garden.

"My ordinary deportment is chilling to the Hooligan element," said Winwood. "Miss Severn mentioned my name to allay your suspicions."

"Our only excitement is to be the visit which we are to pay to The Gables," said Amber. "Guy has invited us to drink tea on his lawn."

"That is something to look forward to," said Josephine.

"I hope his caterers are not the Casa Maccaroni," said Winwood.

And then two or three other people joined their group, and Winwood got parted from Amber by the thoughtfulness of Lord Lullworth who, it seemed, was an emissary from his mother, the Countess of Castlethorpe. The great lady hoped, according to Lord Lullworth, that Miss Severn would consent to be presented to her, and, of course, Miss Severn would not be so absurd as to return a rude answer to a request which represented so modest an aspiration.

By this means Lord Lullworth who had great difficulty in finding his mother had for a companion for quite half an hour of this lovely afternoon, Miss Severn, and for even a longer space of time Josephine West was by the side of Pierce Winwood beneath the red brick walls which had once sheltered a great Man of Letters.

They talked of the great Man of Letters and indeed other topics.

CHAPTER XXI

Amber had come to the conclusion that it would be better for her to be frank with her friend Josephine in regard to the *personnel* of her fellow-guests at The Weir for the Sunday. A month had passed since Josephine had promised to keep herself disengaged for this particular Sunday, but in the meantime a good many things had happened, the most important being (as she fancied) the dinner at Ranelagh, which had given a certain amount of prominence to Mr. Winwood and had aroused a curious prejudice against him in the estimation of Josephine. It was thus, she thought, only fair to Josephine to tell her that Mr. Winwood

had also promised to go to The Weir for the Sunday, so that, if she felt that another day spent in his company would be insupportable, she might have a chance of concocting some excuse for remaining in town.

The daughter of a politician of eminence should be at no loss for a plausible excuse to extricate herself from the consequences of a promise of a month's standing. She should have at her command—even though her father did not actually belong to the Cabinet—a sufficiency of that subtle element called (by the organs of the Opposition) tergiversation to tide her over a shoal place.

It was this thoughtfulness on the part of Amber that impelled her to let Josephine know that Mr. Winwood also had promised to go to The Weir, and she felt greatly relieved to find that her friend did not make any attempt to draw upon her imagination for an excuse to prevent her joining the party at Sir Creighton's riverside cottage.

She wondered if Josephine's prejudice was abating already, or if she was merely showing how polite she could be.

It was when she was trying to recover from the startling effects of the return of Pierce Winwood to the drawing-room after the departure of Lord Lull-worth, that her father came to her, saying something about Pierce Winwood.

"I am very glad you asked him here," he said. "Yes; he was able to convince me of his identity."

"So you remembered his father's name after all," said Amber.

"Yes—oh, yes. I remembered his father's name."

"It was the story that brought it back to you?"

"Yes—that singular story."

"You were able to tell him the names of the people—the names that he was so anxious to find out?"

"Oh, yes; I was able to—to satisfy him on this point. By the way, he and Josephine had some chat together in the garden—I could see them from my window."

Amber shook her head and then said:

"Poor fellow!"

"Why poor fellow, pray?" asked her father raising his eyebrows.

"I am afraid that he—that is—I'm not quite sure that I should tell you that——"

"Let me know what it is you are in doubt about, and I will give you my best advice on this doubtful and delicate point," said he.

"If you decide that I shouldn't have told you will you let it be as if I hadn't told you?" she said, clasping her hands over his arm.

"Certainly I will," he replied. "The terms are quite honourable."

"Then I may tell you that an hour after leaving this room he returned."

"For an umbrella—that's what they do in plays: they always come back for the umbrella which, with the most careful inadvertency they have left behind them. But he didn't come back to let you know that owing to the distractions of lunch, he had forgotten to mention that he loved you?"

"Worse—much worse. He came to ask me if I could tell him if Joe had given her promise to marry someone."

"Heavens above! And did he specify the some one?"

"Oh, dear, no; he had no one—that is to say, he had every one in his mind's eye. He could not understand how it was possible that so sweet and lovely a girl should have reached the age of twenty-four without having given her promise to marry some man."

"It does seem a bit queer, doesn't it? Well?"

"That's all. I told him, of course, that Joe was quite free."

"Of course. But that being so, where does your 'poor fellow!' come in. Why not 'lucky fellow'?"

Amber shook her head more sadly than she had shaken it before.

"The pity of it! the pity of it!" she murmured. "Poor Joe!"

"Poor yourself!" laughed Sir Creighton. "You cannot be ambitious enough to wish to include all the world in your pity. Why 'poor Josephine'?"

"She confessed to me that she hated him," said Amber in a whisper—the whisper of an aspen—tremulous rather than sibilant.

"What, hated him? I had no idea that she cared so much as that for him already," said her father. "Are you sure that she confessed to hating him?"

Amber's hands dropped from his arm, but her eyes did not drop from his face.

"Do you mean—you cannot mean—that—that all may yet be well?" she cried.

"My dear girl," said he, smiling a smile which he had provisionally patented since his daughter had made it a practice to consult him on curious points of psychology and diction and deportment. "My dear daughter, I have, as you well know, little time to devote to the study of temperament or poetry or unpractical things of that sort, but I have seen enough in the course of a busy but not wholly unobservant life, to convince me that when a young woman goes so far as to confess that she hates any particular young man, or old man, for that matter—she has gone very far in the direction of saying that she loves that particular man. I don't say that Josephine——"

"She doesn't. She doesn't—at least—I don't believe that she has thought about him one way or another. She was, however, quite polite to him today."

"That's rather a bad sign, isn't it? When a girl is polite to a man whom she hates, she makes one feel that his chances with her are reduced. But of one thing you may be sure—yea, of two things you may be certain; the first is that no girl hates a man of whom she has not been thinking a great deal; the second is that no girl

hates a man unless she knows that he loves her."

"How curious! How very curious! You are sure—quite sure?"

"There are variants," said the man of science. "But one cannot study the properties of the positive and negative currents of electricity for forty years without learning something of the elementary principles of attraction and repulsion. The air was, I think, strongly charged with electricity when the first woman was born; and that being so, don't you think you might do worse than ask Winwood and Josephine to join us at The Weir, some of these days?"

He was smoothing her hair very gently: the action was prettily paternal but it was also strictly businesslike; for was he not the inventor of that microelectrometer which is so marvellously sensitive that it is capable of measuring the force of the current generated by the stroking of a cat. He had experimented on his daughter years ago. No penalty attached to his doing so, though had he tried his electrometer on the cat he would have laid himself open to a criminal prosecution.

She was all unconscious of the escaping ohms; she was puzzling out the hard saying that had come from her father. She was trying to see daylight through the obstructions of his phrases and the obscuration of his logic.

She shook her head—for the third time—saying: "I'm in a bit of a mist just now. I should like to think it all out."

"As if one can get out of a mist through much thinking," said he. "Dearest daughter of my house and heart, take my advice and think only when you cannot help thinking; but remember that woman was not made to think but to act. It is man, foolish man, who is so badly endowed of nature that he is compelled to think out things. The woman who thinks is about as womanly as the pantomime Old Mother Hubbard. Be a woman, my dear, and assert your femininity by acting—yes, acting in accordance with no principle of logic, but strictly in response to the prompting of your instinct."

He kissed her and looked at the timepiece.

"I'll write to Mr. Winwood," she said somewhat helplessly and hopelessly. "Joe long ago promised to come to us at The Weir on Saturday week. But I think I must tell her if he accepts the mater's invitation."

"Oh, certainly; that is the least you can do: she was so polite to him to-day," said her father from the door, smiling that registered smile of his and making his escape before she could put the question to him which that smile invariably prompted.

She felt that it was all very well for him to advise her not to think out any matter; it was not so easy, however, for her to refrain from thinking, seeing that he had led her into the perilous paths of thought long ago. He had taught her the art of thinking long ago, and yet now he could airily assure her that she was very foolish and—what was much the same thing—very unwomanly to try to think herself out of a difficult place.

Well, that showed that he was a man anyway—a man as illogical as the most sapient *savant* can be, and that is saying a good deal.

The suggestions made to her by her father had, however, considerably widened the horizon of her consideration, so to speak. That is to say, she had only been thinking how admirably Josephine had succeeded in hiding beneath a mask of politeness her ill-founded prejudice against Mr. Winwood; whereas now she was led to consider the possibility of that mask of hers concealing a good deal more. She had been pitying, first, Mr. Winwood for having been so impulsive as to fall in love with Josephine; and, secondly, Josephine for having been so impulsive as to conceive a prejudice that might interfere with her happiness in the future.

But now, it seemed that she need not have pitied either of them—if her father's suggestions were worth anything.

And then she had given an exclamation of derision and had begun to think of other matters. She meant this exclamation to bear upon the wisdom of her father veiled (as so much wisdom may be if one is only wise) in a fine lacework of phrases. Her father's Valenciennes phrases were much admired: they had a charming and delicate pattern of their own which perhaps some people admired more than the wisdom whose features they effectually concealed, and the design of his Point de Venise was so striking that no one was in the least curious as to whether it concealed any thought or not.

Thus it was that Sir Creighton's daughter found it necessary to make use of a serious exclamation when she found that when she had looked for wisdom from her father he had given her a phrase—the lace ceremony of wisdom.

And then she gave a more emphatic exclamation when she reflected upon the possibility of Josephine's polite demeanour being as opaque as her father's paradoxes. She had believed that the embroidered domino of politeness—that makes a variation from the rather flimsy trope of the lace—concealed within its folds only her friend's dislike for the presence of Mr. Winwood; but now it had been suggested to her that there was a good deal below the billowy surface of the ornamented fabric that she had never suspected to exist there.

She said "Psha!" also "Phu!" and "Phi," and gave vent to all those delicately modulated breathings with long-drawn sibilants which moments of staccato derision suggest to those young women who have not trained themselves to the more robust verbiage of condemnation—sounds like the stamping of Alpine heels upon a solid pavement.

It was of course a great relief to the girl to give way to those half tones of vituperation—those dainty slipper-taps as it were, of impatience. But after all the real relief that she experienced was in diverting her thoughts from the possible dissimulation of her father and her friend to the plain and simple language made use of by Lord Lullworth in her presence.

Lord Lullworth was, of course, a fellow with no pretensions to brain-power—with no delicate appreciation of the subtleties of language; but beyond a shadow of doubt Amber felt the greatest relief to her mind through reflecting upon his extraordinary frankness. There at any rate was a man who knew exactly what he meant and who was able to communicate to another person exactly what he meant. To be sure what he did mean was something too absurd to be entertained for a moment; still it had been clearly defined and—yes, it was not without picturesqueness and—yes, it was undeniably a relief to think about him.

Only an hour had passed since she had been lying back among her cushions, reflecting, with the help of the Florentine mirror, upon the situation of the moment. She had at that time been led, out of a feeling that Lord Lullworth should have fair play, to think of him in active and brutal contest with the other young men who had been drinking tea with her; but now she found that, even judged from a lofty standpoint, he was susceptible of being thought about with positive pleasure—well, if not absolute pleasure certainly with satisfaction, the satisfaction which comes from a sense of relief.

And then she found that really his frankness had not been unpicturesque as a pose. She began to feel that a great misapprehension existed in the minds of most people in regard to frankness. The impression undoubtedly did prevail that frankness was only candour in hob-nailed boots. She knew that the general feeling is that if candour is insolence in a white surplice, frankness is rudeness in rags. That misapprehension was allowed to exist simply because so many people who were really clever, never found that it suited them to be frank. They had given all their attention to the art of not being frank, just as some women give up all their time to their dress, neglecting their bodies, to say nothing of their souls, in order that they may appear well-dressed. She felt convinced that if a really clever man were to study frankness as an art he might be able to make a good thing out of it. At any rate it would be a novelty.

Yes, Lord Lullworth had certainly struck out a path for himself, and had made some progress—quite enough to impress her, and to cause her some remorse when she reflected upon her having thought of him as a fool.

Lord Lullworth undoubtedly had made an appreciable amount of progress when he had impelled the girl who had first thought of him only as a young fool, to give herself over to the consideration of his position as an athlete, then of his position as a relieving influence coming after the distractions of intellectuality; and, finally, of his position as an original thinker—the pioneer of a cult which might yet become a power in a society where dissimulation, flourishes.

And what marked the extent of his progress the more vividly was the fact that the result of her consideration of the young man from every successive standpoint only strengthened his place in her esteem.

Then her mother wrote the invitation to Mr. Win-wood for Saturday week and he accepted it in due course; and it was on the Wednesday next before that Saturday that Amber met Josephine on the terrace of the great historic house in Kensington, and reminded her that she had engaged herself to go up the river to The Weir from Saturday to Monday.

That was not the only engagement of which Josephine was conscious.

Still she had been able to shoot a dart of pretty badinage with a barb touched with sugar instead of gall, in the direction of Mr. Winwood at that moment; and thus Amber had gone home more amazed than ever.

But not before she had been charmed by her gracious reception at the hands of the Countess of Castlethorpe.

No young man with a mother so perfectly charming could be unworthy of consideration, she felt.

And thus Lord Lullworth took another stride along the perilous path upon which he had set his feet.

CHAPTER XXII

Even when he was living for two days in the retirement of his cottage on the bank of the River Thames, Sir Creighton Severn was too busy a man to find time to join the little company who set out in his launch on the Sunday to pay the visit which his daughter had promised to the new proprietor of The Gables. He was not so utterly overwhelmed with business, however, but that he could look forward to two hours of solitude and slumber during their absence. He calculated, without the aid of logarithms, that the little company would be absent for two hours, and he proposed spending twenty minutes of this space in the enjoyment of his solitary cigar on the lawn and the remaining hour and forty minutes on one of the long cane chairs in a bower over-clustered by clematis, blue and white, and hidden away from the intrusive enquiries of impressionable flies and impossible visitors.

He had no doubt that a visit to The Gables would have been very interesting—as a matter of fact he found most things in the world very interesting—but, as he remarked with a sigh that fully expressed his gratification at the thought, a busy man must make up his mind to forego a good many of those enjoyments which he most detested.

The utmost enjoyment that he could allow himself in connection with this expedition was seeing the departure of the electric launch from the little staging at the water's edge. But this enjoyment though only lasting a few minutes, was intense while it did last. His wife understood his feelings thoroughly. It was not often that she was able when up the river to withdraw her guests in so solid a body, leaving Sir Creighton to the solitude of his bower.

Her guests pitied him. Some of the more sapient ones shook their heads and talked about burning the candle at both ends.

She only smiled in response and said that it did not matter when the candle was an electric one.

And so the launch made its noiseless way towards the lock at Hurley.

The cottage known as The Weir was quite a small place—it could only accommodate six or seven visitors at once in addition to Sir Creighton's family, and the usual maids which the visitors brought with them; it was just the snug little nook that would suit any one who did not want to keep more than two gardeners and half a dozen servants. The woods of Clievedon were behind it, and the waters of the weir at Marlow whispered a

perpetual "Hush" in the ears of all the household. Sometimes, however, the sound was sufficiently loud to drown the silly bleatings of the phonographs on the excursion steamers on the other side.

The fellow-guests of Josephine and Pierce on this particular Sunday were only two—a man and his wife who were entering on the third month of married life and living as if they were utterly regardless of the likelihood that they had forty years or so ahead of them. They sat far astern, not exactly side by side, but within easy reach of each other's hands. They thought it well to be prepared for any emergency. And they were.

The Gables was scarcely a mile beyond Hurley. It had now and again peeped into the pages of English history during the two hundred years of its existence. It was only because it had not let very readily since the death of its late owner that the agents had thought it advisable to apply the Nell Gwyn myth to it. The imagination of the house agent is bounded on every side by Nell Gwyn. He has not the least notion who Nell Gwyn was and he doesn't greatly care; but he knows that as a jog to the dilatory purchaser there is no name so potent in a catalogue, whether the "item" refers to a public-house or a rectory.

Nell Gwyn had been dead for several years before The Gables was built. It was quite another actress who had found it a convenient place of rest for a season, but even in respect of the date of her residence beneath its roof some doubt exists; for at the very period assigned to her occupancy of the house, it is known that it was in the possession of a Royal Personage, which, of course, proves that a confusing error has crept into the dates.

But it is certain that an historic duel once took place on the lawn—a duel in which a distinguished nobleman ran his dearest friend through the vitals, and subsequently was himself stabbed by the husband of the lady with whom his former antagonist was in love.

The duel took place with swords on the lawn; but the successive owners of the house have pointed out for generations the marks of the bullet on the painted wainscot of one of the drawing-rooms; and the mahogany Hepplewhite chair a portion of the carving of which was injured by the same missile. No one has yet ventured to explain how it was that the bullet in a duel fought with swords killed a man who was run through the body and then injured the carving of a chair made of a wood that was not introduced into England until forty years later, and by an artist who was not born at the time.

Still there are the bullet marks and they were pointed out with pride by the new owner of the house to his guests who had joined his house party this evening.

And the girls, who knew all about the house, laughed quite pleasantly, and the young man from Australia said that servants were very careless, which was an absurd remark to make when talking about historic deeds and the eccentricities of bullets.

Lady Severn said that the room wanted badly to be dusted, and this was quite true, as every member of the house-party—they were three in number: namely, Galmyn, Bateman and another—was ready to testify.

The historic house was not seen to the greatest advantage at that time; but so far as one could gather, the pride of the new owner in possessing it, was quite as great as if the place were habitable. It was far from habitable, a casual observer might have been led to believe. After crossing the high grass on the lawn—the proprietor explained apologetically that he had been offered fifteen shillings for the hay crop but he meant to hold out for a pound—the visitors skirted the enormously overgrown shrubs and the unclipped yew hedges, until they found themselves stumbling over the hillocks of what had once been a rose-garden, now given over to the riotous luxuriance of the flaming dandelion and the tangled masses of the blue periwinkle, and the persistent nasturtium. The whole place resembled nothing so closely as a neglected graveyard.

Guy Overton and his house-party trooped out to meet them, from the big entrance-hall; and it was plain that the little party had been playing billiards, for one of them appeared in the porch with a cue still in his hand, and they all seemed warm and dusty, having hastily struggled back into their coats, as garden snails retire to their shells when surprised.

"Is it possible that you have been playing billiards indoors such a lovely afternoon as this?" cried Amber in grave surprise.

"Oh, no; not billiards, only pool," said Guy.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves," said Amber.

"How could they do it when so charming a garden is smiling at them here?" asked Pierce.

"Well, to tell you the truth, we have had only a poor kind of game," said Guy, with an exculpatory inflection. "In fact, I don't think it could be called a game at all."

"There is the less excuse for you then, spending your time over it," said Amber.

"When all nature calls to you rapturously from the cemetery outside," added Pierce.

"Oh, that's all my aunt!" cried Guy impatient of sarcasm. "The garden is a bit depressing just now, but sooner than take fifteen bob for the hay crop, I'd give it away."

"That would be an extreme measure indeed," said Pierce. "Take my advice, Guy; let it continue increasing in luxuriance until the winter and then sell it when the hay is getting scarce."

"Welcome to The Gables!" cried Guy hospitably as the party passed through the porch into the hall. "Welcome all! I hope this may be the first of many pleasant visits to my humble home."

"How nicely said," cried Lady Severn. "I am sure that we all share your kind hopes, Mr. Overton."

The hall was a spacious apartment with a transparent dome roof and mullioned windows. Here and there on the walls hung trophies of the chase, done in plaster of Paris, beautifully tinted (an idea due to the house agent) and some excellent specimens of drapers' Japanese. The floor was beautifully inlaid as one could see where the borders remained free from the earthy layer that had been transferred from the garden by the boots of (it seemed) half a century.

Cobwebs hung from the beams of the roof like the tattered regimental colours in a church, and here and there a piece of plaster had disappeared from above the panels of the walls. The remaining breadths of plaster bore countless round marks on its surface, suggesting that some man had designed a new and curious scheme of decoration, but had failed to realise his aims.

It was while Josephine and Pierce were examining these singular impressions on the wall that Guy explained their origin.

"The fact is," he said, "we played a billiard or two last night, and as the tables hadn't been used for five or six years, there was no chalk, but Galmyn, not to be beat, hit upon the notion of rubbing the tips of our cues against the plaster of the walls. The idea worked remarkably well."

"It was worthy of the imagination, of a poet," said Pierce, feeling the cushions of the table and laughing. "You must have had a joyous time over this table," he added. "The cushions are clearly made of chilled steel."

"They are a bit hard, aren't they?" said Guy. "Yes, we found that they hadn't much spring left in them."

"Spring?" cried Mr. Galmyn. "Spring? No, there's more that suggests winter than spring about them."

"They'll be all right when they are played on for some time," said Guy.

"Oh, yes; in a year or two they'll be like butter," said Pierce encouragingly. "Your light wasn't particularly good I should say?"

He pointed to a splash of wax about the size of a crown piece on the edge of one of the pockets.

"That chap is a regular Sherlock Holmes," cried Guy. "He has found out that we played by the light of candles last night."

On the shelf of the mantelpiece stood a pair of silver candelabra with remnants of candle still in the sockets, but a good bit out of the upright. Splashes of wax decorated the path from the billiard-table to the fireplace, suggesting the white stones alongside a carriage drive.

"Only one cue had a tip," said Guy. "That made playing a bit tiresome: you see we had to pass it on for every stroke. We had best go on to the drawing-room. The ceiling is said to have been painted by Angelica Kauffmann—whoever she was."

"I never saw a painted ceiling that poor Miss Angel hadn't something to say to," whispered Josephine as the party trooped through the open door.

It was as Lady Severn had said: the drawing-room stood sadly in need of dusting.

So, for that matter, did every other room, to say nothing of the stairs which were carpetless. The house was not quite a wreck; but one felt oneself instinctively quoting lines from Tennyson's "Mariana" as one stood—it was scarcely safe to sit—in any of the rooms. There were bald patches upon some of the walls that had some time—long ago—been painted; but as a sort of compensation for this deficiency, as a member of the party remarked when it was pointed out to him there were several patches on the wall that were not bald but quite the contrary; for indeed the mildew had been at work increasing the forlorn appearance of the place.

But the new proprietor was very proud of everything—of the patches on the wall that marked where the plaster had become dislodged—of the hirsute patches that had been subject to the damp—of the bullet marks that he considered the visible signs of the duel fought with swords—nay, even of the rat that went scurrying across a room which he called the library, the moment the door was opened. Oh, there were plenty of rats, he declared—some fine fat healthy animals; he talked of them as though they were part of the live stock of the estate.

And in the drawing-room, after a depressing ramble through the dreary house, tea was served by a couple of elderly women (local) and it was certainly not deficient in strength. Neither was the cake (local) nor the china. Young Mr. Overton was already making a heroic attempt to introduce a scheme of economy that should tend to lessen the dead weight of the expense to which he had been put in purchasing the historic house.

Some members of the party wished that he had gone a little further in the same direction and had refrained from forcing his *recherché* entertainment upon them. They swallowed a portion of the black tea, however, and congratulating him upon the appearance of everything—for any one who was fond of developing a property, as he assured them he was, the state of the house and grounds left nothing to be desired—wondered secretly why he should have asked them to visit such a scene of desolation.

If Amber was among those who marvelled what his motive could be, her doubts were dispelled when she found herself alone with him at one of the drawingroom windows: the other members of the party had made their escape to the field of grass called by a daring figure of speech, a lawn; but she had allowed herself to be persuaded to sample, so to speak, a view from a side window. She admitted that the silver of the river gleaming between the yew hedges was very effective, and felt convinced that it would be improved by a judicious trimming of the shrubs.

"And you like the old place?" said he. "It has surprised you, hasn't it?"

"Surprised me?—well,—oh, yes, it certainly surprised me," she replied. "You are looking forward to a delightful time with it, are you not? I suppose it wouldn't have had the same attraction for you if it had been in any better condition?"

"Amber," he said in a whisper which had something of shyness lingering in its tremulous emotion. "Amber, I lay it all at your feet."

She allowed him to catch her hand—she was too puzzled to keep it from him. Was this his way of saying good-bye, she wondered.

"I lay everything here at your feet; if you like it, it is all yours," he cried.

"Don't be a goose, Guy," she said snatching her hand away. "What on earth would I do with such a place as this?"

"Come to it—be the chatelaine of my castle, reign here, Amber, as you do in my heart. I got the place cheap; but I shall spend money on it—by degrees—to make it worthy of your acceptance, Amber, my own—my ___"

At this point a rat put in an appearance at the side of the door and rushed out through the open window.

"Was it for this you asked me to come here?" cried Amber, bravely ignoring what other girls might have regarded as a legitimate interruption of the scene. "Yes, you asked me to come here in order to make your absurd proposal to me. You should be ashamed of yourself, when you knew so well that I thought of our

friendship as wholly disinterested. If I had, for one moment——”

“I thought you saw it coming,” said he hanging his head.

“What coming?”

“This.”

“You have given me a blow, Guy—I thought that you were a sincere friend.”

“So I was—I am. But I can’t help loving you all the same. Great Queen of Sheba, you don’t fancy that what you call Platonic friendship can go on beyond a certain point. It’s all very well for a beginning; it makes a good enough basis for a start—but, hang it all, you don’t think that a chap with any self-respect would be content—when there’s a pretty girl like you—the prettiest and the dearest girl that ever lived—— Who the mischief is bawling out there?”

“They are calling to me from the launch,” said Amber. “It is just as well. Guy, I am not angry—only disappointed. You have disappointed me. I thought that you at least—they are getting impatient. I must go.”

She hastened away to the open window and he followed her with a face of melancholy so congenial with the prevailing note of the house that an artist would have been delighted to include him in a picture of “The Gables from the River.”

She ran through the long grass and reached the launch so breathless that she could with difficulty explain that she had been watching a rat.

Every one in the boat knew that Guy had been asking her to marry him. Chaps only have that hangdog expression, worn with some distinction by Guy Overton, when they have been proposing to girls, the two-month husband explained to his wife.

A girl only shakes hands with a man so cordially as Amber had shaken hands with Guy, when she has just refused to marry him, Josephine knew.

And the boatman shifted the lever.

CHAPTER XXIII

There was a field of wheat not so far from The Weir. It was approached by a stile from the roadway and a narrow path went through it to the Clieve-don Woods as evenly as a canal divides a landscape. At the further end there was another stile and a bank of low trees, with a hollow and a slope overgrown with green grass and a myriad of wild flowers beloved by bees. A grass meadow with a little stream creeping through it, and here and there a tuft of rushes; behind all the long high ridge of the woods—these are the details of which one becomes aware when one has begun to recover from the vast wonder of the field of wheat.

Josephine was not wearing a hat. She had merely picked up a crimson sunshade after breakfast on the Monday, and had gone alone strolling through the garden, a magazine under her arm. She had given her maid instructions to be ready to start for town after lunch—the other guests, with the exception of Pierce Winwood, had already taken their departure, and Pierce Winwood had gone to Marlow with Lady Severn and Amber. That was how Josephine came to be alone, and to be glad to be alone. She had become aware of the fact that she had something to think about, and she hoped that half an hour on the green shorn breadths of grass with the river at her feet and the whisper of the weir in her ears would be a relief to her.

She strolled down the lawn to the river, but a steamer with people aboard drinking out of bottles and playing on banjos, when the sexes had duly exchanged hats, was hooting for the lock-keeper, so she turned away to the upper part of the garden. She found that she had more to think about than the garden would contain, so she passed out by the little gate to the silent road and stood for a moment looking along its dusty curve to where it got lost in the dimness of overshadowing trees, and then, in the other direction, where it twisted round by the boathouse at the bridge. She began to walk in this direction, slowly and listlessly, and when she came to the stile leading to the wheatfield, she mounted it, and remained for some time on the topmost step gazing along the surface of that yellow flaming plain lost in the marvel of it, when there came a wind too light for her to feel upon her face, and fanned the moveless breadth of flame into a thousand flickers, and the whole wide field of a hundred acres became quickly alive, and full of the whisperings of newly acquired vitality.

She felt that she had never seen anything so beautiful before. She leaped down from the topmost step to the path, with all the delight of the swimmer springing into the sea. The waving mass closed on her head for a moment but when she recovered herself she was head and shoulders above the grain. She strolled along the flat track by the side of the little bank, with blue wild flowers on one hand and flaring poppies on the other, breathing of the fresh warm sunlight that seemed to be enclosed between the green bank and the serried lines of the ripe grain.

And then, where a space had been cleared by the reaping-machine, and the bundles of grain lay at regular intervals along the ground, there arose from under her very feet a flock of blue and white wood pigeons, and flew for a few dozen yards ahead, then fell in an exquisite curve, the sunlight gleaming for a moment upon every white feather in succession until all had dropped at the brink of the field.

When she reached the farther stile with the woods at her back she seated herself, feeling that she never wished to get back to the world again,—that she had at last reached a spot where all the joy of life was to be had. There was nothing better than this in all the world—this breathing of warm air, this listening to the hum

of insects, this watching of the myriad butterflies, fluttering, and flitting and poising over everything that was sweet smelling on the bank and in the grass, this gazing on the rippling flames that burned yellow into the distance where no ripple stirred. The beauty and the quietness of it all! The satisfied sense of waiting without emotion for the heat of the noontide, of waiting, without longing, for the poppy sunset—for the sounds of the evening, the cooing of the wood pigeons, the cawing of the rooks, with now and again the rich contralto of a blackbird's note.

And then the warm silence of a night powdered with stars, as the soft blue of the sky became dark, but without ceasing to be blue! Oh that summer night!

The thought of it all as she could imagine it, meant rest.

That was what every one needed—rest; and she felt that she had wandered away from man and into the very heart of the peace of God.

The thought that she had a thought which was not one suggested by the landscape irritated her. She felt that she had a good reason for being irritated with Ernest Clifton who was responsible for her failure to continue in this dream of perfect repose. She felt irritated with him just as one is with a servant who blunders into the room where one is in a sleep of divine tranquillity.

During the ten days that had passed since he had surprised her—for a few moments—by giving her the release for which she had asked him, only to impose upon her a much stronger obligation, she had been thinking over his trickery—the word had been forced upon her; she felt quite shocked at its persistent intrusion but that made no difference: the word had come and the word remained with her until she was accustomed to it.

But it was not until now that she asked herself the question:

"How could I ever have fancied that I loved the man who could thus juggle with me?"

She knew that what she had told him on that Sunday at Ranelagh was quite true: she had been greatly troubled for some months at the thought that she was guilty of deception—a certain amount of deception—in respect of her engagement to him. The deception of her father and mother had become at last unendurable to her. She began to despise herself for it all and to feel humiliated every time she was by the side of Ernest Clifton when the eyes of people were watching her. She had to act as if he was nothing to her, and this dissimulation had become unendurable, so that she had sought for the opportunity of telling him that he must release her.

She thought that she cared for him even then—she thought that the first step apart from him was taken by her when she perceived that he did not believe what she had said to him at that time. She knew that he did not believe that it pained her to deceive her father and mother—she knew that he was thinking "Who is the other man?" and then she was conscious of taking the first step apart from him.

But it was not a mere step that she had taken away from him on that evening on the Italian terrace of the Kensington garden when she had recovered from her surprise at his generosity only to discover that he had tricked her—that he had substituted a new bondage for the old from which he had released her—it was not a mere step: she became conscious of the fact that he and she were miles asunder—that she detested him so much that she could scarcely realise that she had ever cared a jot for him. And now—

Well now she was irritated that the thought that she had yet to free herself entirely from him, came upon her shattering with a note of discord her crystal dream of peace.

She would write to him—no, she would see him face to face before another day had passed, and tell him that she perceived how he had juggled with her, and that she declined to be bound to him by any tie. It was a comfort to her to reflect that she had need only to tell him to go to her father and ask his consent to her promising to marry him, and her separation from him would be complete, for she knew something of the ambition of her father, and that he had other views respecting her future than to marry her to a man who though perhaps possessing some power as the wire puller—the stage manager, as it were—of a political party, was far from being a match for the daughter of a man who hoped for a peerage. Mr. Clifton himself had been well aware of this fact, or he would not have imposed upon her that bondage of secrecy which had become so irksome to her.

Yes, she would tell him that unless her father gave his consent, she would consider herself bound in no way to him—not even by that subtle silken cord of mutual faith, "mutual confidence holds us together," was the phrase that he had employed.

She laughed at the thought of it.

"Does it—does it?" she thought, through her laugh. *"Well, perhaps—but—"*

And then she started, hearing through the hum of the wild bees about the sweet briar of the grassy bank, the sound of a step on the track leading from the stile through the woods. She started and then her face flamed like the poppies at her feet, though she must have seen in a moment that the man who had vaulted over the rails of the stile was no stranger but only Pierce Winwood.

And then he too started and his face—but his face being already the colour of a copper-beech was not susceptible of any poppy tint, although there is an inward blushing, just as there is an inward bleeding—far more fatal than the other.

Then they both laughed, with their heads thrown back, after the manner of people who give themselves over to a laugh.

It seemed that she was under the impression that an apology for her presence there was necessary, for there was more than an explanatory note in her voice while she said:

"I had no idea that—why, I thought that you had gone to Marlow—I was in the garden but there was a horribly crowded steamer with a terrible Hampsteading crowd aboard and a whistle. I came out on the road and was amazed to find that I had never heard that a wheatfield is the most beautiful thing in the world. How is it that the people here have been talking on any other subject during the past few days? What else is there worth talking about in comparison with this?"

She made a motion with her sunshade to include all the landscape. He did not look at the landscape: he was too busy looking at her.

"I wondered what it could be compared to," she resumed with great rapidity. She did not show her disappointment at his disregard of the glory of mellow growth which he had taken the trouble to indicate. "Oh, what is worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as this?... But how did you come here from that direction?"

"I crossed the river by the bridge and took a stroll through the woods," said he. "I was not sure that I should find a path through this field, but when I saw the stile I had hopes."

"That is how people come upon the best things that life has in store for them—by the merest fluke," said she, and she made a movement as if she understood that they were to walk together to The Weir.

"Don't let us go away for another minute," said he, without moving.

She turned her head only, with the sunshade over it. An enquiry was on her face.

"Don't go away," he repeated. "I was going to put those words of yours to the test."

"What words? Did I say anything? Oh, the beauty of the wheatfield? I will not have it analysed by any canon of criticism. If you say that it is too yellow I shall never speak to you again."

"I will not say that, and yet perhaps you will never speak to me again."

The smile faded away from her face at the tone of his voice.

"I will listen to you," she said resolutely.

He looked into her face for a few moments and then he took a step or two away from her, actually turning round to do so. His eyes were fixed on the ground.

"You said that people come upon the best things in life as—as I came here—to you, and I am going to find out whether I have come upon the best or the worst thing that life has to offer me, for I am going to tell you that I love you and to ask you if you can give me any hope that you will one day think of me as loving you."

He was now standing face to face with her. He spoke in a low voice but not in even tones, until she gave a little cry—it sounded like a sob—when he was half way through his sentences, making a motion of protest with one hand; then his voice became quite steady—steady almost to a point of coldness.

She did not answer him at once. But there came a silence, through which they could both hear the hum of the wild bees on the green bank.

Two sulphur butterflies danced above them in the air.

She watched the butterflies, and then glanced at the bank.

"There is sweet briar about here I am sure," she said, as if they had been discussing the herbarium.

He thought he appreciated her mood of the moment.

"Yes," he said; "I think there must be sweet briar somewhere."

He did not stir hand or foot. His hands were in the pocket of his jacket.

She took a few steps to the bank; then her sunshade slipped from her shoulder and fell awkwardly on the ground behind her; for she had no hand to hold it; she was holding both her hands to her face sobbing in them.

He made no move. He did not even recover her sunshade, sprawling there a mighty crimson thing among the crimson poppies and the pink. He could not understand her tears; he only felt that she could not be indifferent to him. There are only two sorts of tears; they never come from indifference.

And then she seated herself on the bank and wiped her tears away with her handkerchief. He saw how the sunlight was snared among the strands of her hair. He had never known that it had that reddish gold tinge among its masses of rich brown. It maddened him with its beauty; but still he could not move. He had a feeling that it would be fatal for him to make the least movement.

He had ample time to admire this newly-discovered charm of her hair, for she did not look at him nor did she speak until several minutes had passed.

Then she tossed from her the handkerchief that she had rolled into a round mass, as a child flings its ball away, and the recklessness that the act suggested was prolonged in her voice, as she said:

"What a fool I am! Why should I cry because I know that you love me when I too know that I love you, and that whatever happens I shall marry you—you—you—and not the man whom I promised to marry? What a fool!"

CHAPTER XXIV

He was beside her in a moment. An inarticulate sound of triumph had come from him—the legacy of some carnivorous ancestor coeval with Adam. He was kissing her hands, and her face, and, when she bowed her head, he kissed the shining beauty of her hair.

It had the taste of sunlight.

She did not take any great pains to prevent him. She did not at that moment see that there was a particular need to do so. It seemed to her so good to be kissed by him.

He had an impression that she kissed him back—once.

Then they looked into each other's faces and laughed quite pleasantly.

"How funny, isn't it?" she said, "you have not seen me more than a dozen times."

He was unable to see what was funny in the matter—that was why he laughed very seriously, and whispered, "My beloved!" in her ear.

"My beloved," he said again holding her hand close to him. "My beloved, never say that I have not been seeing you all my life. From the time I first knew what love meant I loved you—an ideal—I loved the Ideal that was you. I wondered if I should ever meet you. I hoped that I should or it would not have been worth my while to live. But I met you—you came to me."

"Yes, I have come to you," she said. "But..."

"Ah, why should you introduce that note of discord?" he cried. "You said something just now—something—I wonder if I heard it aright... Never mind. This hour is mine, is it not?"

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "You have made it yours, have you not? Oh, yes it must be your hour—and mine—I suppose it must be mine too—because I never felt so happy before; and I do not even let the thought of—of—the other man come between us."

There was a dreadful recklessness in her voice. She could not help it: she felt reckless at that moment. She felt that she was retaliating justly upon the man who had tricked her. She would have liked if he had suddenly appeared on the other side of the stile and looked on. She would have kissed her lover before his face. What could he have done to her? Did he really fancy that Pierce Winwood would allow him to interfere? If he did he was a fool.

He did not know that it is part of a woman's nature to be reckless—once in her life; and he became a little afraid of the way in which she was speaking to him. He did not know how she had been driven ahead by the thought that another man had tried to trick her into being true to him.

She was having her retaliation.

He did not object in the least to be a participator in it, though he knew nothing about it. He held her hands in his own and looked into her face.

"You were right," he whispered; "it is the best day of my life. And I thought that I came here by chance. You love me, don't you? I wonder if you really do love me. Shall I awaken and find that this marvel of sunshine and summer has fled forever? Were you really thinking of me as I came up? It seems ridiculous to hope so much."

"I think I must have been thinking of you," she said, "if I had not been thinking of you should I have felt so... Oh, I recollect now—I was not thinking of you—I was only thinking of the loveliness of the world—that was why I felt angry that he had bound me to him—if I never really hated him before I hated him then. You will not let me go back to him, will you? You must promise to save me from him."

She had caught him by the arm. All her recklessness had vanished. She was appealing to him as a child appeals to one for protection against a bogey man.

He had his arms about her.

"No one shall take you from me," he said. "Who is it that you fear, my dearest?"

She stared at him for some moments, and then burst into a laugh.

"I forgot—I forgot," she cried. "You never heard it. How was it possible for you to hear it?"

Then she put down a hand to his that clasped her waist, and held it away from her. Her eyes were looking out over the whispering breadth of the wheat-field. The wood pigeons were still rising at intervals and curving downward with a glint of sunlight on their feathers.

She rose from where she was sitting against the bank, and picked up her sunshade.

"I am afraid that it is all wrong," she said, shaking her head. "I have been too sudden—I had no right to listen to you—to tell you—but you came upon me before I was aware of it, and—oh, I told you just how I felt. As I kept telling you, I felt that I was telling myself the truth for the first time. But—well, I was free—that is to say, I should have been free if he had not said that he trusted in me. That was his trick... Oh, why did you come here to-day? Why—why—why? Could you not have waited until I had carried out my resolution to go to him and tell him that I would not be bound by any trick of his? You had no right to come as you did. I feel that I have been wrong—horribly wrong. I should have gone to him first."

"Yes; but I came—I came, and you cannot take back a word that you spoke—that's one good thing anyway," said he in the voice of a man that no woman's treble can oppose, unless it becomes shrill, and there is a craning of the neck as it is uttered.

"You will say that women have no sense of honour—I have heard men say that," she continued, and there was indignation in her voice. "No sense of honour! Perhaps we have not; but I meant—yes, it was my sense of honour that made me make up my mind to go to him and give him to understand that I meant to be free—free, not merely in name, but really free—free so that he should have no right to say that he trusted me. He said that he trusted me—those were his words; they sounded generous at the moment, but then I perceived that—that—" Her utterance became more deliberate; then it seemed to occur to her that there was something wanting on the part of her auditor: there was a puzzled expression on his face that puzzled her at first interfering with her fluency; then all at once she seemed to recollect that the extent of her knowledge of

the subject on which she was speaking was a good deal more than his could possibly be. How could he be expected to know what had been kept a secret from her father and mother—from all the world?

"You know nothing," she said after a long pause. "I shall have to tell you everything. Perhaps you will feel that I have acted badly—disgracefully—without a sense of honour. I dare say I have—yes, I feel that I have behaved badly; but it was your fault. You came too soon. I tell you that indeed I had thought it all out, and made up my mind that I should be free from all blame."

"Tell me all that is on your mind, my dearest," said he. "You have already told me all that is on your heart."

"It doesn't matter what he may think—now, does it?" she cried.

"Nothing matters so long as we love each other," he responded glibly and gladly.

"And it really isn't much after all that I have to tell," she said. "How I ever came to agree to his proposal, I cannot explain."

"Whose proposal?"

"Whose?—Whose? Oh, you do not know even so much. Listen. Nearly a year ago I fancied that I was in love with Ernest Clifton. At any rate he told me that he was in love with me and I admired him so much for the way he had worked himself up from the humblest of positions—I suppose that's the best explanation of the matter—I agreed to marry him, and he also persuaded me to keep my engagement secret from all the world: he knew that my father would not sanction it until at least he had a seat in Parliament. Well, it was kept a secret; but I gradually so came to see that I was acting wrongly—the whole business so weighed upon me that I was conscious of my whole character—my whole nature changing, and I insisted on his releasing me from my engagement."

"And he did so? It would not matter to me whether he did so or not; but I suppose he was wise enough to do so."

"After some time, and a letter or two, he said that he released me; and then—this was what made me angry—he said, 'Between you and me there is no need for the formality of an engagement. I have implicit faith in you and I know that you have implicit faith in me. We can trust each other.' Now don't you see how despicably clever he was? Don't you see that while he released me with one hand he was holding me to him with the other? Don't you see that in listening to you here to-day—in admitting to you that it is you and none other whom I love, I have acted dishonestly—shamefully, if you insist on it."

"I don't insist on it. I am glad that I came here when I did, taking you by surprise. I see clearly that if I had not taken you by surprise I might never have had a chance of hearing the truth from you—the truth which has made a new man of me."

"I don't agree with you. I feel that when he trusted me—cannot you see that he made it a question of honour with me? Haven't you heard of a soldier's *parole*? I have broken my *parole*. That's what I feel."

"My dearest girl, do you fancy that *parole* can be a one-sided agreement? Is your sense of honour to be entrapped by sophistry? Talk of *parole*—a man to whom you consider yourself bound by a promise releases you from the consequence of this promise, and then tells you that though you promised not to run away, and though he releases you from that promise he trusts in your honour not to run away. What sophistry is this? It might do well enough for a political juggler, but it is not for such people as you or I. You didn't say to him, did you?—'I agree to be bound to you by the faith which we have in each other.'"

"He took care to give me no chance of replying to him one way or another."

"Then cannot you perceive that he had no claim on you?"

She was silent. The fact was that she did not perceive it. But undoubtedly the way he proved the point was agreeable to her. Of course it is quite possible for a man to prove a point to a woman's satisfaction and yet to leave her unsatisfied as to whether or not his contention is correct. Pierce Winwood had proved to this young woman that she had been well within her rights in accepting him as her lover, and yet she had an uneasy feeling that she had done the other man a wrong. An old rhyme went jingling through her brain, with all the irritating force of a milk cart hurrying for a train—something about the advisability of being off with the old love before being on with the new.

But that was just what she had done: she had been strictly conscientious. She had written to Ernest Clifton asking to be released from the promise which she had made to him and he had freed her—what the young man beside her said was perfectly true: she had not been a party to the *parole*—it had been forced upon her. She had not consented to it. Nothing in the world could be clearer than this.

And yet the result of thinking over it all was to leave her with a feeling of uneasiness in respect of her own action and of still greater uneasiness in respect of his sense of honour.

"Don't think anything more about the business," said he.

"I will not," she said. "I will not; after all, did not he *try* to trick me, and why should not I, if I saw that—that— But you—well, I have made a confession to you at any rate, and that's something, isn't it? You are not angry?"

"Angry—I—angry—"

He was taking such action in regard to her as should he thought convince her that he was not permanently embittered against her; but she gave him to understand that his word of mouth was quite adequate to allay her doubts.

"Ah, no—no," she said; and his lips had to be content with the back of her hand. "I was taken by surprise just now. I did wrong, considering the position in which I stood—in which I still stand."

"Good heavens," he cried, "haven't I proved—didn't you agree with me—"

"Yes, yes; there can be no doubt about it," she assented with the utmost cordiality. "Yes; still—but I see clearly what I can do. I can tell him that without my father's consent it would be impossible for me to—to—to be otherwise than free. I will tell him that I consider myself to be free—that I considered myself to be so from the moment he agreed to my taking back my promise."

He could not see that anything would be gained by this traffic with the other man; but he thought that she might fancy that he was giving himself the airs of a lover too early in his career. Only half an hour had elapsed since he had undertaken to play the part, and though ambitious to make a mark in the *role*, he thought it would be more prudent to perfect himself in it by slow degrees.

Still he could not refrain from saying:

"I wouldn't bother myself much, if I were you, in this business. These chaps are so clever you never know quite where you are with them. I see plainly that was how you came to engage yourself to him. He told you of his hopes—you wished out of the goodness and generosity of your heart to help him on, and so—well, there you were, don't you see?"

"That was exactly how it was," she cried. "You are just to me. I know now that I never loved him—ah, now I know what love is!"

"My beloved!"

"I admired him for his courage—I admired him for having got on without any one to help him—I do so still: indeed there is a good deal that is worthy of admiration about him—and respect—oh, heaven knows that I respect him."

The lover laughed. He knew that he had nothing to fear from the other man when she began to talk of respecting him. In fact the more she spoke in praise of the fellow the more confident he felt in her love for himself. Girls do not talk in praise of the men they love. They simply love them.

She went on.

"Yes, I thought—I hoped that it might be possible for me to have helped him. Perhaps I felt flattered—every one about me was saying how clever he was—that he was one of the coming men—that was the phrase—I think I hate the sound of it now. But I dare say that I felt flattered... he might have chosen some other girl, you see: such men usually choose girls who are heiresses—and yet he chose me—I suppose I felt all that."

"He'll have a chance of choosing one of the heiresses now," said the Real Lover grimly; "and he'll do it, you may be certain."

She did not respond to the laugh he gave. She felt that it would have been in bad taste. When the second husband looks at the portrait of his predecessor and says something jocular about the size of his ears, the widow of the original of the picture does not usually acquiesce with a smile, even though her late husband's ears were as long as Bottom's. She thinks that, ears or no ears, he was once her gentle joy.

There was a note of reproof in Josephine's voice as she said:

"You must do him the justice to acknowledge that he was not mercenary when he asked me to give him my promise. We must do Mr. Clifton justice."

The Real Lover was better pleased than ever. He had almost reached the chuckling point of the condition of being pleased. When a girl talks about her desire to be strictly just towards a man she (Mr. Winwood felt assured) has no remnant of affection for that man. The moment a girl becomes just towards a man she ceases to have any affection for him. There is some chance for a man (Winwood knew) so long as a girl is capable of treating him unjustly. The assumption of the judicial attitude on the part of a girl means that the little god Cupid has had the bandage snatched from his eyes, and Cupid with his eyes open might, if provided with a jacket covered with buttons, pass for the boy at any dentist's door.

The Real Lover being, by virtue of his Loverhood, strictly dishonourable, encouraged her to be just to the other.

"Yes," he said gravely, "I should be sorry to think that he is otherwise than a good kind of chap—for a professor of politics. But there are heiresses and heiresses. Money is a very minor inheritance. I am quite ready to believe as you did, that he had a real—that is to say, a—an honest—he may have fancied it was honest—feeling that you—yes, that you could advance his interests. Oh, I don't say that these clever chaps are indifferent to beauty and grace and the soul of a woman as the means of advancing their own ends. I dare say that he had a notion that you—but he'll certainly have a look in where there are heiresses now."

"You are grossly unjust—you are grossly ungenerous—and I am deeply hurt," said she.

"That makes me love you all the more," he cried. "For every word you say in his favour I will love you an extra thousand years."

He knew that if he could only stimulate her to talk still more generously about Mr. Clifton he would soon get her to feel that she had not been guilty of the breach of honour with which she was still inclined to reproach herself. It was so like a woman, he thought, to place so much importance upon a little flaw in the etiquette of being off with the old love and on with the new. He loved her the more for her femininity and he thought that he might lead her on to feel that she had actually been generous in respect of the other.

"I will not have a word said against Mr. Clifton," she said firmly.

And she did not hear a word said against him, though she had so earnestly encouraged him to say such a word; but the fact was that the dinner-hour of the prosaic harvesters had come to an end, and the reaping machine, with the patent binding attachment, began to work under their eyes, and a girl cannot speak well even of the man whom she has just thrown over when so interesting a machine is at hand.

The two stood spell-bound watching that beautiful thing of blue picked out with red, as it went mightily on its way down the wall of standing grain, stretching out its pendulous arms with a rhythmic regularity that a poet might have envied,—lifting the material for a sheaf and laying it along with more than the tenderness of a mother for her child, laying it in its cot.

How much more picturesque—how much more stimulating to the imagination was not this marvellous creature—this graminivorous reanimated thing of the early world, than the squalid shrill-voiced, beer-exhaling reapers of the fields in the days gone by? This was the boldly expressed opinion of both the watchers, though each of them had a good word to say for the cycle of the sickle.

"The sickle was the lyric of the wheatfield, the reaping machine is the epic," said Josephine, with a laugh at her attempt to satisfy an exacting recollection of a picture of Ruth, the Moabitess, with her sickle in a field

flooded with moonlight, as well as an inexorable sense of what is due to the modern inventor.

"My dearest," said he, "I know now that you are happy. Are you happy, my dearest?"

"Ah, happy, happy, happy!" she whispered, when their faces were only an inch or two apart.

They watched the wood pigeons circling, and dipping with the exceeding delicacy of cherubic wings until they dropped upon the surface of the freshly cleared space. They breathed the warm fragrance of the sun-saturated air, with now and again a whiff of the wild thyme that caused them to hear through the whirl of the machinery the faint strain of a Shakesperian lyric floating above the oxlips and nodding violets of that bank beside them—and the sweet briar that was somewhere, loved of the wild bee. The sulphur butterflies went through their dances in the air, and more than one velvety butterfly in brown—a floating pansy—swung on the poppies of the path.

"You are happy," he said again.

"Happy—happy, happy," she repeated.

Happiness was in her face—in her parted lips—in her half closed eyes—in the smile of the maiden who loves she knows not why, and she cares not whom.

She was not quite so happy when she had returned to her home two hours later and her father met her saying:

"My dearest child, Ernest Clifton has been with me and he has persuaded me. Josephine, my child, I think of your happiness more than any earthly consideration. I have given my consent to your engagement. Kiss me, my Josephine."

CHAPTER XXV

What could she say? What could she do on hearing this sentence pronounced by her father?

He had impressed upon her the kiss of a father. It lay on her forehead and she could feel it there like the seal to a contract. It was his formality that made her feel there was nothing to be said or done further in the matter. When once a contract is sealed no one can do anything. Protest is useless. Submission is taken for granted.

But to come up fresh from the glory of that wheatfield—every ear of grain seemed a unit in the sum of the love which was alive in that field—to come up to town by the side of the man whom she knew that she loved—his hand touching hers now and again—his eyes evermore drawing her own to meet them and to mix with them—his voice still in her heart—to leave him feeling certain of him—certain of the future, and then to hear her father speak that sentence and to feel that cold wax kiss of his on her forehead—oh, the thought of it all was suffocating.

What could she say?

How could she tell her father at that moment that two hours ago she had found out that she loved, not the man who had by some mysterious means won her father's consent to her name being united with his, but quite another man—a man whom her father had only seen twice, and who had been seen by herself not more than a dozen times, and all within a period of a few weeks.

The surprise was too much for her. The mystery of it all overcame her. She could only stare at her father, while he held her hand and talked to her in a paternal, parliamentary way, patting the back of her fingers very gently.

She felt that his words were in good taste and well chosen. She knew that they could never be otherwise. But how could they ever come to be uttered? That was the question which was humming through her poor head all the while he was assuring her that though perhaps he had had other views in his mind in respect of securing her happiness—other ambitions in regard to her future, still he was content to waive all in order that she might marry the man of her choice.

"Clifton has been perfectly frank with me, my dear," he said. "Oh, yes, he confessed to me that you and he had an understanding early last autumn that if my consent could be obtained he could count on you. I cannot say that I approve of such secret understandings between young people: an exchange of confidences of this type is almost equivalent to a secret engagement, is it not? But he told me how sensitive you were on this point and how scrupulous you were—I know that he admires you more than ever on account of your scruples—every right thinking man, lover or otherwise, must do so. He too had his scruples—they do him honour also. He was sensible—fully sensible of the fact that we had every right to look higher—much higher for our daughter than our daughter herself thought fit to look. Of course my position in the Government—well, some people have been flattering enough to say that I may look for a place in the Cabinet when the next change takes place, and between ourselves, I think a change is imminent. Never mind that. I know that Clifton is a rising man; he has been a power in our camp for several years past and his advice is esteemed in—I have reason to know—the highest—the very highest quarters. In fact if he had not made himself so very useful as to become almost indispensable he would long ago have been provided with a Seat and a post. He is by no

means at the foot of the ladder. He is a man who has made a successful fight against the most adverse influences—he knows his own strength—he still knows it—he does not fritter away his chances, taking up one thing and then dropping it for another. Men of his stamp are the men to succeed. Your future, my child, is, I know, safe in his keeping—oh, quite safe. You have shown your wisdom in your choice. God bless you, my dear, God bless you!”

The paternal kiss was this time impressed upon her forehead with a paternal smile, and she could say nothing. The futility of saying anything was impressed upon her with each of the two paternal kisses. The next moment she was left alone, and her most prominent thought was that he had spoken so convincingly as to leave no opening for any one to say a single word.

And yet, only two hours before, she had been kissed on the cheeks and on the hair by Pierce Winwood!

The result of her father’s words was to make her feel far more deeply than she had yet felt that she had been guilty of something dreadful in the way of double-dealing when she had allowed Pierce Winwood to kiss her—even if she had allowed him to kiss only one of her hands she would have been guilty (she now felt) of something almost shocking. Breathing as she now did, in the centre of the paternal halo of her father’s phrases, she could not but feel shocked as she reflected upon her frankness in confessing (in the breathing spaces between his kisses) her love for Pierce Winwood, and before she met her mother she was actually thinking what reparation she could make to her parents for her shocking conduct. Would an attitude of complete submission to their wishes be sufficient, she asked herself.

She came to the conclusion that it would not be an excessive atonement to make for so terrible a lapse from the conduct which was expected from her. It certainly would not, for her father had given her to understand that he had only been induced to give his consent to her engagement to Ernest Clifton, because it was clearly her dearest hope to get his consent to that engagement. How absurd then was her thought that there was any atonement in an attitude of submission to a fate which her parents had the best reasons for believing that she most ardently sought.

And thus she had to face her mother.

The maternal halo which her mother welded to that of her father formed a most appropriate decoration, any connoisseur of phrases would have admitted. It was mat gilt with a burnished bit of *repousse* here and there along the border. But the double halo, though decorative enough, was too heavy for Josephine’s head and its weight oppressed her.

Her mother was a charming woman. She had not reached that period of humiliation in the life of a woman of the world when she hears people say that she is a charming woman *still*. No one ever thought of saying that she was a charming woman *still*. Growing old has gone out, for it has become acknowledged that the custom of a woman’s doing her best to look hideous with caps and combs and things when she gets married is allied to the Suttee; and Lady Gwendolen West—she was the fifth daughter of the late Earl of Innisfallen in the peerage of Ireland—was one of the leaders of modern intelligence who had made this discovery in the science of comparative superstition. By the aid of a confidential *masseuse* and an hour’s sleep before lunch and dinner every day of her life, she remained worldly at forty-six.

She kissed her daughter with a subtle discrimination of what her daughter expected of her and gave her her blessing.

“You are a wicked child,” was the opening bar of the maternal benediction. “How wicked you have been!—absolutely naughty: you know you cannot deny it, you sweet thing. And you make me look a hundred, you know, especially when I have anything of mauve about me. Thank heaven, I am not as other women who make up with that absurd mauve complexion and think that it deceives any one. What would you think of your mother, Joe, if she made up like those poor things one meets even at the best houses, though I do think that you might have let me into your confidence, Joe—I do really. You know that I should have been delighted to take your part against your father any day. I see you looking at my new *tocque*, but if you say that the pink and crimson poppies do not look well among the corn ears I’ll have nothing more to do with you or your affairs. Now what on earth are you staring at, Joe? Isn’t it quite natural for corn and poppies—”

“It’s wheat—wheat,” said Josephine, and still she kept her eyes fixed upon the headdress of her mother. (“*Only two hours ago—only two hours ago.*”)

“And where’s the difference between wheat and corn, you little quibbler?” laughed Lady Gwen. “You didn’t know that I had ordered the *tocque* from Madame Sophy. I kept it a secret from you in order to surprise you. But it hasn’t surprised you after all. Now what was I saying apropos of secrets just now?—something about—of course, I knew that we had been talking of secrets. You were very naughty, you sly puss, and you don’t deserve to be forgiven; but Mr. Clifton—I suppose I must call him Ernest now—how funny it will be!—he’s one of the most coming men—he’s awfully coming. Your father agreed with surprising ease. I expect that some one turned him against the notion that he had that Lord Lull-worth would have suited you. Lord Lully is no fool, as I happen to know; so perhaps things are just as well as they are, though I know your father thought that, with you married to the son of the Minister, he was pretty sure of getting into the Cabinet. I met Lord Lully only yesterday and he asked me how it had never occurred to some of the men who do the caricatures in the papers to draw the Marquis in the character of a job-master. Funny, wasn’t it? A bit disrespectful of course; but then everybody knows that the Marquis has done very well for all his relations and his relations’ relations. Good heavens, is that four o’clock striking? Hurry upstairs and get Madeline to put you into another dress. We are going to the Glastonburys’ reception in Hyde Park Gate. The Green Scandinavian are to be there. Make haste. We have two other places of call.”

What was she to say to such a mother? How could she hope for sympathy from such a source? How could she tell Lady Gwendolen that she had changed her mind—that she loved not Ernest Clifton but Pierce Winwood?

That was the terrible part of this greeting of her parents: they took everything for granted; they assumed that her dearest wish was to obtain their consent to be engaged with Mr. Clifton, though it did not look very much as if they expected her to be exuberant in her gratitude to them for their complaisance. She had been deadly cold while her father had spoken to her, and she had not warmed in the least under the influence of

her mother's chatter. Was this the way in which girls as a rule deport themselves when the happiest hour of their life has come?

"I am not going out this afternoon," she said when her mother had turned to a mirror to pinch some fancied improvement in the poppies that flared over her *tocque*.

"What nonsense are you talking?" cried Lady Gwen pinching away. "What nonsense! These things should be bordered with wire; they fall out of shape in a day. Is that an improvement?"

She faced her daughter, and Joe said:

"I somehow think that it was best lying flat. No, I'm not going out this afternoon. I am deadly tired."

"You do look a bit blowsy," said the mother with a critical poise of the inverted flower-basket on her head. Then, as if a sudden thought had struck her, she added, while Josephine was going to the door: "Don't you run away with the notion that he is likely to drop in this afternoon upon you. The chances are that he will be at the Oppenkirks', so your best chance will be to come with me."

"I have no wish to see anybody this evening—least of all Mr. Clifton. I'm only tired to death," said Josephine.

Her mother's laugh followed her to the staircase.

CHAPTER XXVI

She threw herself upon the sofa in her boudoir and tried to face the situation which presented itself to her. She tried to think what she could do to escape from the toils which had been woven round her—woven with the appropriate phrases that went to the declaring of a father's blessing, and the frivolous inconsequence of a mother's acquiescence.

She felt for a moment as if she were a prisoner in a strong room, with bars across the windows and bolts upon the door. She looked, as an imprisoned girl might, first to the door then to the windows, as if she had a hope that, by some accidental neglect of precaution on the part of her gaoler a chance might be left for her of escape one way or another.

She threw back her head and stared at the ceiling. She felt that she had no chance. The door had its bolts drawn and no one of the bars across the window was defective. She was a prisoner without means of escape.

She felt hopeless facing such cleverness as that which Ernest Clifton had shown her he had at his command. A fortnight ago he had given her to understand that he considered it beyond the bounds of possibility that he should obtain the consent of her father to their engagement—he had certainly had no hope of winning her father's consent for if he had had such a hope he would only have required to tell her so when she had met him at that garden party and had asked him to free her from her promise made to him in the autumn. Yes, all he need have said was this:

"I am going to run the chance of getting your father's consent, and if I am not successful we can then talk as you are talking, of throwing over our compact."

That was all he need have said, if he had had any expectation of winning over her father; but he had said nothing of the sort; and yet he had, by his own cleverness—by some mystery of adroitness of which she was ignorant—by some strange trick—she was sure it was a trick, though she knew nothing about it—gained the acquiescence of her father in their compact, and his cheerful forgiveness for the deception of the past.

What could she do in the face of such cleverness as this? How could she hope to combat it? Would it not be ridiculous for such a girl as she to strive against such a man as he? Would it not be better for her to submit to the inevitable with good grace?

But had she not already submitted to it? She had been dumb in the presence of her father, so overwhelmed as she was with surprise at the first words of the announcement of his forgiveness; and she had thus given him to understand that she was extremely grateful—grateful to a point of complete extinction of the power of expressing her gratitude—to him for his more than fatherly appreciation of her dearest hopes. And as for her mother—she had allowed her mother to go so far as to suggest that she was pretending to be tired in order to be at home if her lover—her lover—were to call.

Well, she had made a fool of herself—so much was certain. That secret engagement was an act of folly that had to be paid for. It seemed as if no power was strong enough to show her how she could evade the supreme penalty which that act carried with it. Yes, she had undoubtedly made a fool of herself.

And then the thought came to her that she had not only made a fool of herself, she had also made a fool of Pierce Winwood. This reflection was too much for her. She turned her face to a pillow and wept silently into its depths.

This was the second time she had been moved to tears since the morning, and it was the memory of the incident of her first tears that caused her to weep the more piteously now. By a strange inconsistency it was this same memory that caused her to leap to her feet after an interval of silent sobbing, and to toss away her second handkerchief just as she had done her first and then to strike the palms of her hands together crying aloud:

"I will face them all—I will face them all. I am not afraid of any of them. I know my own mind now—now. I don't care whether I have behaved honourably or basely or idiotically, I love one man and that man I mean to marry. That's enough for me."

It was in this spirit that she sat down in front of her *escritoire* and flung the ink upon a sheet of paper to the effect that if Dear Mr. Clifton would have the kindness to pay her a visit on the following afternoon she would be glad. She thumped the scrawl when face downward on the blotter, as good-natured people thump the back of a child that has swallowed a fishbone. It was a great satisfaction to her to pound away at it; and when she picked it up she saw that the blotting paper, which had been spotless before was now black. The face of the letter was also smudged, the absorbent not having been rapid enough in its action. But she knew that not only would the lines be deciphered by the man to whom they were addressed, he would also be made to understand something of the mood she was in when she had made that cavalry charge upon the paper using her broadest quill as a lance.

She gave a sigh of relief when she saw the envelope with the letter inside, lying on the table beside her; and then she wrote the date on another sheet of paper. The second letter, however, seemed to require more careful composition than the first. She sat looking wistfully at the blank paper for more than half an hour, without making sufficient progress to write the name of the one whom the post office authorities call the addressee. She leant back in her chair and bit at the feather end of the pen for a long time. At last she tore up the sheet of paper and dropped the fragments with great tenderness into the Dresden vase that stood on a carved bracket on the wall.

"I will not spoil his day," she said pathetically. "I may have a good deal more to tell him by this time tomorrow. But I am not afraid to face anything that may come to pass. I know my own mind now—now."

Her maid came to enquire if she was at home, and if she would have tea in her boudoir or in one of the drawing-rooms. She replied that she was not at home and that she would like her tea brought to her at once.

This was done and she found herself greatly refreshed, and able to enjoy an hour's sleep before dinner, and to hear during that meal, her mother's account of the two entertainments at which she had assisted, with a detailed description of some of the most innocuous of the dresses worn by the heroines of the lady correspondents' columns. A word or two Lady Gwendolen threw in about the less interesting subject of the men who had walked through the garden of the Hyde Park Gate house, with the usual mournfulness of the men among five o'clock ices and angel-cakes, failed to move Josephine.

"You should have been there, Joe," said the mother when the servants had left the dining-room, and the scent of fresh peeled peaches was in the air. "I told you that it was quite unlikely that your Ernest would call to-day, so you had your waiting at home for nothing. Amber was there wearing that ancient thing with the little sprigs of violets—she must have had that since May—but I think the hat was new—do you know it?—a fearfully broad thing of white straw with a droop on both sides and two ostrich feathers lying flat, one falling over the brim and coiling underneath, and who is the latest victim to her theories of training, do you think? Why, Lord Lully himself. She had ices with him, and held on to him with grim determination for half an hour, though he told me last week that he would be there and I saw that he was struggling hard to get away from her, poor boy! But if she fancies that Lord Lully is such a fool as the rest of them, she is going a little too far. I happen to know that he has his eyes open just as wide as his father could wish. Amber will make nothing of him, take my word for it. Theories! Experiments! Fiddlestrings and fiddlesticks! And his mother was quite civil to her too—almost gracious, only that we know that she never is so except for three weeks during a General Election, and she takes it out of her home circle when it's all over and she need be civil no longer. I hope your father will get into the Cabinet and so relieve me from the General Election smile. I smiled him through three General Elections, but I decline to face a fourth. Why should an Under Secretary's wife be supposed to make a Cheshire Cat of herself when the wife of a Cabinet Minister need only be civil?"

This and several other social problems were formulated by Lady Gwendolen for the consideration of her daughter while they ate their peaches, and then they had an interval to themselves before dressing for a very Small Dance at a very great house, following an Official Reception.

An Official Reception means a scuffle in a hall, a scramble on a staircase and a scamper past a whiff of scent. That's an Official Reception.

Josephine danced eleven dances at the Small Dance and would have gone on to the fifteenth only that she had the responsibility of chaperoning her mother. She knew that her mother could not stand late hours, so she took her home (reluctantly) at two.

At four o'clock the following afternoon Ernest Clifton made his call, and Josephine received him alone.

"At last—at last!" he cried in a very creditable imitation of the lover's exaltation, when they were alone. He had approached her with outstretched hands. His voice was tremulous.

She did not allow him to put even one arm around her. He was showing an aspiration in regard to the employment of both.

"I wrote to you to come here to-day in order to tell you that—that—" she paused. She did not know what she had to tell him. Was it that she considered that he had tricked her into an acceptance of the terms on which he had granted her petition for liberty? Was it that she had merely changed her mind in regard to him? "I wish to tell you that—that you must have misunderstood—I cannot tell how—the effect of the letter which I wrote to you—of the explanation I made to you the last time we met."

"Good heavens! what can you possibly mean, my Josephine?" said he in a maelstrom of astonishment; but she thought she could detect an artificial gesture for all the swirl: the whirlpool was a machine made one. "Good heavens! where was the possibility of a mistake?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I meant to be clear enough. I told you that I wanted to be freed from the consequences of our engagement; you freed me, and yet a few days later, you go to my father and tell him that all we want is his sanction for our engagement—our engagement that was annulled some time before."

"What," he cried, "can you forget that the only reason you put forward for wishing to be free—nominally free—was that you felt uneasy at the secrecy of our engagement? You said you felt as if you were guilty of double-dealing because your father had not given his consent—you said all this, my dearest, the last time we met, and your saying so—your feeling so—filled me with remorse—the deepest remorse—the intensest self-reproach. I had caused you to suffer, and what more natural than that I make the attempt at the earliest

possible moment to atone for what I had done—to remove the one cause of your suffering? I made up my mind that I would risk all to save you from further self-reproach. I took my life in my hand, so to speak—I risked all on a simple cast for your sake—I went to your father... well, by giving his consent he withdrew the cause—the very reasonable cause, I admit of your—your uneasiness. Surely you remember?”

“I remember everything,” she said. “I asked you to free me—to release me from the promise I had made to you and you released me.”

“You place too great emphasis on my simple act,” said he. “What man worthy of the name of man would have been less generous than I was? Could I forget that you had suffered on my account? Oh, my Josephine, I could not but release you from your promise—your promise of secrecy. But I trusted you—I knew I could trust you.”

She perceived in a moment the position in which he meant to place her.

“But it was not from my promise of secrecy that I begged you to free me,” she said; “it was from my engagement—I wished to be free altogether, and you agreed. I was free when we parted. I did not consider myself bound to you in any way.”

“What? ah, my dear Josephine, you are something of a sophist. Just think for a moment and you will see how impossible it was for me to accept what you said in the sense in which you now say you meant it. You told me that the one reason—the sole reason you had for writing to me as you wrote, and for appealing to me as you did, was the fact that the secrecy—the secret—the secret that you shared with me was preying on your mind. Well, that sole reason is now removed, therefore—oh, the thing is simplicity itself.”

“That is perfectly plausible,” said she, after a long interval. She saw without difficulty that he had logic and reason on his side. That made her feel a greater antipathy to him than she had yet felt: a woman hates the man who has proved himself to be in the right. “Yes, it is perfectly plausible, but—but—you did not tell me that you intended coming to my father.”

“And you did not know enough of my character to know that the first step I should take after hearing from your lips that the fact of our engagement being kept from him was causing you pain, would be to go to your father?”

There was more than a suggestion of reproach in his voice: there was pain.

“I did not know enough of your character,” she said. “And so I considered myself free—altogether free. No engagement existed between us when we parted last.”

“Although my last words to you were that I knew I could trust you? Did not those words suggest to you that you had not made your meaning plain to me—that I at least had no feeling that our engagement was at an end?”

“I felt that—that you were setting me free with one phrase and trying to bind me faster than before with another phrase,” she replied.

“But you made no protest. You tacitly admitted that I was entitled to accept your meaning as I did.”

“You did not give me a chance. You turned away to speak to some one who came up at that moment.”

“What would you have said to me if you had had the chance?” he asked her slowly.

She hesitated.

“Oh, do not trouble yourself thinking for an answer,” he cried. “What is the good of discussing in this way the—diplomatists call it the *status quo ante*? Such a discussion is quite profitless. Even if we were not engaged then we are now. The obstacle has been removed.”

She felt overcome by the plausibility of it all, just as she had felt overcome in the presence of her father by a sense of the inevitable. It was not surprising that he accepted the long pause on her part as indicating complete surrender to his reasoning. He went towards her with a smile and outstretched hands.

“Do not come to me: I love another man and I mean to marry him—I shall never marry you,” she said quietly.

CHAPTER XXVII

So she had abandoned the untenable position of reason, and had withdrawn to the cover of a statement of complete femininity. She gave a sigh of relief: she knew where she was now. She was on firm ground.

“I am afraid, Josephine,” said he with the utmost calmness, “that you have been too late in coming to this determination. You cannot be so flagrantly inconsistent.”

“I know nothing about consistency or inconsistency; I love another man, and all the arguments in the world will not prevent my loving him.”

She knew where she stood now. Her position was impregnable.

“You say that you broke off your engagement with me. Why? Because I had not got your father’s consent. Well, if the absence of your father’s consent was a legitimate reason for our engagement coming to an end it is certainly a reason for your refraining from entering into an engagement with another man, for your father cannot give his consent to two men at the same time. You see that you cannot possibly—as you are showing—be engaged to any one but myself.”

“I told you I care nothing for consistency—or reason—or logic—or—or—you. I love another man—I love

another man."

"I am sorry for you, dear Josephine. But if you do not care anything for consistency and me, I care for consistency and you far too much to relinquish either. If you can show me that there has ever been a breach in our engagement I might be led to consider the situation from another standpoint. Look at me and tell me that you understood clearly when we parted last that you were free—that there was no uneasy feeling in your mind that you were still bound to me. You see, you cannot. You are silent. Yes, my dearest, there was a bond between us when we separated, and you and I are engaged now, as we have been for several months, and your father and mother take exactly the same view of our position, and are good enough to sanction it. That is enough for me; it should be enough for you. I decline to take any other view of the matter. You have admitted tacitly—that I never released you. I decline to release you now. Of course you will accept the situation. Think over it and you will find that no alternative remains. Good-bye, my dear—for the present."

He did not ask her to give him her hand; but simply moved smiling, to the door with a wave of his own hand that somehow produced upon her the effect of shaking hands with her—at any rate that graceful gesture rendered a parting salute unnecessary, without the slightest suggestion of a breach of courtesy.

He was gone, and he had got the better of her—that was her first impression when he had closed the door—very gently—behind him. He had been too clever for her. She knew long ago that it would be ridiculous for her to hope to get the better of him.

And the worst of it was that he was altogether in the right. He was hopelessly in the right. She had treated him badly. She had behaved dishonestly, whatever Pierce Winwood might say by way of exculpating her: she had parted from Ernest Clifton feeling—she could not deny it face to face with him—bound to him, and she could not but acknowledge that until she had a complete understanding with him, she had no right to listen to a word of love to another man.

She had behaved basely—there could be no doubt about that, and the only excuse—and she knew that it was no excuse—that she could make for herself was that Pierce Winwood had come upon her so suddenly—so unexpectedly that she had no chance of giving due consideration to the question as to whether or not she would be justified in listening to him. The idea of her pausing at such a moment to determine whether or not Pierce Winwood had what lawyers term a *locus standi* in the suit did not strike her as being at all funny. She felt that she should have adopted something of a judicial attitude in regard to Pierce. She could not understand how it was that she had had that moment of recklessness—that moment of recklessness which remains a mystery to so many women.

And the result of all this after consideration of the matter was to convince her that she had been desperately in the wrong—deceiving every one around her and trying to deceive herself also from the very first; for knowing the impression that Pierce had produced on her upon the occasion of their first meeting at Ranelagh, she had not refused to meet him again as she should have done. She had told Amber that she hated him; but she knew perfectly well that why she hated him was because he had compelled her to love him. It was not he whom she hated but only the idea of acting dishonourably in regard to the man whom she had promised to marry.

Oh, she knew all along but too well that she loved him from the first, and yet she had not—after the first week—taken the least trouble to keep apart from him, the result being the feeling of humiliation that now had taken possession of her—this feeling that she had been so dreadfully in the wrong that nothing remained for her but to plunge still deeper into the depths of wickedness by agreeing to marry the man whom she did not love and to throw over the man she did love.

She felt that Ernest Clifton had spoken the truth. No alternative remained to her. She had agreed with her eyes open, to marry him, and she was quite unable to give any reason that would be considered satisfactory by her father for declining to marry him.

After an hour or two she actually became resigned to the idea. After all, what did it matter? She had got into the frame of mind of the one who asks this question. The frame of mind of the French philosopher on the guillotine, who rolled his cigarette, saying "N'importe: un homme de mois!"

What did it matter whom she married? The general scheme of the universe would not be interfered with because she was about to do the thing that was most abhorrent to her of all acts done by women—this act being, by the way, the one which she was most earnest to do only six months before!

She was able, without the shedding of a tear, to sit down to her *escritoire* and write a letter to Pierce, letting him know the determination to which she had come, and admitting to him that she had behaved basely—cruelly—inconsiderately. She had been bound to Mr. Clifton—and she knew it—at the very moment that she had acknowledged to the man to whom she was writing that she loved him. She admitted how culpably weak she had been—and still was, but she thought that she was strong enough to see that the best way—the only way—of sparing the one who was dearest to her much misery—the only way of escaping from a hopeless position was by submitting to Fate. If he would think over the matter he would, she was sure, see that she was right, and thinking over it all he could not but be thankful that he was saved from a wretched woman who did not know her own mind two days together and who had no sense of honour or truth or fidelity.

That was the substance of the letter which she felt great satisfaction in writing to Pierce Winwood; and she sincerely believed that she was all that she announced herself to be, though she would have been terribly disappointed if she had thought that she would succeed in convincing him that she was unworthy to be loved by him.

She felt greatly relieved on writing this letter embodying as it did so frank a confession of her weakness and—incidentally—of her womanliness, and she was able to dance nine dances and to partake of a very *recherche* supper in the course of the night. She felt that she had become thoroughly worldly, taking a pleasure in the whirl and the glow and the glitter of all. There was no chance of her being led to think about what lay heavy on her heart while she was giving herself up to this form of intoxication. Every dance had the effect of a dram of green Chartreuse upon her, and the result of her night's festivity was to make her feel, she thought, that the world was very well adapted as a place of residence for men and women; and as for the worldliness—well, worldliness was one of the pleasantest elements in the world of men and women.

Having come to so satisfactory a conclusion, it was somewhat remarkable, she thought, that, on finding her father drinking his glass of Apollinaris in his study—he had just returned from the House—she should go straight up to him, after shutting the door, and say, “I wish to say to you that I do not wish to marry Ernest Clifton, because I love quite another man.”

He looked at her curiously for a few moments, then he said, laying down his tumbler:

“What stuff is this? Is it not true that you agreed to listen to Clifton six months ago? Heavens above us! Another man—quite another man! Have you been making a fool of Clifton and—and yourself, and do you now think to make a fool of me?”

“I am ready to admit everything,” she cried plaintively. “I have been a fool, I know. I have behaved badly—with no sense of honour—basely—basely—but I am wretched and I will not marry Ernest Clifton—oh, nothing will force me to marry him.”

“Poor child! poor child! It is quite natural this maidenly shrinking!” said the father smiling like a mulberry. “Bromide of potassium—that will steady you. After all, you are not going to be married tomorrow, nor even the next day. Give yourself a night off, my child. Don’t let your mother rush you. It’s all very well for her. At her age women can do anything; but a girl’s nerves—”

“It is not my nerves—it is—because I love another man—and I mean to love him. I cannot help it—I have tried—God knows—oh, my dear father, you will pity me—you must pity me, no matter how foolish I have been.”

She broke down and would have thrown herself into his arms but that he was too quick for her. At the first suggestion of such a thing, he had picked up his tumbler half full of Apollinaris. That saved him. It was on a big red leather chair that she was sobbing, not on his shirt front.

“Poor child—poor child, poor—bromide,” he murmured. “Tell me all about it, my Josephine—my little Josephine. I have had a busy night of it but I can give five minutes to the troubles of my little girl.”

He flattered himself that he was acting the part of the father to a quaver. He half believed that she would accept his representation of an honourable character without misgiving. What could she know of the terms of the contract which he had made—in the most delicate way, no word being used on either side to which exception could be taken by a sensitive person—with Ernest Clifton, respecting the feeling of the ticklish constituency of Arbroath Burghs?

She lost some precious moments of the night in sobbing. But though her father did not know very much about women he knew enough to cause him to refrain from asking her to come to the point upon which she was anxious to talk to him. Upstairs the door of the Lady Gwendolen’s dressing-room banged.

“Poor little Josey!” said the father smoothing her hair. He felt that he really would miss her when Clifton had married her and he had got his seat in the Cabinet.

She looked up.

“I know I have been a fool, my dear father,” she said. “But I love another man—not Mr. Clifton, and I will not marry Mr. Clifton.”

“That is nonsense, my dear,” said he in a pleasant, soothing tone—the tone that suggests a large toleration for human weaknesses, especially those of a girl, because so few of them are worth talking about. “You must not worry yourself, my dear. You will have worries enough when you are married, if I know anything about what marriage means. Now take my advice and have a good dose of bromide and get into bed. Don’t get up early. Had you a touch of the sun when you were up the river?”

“He will not listen to me! He treats me as if I were a child—a sick child!” cried Josephine piteously.

The reproach annoyed him.

“You are behaving as such,” he said. “I am anxious to make every allowance for you, but when you talk in this wild fashion—why did you not stop me yesterday when I told you that I had given my consent to your engagement?”

“I did not know what to say—I was overcome with surprise.”

“Do you mean to tell me that he—Clifton—left you the last time he was with you before you went up the river, under the impression that you and he were no longer engaged?”

“I cannot say what his impression was—I asked him to release me on that very day.”

“What reason did you put forward for making such a request?”

“I said that—that I felt that I was doing wrong in remaining engaged to him in secret—without your consent.”

“You were quite right. But you see I have removed the cause—the legitimate cause of your self-reproach. The consequence is that you are engaged to him, if I know anything of logic and reason.”

“Oh, logic and reason! I am only a woman, God help me!”

“My dear girl, to be a woman is to be a very charming thing, if a bit unreasonable at times. You are the slaves to your nerves. And these days—what does the poet say? ‘It was the time of roses’—ah, neurosis, he would have written to-day—‘and we plucked them as we passed.’”

She had risen.

“I am going to bed,” she said. “Good-night.”

“You couldn’t do better, my dear. Good-night and God bless you! Don’t neglect the bro—by the way, I should perhaps mention to you that even if I were inclined to accept your protest now it would be too late—I should be powerless to do anything, for the announcement is already gone to the papers.”

“What—you have sent it to the papers?”

“Of course I have—that is to say, Clare has sent it.” (Julian Clare was Mr. West’s private secretary.) “It was necessary for it to appear without delay. It will increase the interest in your father—there is always a sort of reflected glory upon the father of a beautiful girl who is about to be married. We cannot fly in the face of

Providence and the papers at the present moment. The present moment is critical for the house of West."

"You are going into the Cabinet," she said. "That represents the highest height of your ambition."

"It is one of the peaks, at any rate," said he smiling. "It is high enough for me. Those who cannot get to the summit of Mont Blanc must be content with the humble Monte Rosa. And feeling that your future, my child, is assured, I shall be the more content, if—ah, you are quite right. Good-night—good-night."

She went upstairs feeling that the fight with Fate was over. What would be the use of struggling any longer against what was plainly the decree of Fate? Fate is a tough antagonist at any time, but when Fate and the newspapers are pulling together—

She went to bed without saying her prayers.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Amber Severn read the announcement in one of the papers the next morning that a marriage was arranged and would shortly take place between Mr. Ernest Clifton, fifth son of the late Constantine Clifton of The Elms, Lynnthorpe, Esq., and Josephine, only daughter of the Right Honourable J. Carew West, Under Secretary of State for the Department of Arbitration.

She gave an exclamation of surprise, and this was followed by one that suggested irritation. She was more than irritated, she felt that she had lost a friend—her dearest friend. She had always known that Josephine was somewhat reticent about her own affairs for an ideal friend; but the notion of her being in love with Mr. Clifton and carefully refraining from giving a hint to any one of the state of her heart was past all bearing.

And yet she remembered now having had once or twice during the previous six months, a suspicion that if Josephine inclined to look on any man of their acquaintance with especial favour that man was Mr. Clifton. She might have guessed but what about Pierce Winwood? What about her father's subtle suggestions as to the possibility of Josephine's looking with eyes of favour on Pierce Winwood? What about that Monday morning when they had come into the house together talking with guilty fluency about a reaping machine that was painted blue and delicately picked out with vermilion?

"I will never—never trust to the evidence of my own eyes again," she cried, remembering the look of exultation on Mr. Winwood's face upon that morning. She also made up her mind that she would never again in matters of this sort trust to the evidence of her father's experience, even though conveyed to her in the choicest and most enigmatical language ever employed by him. Her father had shown a desire to encourage the bringing about of a match between Josephine and Pierce; and indeed he had proved his possession of some of the qualities of the fully equipped match-maker, which she took to be a cheery readiness to assume the rôle of a sort of boarding-house Providence, and a complete faith in the influence of propinquity upon opposing natures.

She would never again trust to her father's judgment. He knew too much about electricity.

She had an opportunity of telling him so, but she refrained from doing so: if he lacked judgment there was no reason for her to attempt to consolidate his views on heredity by so indiscreet an act. She pointed out the paragraph to him when he came down to breakfast but made no comment upon it. No one since the world began ever regarded an absence of comment as an indiscretion.

"But it takes my breath away," said Sir Creighton. "Heavens! just think of it—Clifton—Ernest Clifton, the wire-puller. What can she possibly see... oh, after all... a curious coincidence, isn't it, that this talk should be just now about her father getting a seat in the Cabinet? But I can't for the life of me see where Clifton comes in. He has no power of that sort, whatever may be ascribed to him as an organiser in the country. He could be of no use to West, for his seat is a perfectly safe one. And we thought..."

"You did, at any rate," said Amber.

"I did—I admit it. I thought—I hoped. It would have come out so well. I might have been able to give him a helping hand."

"To give Mr. Winwood a helping hand?"

"I thought it just possible if the worst came to the worst. But I suppose the business is settled in the other quarter. We can do nothing now."

"Of course one can do nothing when the announcement has appeared in the papers." Amber was disposed to take the same view of Providence and the papers as was taken by the Under Secretary for the Arbitration Department. They both appeared to regard the newspaper announcement as a sort of civil ceremony, quite as binding as the one which follows the singing of "The Voice that breathed o'er Eden."

"I confess that I am surprised," continued Amber. "But I suppose one's friends never do marry the people one allots to them. Still, there was no reason for Josephine to be so secret."

"Was there not?" said her father. "Take my word for it, if a woman is ever secret it is only under the severest pressure."

Amber smiled. Applying her father's aphorism to herself, she refrained from expressing what she thought on the subject of her father's knowledge of woman's nature.

But beyond doubt Sir Creighton took deeply to heart the frustration of his incipient efforts as a matchmaker. His daughter was surprised at his head-shakings and his thoughtful pauses—at his general abstraction. She knew enough of him to be well aware that it was not his own work which disturbed him: he

was accustomed to make merry over the little aberrations of adapted electricity, just as some fathers (with trusted memories) make merry over the vagaries of their sons, and as some women (with a sense of humour) can smile at the fringes of their under-housemaids. It was perfectly clear that Sir Creighton was profoundly discouraged at the failure of his attempt to make Josephine and Pierce fall in love, each with each. He felt as if Fate had openly sneered at him and he was looking about for a way of retaliating. So much at least his daughter gathered from his manner, and his frank admissions. The frank admissions of a man count for something in any honest endeavour that one may make to determine what is on his mind.

"Do you know what a straight flush is, my dear?" he enquired as he rose from the table. "I thought that I had the joker," he added thoughtfully—regretfully.

(He was the best poker player in the Royal Society.)

Amber had herself been thinking out a scheme of retaliation, and it was directed against her friend who had been reticent to a point of unfriendliness. A friend should be permitted to share her friend's infirmities but Josephine had left her to read the announcement of her engagement in the papers. After some thought she came to the conclusion that she would be out when Josephine should call. She took it for granted that Josephine intended to call, and so made arrangements for going to the Technical School of Literature immediately after lunch. She would have gone before lunch—for she had not been latterly so regular an attendant as Mr. Richmond could have wished—but that for the fact that her mother had asked Lord Lullworth to drop in and have lunch with them, and Amber's scheme of retaliation did not go so far as to compass the personal slighting of even the least of her mother's guests.

And Lord Lullworth came.

He was really very amusing, and sometimes very nice; but he was both during lunch; it was when that refectation was over, and Lady Severn had gone into an inner room to write out a commission—it had something to do with the matching of sewing-silks—for her daughter to execute in Regent Street that Lord Lullworth ceased to be amusing because he began to be funny. He told Amber that he didn't mind being one of the literary arbitrators on the Aunt Dorothy competition, should such be set on foot at the Technical School. Would dear Aunt Dorothy tell him what was the colour of Adam's grey mare? Would she hazard a reply to the query, under the heading of "Our Feathered Pets" as to whether the white goose or the grey goose was the gander? Also could she supply some information respecting the man who had the twenty-six sheep—twenty sick sheep, mind—and when one of them died how many were left?

"I will not have my hobby made fun of," said Amber. "It would do you all the good in the world to come to the school."

"I believe it would," he said, after a pause, "and I do believe that I'll come; but it won't be for the sake of the show, but just because you are there. Now, a fortnight ago I would have laughed at the idea of going to such a show, so I think that you'll agree with me in what I said about love growing. I really feel that mine is becoming quite grown up. He has got too big for his sailor suit, and I'll have to get him measured for an Eton jacket. I wonder if you have been thinking over the possibilities that I placed before you that day."

"Of course I thought over them. Why shouldn't I?" said Amber.

"And do they appear so ridiculous now as they did then?"

"Not nearly so ridiculous," she replied. "One gets used to things. Really there's nothing I like better than to hear that you will be some place where I am going. I have—yes, I have got really to like you."

"You never thought of wishing to have me for a brother, did you?" he asked apprehensively.

"Oh, never—never—I give you my word—never!" she cried, and he breathed freely once more.

"Thank goodness! Then I've still got a chance. If you had ever felt that you would like me for a brother I would put on my hat and skip. Do you know that you are encouraging me?"

"Of course I know it. I meant to encourage you, just to see what will come of it."

"You'll see. I should like to encourage you. It will take a deal of encouragement to bring you on so that we may start scratch; because, you know, I—I really do believe that I'm on the verge of being in love with you."

"I would not go on any further, until I catch you up."

"If I thought you would one day."

"I really think that I shall—one day. There is nothing like getting used to an idea. I thought that I should never get reconciled to the notion of a lover—a lover seems so *banal*—and yet already I—yes, I like it. You see, I'm wondering what will come of it. I was born in a laboratory atmosphere. My father made his first great discovery in electricity the day I was born—that's why he called me Amber—Amber is the English for the Greek word *electron*, and that's the origin of the word electricity, you know." He looked at her admiringly. "You don't need much to go to any school," said he. "Just fancy your knowing all that! By the way, don't you forget that it's in the bargain that I'm to let you know if I find myself properly in love with you—seriously, I mean."

"It will be so interesting," said she. "I'm dying to see what will be the result of our experiment. I wonder does it matter about my not thinking you good-looking."

He caught her hand. She flushed.

"Do you not think me good-looking?" he asked. "Well, really, to be candid with you—and of course it's in the 'rules' that we are both to be candid, I think you anything but—but—good gracious! what has come over me? Only yesterday I was thinking about you and I thought of you as being quite plain; but now—now that I come to look at you, I declare that you seem good-looking—positively good-looking! You have good eyes. I don't suppose you ever told a lie in your life."

"That's going from a question of eyes to ethics, isn't it; but whether or not I ever had imagination enough to tell a whopper, I am telling the truth now when I say that I have come to the conclusion that you are the nicest girl I ever met as well as being the most beautiful—that's why I tried to. You see I always thought you the most beautiful—that's why I tried to avoid meeting you for a long time—I was afraid that I would be disillusioned, as they call it."

"And you were not?"

"On the contrary I think that—that we're on the eve of a very interesting experiment—that's how the newspapers would define the situation of the moment."

"After all nothing may come of it." There was a suspicion of a sigh in her delivery of the phrase.

"Are you taking what you would call an optimistic view of the matter?" he asked.

She actually flushed again—very slightly—as she said:

"The scientific atmosphere in which I was born forbids optimism or pessimism. I wish to remain neutral."

"I shall make no attempt to bias your judgment one way or another," said he.

Lady Severn returned to the room and gave her daughter her instructions regarding the silks.

"I wish you would let me do it for you, Lady Severn," said Lord Lullworth seriously. "I have to go to Bond Street anyway, and my horse wants exercise." Amber turned round and stared at him; her mother laughed. Then Amber put the patterns of silk into one of his hands, and crying, "Let him do it: he really wants to do it," she ran out of the room.

"I want to have a chat with you, my dear Lady Severn," said he. "It was you who were good enough to ask me to lunch, and yet I've hardly exchanged a word with you."

"Nothing would delight me more," said Lady Severn. "I will intrust you with my commission, but it will do any time in the course of the afternoon. We can have our chat first."

And they had their chat.

It was while it was in progress Amber was sitting at her desk in the Technical Schoolroom listening to Mr. Owen Glendower's enunciation of the problem in plots which was to serve as an exercise for his pupils. Amber, in her haste to retaliate upon Josephine's secrecy by being absent when she should call, arrived at the class-room several minutes too soon. She had, however, upon a former occasion, made the acquaintance of the earnest American girl whose name was Miss Quartz Mica Hanker—she was said to be worth some ten million (dollars)—and now she had a pleasant little talk with her.

At first Amber hesitated approaching her, for today, Miss Hanker was dressed in deep mourning. She, however, smiled invitingly towards Amber, and Amber crossed the class-room to her.

"I fear that you have suffered a bereavement," said Amber in the hushed voice that suggests sympathy.

"Oh, no; at least not recently; but you must surely remember that this is the anniversary of the death of King James the Third," said Miss Hanker.

"Oh, King James the Third?" said Amber. "But there never was a James the Third of England."

"That is the fiction of the Hanoverians," said Miss Hanker scornfully. "But we know better. I am the Vice-President of the White Rose Society of Nokomis County, Nebraska, and we are loyal to the true dynasty. We decline to acknowledge any allegiance to the distant branch at present in occupation of the Throne. The rightful Queen to-day is the Princess Clementina Sobieska."

"I thought that the Pretender—" began Amber.

"The Pretender!" cried Miss Hanker still more scornfully. "He pretended nothing. I am going to separate pretence and the Pretender once and for all when I write my novel—'The White Rose.' I came to this side to learn how to do it. I find Owen Glen-dower Richmond very helpful. He has royal blood in his veins—plenty of it. He may be on the throne of Wales yet. Miss Amber, I don't desiderate a Civil war, but when my novel comes out if the British don't turn round and put the Princess Clementina Sobieska on their Throne, they are not the people I have been told they are. I don't advocate extreme measures, but loyalty is loyalty, and the American people are true Royalists. They can never forget that it was one of the Hanoverians who brought about their separation from Britain. That old wound is rankling yet in the breast of every true American."

And then Mr. Owen Glendower Richmond entered the class-room, and Amber nodded *au revoir* to the American girl, and went to her own desk.

CHAPTER XXIX

Mr. Richmond had become more carefully careless in regard to his dress during the past few weeks than he had yet been, Amber thought. She noticed with surprise that there was a breath of Byron—a suspiration of Shelley about his collars, which was not so before. He still wore a frock coat but he did it with the most painstaking negligence, and from some standpoints it did not look a bit like a frock coat. His hair was short, but it was plainly (in some lights) the hair of a thoughtful man. The amount of thinking that goes on beneath even the shortest hair has a perturbing influence upon it: one does not expect the grass which grows on the sides of an active volcano to be as ordinary grass.

He wore his tie in a loose bow.

"I am about to offer for your consideration a time-study," said Mr. Richmond, when he had tapped the tubular end of his quill pen upon the edge of his desk. "Last week I had a most satisfactory response to the home exercise on the 'Honest Doubter' form of fiction, but I must say here lest I should forget it, that I think it was unnecessary to define, as some of the class did, the doubts of the Honest Doubter. It was also a technical error to clear away his doubts. Of course there is a good deal to say in favour of the domestic treatment of the theme, adopted by some of the class. Marrying him to an estimable and brainless woman, and showing his doubts cleared away as he stands alone in the nursery looking at the face of his sleeping

child, is an excellent suburban view to take of the Honest Doubter; nine ladies were most successful in their treatment of the subject on these lines; but I regret to say that not one of them thought of the moonlight. A moment's reflection should be sufficient to convince any one of the impossibility of banishing a strong man's doubts in the afternoon, or before lunch. He must be brought full into the moonlight. The technical phrase is: 'There; with the moonlight of heaven streaming through the nursery window upon the little face of his child, the strong man felt his heart soften and become once more as the heart of a little child. All the doubts that had clung to him for years as the mists cling to the moor fled away, as those same mists melt into the moonlight. He felt that a new day was breaking for him, a new light, he looked down at the little sleeping face, and cried—'you can make him say anything you please: but he must say it when the moon is full. Still, I repeat the papers were most satisfactory as a whole. Now, the Time Study for to-day is on a very different theme; but it is one which I hope will appeal to the imagination of a good many in the class. The headings are these: Given, a young man—well, not perhaps, very young—let us say, a still young man, of good family, but by the force of circumstances for which he is not responsible—undeserved misfortune—compelled to become a tutor in a family of distinction; he falls in love with the beautiful daughter of the house; but he is too proud to confess his love, he is too modest to reveal himself to her. He has his hopes—sometimes they are strong when she smiles upon him, and then he thinks of his own humble position and he is on the verge of despair. Required the conclusion of the story: the happy accident by which he is enabled to reveal himself.'

In a second a dozen at least of the young women in the class were writing away for dear life, only a few thought it necessary to give any preliminary consideration to the problem suggested by Mr. Richmond. The little governess, however, who sat at a distant desk, could not write on account of her tears, and the half pay veteran was laboriously mending his quill pen. Amber, who used a reservoir pen, and had never seen a quill being mended, watched the operation with a curious interest.

She had no intention of making an attempt to work out the theme. The truth was that her heart was beginning to soften towards Josephine, and she came to the conclusion that in adopting so drastic a scheme of retaliation for Josephine's secrecy respecting her engagement to Mr. Clifton, she was showing herself to be very hard-hearted. She felt that she should have waited at home to kiss Josephine when she should call.

She made up her mind not to remain at the school for the Aunt Dorothy class which followed the Time-Study class, but to hasten to the side of her friend, and if she failed to find her at home, she would drive back to her own home, and catch her there, and then—well, perhaps Lord Lullworth would drop in for tea, when he came back with the matched silks for Lady Severn.

"You are not working out the Time Study, Miss Severn," said Mr. Richmond taking a seat beside her. This was his system of helpfulness referred to by Miss Quartz Mica Hanker. He was accustomed to take a seat by the side of some member of his class—he seemed discreetly indifferent to sex in this matter—in order to make suggestions as to the working out of the Time Study. He invariably spoke in so low a tone as to run no chance of disturbing the active members of the class.

"I do not feel much inclined to work at anything just now," said Amber. "But I am glad to see so many other girls do their best. You have given them confidence, Mr. Richmond."

"Then I give away what I myself stand most in need of just now," said Mr. Richmond in a still lower tone.

"Confidence?" said Amber. "Oh, I think you have a very firm hand in these matters, Mr. Richmond. You deal with every problem with the hand of a master."

"Alas!" he murmured. "Alas! I find myself faltering even now—at this moment. Dear Miss Severn, will you not make the attempt to work out the question which I have enunciated for you—believe me, it was for you only I enunciated it?—a Time Study? Ah, it is with me at all times—that problem. Miss Severn—Amber, will you try to suggest a happy conclusion to the parable which I have just uttered, when I tell you that I am in the position of the man, and that I think of you in the position of the girl?"

Amber scarcely gave a start. She only looked curiously at the man as if she was under the impression that he was enunciating another Time Study for her to work out—as if he was making a well-meant but more than usually unintelligible attempt to help her over a literary stile.

"I don't quite understand, Mr. Richmond," said she, after a thoughtful pause. "You say that you are—you ———"

"I am poor and obscure, and I am unfortunate enough to love—to love the daughter of a distinguished family—you—you, Amber. What is to be the conclusion of the story—my love story?—the conclusion of it rests with you."

Amber heard the quill pens about going scrawl, and the steel pens going scratch and the pencils going scribble. The voice of Mr. Richmond had not been raised louder than the voice of the pens. She was too much astonished to be able to reply at once. But soon the reply came.

This was it.

She picked up her little morocco writing case and folded it carefully and fastened the elastic band over it, then she picked up her parasol, rose, and went to the door, without a word.

He was before her at the door; he held it open for her. She went out without a word.

He was in no way overcome. He simply walked to another desk at which a girl was scribbling. He said a few words of commendation to her. Then he crossed the room to where Miss Quartz Mica Hanker was sitting industriously idle. He knew she was giving all her thoughts to the solution of the problem which he had offered to her, and this was real industry.

"Dear Miss Quartz," he said in his low earnest voice—every time he conversed with her in this voice it was not the white rose that was suggested by her cheeks. "Dear Miss Quartz, are you making the attempt to work out the question which I have enunciated for you—believe me, it was for you only I enunciated it—a Time Study? Ah, it is with me for all time—that problem. Miss Quartz, will you try to suggest a happy conclusion to the parable which I have just uttered, when I tell you that I am in the position of the man and that I think of you in the position of the girl?"

Miss Quartz proved herself to be a far more apt student of the obscure than Miss Severn. She looked down

at the blank paper in front of her saying:

"I wonder if you mean that—that—you—"

"I am poor and obscure," said he, "and I am unfortunate enough to love—to love the daughter of a distinguished family—to love you—you. What is to be the conclusion of the story—my love story?—the conclusion rests with you."

Miss Quartz had mastered the literary technicalities of various sorts of proposals and acceptances—it had been Mr. Richmond's pleasing duty during the month to keep the members of his class abreast of that important incident in the making of fiction known as *The Proposal*. She carried out the technicalities of the "business" of the part of the addressee to the letter—that is to say, she became suffused with a delicate pink—only she became a very peony, as she looked coyly down to the paper on her desk. She put her ungloved hand an inch or two nearer to his, raising her eyes to his, for a moment.

He glanced round the room, and having reassured himself, he laid his hand gently on hers.

"Dear child," he said. "I have greatly dared—I have greatly dared. You will never regret it. Your novel will rank with 'Esmond' and 'The Virginians' and 'Ben Hur'———"

"And Kate Douglas Wiggin?" she cried. "Oh, Mr. Richmond, if you promise me that I shall be alluded to as the Kate Douglas Wiggin of Nebraska I'll just go down on my knees and worship you."

"Ah," he said with a smile. "She has never written an historical novel. She has made books, but never an Epoch. 'The White Rose' will be an Epoch-making book."

"The girl's eyes filled with tears. Such a future as he promised her was too dazzling to be viewed except through such a dimness.

"Come to my aunt's for tea to-night," she whispered. "The Daniel Webster boarding-house, Guildford Street. My money is in my own hands. Sixty thousand dollars."

"The legitimate end of the story has come—you have solved the question," he murmured.

He rose and returned to his desk. Sixty thousand dollars—twelve thousand pounds. He had calculated on five millions. Sixty thousand—well, it was better than nothing.

And that insolent girl, Amber Severn, would know that all girls were not like her—that was something too.

But by the time he had come to consider this very important point, Amber Severn, full of anger against the man who had not hesitated to take advantage of his position as the master of a school in order to make a proposal to one of his pupils—the man who had outraged her sense of the protecting influences of Platonic friendship, was flying along in her motor Victoria in the direction of Palace Gate where was the town residence of the Under Secretary for the Arbitration Department. She was burning with indignation against Mr. Owen Glendower Richmond, for his having the effrontery to add to the efforts which other people had already made to shatter her theory. She had heard of preceptors—they were mostly in the musical line—taking advantage of their opportunities to make love to their pupils and she had always held such persons in contempt. But if they were contemptible, how much more so was not such a man as Mr. Richmond—a man whose business it was to give a helping hand to those who might be anxious to write books illustrating the charm of disinterested friendship between men and women?

She felt very bitterly in regard to Mr. Richmond, quite as bitterly as did Barak the son of Zippor against the professional vituperator who, when he had a chance of showing what stuff he was made of, had rounded upon his patron. Amber had great hopes that one day a novel might be written to make the world aware of the beautiful possibilities of friendship for friendship's sake only, between the sexes, and she had looked to Mr. Richmond to help on such a project. And yet it was he who had gone further than any one else in impressing on her the weakness of the basis of her faith.

She felt greatly disappointed. She felt that she was being daily disillusioned, and no one likes to be disillusioned: it makes one feel such a fool. So great an effect had the act of Guy Overton and Mr. Richmond upon her that she actually felt glad that she had not bound herself irrevocably to her theory but that latterly she had hedged. She knew that her attitude in regard to Lord Lullworth was suggestive of the hedge. He had boldly refused any compromise with her. He had told her at the outset of their acquaintance that he scoffed at the idea of her ideal—that his object in coming to see her would be strictly anti-platonic and yet her fondness for experiments had been so great that she had not made his scoffing at her ideal of friendship a barrier to their future association. If this was not hedging there never was hedging in any question of philosophy in the world; and so far as she could make out philosophy was simply the science of hedging.

She felt glad that she had encouraged Lord Lullworth, the exponent of a cult that admitted of no compromise. With him she was at least safe. For obvious reasons, he could never cause her to feel such disappointment as she felt at the conduct of Guy Overton and at the conduct of Owen Glendower Richmond. When one is in the presence of a man who promptly avows himself a brigand one is never surprised if one feels a tug at one's purse. The surprise and the sorrow come only when one is in the company of a professional moralist and detects him trying to wheedle one's handkerchief out of one's pocket.

By the time she had reached the Brompton Road Amber Severn was feeling very strongly that the companionship of professed brigands was much to be preferred to the association with philosophers who talked of disinterested friendship while in the act of pocketing your silver spoons. An avowed lover was, she was sure, infinitely safer than a man who carries Plato in his breast pocket and presses his hand upon it while he makes a glib proposal of marriage to every girl he meets.

CHAPTER XXX

Amber had been dwelling so much upon her philosophy and its development that she half hoped that Josephine was not at home: there was just a possibility that if Josephine was not at home, she, Amber, would get back to her own home in time to give Lord Lullworth a cup of tea on his return with the matched silks for her mother. She was therefore slightly disappointed to learn that Miss West was at home and in the drawing-room with her ladyship.

Josephine was paler than Amber had ever seen her, and she was certainly colder than she had ever known her. She scarcely made any response to Amber's long kiss.

Resignation—that was the word which came to Amber's mind when she held her friend by both hands and looked at her. She was a statue—a marble statue of Resignation. The worst might come; it would not move her.

"I thought—I expected—" Amber began, with a tone of reproach in her voice. "You are really going to marry him—him—Mr. Clifton?" she cried, after faltering over a word or two.

"Did you not see it in the papers, and has any one the hardihood to put the papers in the wrong?" said Josephine.

"And you are to be congratulated? I am to congratulate you?" said Amber.

"Ah, that is quite another matter, my Amber," laughed Josephine. Amber did not like her laugh.

"Why should it be another matter?" she asked. "If you love——"

"Heavens! are you—you—you who are the exponent of the ineffable fragrance of friendship—according to Plato—are you going to talk of the lustre of love?" said Josephine. "There's a cluster of phrases for you, my dear. 'The fragrance of Friendship—the lustre of Love'—quite like a modern poet's phrase, is it not? Send it to your friend Mr. Richmond to serve up to his fourth form pupils. 'Given, the phrase to make the poem'—that's the exercise—what does he call it—the Time Study? Do let us try it. It should run like this: 'The Fragrance of Friendship is folly'—that's a capital line—even though it does contain a memory of 'Dolores.' And then you must go on—'The Lustre of Love is a lure'? Yes, that might do, if you can't find anything better. And now let us talk about something agreeable for a change. Here is my dear mother dying to tell you what she thinks of your trying to entrap poor Lord Lully in your network of Platonism. She saw you in the garden at Hyde Park Gate on Monday."

Amber turned away. She had never known anything more pathetic than the way in which Josephine had rushed along when once she began to speak.

There was not a note of Josephine's voice in all she had said. When Josephine had ever played at being cynical, she had gone softly—there had been something of merriment in her voice; but now there was the gleam of chilled steel in every flash of her phrases. The implacable brilliance of a bayonet charge was in all her words. Amber felt as if a bird which had always sung the song of a thrush had suddenly developed the metallic shriek of the parrot.

Amber was ready to weep at the pathos of it. It was pathetic; but terrible. She saw that Josephine's nerves were strung up to the highest point of tension, and that was why the effect of shrillness was produced by her speech.

She turned to Lady Gwendolen. Surely Lady Gwendolen would at last become a mother to her own daughter! Surely she would detect the pathos of the change that had come about in her nature. And indeed Lady Gwendolen was very sympathetic.

"It is all very well to make light of the whole business, my dear Amber," she cried plaintively. "Daughters engage themselves to be married, and sometimes get married too, without a thought for their mothers. Ah, is there no poet—no novelist—who will deal adequately with the mother's tragedy? It will make me look a hundred, at the very least! A married daughter! ... 'Good heavens!' people will say. 'I had no idea that Lady Gwendolen had a married daughter; why then she must be at least'—and then they will name some horrid age—forty, may be,—I know the way of these women. 'Forty—she must be a good way over forty,' they will say. 'She was no chicken when she married, and her daughter looks every day of twenty-six—why, she must be at least fifty'—they will try to make me out to be fifty—fifty-two the spiteful ones will insist on—I know them. They will take very good care never to look up Debrett to get at the truth. Ah, the Mother's Tragedy—the Mother's Tragedy. No one ever thinks of asking about a woman's age until her daughter gets married. Then, it's the first thing they do. Ah, the Mother's Tragedy! How well that broad brim suits her, doesn't it, Joe? You didn't think, I suppose, of a bow of cerise chiffon just at the curve? A little daring thing like that, you know, is often quite effective."

"I hope you will be happy, my dearest Joe," said Amber.

"I shall be married, at any rate," said Josephine, "and isn't that a step in the right direction? Happiness?... Well, could there be anything more ridiculous than an attempt to define happiness? Six months ago I had no hesitation in defining it for my own benefit. I defined it—down to the very man. That was where I was the fool,—for now I have come to think that that which I thought to be happiness is the only unhappiness that exists for me in the world. But I shall face it. I shall face it. When one has been a fool one must pay for it."

"Dear Joe—oh, Joe—Joe! Do not talk so, for God's sake," cried Amber.

"You began it, my dear Amber," said Joe, pointing a finger at her, and leaning back among the cushions of her sofa. The attitude was that one of the lovely figures in Andrea's picture of "The Wedding Feast," and Amber recognised it with horror. "You began it—you, talking about happiness and the rest of it," she continued. "Well, there, I'll say no more.... Heavens, I forgot that I did not see you since we returned from The Weir! And that seems a lifetime ago. Ah, it is true, 'Marriage and death and division, make barren our lives.' I wonder why I was such a fool as to go to The Weir with you, Amber."

"What has come over her? She has been quite as rude as that all day," complained Lady Gwendolen. "I thought that nothing could make her rude, however full of theories she might be. But I've noticed, Amber,

that rudeness and a reputation usually go together. At any rate, the women who are said to be intellectual seem to me to be nothing but rude. As soon as a woman has insulted you grossly three times you must take it for granted that her intellect is of the highest order. Of course if you think cerise too trying you might have it in a much lighter shade just where the brim begins to curve. You saw my toque with the poppies and the corn? I was not afraid to face the strongest colour. Oh, must you really go?"

"She really must: I cannot see how she could possibly remain another five minutes," said Josephine. "Amber has some sense of what is sacred and what is profane. I had the same ideas a week ago, but that's a long time back. Priestesses of Baal must have revolted the sensitiveness of the daughters of Levi. Good-bye, Amber, and take my advice and don't come back to us. I should be sorry to flaunt my new-found unhappiness in your face."

The tone of her voice and of her laugh that followed gave Amber the impulse to put her fingers in her ears and rush from the room—from the house. She resisted the suggestion, however, and contented herself with a protest of uplifted hands and mournfully shaking head.

"Poor Joe—poor Joe!" she whispered.

"That is the sincerest congratulation I have yet had," said Josephine. "It is the congratulation that contains the smallest amount of bitterness. When people say 'I hope you may be happy, my dear,' they mean that they wouldn't give much for my chances. No, Amber, don't come back to us until I get used to being engaged. So many people have come. Mr. Clifton is wiser: he stays away. Oh, he was always so clever! The idea of a girl like myself trying to be equal to him!—Good-bye, dear."

Amber did not speak a word. She almost rushed from the room, while Lady Gwendolen was still talking, musingly, of the merits of a bow of pink chiffon—it need not necessarily be a large or an imposing incident in the composition of the hat with the broad brim, a mere suggestion of the tint would be enough, she thought.

Amber felt as if she had just come from the deathbed of her dearest friend. She was horrified at the tone of Josephine's voice and at the sound of her laugh. She felt that she never wished to see again the creature who had taken the place of her dear friend Josephine West.

The daughter of a mother who was a worldling, and of a father who was a politician, Josephine had ever shown herself to be free from the influence of either. But now—well, even her father was able to assume a certain amount of sincerity in dealing with political questions, especially when a General Election was impending. He had never talked cynically of the things which were held dear by the people with the votes. And as for her mother she was in the habit of speaking with deep feeling on the subject of the right fur for opera cloaks and other matters of interest to the intelligent. But there was Josephine talking and laughing on the first day of her engagement with a cynicism that could not have been bitterer had she been married a whole year.

What did it mean? What had brought about that extraordinary change in the girl's nature? These were the questions which distracted Amber all the way to her home.

She could not forget that, after Josephine had written that little paper defining Platonic Friendship, she had been led to ask herself why Josephine should have thought well to be so satirical on the subject; and she had come to the conclusion that Josephine's attitude was due to the fact of her having a tender feeling not of friendship but of love for some man; and Amber's suspicions fell upon Ernest Clifton. She felt sure that she had noticed a certain light in Josephine's face upon occasions when Mr. Clifton was near her. And yet now that she promised to become the wife of Mr. Clifton, the light that was in her eyes was an illumination of a very different sort.

And then as the question of exultation suggested itself to her she recollected how she fancied that she had perceived such an expression on the face of her friend on the Monday morning when she had returned to The Weir by the side of Pierce Winwood. The same expression was on the face of Pierce Winwood also, and Amber had felt convinced that he had told her he loved her and that she had not rejected him.

That was why they had talked so enthusiastically on the subject of the reaping machine (blue, picked out with vermillion).

But how was she to reconcile what she had seen and heard in the drawing-room which she had just left with her recollection of the return of Josephine and the other man—not the man whom she had promised to marry—from the survey of the reaping machine?

Pierce Winwood had practically confessed to her that he meant to ask Josephine if she thought she could love him, and the chance had undoubtedly been given to him to put such a question to her. If then—if—if he...

In an instant she fancied that she perceived all that had happened.

She did not as a matter of fact perceive all that had happened, but she certainly did become aware of a good deal—enough for her to go on with; and a moment after perceiving this she saw that Pierce Winwood was walking rapidly alongside the rails of Kensington Gardens.

He saw her and made a little motion with his hand suggesting his desire to speak to her. She stopped the victoria.

"I hope you will be at home this afternoon," he said. "I am so anxious to speak with you for five minutes."

"I will walk the rest of the way home: I have not had a walk to-day," she said, stepping out of the victoria.

"You are very good," he said, as the machine whirled off. "Do let us turn into the gardens for a minute. I should not like to miss this chance. You saw that announcement in the papers to-day?"

"Ah—ah!" she sighed, as they went through one of the gates and on to an avenue made dim by the boughs of horse-chestnut.

"Think of it! Think of that paragraph if you can when I tell you that she told me only on Monday that she loved me," he cried.

She stopped short. So she had not been mistaken after all.

"She promised—Josephine promised?"

"She promised. I gave you to understand that I meant to put my fate to the test, and I did so on Monday.

Ah, she told me that she loved me—me only—me only—and I know that she spoke the truth. She loved me then—she loves me now—me only—and yet—you saw that announcement.”

Amber could only shake her head dolefully. Matters were getting too complicated for her. The effort to reconcile one incident with another was a pain to her.

“You told me that she was free,” he continued. “That was because you did not know that she had been engaged secretly to that man. He was clever enough—unscrupulous enough—clever people are unscrupulous. It is only the people who are less clever that fail to get rid of their scruples—at any rate he persuaded her to bind herself to him in secret. Later—a fortnight ago—she insisted on his releasing her and he did so—technically; but in parting from her—more cleverness—he gave her to understand that he regarded her as still bound to him—he made it a matter of honour—she was only released on *parole*—a trick. Was she not entitled to listen to me? No one can deny it. She had her misgivings, but that was afterwards—she had confessed that she loved me—me only. I did not give the matter a thought. She had no doubt that she would be able to meet him. Her protection was to ask him to go to her father for his consent.”

“And he took her at her word. He got her father’s consent. They are both politicians—her father and the other. And every member of the Government knows enough about every other member of the Government to hang him. They must have made a compact together. They say that Mr. Clifton is the cleverest politician in England. We know what that means. My father says, ‘Show me the cleverest politician in England and I’ll show you the greatest rascal in Europe.’”

“There must have been something diabolical at work. This is the letter which she wrote to me. Poor girl! Poor girl!”

“I cannot read it—I know it all—all. I love her—I cannot listen to the despairing cries of one whom I love. Poor Josephine! I was with her just now... oh, terrible—terrible!”

“Ah, you have been with her? you saw her? She would not see me. And what have you found out? Do not tell me that she cares anything for him.”

“I saw her; but what could I find out? She did not confide anything to me—she did not seek to do so. I shall never go again— She frightened me. There was no word of Josephine in all she said. Have you not been to her?”

“Been to her. How could I get that letter and remain away from her? I went in the forenoon—she would not see me—the man had received his instructions. That is why I was going to you. You must ask her to go to you to-morrow, and I shall meet her at your house. My God, cannot you perceive that I must see?—that she must be saved from her fate?... What am I thinking of—to talk to you in this way—commanding? What can you think of me?”

“Do not accuse me of being unable to see how you love her. But I cannot do what you ask me. How would it be possible? You must write to her—persuade her to see you.”

“And I thought that you were my friend.”

He had stopped on the avenue and was gazing at her reproachfully.

“I am your friend,” she said, “and therefore I cannot do this. If you were to meet her and hear her talk as I heard her to-day you would turn away from her forever. I know that.”

“Turn from her—I—I—turn from her—her?” he cried. “Oh, let me have the chance—you will give me the chance?”

She shook her head.

“Then what am I to do?” he said. “Would you counsel me to remain passive—to allow her to marry that man whom she detests and to send her a wedding present? A diamond star would be a nice present, wouldn’t it? or a wheat sheaf—I saw one the other day—set with pearls and diamonds?”

“Oh, you are talking now just as she talked—so wildly—so wickedly. Cannot you see that just at this moment you are both beyond the control of reason? You say things to me now that you do not mean—she did the same. If you were to meet now you would say things to her—she would say things to you—you would part from her forever.”

“I would be calm. I would remember that everything depended on my being calm.”

“Ah, you think so. But you cannot be calm even to me. And you did not see her as I saw her just now.”

“Would to heaven that I had the chance.”

“Do not say that. You would drown yourself there.”

(They had reached the Round Pond.)

He walked along in silence by her side—in silence and with bowed head.

“I know what will happen,” he said at last: “she will soon become reconciled to her fate. She will soon come to think that he is part of her life and I shall cease to be in any thought of hers. Well, perhaps that is the best thing that could happen. But I thought that she was not like other women. I fancied that when she knew... But you will see her again? You will tell her that I must see her—surely she will let me say good-bye to her.”

“I can say nothing. But you must not see her now. Wait for a day or two. Oh, cannot you trust her to bear you in mind for a day or two? Did she not say that she loved you?”

“And she does—I know that she does. Oh, it is the old story—the old story. Her father has forced her into this.”

Amber could say nothing. She thought that it would be better for her not to go into the question of the antiquity of the story of a girl promising to marry a rich man, and her parents endeavouring to marry her to a poor one—that was the summary of the love story of Josephine West.

He walked in silence—comparative silence—by her side until they reached the road once more. At the entrance to her home, he said humbly:

“My dear Miss Severn, I feel that you have given me good advice. I will obey you—I will make no attempt to see her for some days. I knew that I should be right in coming to you. You will forgive me for the wild way I

talked to you."

"If you had not talked in that way I would never speak to you again," said Amber, giving him her hand.

CHAPTER XXXI

Amber ran upstairs to her room and threw herself not upon the little sofa in her dressing-room but upon the bed in her bedroom. She was guided in the right direction. She knew perfectly well that the cry which was coming was too big for a sofa—it was a bed-sized cry.

She lay in her tears for more than an hour, and no one went near her to disturb her. Emotions were recognised as possible in this household—emotions and moods and sulks—and no member of the household—ancillary or otherwise—was allowed to interfere with another.

Her mother was fortunate in having been at one time of her life of the same age as Amber, and she had a pretty good notion of how it was that her daughter did not come downstairs for tea. Lady Severn had heard her daughter's comments upon the announcement of Josephine's engagement, and having herself noticed the expression on the faces of her guests at The Weir on their return together from their stroll, she had no great difficulty in understanding how it was possible that Amber might be having a good cry after visiting her friend Josephine.

It was, however, Sir Creighton who, before dinner, asked Amber if she had learned anything by her visit to Josephine. He appeared quite anxious to know all that there was to be known on the subject of Josephine's engagement to Mr. Clifton; but for that matter he took quite as much interest as his wife, in the incidents of their social life. Even the humblest essays in elementary biology had a certain attraction about them, he was accustomed to say.

Amber gave him a spasmodic account of her call upon Josephine, and of her subsequent overtaking of Pierce and his confession during their stroll in the Park.

"Just think of it," she said by way of summing up. "Just think of it: she acknowledged to Mr. Winwood on Monday that she loved him, and yet to-day she allows it to be announced in the papers that she is to be married to the other man! Was there ever anything so terrible since the world began?"

"Never—never," said he. "Nothing of such terrible significance to Josephine and Winwood has been heard of since the world began. There is a good deal in this business which is not easy to understand without the aid of a trustworthy key to the motives of men and women and political adventurers. If she had promised in secret long ago to marry Clifton, the secret being kept a secret because of the unlikelihood of her father's giving his consent to the engagement, what, I should like to know, has occurred during the past few days to make Clifton perceive that her father would give his consent? You got a hint from Josephine on this point—or that fool of a mother of hers—did she say nothing that would suggest a compact—a reciprocal treaty, these politicians would call it—between Mr. West and Mr. Clifton?"

Amber laughed scornfully.

"Lady Gwendolen talked about the new opera cloaks," said she.

"A topic well within her grasp," said Sir Creighton. "If I wished for any information regarding the possibilities of longevity among certain esoteric developments of the opera cloak I think I would apply to Lady Gwendolen. She is, one might say, the actuary of the opera cloak: she can calculate, upon the theory of averages, the duration of life of such ephemera."

"Yes; but what is to be done," said Amber, who perceived the danger of drifting into phrases and fancying that because a good sentence has been made, there is no need for further action.

Sir Creighton walked to a window and stood in front of it with his hands in his pockets.

"We can do a good deal," he said, after a pause of considerable duration. "I know, at any rate, that I can do a good deal in this matter—yes, in certain circumstances I think that I have a good deal of influence—moral influence of course, not the other sort,—to avoid making use of an uglier word, we shall call it political influence. But we must be certain first how we stand—exactly how we stand. Why should West give his consent just now to his daughter's engagement to Clifton when both persons mainly concerned in the contract considered six months ago that it would be quite useless to make an appeal to him. Why, according to what you say Winwood told you, Josephine up to last Monday felt certain that it would be ridiculous to expect that he would entertain a thought of Clifton as a son-in-law. Now, what we need to find out is, How did Clifton convince Josephine's father that he was the right man to marry his daughter?"

Amber could not see for the life of her what bearing this point had upon the question of the destiny of Josephine, but she had a great deal of confidence in her father.

"Mind you, my dear," resumed Sir Creighton, "I do not say that Josephine has not herself to thank for a good deal of this trouble. Why should she allow herself to be persuaded into an underhand compact with that man? And then, having entered into that compact, why does she allow herself to fall in love with quite another man?"

"How could she prevent it?" cried Amber. "How is a girl to prevent herself from falling in love with one particular man?"

"Possibly a course of higher mathematics might be prescribed," said Sir Creighton. "My dear Amber, I don't think that Josephine is the heroine of this romance. However, that is no reason why she should not be happy—it is certainly no reason why Pierce Winwood should be unhappy. He at least is blameless."

This was the end of their conversation at that time, and Amber felt that it had not been very helpful in the way of furthering the prospects of Pierce Winwood, and, incidentally, of Josephine West.

She could not even see why her father should laugh the laugh of a man who is gratified on receiving a proof of his own shrewdness, when the following morning he pointed out to her in one of the newspapers, under the heading of Changes in the Cabinet, the announcement that the Minister of the Annexation Department had agreed to go to the Exchequer on the resignation owing to his increasing deafness of the Chancellor, and that Mr. Carew West, the Under Secretary for the Arbitration Office, had accepted the portfolio thereby rendered vacant, with a Seat in the Cabinet.

Every paper in the kingdom contained a leading article or a note under the leading article, referring to this important change and offering congratulations to the new Minister. But the paper which Sir Creighton showed to his daughter went rather more into the details of the Cabinet Changes, and explained that it was thought by many people that the Chancellor of the Exchequer would not resign until a seat had been found for Mr. Eardley, who had had a seat in the last Cabinet of the existing Government, but who had failed to be returned for his old constituency at the General Election. The Government had, however, been advised that, owing to the attitude of the electors of the Arbroath Burghs in regard to the war, the return of Mr. Eardley for that fickle constituency could not be relied on, and therefore the Under Secretary at the Arbitration Office had got his seat in the Cabinet rather sooner than might have been expected.

"There is the explanation of it all," said Sir Creighton. "I wondered how it was that Clifton could get into his hands the wires that affected West, for every one knows that West's seat is a perfectly safe one, and Clifton is only a wire-puller among the constituencies. But now the whole thing is clear to me. The Chancellor has made a fool of himself and the Government want to unload him. They want their old colleague Eardley back, and they ask Clifton about the Arbroath Burghs. If Clifton says 'safe,' the Chancellor will wait until Eardley is returned; if he says 'unsafe' the vacant place will be given to West. Clifton then goes to West and says 'Would you care to get into the Cabinet? I can put you into the Cabinet to-morrow.' 'What's your price?' cries West, perceiving that the object of his ambition is within reach, and hoping that Clifton will be as reasonable as Mephisto was to Faust, and only say, 'Your Soul.' But Clifton knows that the soul of an Under Secretary is quoted low in the Market, but that a daughter is a perfectly negotiable security—oh, the whole thing is clear."

"Quite clear," acquiesced Amber, "but where does Mr. Winwood come in?"

Her father roared with laughter.

"You are surely the most practical young woman that lives," he said. "Here have I been romancing away in the vaguest fashion and so overwhelmed with a sense of my own cleverness that I lose sight of the true objective—the phrase is one of the multitudinous military critics, my dear—but you, you hold me down to the dry details of the matter in hand."

"You see, my dear father, I have not yet been able to understand how much is gained by your knowing that Mr. West had some reason for giving his consent to Josephine's engagement with Mr. Clifton," said Amber.

"It was necessary for me to see if Mr. Clifton held debenture stock in the Soul of Julian Carew West or only ordinary shares," said Sir Creighton. "And have you found that out?"

"I have found that he holds merely preference shares. And now that the Soul of Mr. West is going into allotment it is just possible that I may be successful in getting in on the ground floor, as your friend Mr. Galmyn would say."

"I don't understand even yet."

"Better not try for a few days yet. Give the man a chance of settling down in his place in the Cabinet and feeling comfortable in regard to his future. A man who has just managed to crawl into a high office should not be bothered by people making enquiries as to the marks of mud on the knees of his trousers. There is no crawling through mud without getting a stain or two. But do not forget that I am the inventor of the only time fuse in existence."

He left his daughter to ponder over that dark saying. Exploding mines were so well known that even the members of his own family had heard of them. But what did her father who was the least egotistical man on the face of the earth, mean by referring to that special invention of his?

She was annoyed by his attitude of mystery, and when the afternoon came she was still further annoyed, when in the course of giving Arthur Galmyn a cup of nice tea, he begged of her to marry him, confessing that he had gone on the Stock Exchange only out of love for her, and threatening to go back to the poetry once more if she refused him.

Regardless of this pistol held to her head, she told him that he had disappointed her. She had always looked on him as a true friend.

He hurried away at the entrance of Mr. Willie Bateman, and before Mr. Bateman had eaten his second hot cake, he had assured her that if she were good enough to marry him she might depend upon his making her the most celebrated woman in England. He had a plan, he said—an advertising system that could not possibly fail, and if she rejected him he would communicate it to the Duchess of Manxland who was at her wit's end to find some new scheme of advertising herself—she had exhausted all the old ones.

But even the force of this threat did not prevent Amber from telling him that he had disappointed her. She had always looked on him as a true friend.

When he had gone away in a huff, she ate the remainder of the hot cakes and reflected that she had received four proposals of marriage within the week.

This was excessively flattering and annoying, and the truth began to be impressed upon her that Platonic Friendship was all that Josephine had said it was and that it was in addition a perpetual encouragement to a timorous lover.

CHAPTER XXXII

A letter received from Pierce Winwood two days later made her inclined to ask, as he did several times, in the course of three hurricane pages, if inaction as a policy might not be pursued too long? Her father had responded enigmatically to her hints that she thought if a Cabinet Minister could not settle down in his seat in the course of two days he must be singularly ill-adapted for a career of repose.

He had laughed heartily when she asked him again if Mr. West was not ready for the time-fuse? or was it the time-fuse that was not ready for Mr. West, but the questions were not further responded to; and now here was Mr. Winwood saying that he would call this very day.

His announcement sounded like the tradesman's threat which she had once seen at the foot of a college bill of her brother's to the effect that the writer would call on such a day at such an hour and hoped that Mr. Severn would find it convenient to have his money ready for him.

She found, on counting her loose change—all that she had got from her father in response to her hints—that she had not enough to pay Pierce Winwood—she would not even be able to give him something on account. She had neither seen Josephine nor heard anything about her; and she knew better than to fancy that the ardent lover would go away satisfied with the parable of the time-fuse.

She had all the courage of her sex; but she could not face him. She actually felt herself becoming nervous at the thought of his entering the room and repeating in her ears the words which he had shouted into his letter. His noisy letter had greatly disturbed her; so after an interval—an uneasy interval, she rushed at paper and pens and scrawled off a page in precisely the same style as that which he had made his own, begging him for heaven's sake to be patient, if it was possible, for a few days still, and entreating him to be a man. (She knew that this was nonsense: to be a man was to be wildly unreasonable and absurdly impatient in simple matters such as waiting until a young woman came to know her own mind.)

She was in the act of putting her avalanche letter in reply to his hurricane pages, into its envelope when the door of the small drawing-room where she was sitting at a writing-table was flung open and Josephine swooped down on her, kissing her noisily and crying in her ear the one word "saved—saved—saved!" after the style of the young woman in the last popular melodrama—only much less graceful in pose.

"What—what—what?" cried Amber spasmodically within the encircling arms of her friend.

Then they both rose, as it might be said, to the surface of their overwhelming emotions, and stood facing each other breathless and disordered.

Josephine went off in a peal of laughter, Amber, ever sympathetic though burning with curiosity, followed her, and then they flung themselves on the sofa—one at each end, and laughed again.

"I am saved—saved—and I come to you to tell you so," cried Josephine, catching one of Amber's hands and swinging her arm over the cushions that billowed between them.

"Saved—saved—is he dead—or—or—has he been found out?" whispered Amber. "Clever men invariably are found out."

"Found out?—oh, I found him out long ago—the day he tricked me into believing that I was still bound to him, though he had just pretended to set me free. But to-day—before lunch time—by the way, I have had no lunch yet!"

Both girls laughed as aimlessly as negresses at this point, it seemed so ridiculous not to have had lunch.

"Before lunch—he came to you?" suggested Amber.

"Not he—not Launcelot but another—the other was a young woman—oh, quite good-looking, and wearing a very pretty Parma-violet velvet hat with ospreys, and a cashmere dress, with an Eton jacket trimmed with diagonal stripes of velvet to match the hat—oh, quite a nice girl. I had never seen her before—she had sent in her name—Miss Barbara Burden—such a sweet name, isn't it?"

"Quite charming! Who was she? I never heard the name."

"I had never heard the name. I fancied that she had come about a bazaar for the widows and orphans, so many strangers come about that, you know—but she hadn't. I saw her. It was most amusing; but she was quite nice. She had the newspaper in her hand with that announcement—that horrid announcement——"

"I know—I know."

"Do you love that man, Miss West?" she began, pointing to the paragraph.

"Good gracious! That was a beginning—and a total stranger!"

"So I thought. Of course I became cold and dignified. 'Have you not seen that I am going to marry Mr. Clifton?' I asked in as chilling a voice as I could put on at a moment's notice. 'What I mean is this,' said the young woman; 'if you tell me that you are about to marry him because you love him, I will go away now and you will never hear anything of me again. But if you cannot say truly that you do love him I will tell you that the day you marry him I shall bring an action against him that will go far to ruin his career and to make you unhappy for the rest of your life unless you are very different from what I have heard you are, Miss West.'"

"Heavens!"

"I looked at her and saw that she was quite nice. 'I cannot tell you that I love him,' said I, 'but I can tell you that I detest him, and that I love somebody else. Is that good enough for you to go on with?' 'Thank God!' she cried quite fervently, and then she told me her story. Oh, there was nothing wicked in it. She is the daughter of a doctor in a town where he lived before he came to London. Her father was a man of influence in the town and Mr. Clifton became engaged to the girl—but in secret—no one was to know anything about it until he should find himself in a position to get her father's consent."

"A country doctor: Mr. Clifton must have been in a small way even then."

"So he was—he hoped to better himself by marrying her, however. She showed me several letters that he had written to her—clever letters, but still such letters as would be received with laughter, in brackets, if read in a court of law. Well, he left that town and went to a larger, and having worked himself into a better position, he found that to marry the girl would be to marry beneath him—that was the girl's phrase—'to marry beneath him'—so he engaged himself—also in secret—to a girl above him in social position; but in the meantime he had worked himself up and up until he came to London and was a sufficiently important person to get me to engage myself to him—in secret too—and—that's the whole story the young lady had to tell only—yes, I forgot: before he met her he had actually engaged himself to a girl in Lynnthorpe—a grocer's daughter in the town—Miss Burden found that out also. Was there ever anything so amusing heard since the world began—such a comedy of courtships! He had been gradually working himself up through the whole gamut of the social scale until he reached the dizzy height represented by me—me! But there is a sublimer height even than me, and now he shall have his chance of reaching it."

"And we have always thought him so clever!"

"So he is. But the cleverest men that have ever lived have had their weaknesses. His little weakness seems to have been the secret engagement. It appears that he has never been able to resist it. He has gone from one girl to another like a butterfly. He will marry the daughter of a Duke now."

"You believed the girl—Miss Burden?" said Amber in a tone that suggested suspicion.

Josephine laughed and patted her hand.

"He came into the room while we were together," she said.

"Oh!"

"He had not been to see me since Tuesday, and to-day is Saturday; he thought it better on the whole to let me get accustomed to the situation which was the natural sequel to the announcement in the papers. But he came to-day. He met the other girl—one of the other girls—face to face. You never saw anything so funny. For a moment I thought that he would make the attempt to strangle her as the villain on the stage does. But he did nothing of the sort. 'I have just been telling Miss West that the day you marry her, I shall bring up an action against you and give the leader writers of the Opposition a chance of showing off their cleverness in dealing with the case of Burden v. Clifton,' said she quite nicely. And he was dumb—absolutely dumb! 'But Miss West has too high a regard for Mr. Clifton to precipitate such an event,' said I, and then my father came into the room."

"More comedy!"

"I felt equal to playing my rôle. He looked from me to Mr. Clifton, and from Mr. Clifton to Miss Burden. 'Oh,' I said, 'I forgot that you don't know Miss Burden, papa. This is my father, Miss Burden. Miss Burden is the young lady whom Mr. Clifton promised to marry four years ago. It is a nice question, and one which no doubt will have to be decided in a Court of law, but it really seems to me that he is still engaged to marry Miss Burden. But of course there were other girls and other secret engagements.'"

"You said that? How neat! And your father?"

"He said 'Don't be a fool, Josephine. What nonsense is this, Clifton?' 'I think I should like five minutes alone with Miss Burden; I think I could bring her to see that nothing would be gained by—' 'I do not want such an interview with you,' said Miss Burden. 'I am here and if Mr. West wishes to ask me any question—Mr. West or Miss West—I shall answer it in your presence, Ernest.' I pitied my father—I really did. 'Clifton,' said he, 'do you mean to tell me that you were not a free man when you made your proposal to my daughter?' 'A free man? that girl is a fool—an utter fool!' said Mr. Clifton. 'Good heavens! Because a man happens—psha! it was four years ago. There is nothing criminal in the business!' 'Oh, no,' said I, 'nothing criminal—only ridiculous; but for my part I have no intention of allowing my name to be associated with the brackets in the newspaper reports enclosing the words "Great laughter in the court," and I cannot believe that my father anticipates such a destiny for me.' Then my father did a foolish thing. He said, 'Madam, what damages do you hope for in this matter? Do you fancy that any jury would award you more than a thousand pounds? That would be ridiculous. But at the same time—I have my cheque-book here—supposing we say fifteen hundred pounds?'"

"He fancied that she would take it? Was he deceived by the ospreys in her Parma-violet hat, do you think?"

"He couldn't have been, they were quite simple. But anyhow the girl walked straight to the door and was out before any one could say a word."

"How good!"

"I ran after her and caught her up on the landing. I kissed her, and—well, I didn't think it worth while returning to the drawing-room. But when I was putting on my hat to come to you, my father met me and said, 'Don't you fancy that because this business has gone astray for a while there is the smallest chance of your getting my consent in regard to—to that fellow from Australia. Perhaps it is as well for us to be clear of Clifton—such men have no sense of honour; but don't you think for a moment that this Winwood man—Clifton told me all about him—will get my consent.' So you see, my dear, although I have escaped from Ernest Clifton... oh, how horribly I talked when you came to see me... But you knew that I cared for Pierce—you knew that I had given him my promise—you knew that he—"

And at this point Mr. Pierce Winwood was announced and Amber Severn rushed past him as he entered the room.

"My dear West," said Sir Creighton Severn when after church the next day, he found himself seated opposite to the new Minister of the Annexation Department in Mr. West's library. "My dear West, so old a friend as I am should be the first to offer you congratulations. You see that your ambition was not the foolish impulse that so many people in the old days said that it was. You had the stuff in you."

"I knew that you would be the first, my dear Severn," said the new Minister. "We have both done very well for ourselves since those old days—those cruel old days, Severn. Ah, we had both ambitions of the right sort. We knew how to make the most of our opportunities, you and I. Yes, we have done pretty well for ourselves."

"And we have done pretty well for others too—if people only knew it," said Sir Creighton.

"Yes, yes, the world is the happier for our having lived in it—you in particular, Severn—you in particular. Your inventions—where are they going to end? that's what some one was saying to me the other day—a man at the Admiralty—we had been hearing the result of the trial of that boat of yours. Ah, you are fortunate, Severn. Your work is recognised freely; whereas the labours of one who aspires to be thought a statesman—ah, how few appreciate the life of perpetual self-sacrifice which we are compelled to lead. People talk of the sweets of office—sweets?—Do you know, Severn, I feel greatly inclined sometimes to relinquish forever all this worry of political life—all this noise—the clamour—the—the *strepitum*—that is the word—the *strepitum*—and settle down to enjoy the life which is nearest to my heart—the home life—the home—the hearth."

"Not yet—not yet, my friend," said Sir Creighton, shaking his head sadly. "You are not your own master now. Your duty may be an onerous one, but there are too few statesmen in England for you to think of retiring yet awhile."

"Well, perhaps one should not look at such a matter from the standpoint of one's private feelings. You do not see so much of me nowadays as you once did, Severn; if you did you would know that the home—the hearth—ah—ah!"

"We do not see so much of each other; but our children—our girls, you know that they are inseparable—West,—you are the father of a girl whom I have come to understand, and to understand such a nature as hers is to love her. I love her as I do my own child; and I am here to talk to you about her."

"Ah, Severn, she is a good girl—a noble girl, but—well, frankly, I am rather glad that this affair with Clifton has come to an end. It will be years before Clifton is anything but the merest wire-puller—a paltry provincial sort of jobbing jerrymander—that was—he will be—not without his uses, of course—those organisms have their uses to us; but I think that my daughter has every right to look for some one—some one, in short, more in her own rank in life. You heard, of course, that Clifton had been a fool—that it would be impossible for us to entertain any longer the idea of—"

"I saw Josephine yesterday. I am quite of your way of thinking in this matter. Clifton behaved badly from the first—inducing her to do an underhand thing—I know that her better nature recoiled from it. I cannot understand how you ever came to give your consent, West."

"Well, you see, my dear Severn, I believed that she loved him, and a girl's heart—ah, Severn, Severn, when the prospect of one's daughter's happiness—"

"That is what I want to talk to you about, West—her future happiness—and yours."

"If you are going to talk to me about that man from Australia—or is it New Zealand?—whom she fancies she loves, you may spare yourself the trouble, my dear friend—I decline to discuss a man so obviously—flagrantly ineligible."

"I have found out a good deal about him during the past month, and I have heard nothing except what is good."

"Good—good—what signifies goodness—I mean, of course, that my daughter is now in a very different position from that she occupied six months ago. The best families in the land might receive her with open arms. But a Colonial—well, of course, they did very well in the war, the Colonials, and the mother country is proud of them—yes, quite proud of them. But for my daughter to marry a man who does not know his own father—"

"I know all about his father, though he does not."

"I don't want to know, anything, West. His father may have been the Archbishop of Canterbury for all I care; but the chances are that he was a convict—or a descendant of convicts."

"You have not guessed very wide of the mark; his father was a convict."

"What; and you are here to suggest that—that—good lord, Severn, are you mad—oh, you must be mad?"

"I do not consider that he is anything the worse for being the son of a convict, West. There is always the possibility of a convict being innocent."

"Oh, they all affirm their innocence, of course. Now, that is all I want to hear about either father or son. You will stay to lunch, I hope—oh, yes, you must stay to lunch. The Marquis may drop in afterwards; his son is certainly coming. You know Lord Lullworth—a promising young fellow, Severn—quite promising. Come upstairs; Lady Gwendolen will be pleased."

"One moment, my dear West. I happen to know that the convict father of Pierce Winwood, as he calls himself, was innocent of the crime for which he suffered."

"Then comfort the son with that information. He will be glad to believe it, I am confident."

"Shall I add to that information the name of the criminal on whose behalf he suffered?"

"You may add the names of all the heroes of the Newgate Calendar, if you please, my dear friend."

"I will not offer him so interesting a catalogue. But come with me—I have taken the liberty of bringing him here with me: he is upstairs—I will give him the name of the real criminal in your presence and in the presence of the Marquis and the Marquis's son and also present him with the proofs, which I have in my pocket, that I have not made a mistake."

Sir Creighton took a step towards the door.

Mr. West did not move. His jaw had fallen. He had grasped the back of a chair.

The gong sounded for luncheon filling up the long pause with its hum.

"For God's sake—for God's sake," whispered the Cabinet Minister.

"I tell you the truth, West," said Sir Creighton. "The son of Richard Gaintree, the man who was in your father's works with myself and with you—the man who in that strange way when we thought he was at the

point of death confessed to the crime which you committed and so saved you—the man whom you saw go cheerfully to prison, without speaking a word to save him—that man is the father of Pierce Winwood as certain as we stand here.”

Mr. West gazed at Sir Creighton Severn for some minutes, and then with an articulation that was half a cry and half a groan, dropped into the chair in front of him, and bowed his head down to his hands on the table.

For a long time his visitor did not speak—did not stir. At last he went to him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

“‘God moves in a mysterious way,’—you remember that hymn at the Chapel in the old days, Julian?” he said in a low voice. “Though we have drifted away from the chapel, we can still recognise the truth of that line. I know that for years you have thought and thought if it might be possible for you to redeem that one foolish act of your life—to redeem your act of cowardice in sending that man to suffer in your place. Well, now, by the mysterious working of Providence, the chance is offered to you.”

“And I will accept it—I will accept it as I did the offer of Richard Gaintree,” cried West, clutching at his friend’s arm. “Thank God I can do it—I can do it. But he need not know—the son need not know—you say he does not know?”

“He knows the story—the bare story, but his father hid the names from him. He need never know more than he does now.”

“Send them to me—send them to me, quick, Severn, quick—I may die before I have accomplished the act of restitution.”

Sir Creighton put out his hand, the other man put his own right hand into it for a moment.

Sir Creighton went upstairs to the drawing-room where Josephine and Pierce were sitting with Lord Lullworth and Amber. Lady Gwendolen was still in her dressing-room.

Josephine started up at his entrance. She looked eagerly—enquiringly at him.

“He is in his study. He wants to see you both. Dear child, you have my congratulations—and you too, Winwood.”

Josephine was in Sir Creighton’s arms before he had finished speaking.

“We are starving. What has happened?” cried Amber with some awe in her voice, when Josephine and Pierce had disappeared.

“The time-fuse has burnt itself down—that’s all,” said her father. “Listen: you can almost hear Mr. West telling his daughter that his fondest wish has always been for her happiness, and that he is ready to sacrifice all his aspirations and ambitions in order that she may marry the man whom she loves. That is what he is saying just now.”

And, sure enough, that was exactly what Mr. West was saying at that moment.

“But the time-fuse?” said Amber.

“Time-fuse—the time-fuse,” said Lord Lullworth. “Ah, that reminds me—well, I may as well get it over at once, Sir Creighton. The fact is that I—I have—well, I gave myself a time-fuse of six months to fall in love with your daughter, but the explosion has come a good deal sooner than I expected. She says that she thinks that she may come to think about me as I do of her, in about four months.”

“Oh, less than four months, now,” cried Amber. “It was four months half an hour ago. Half an hour of the time-fuse has burnt away. And it’s not the real Severn time-fuse, I know, for I’ve no confidence that the climax may not be reached at any time.”

“You are a pair of young fools,” said Sir Creighton. “And yet—well, I don’t know. You may be the two wisest people in the world.”

“Great Queen of Sheba! we can’t be so bad as all that,” said Lord Lullworth.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ACCORDING TO PLATO ***

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