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DEFICIENT SAINTS

A Tale of Maine

BY

MARSHALL SAUNDERS

AUTHOR OF

"BEAUTIFUL JOE," "ROSE À CHARLITTE,"
"THE KING OF THE PARK," ETC.

"Keep who will the city's alleys,
Take the smooth-shorn plain,
Give to us the cedar valleys,
Rocks, and hills of Maine!"

LONDON
GEORGE BELL AND SONS
1903

TO
THE CITIZENS
OF
BEAUTIFUL BANGOR
THIS STORY IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED
BY THE AUTHOR

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DEFICIENT SAINTS.

CHAPTER I.

THE ELECT LADY AND HER DEATH-BOOK.

In the dining-room of the old stone Mercer mansion in the town of Rossignol, Me., Mrs. Hippolyta Prymmer, sanctified vessel and uncommon saint, charter member of the church of the United Brethren, chief leader in religious work, and waggishly nicknamed by the ungodly about her "the elect lady," sat looking earnestly at her death-book.

This death-book was her never-failing source of interest and chastened entertainment. In it she had enrolled the names of the various friends of whom she had been deprived by death, and for its enlargement and adornment she collected photographs, cuttings from newspapers, and items of information, with an assiduity superior to that of some of her acquaintances, who prepared scrap-books merely for purposes of diversion and amusement.

The covers of the book were ornamented with two silver plates engraved with the names and ages of her two deceased husbands,—Sylvester Mercer and Zebedee Prymmer. These plates had been taken from the coffins of the two worthy men before they had been lowered to their graves. Wedged under each plate were locks of hair shorn from the heads of the dead men. Sylvester, according to his coffin plate, had been a man in the prime of life. His lock of hair was soft and brown, while that of Zebedee Prymmer, whose age was given as sixty-five, was stiff and grizzled. [12]

Mrs. Prymmer did not quail as her eye ran over these somewhat ghastly souvenirs. She even sighed gently, and with eyes partly closed,—for she nearly knew the contents of the book by heart,—repeated softly some lines addressed to herself, written by Zebedee Prymmer before death, but worded as if they had been penned after his flight to regions above.

"Mourn not, oh loved, oh cherished dear,
I have no longer foes to fear,
From here above, far in the sky,
I see the pit wherein they'll lie."

"They digged around me in the dust,
But Providence sustained the Just,
Come soon and join the dear upright,
And triumph over sons of spite."

[13]

Mrs. Prymmer, musing enjoyably over these lines, had her attention distracted by her cat, who was mewing around her feet, turning his sleek face up to her sleek face, and pretending that he thought it was breakfast-time instead of bedtime.

"I sha'n't give you any milk," she said, severely, "you had enough for your supper; go to bed."

The cat fled down-stairs, and Mrs. Prymmer gazed across the room at the clock. The sight of her round gray eyes was undimmed. All her bodily faculties were in a good state of preservation, and undeterred by the mournful fact that she had laid two husbands in the grave, she was, perhaps, by no means averse to taking a third one. In the course of time she would probably have another offer, for Rossignol was a marrying-place, and she was somewhat of a belle among elderly widowers, being still good-looking in spite of the artificial and unpleasing compression of her lips, and the two lines up and down the corners of her mouth.

She began to wonder just how her son would take the news of another marriage on her part. She was a little afraid of this son, although she loved him better than any one else in the world. He was the only living person admitted into her death-book, and drawing his photograph from between the leaves, she looked at it half lovingly, half apprehensively. It was a not unstriking face that confronted her. He was a curious combination, this boy of hers,—half Englishman, half Yankee. His tall, firmly built figure, his reserve, and his pale face were a legacy from his father, who was of direct English ancestry; his business ability and calculating ways, and his granite-coloured eyes, that so swiftly and unerringly measured his fellow men with respect to their usefulness or uselessness to him, were direct gifts to him through his mother from a generation or two of New England traders. [14]

She wondered once more just how he would look and what he would say if some one were to observe suddenly to him, "So I hear your mother is going to be married again."

Her plump shoulders quivered nervously, and she looked deeper into his fathomless eyes. Probably he would be annoyed at first, but in time he would calm down, and would go on living with her and a third husband just as he had lived with her and a second one.

"He never liked Zebedee," she reflected, comfortably, "yet he was always respectful to him. He's a pretty good boy is Justin," and she passed one hand caressingly over the pale, composed face, and wished earnestly that he would come home from the long and mysterious journey that he had undertaken some weeks ago.

The house was very quiet now that he was away. A cousin who boarded with her was also absent, and her solitary maid servant, who should have been in bed, was roaming the streets with a sailor lover. [15]

"Half-past ten," said Mrs. Prymmer, in a voice that boded no good to the loitering maid, "and her hour is ten sharp. There she is,—the witch," as a ring at the bell resounded through the silent house.

She got up and went quickly through the hall. "Mary!" she said as she opened the door. "Mary!"

There was something so aggravating in her tone that it checked the apology on the lips of the belated girl, and made her toss her head angrily.

"Mary," repeated her mistress, warningly, "if this happens again I shall consider it my duty to dismiss you without a character."

The maid hurried up-stairs, her back respectful, her face working vigorously as she made mouths at an imaginary mistress in front of her.

Mrs. Prymmer was about to follow her when her attention was caught by a sound of sleigh-bells coming from the snowy street. The old stone house, in common with most of its neighbours, was perched on a bank some distance from the street, and was approached by several flights of steps cut into the terraces before it.

A sleigh was drawn up to the pavement below, and slowly descending from it was her son, whom she had supposed to be in California. She held her breath with pleasure. She had got him back again, her one and only child, her son by her first marriage,—young Justin Mercer, junior deacon in the church of the United Brethren, the hope of the older members of the flock and the model of the rising generation. In unbounded pride she noted his firm step, his unruffled appearance, the uprightness of his figure, and the cool flash of the eye behind the glasses that he always wore. [16]

Instead of looking like one arriving home from a journey, he had rather the appearance of one just about to leave home, and as calmly as if he had seen her a few hours before he bent his tall figure to bestow a filial embrace upon her.

In a sudden upsurging of maternal affection she responded warmly and involuntarily, until the remembrance of his abrupt departure made her draw back and survey him silently.

"Are you not glad to have me back?" he asked, with a slight smile.

"Yes, though your going away was none of the pleasantest," she said, in an injured voice, while with the tips of her fingers she arranged on her temples the thick crimped hair slightly disturbed by his caress.

"I am sorry for it, mother," he said, with the same curious smile, "and I regret to state that, unpleasant as it was, you may find it was not equal to my return." [17]

"What do you mean?" she said, peevishly, "and why doesn't that man fetch in your things?"

"I told him to hold his horses until I came back. I have a present for you," and he turned and went down the steps while his mother returned to the shelter of the porch.

Suddenly she became as rigid as the door-post behind her. The present was taking on the shape of all things in the world most hateful to her. A young girl of medium height was coming up the steps, and bending over her in a protecting attitude was her son Justin.

They paused for an instant before her. Mrs. Prymmer had a brief confused vision of a big, beautiful wax doll whose limpid eyes shone out of a mist of light hair, then her son flashed her a swift glance, and seeing that he could hope for no response, laid a hand on the shoulder of the vision and withdrew it.

Mrs. Prymmer, brushing by the cabman who was staggering in under the weight of a trunk, marched solemnly into the hall, opened the door of the parlour, and, lighting the gas, sat down in an armchair of imposing proportions and awaited an explanation.

Her son had conducted his companion to the dining-room. She heard a few low-spoken words, then his heavy step came through the hall, and, entering the room, he sat before her. [18]

"I don't know what some women would call this," she said, compressing her lips till there was nothing but a thin streak of red between them, "but I call it an insult."

"It is not intended as an insult," he said. "Perhaps if you will wait till I explain—"

"You can't explain away the fact that that is a woman," replied Mrs. Prymmer, pointing an accusing finger toward the next room.

No, he could not. With all the words that he could utter, with all the stock of logic at his command, Justin Mercer could not disprove the fact that in the room beyond them was a young and uncommonly beautiful woman.

"What do you mean by saying that she is a present for me?" asked his discomfited mother. "I have one girl now. I suppose this is some creature you have picked up on your travels."

Justin Mercer was not a man given to unseemly mirth, yet at this disdainful remark he made a sound in his throat closely approaching a laugh. "Did you look at her, mother?"

Mrs. Prymmer for a few instants forgot her vengeance in her curiosity. It was no servant, but a lady that had passed her in the doorway. The delicate face, with its clear-cut features and limpid eyes, was a refined and not a vulgar one. [19]

"Who is she?" she asked, peremptorily.

"She is my wife," he said, quietly.

"Your wife," gasped Mrs. Prymmer, and she half rose from her chair, then staggered into it again, and laid her hand against the high back for support, while all the furniture in the room, presided over by her son's sober face, whirled slowly by her in a distracted procession.

"Shall I get you a glass of water?" he asked, sympathetically.

She made a prohibitory gesture. This was only the reflex action of the blow struck when first she had seen the young girl accompanying him up the steps. She knew then that he had brought home a wife. Moistening her dry lips with her tongue so that she might compass the words, she articulated, "This is the fruit of disobedience."

Her son did not reply to her, but there was no sign of regret on his face, no word of apology on his tongue. He had found the fruit sweet, and not bitter,—he had plucked it in defiance of her well-known wishes. She had lost the little boy that she had led by the hand for years,—the young man that had lingered by her side, apparently indifferent to all feminine society but her own. She had lost him for ever, and, making a motion of her plump hands as if she were washing him and [20] his affairs from them, she got up and moved toward the door.

"Don't you want to hear about my journey?" he asked, kindly.

She did indeed want to hear. She was suffering from a burning inquisitiveness, yet she affected indifference, and said, coldly, "I do, if you will tell me the truth."

"Did I ever tell you a lie?"

"No, but I daresay you will begin now,—'by their fruits ye shall know them.' I thought you were never going to get married."

"I never said so."

"You acted it."

"You had better sit down, and I will tell you how it happened," he said, soothingly.

Mrs. Prymmer hesitated, then, dominated by his slightly imperious manner and her own ungovernable curiosity, she took on the air of a suffering martyr, and reseated herself.

There was a large mirror over the mantelpiece, and the young man, catching in it a glimpse of the contrast between his own pale face and the ruddy one of his mother, murmured, "You are very fresh-looking for fifty-five years."

It was not like Justin Mercer to make a remark about the personal appearance of man, woman, or child. His mother glanced at him in surprise, then for a brief space of time was mollified by his [21] approval of her comfortable appearance, although she murmured a stern reference to gray hairs that are brought down by sorrow to the grave.

"Your face is full," he went on, in his composed voice, "and your hair is thick and glossy like a girl's, and your eyes are bright,—as bright as Derrice's there—"

The mention of his wife's name was inopportune. "Is that what you call her?" asked his mother, with a scornful compression of the lips.

"Yes, Derrice Lancaster."

Mrs. Prymmer's countenance grew purple. "She is not a daughter of that man?"

"She is."

"Help, Lord, for the godly man ceaseth," murmured the lady, upon whom these repeated blows were beginning to have the effect of inducing irrelevancy of Scripture quotations.

"If you like, I will tell you from the first," said her son.

"Do you want her to hear?" asked Mrs. Prymmer, with a glance toward the sliding doors that divided the two rooms.

The young man's face changed quickly, and muttering, "It would be just like her to listen,—the little witch," he got up and approached the doors.

"Hello," said a mischievous voice, and he caught a gleam of bright eyes and a smiling face at the [22] gaping crack. Hastily opening the doors, he passed through, and, firmly closing them behind him, stood over the beautiful but slightly unformed and undeveloped figure sitting on the sofa, that was drawn close up to the doors.

"Derrice," he said, reprovingly.

"What a trying time you are having with your mamma," she said, saucily. "I was just about to interrupt. I want to go to bed."

"Very well," he said, submissively, and, preceding her into the hall, he picked up a small leather bag.

Mrs. Prymmer, peering out of the front room, saw them go by,—her son with the girl's cloak thrown over his shoulder, his head inclined toward her, as he talked in a low voice.

"Bewitched!" she exclaimed, furiously, and, creeping to the door-sill, she listened to their further movements.

Ever since his childhood her son had occupied a large room at the back of the house overlooking the garden. Mrs. Prymmer heard him open the door of this room and ask his wife to stand still while he found a match. Then there was a silence, and she pictured the girl's critical glance

running over the muffled furniture, the covered bed, and the drawn blinds.

Presently there was the sound of the strange voice in the hall, "I cannot sleep in that room. It is damp, and the sheets are clammy." [23]

"But, Derrice," said her son's clear tones in remonstrance.

"I am not mistaken," repeated the girl, "where are your other sleeping-rooms?"

"If Micah is at home we haven't any," he said, decidedly. "Most of our bedrooms are shut up."

"Then I shall have to sit up all night or go to a hotel," said the girl, with equal decision.

Mrs. Prymmer felt herself called upon to save the family reputation. She stepped into the hall, and in a voice choking with wrath called up the staircase, "Micah isn't home,—put her in his room."

The girl looked over the railing at her. It seemed to Mrs. Prymmer that her eyes were rolling mischievously. "Thank you," she said, sweetly, then she retired, and her disconcerted mother-in-law went back to the parlour.

CHAPTER II.

[24]

AN UNEXPECTED DAUGHTER-IN-LAW.

When Justin returned to the parlour there was a slight flush on his face, and, taking off his spectacles, he wiped them with a somewhat weary air.

"I guess you've got a handful in your new wife," said his mother, with resentful relish.

He gave her an unexpected smile. "She hasn't been brought up as we have—" Then he paused and fell into a reverie out of which his mother inexorably roused him. "I wish you would get on with your story. I don't want to stay here all night."

Justin put on his glasses, brushed back the thick hair from his forehead, and, leaning forward in his chair, said, firmly, "It is just five weeks to-day since I came home with a telegram from Mr. Lancaster asking me to go to see him on urgent business."

"Yes, and I advised you not to go," said Mrs. Prymmer, squeezing her lips together. "'The way of transgressors is hard.'"

"You advised me not to go because you knew nothing of the circumstances. You know that I [25] cannot give you the details of my business transactions. Can't you trust me to do what is right in such cases?"

"Put not your trust in princes," she said, stubbornly. "A man should have no secrets from his mother."

"You forget that I am not a boy," he said, calmly. Then he went on, "I hurried to California and found Mr. Lancaster in a seaside place sitting in the sun parlour of a hotel. He was pleased that I had come so quickly, and talked over his affairs with me—"

"It's a very odd thing," interrupted Mrs. Prymmer, "that a man who has travelled as much as this Mr. Lancaster of yours should do all his business in a little place like this. Why doesn't he go to banks in New York or Boston?"

"He probably knows his own mind," said Justin, with an unmoved face. "That day I did some writing for him, then he looked out the window. There was a long beach where a small number of young people were bathing in the surf. Mr. Lancaster said, 'You have never met my daughter,—come out, and I will introduce you. The bathing season has not begun, but she often gets up a party in the spirit of adventure.' We went outside, and when he called, 'Derrice,' one of the bathers came toward us. I saw that she was a pretty girl—"

"Well—" said Mrs. Prymmer, in an icy voice.

Her son had paused; it was intensely distasteful to him to give her this account of his journey, [26] and he was only urged to it by a strict sense of duty. But not for worlds would he describe to her or to any one living his sensations on first meeting the girl who had become his wife. Through half-shut eyes he gazed at his mother, his memory busy recalling the scene on the California beach,—the dripping, glistening sea-nymph dancing over the sands in her short frock and black stockings, her face radiant, her teeth shining, her slender feet spurning the ground, her whole being so instinct with life and happiness that she seemed to be an incarnation of perpetual grace and motion.

She danced to meet him and he—stiff, awkward—had stood motionless, struck with admiration, his whole soul for the first time prostrate before feminine graces and perfection.

But he must continue his recital, and, rousing himself with an effort, he went on. "Her father said, 'Derrice, this is Mr. Mercer,' and she shook hands with me. Then he asked her to go out and let me see how well she could swim. She rushed into the breakers— They are very high out there and come in in three rows howling and plunging like dogs, and throwing up spray half as high as this house. She dived through one line and another and another, then we saw her head rising beyond them. After a time I wondered why she didn't come in, but no one else seemed uneasy. [27] The other young people had sat down on the hot sand, and her father was taken up with pride in her strength, when some one waved a marine glass from the hotel veranda and cried, 'The tide has turned,—Miss Derrice can't get in, she has been floating for some time.'"

Justin stopped again, and once more lived over his brief experience on the shores of the Pacific,—the quick agony of the father who turned and measured the strength of the young men before him, their responsive looks as they ran like deer down the beach to launch a boat, the cries of consternation of the girls as they hurried into the sea and stretched out helpless hands, and the furious beating and protesting of his own heart at the sudden snatching of his newly found treasure from him by the cruel sea. He would recover her alone and unaided, or he would die with her, and, tearing off his boots and coat, he had plunged through the rows of indignant breakers that slapped and buffeted him until he reached a region of calm where warm waves lapped his throat and playfully tried to blind his eyes with spray. In deliberate haste, for he was strong and broad of limb, he had hurried to the spot where she lay rising and falling on the water, her face like a lily-bud, her limbs stretched out like folded leaves. The glare of the sun, the brass of the sky, his steady, cool head, his beating heart, the look the girl gave him when she [28] raised her head from the waves as from a pillow,—to his dying day he would never forget it all, and he grew pale at the remembrance.

His musings were interrupted by his mother's harsh voice, "Why couldn't she get in?"

"When the tide turns the undertow is frightful. Several drowning accidents had occurred there, it

being a hard place to launch a boat, and as the bathing season had not begun, the life-saving appliances were not in readiness."

Mrs. Prymmer asked no question for a time, but encouraged by a gleam of sympathy on her face, Justin observed, dryly, "She was afraid we could not get out to her, and she was repeating poetry to keep herself from losing her presence of mind."

"I guess she wasn't much frightened," observed Mrs. Prymmer, hardening her heart again.

"She has a good deal of nerve," said Justin, quietly. "She doesn't look it, but she has."

"Well, they must have got her in," said his mother, impatiently, "as she is here; how did they do it?"

"I swam out and stayed by her," he said, laconically, "till the boat came. It kept upsetting in the breakers."

"Why didn't her father go out? It was a queer thing to let you risk your life."

"He could not swim, and he was paralysed with fright." Justin lowered his eyes, for there was a [29]
mist on his glasses. Ah, that meeting between father and daughter when the boat came in! He had turned aside quickly from it, but not quickly enough to escape the expression in the eyes of the half-fainting man as he held out his arms to his recovered daughter.

"Did you make up your mind then to marry her?" pursued his mother, in a voice so harsh that it was almost a croak.

"No; I had already done so."

"You were pretty quick about it."

"I am not always slow."

"And she jumped at the chance."

"Not exactly," and, throwing back his head, he stared at her through his glasses. "If you will recall some of your own experiences when in love, you may remember some of the ways of your sex."

The obstinate face opposite him did not relax. No; although she had twice been wooed and successfully won, his mother had never felt in the slightest degree the influence of the gentle passion. She had not the remotest conception of the strength of a loving attachment except as she had felt it to a limited extent in the guise of maternal affection. However, she was not going to tell her son this, so she said, commandingly, "Go on with your story."

"There isn't much more to tell. The experience in the sea had given her a shock, and she was pale [30]
and quiet for a day or two, then she was all right and was about with her father all the time, and I —of course I was there."

He stopped in a somewhat lame fashion, and Mrs. Prymmer said, scornfully, "I guess her father made the match."

Justin maintained a discreet silence. It would be sacrilege to relate to this unsympathetic listener the history of the steady, sharp oversight that the father had taken in all matters pertaining to his daughter. Justin would not tell her that Mr. Lancaster had spoken first,—that one day he had turned to him with an abrupt, "You love my daughter, don't you?"

Mrs. Prymmer would only sneer if she should be told that her son's voice had trembled as he had answered, "Yes," and that his cheek had burned under the glance of Mr. Lancaster's keen eyes. Nor would he favour her with an account of his love-making to the spoiled and wayward Derrice. It would not inspire his mother with the same intensity of interest with which it had inspired her son. Therefore he remained thoughtful until she broke the silence by an accusation that goaded him into a response. "You promised your father when he died that you would take care of me."

"I know I did. I have married the only woman I have ever seen who would not be jealous of a [31]
mother's appropriation of a son."

Mrs. Prymmer thought over this sentence and decided that it contained an innuendo. "You must choose between us," she said, angrily, "a man must leave father and mother, and cleave to his wife."

"I know it. I should be the last one to gainsay instructions from the Bible."

"My house is not large enough for both," she continued, "I never wanted a daughter-in-law. You have forced one on me."

"You are considerably upset to-night, mother," he said, gently. "I ought to have warned you of my marriage by telegram, but I thought I had rather break it to you myself; you had better think over the matter of our leaving your house."

Her house, yes, it certainly was hers; for she had taken good care that her first husband should leave her in possession of all his worldly goods, and that their son should be dependent on her. However, she was not devoid of feeling, and she knew Justin was not thinking of losing the shelter of her roof, but rather of the sundering of the close ties between them, and, as this thought presented itself, her shrewd and calculating mind recalled the handsome gown of her daughter-in-law, and the costly fur cloak slipping from her shoulders.

"Is that Mr. Lancaster as rich as folks say?" she asked, with a softening of her tone. [32]

"No," he replied, briefly.

"I suppose if anything happened to her you would get his money."

Justin surveyed her in such austere disapprobation that she was daunted, and stammered, "You are so queer about money,—your business is to handle it, yet you haven't any respect for it, not a mite. You fling good money after bad."

Justin understood her reference, and knew that it afforded him just grounds for a retort, yet he contented himself with a silent stare at her until she went on, meekly, "You needn't take your wife away for a day or two. I will make it a subject of prayer and if the Lord directs, of course you will have to stay."

"Of course."

Her resentment did not return to her, although his tone was ironical. He had offended her terribly, this inflexible young son of hers, and even though the new member of their family was ushered in with the glamour of wealth about her, this was but a salve, a flattering ointment for a grievous wound. But after all, he was her son, her only son, and her mother's heart was touched as she got up to leave him.

"Justin," she said, and though she was not moved enough for tears, a little—a very little—whimper came at her bidding, "you have broken my heart, but I forgive you." [33]

"No, mother, not broken," he said, also rising and laying a hand on her shoulder.

"Yes, broken," she persisted; "but you are my boy. Don't—don't let her take you away from me."

"Mother, am I likely to forget the long years that we have spent here together; the sicknesses you have nursed me through?"

"No, no, I can trust you," and she deposited her thick head of hair on his breast; "but what made you marry that chit of a thing? She looks as if she hadn't done growing. Now if it had been a woman—"

"She is older than she looks," he said, with a smile, "and she will be more tractable than a woman, and it was either 'take her or lose her.' Her father is a man of decision."

"And you—you like her?" said Mrs. Prymmer, raising her head.

He gently put her aside, and his face grew crimson. "I love her," he said, shortly.

Mrs. Prymmer went slowly from the room. She was confused in her mind, and falling on her knees by her bedside she wrestled in agitated prayer for a blessing on her son, a judgment on her daughter-in-law, and miraculous strength for herself, to bear this new and heavy cross that had been laid upon her.

CHAPTER III.

[34]

TO HIM THE WORLD WAS GAY.

Captain White was just getting home. For twenty years he had boarded with his cousin, Mrs. Hippolyta Prymmer, and now neither the near prospect of seeing her again after an absence of some months, nor any dislike for a smart rain that had begun to fall, made him quicken his footsteps as he sauntered deliberately along the concrete sidewalks of the little town.

He was a short, dark man, with a slender body, a pair of waggish, twinkling, black eyes, a sleek, dark head, and an ever present smell of fish about his garments. By fish he breathed and moved and had his being, and from the instant that the profitable herring was drawn from its native element, Captain White hung over it, superintending every detail of its curing, preparation, and shipping, for home and foreign markets.

Being a retired sea-captain and present fish merchant, his duties were supposed to end with the placing of a cargo of fish on board a vessel, but at times his affection for his old employment [35] would break forth so strongly that, without a word of warning to Mrs. Prymmer, he would precipitate himself upon a departing schooner, and the town of Rossignol would know him not for a month or two.

It was after one of these hasty departures that he was now returning. He strolled along the lower streets of the town, his fun-loving eyes rolling inquiringly at every one he met, his hands in the pockets of his short nautical jacket, his elbows swaying gently like two pectoral fins propelling him through the air, until he arrived below the old stone mansion, when he drew his hands from his pockets, ran briskly up the three short flights of steps, and rang the bell.

"How de do, Mary," he said, briefly, to the maid when she opened the door.

Upon ordinary occasions he never spoke to her. This greeting was reserved for the important event of his return from a voyage.

Mary smiled, and, not daring to return his salutation lest she should incur a reprimand from the highest authority in the house for undue familiarity with the masculine part of it, made haste to disappear down a back stairway.

Captain White shook himself, thereby scattering a shower of wet on the oil-cloth of the floor, hung up his cap, and walked down the hall to the dining-room.

"I'll find them just the same as usual, I suppose," he muttered, giving a slap to his sleek head that [36] always looked as if he had just dipped it in water, "same old table, same old chairs around it, same old fire, same old girl with same old stocking or same old death-book."

He opened the door. Yes, there she sat, her thick hair parted decently in the middle, her black gown decently disposed about her portly figure, her lips decently compressed, her fingers clicking the needles of the knitting with which she invariably disciplined or amused herself during the successive evenings of her life, her eyes fixed on her son, who sat in a loose coat and carpet slippers, diligently reading the evening paper as Captain White had seen him read it a thousand times before.

The very fire was crackling as it had crackled ever since he had had acquaintance with this hearthstone. He could even tell the hour of the evening by it, for Mrs. Prymmer from motives of economy always started it with wood but continued it with coal. It was now just eight o'clock, for the wood was nearly gone. A match had been touched to it at seven precisely, and at a quarter to eight a shovelful of coal had been lifted on it by the careful hand of his cousin.

"Well, Micah," she said, deliberately, "you have got back."

Captain White did not answer her. It did not seem worth while to confirm a statement that bore [37] truth on the face of it, and moreover he, though a man possessing a fair amount of composure, was completely dumbfounded by his discovery of a curious addition to this hitherto contracted family circle.

The big family lounge, commonly pushed away in a corner, was drawn up near the fire, and on it, comfortably surrounded by cushions, reclined a girl who was not a Rossignol girl, nor anything approaching to a Rossignol girl, as far as Captain White could make out. She had been reading and had fallen asleep over her book, and she lay like a beautiful statue while Justin and his mother were apparently paying no more attention to her than if she really were something without life.

Captain White rubbed his hand across his eyes and looked again. The girl was still there, and, with a puzzled expression of face equivalent to a spoken "I give it up," he sat down beside the door, one of his peculiarities being a reluctance to approach a fire.

"How are you, Micah?" said Justin, laconically.

"First-rate," responded Captain White, "and how's yourself?"

"All right."

"You don't look it."

"I've been away. I guess a long journey doesn't agree with me." [38]

"Where have you been?"

"To California."

"To California!" exclaimed Captain White, in a surprise that was ludicrous, and his gaze again went to the girl as if seeking from her a reason for this extraordinary departure on the part of his hitherto home-loving cousin.

Justin's eyes went with him, then, to the further mystification of Captain White, the young man's face took on an expression more soft, more tender, than any that he had ever seen there before, while he murmured some unintelligible remark below his breath.

There was a change, too, in Mrs. Prymmer. She had laid down her knitting, and her mouth was slowly opening and shutting as it had a habit of doing when she was surprised or deeply moved, and before it settled down to the firm compression of displeasure.

Captain White's glance wandered to the third member of this eccentric family circle. There was a change in her, too. The Sleeping Beauty was waking up. With a yawn and a little stretch of her rounded limbs, she had lifted the heavy lids of her light blue eyes, and was staring at him with a curious intentness of gaze that reminded him, in a casual way, of the expression he had seen on the faces of children who were grappling with and about to seize upon some problem hitherto [39] beyond their solution.

"Derrice," said Justin, quietly, "this is Cousin Micah."

She was smiling at him now, gently and wistfully, and, like a baby learning to walk, was slowly putting her small feet to the floor, trying them, as if doubtful whether she could stand on them.

A flood of benevolence came over Captain White. "Give her a hand," he said to Justin. "Steady her off that lounge."

The young man drew back. "Go yourself, Micah. You have aroused her."

Justin's tone was distinctly mischievous, and Captain White's surprised eyes forgot to twinkle and went in a maze of bewilderment toward Mrs. Prymmer, whose countenance was slowly taking on a frozen aspect.

Who was this girl, who was alternately stopping and advancing in a peculiar kind of a walk that he had never seen before off the stage? Perhaps she was some actress who, for reasons best known to herself, had descended upon his puritanical cousins. Well, he had never yet run from a woman, and he didn't propose to do so now, and, drawing a long breath, he stood up and manfully awaited her approach.

Now she was sentimental. There was a tear in her eye, and her lip was trembling, as she [40] stretched out her hand to him. "Captain White, I am glad to see you. It was stupid in me to fall asleep over my book. I would have kept awake if I had known you were coming."

"Say something sympathetic, can't you?" said Justin, stepping forward, and whispering in his ear.

"Bless my heart and soul, how can I?" ejaculated Captain White. "Now, if I had her alone—" and confusedly folding his arms, he retired to his seat.

To Justin's irrepressible delight, his young wife, in a state of utter fascination, drew nearer to the rough-coated stranger. "You go away from home a good deal, don't you?" she said, wistfully. "I hope that you will be able to stay with us now."

"Now, for the love of mercy," said the sea-faring man, turning in quiet desperation to Justin, and speaking under his breath, "tell me who this is?"

"She is my wife," said the young man.

Captain White fell into a state of speechless unbelief until he found confirmation of the announcement in the expression of Mrs. Prymmer's face. Justin must indeed be married to this lovely creature. Where had he got her? He rubbed both hands over his smooth head and was about to subside into stupid perplexity, when he discovered that the girl's face was quivering in a pitiful manner that threatened a feminine outbreak of some sort. Her face did not belie its [41] promise. In one minute she had burst into violent weeping, and Justin, springing forward, was leading her from the room.

Captain White fixed his attention on the only member of the family left to him. "Hippolyta, can you let a little light in on these queer proceedings? What, you are not cracked, too,—you, best hope of the elect in Rossignol?"

His cousin was, indeed, in a state of collapse. She had just seen tumbling to the ground a fragile house of cards that she had been erecting, or, rather, a castle in Spain,—for she would be shocked at the mention of anything so worldly and pernicious as bits of painted cardboard in connection with her name. All day long she had contemplated with the utmost satisfaction the prostration of her daughter-in-law after her long journey. Derrice had lain in bed till the evening; she had been on the sofa until Captain White's arrival. She seemed utterly overcome. Perhaps it was the will of the Lord that, in a short time, this flaxen-haired doll should be laid in the grave, and she would then again have her son to herself. Now, in some unaccountable way, the girl had been roused to unusual animation by the appearance of Captain White. Her cheeks had flushed, she had seemed interested and pleased. This fit of tears was but a manifestation of temper, —"girls' tricks," she muttered, angrily. The will of the Lord was not to have her sicken and die,—it [42] was clashing with her will, with hers, acknowledged saint, the most devout woman in the town of Rossignol. There was something radically wrong with the order of things, and she felt stunned, and in no condition to talk.

One or two ineffectual attempts she made to answer her cousin's inquiries, then, with a

ponderous and unsteady step, she rushed from the room.

Captain White stretched his lean neck around the door-post. "She's off on a gale with passion for her sail. Never saw such queer doings in this house before. That lass has doddered them,—guess I'll get something to eat. In every sudden squall of life, fortify yourself by a visit to the pantry. It's wonderful how the stomach backs up your staying powers," and, wandering out into the hall, he sauntered down a staircase to the lower part of the house.

His brief warning ejaculations of "Hey! Hist! Hello!" at the kitchen door not being answered, he pushed it open and walked in, saying, "Just as I thought. She's off. Never saw such a house; whenever they've nothing to do they sneak off to bed."

Adjoining the kitchen was a small pantry where Captain White was soon standing beside sparsely laden shelves. There was nothing on the lower ones worthy of his famished condition but a beef [43] bone destined for the soup pot on the morrow. This he seized, and while gnawing the meat from it with his strong sailor's teeth that had been sharpened during the early part of his life by attacks on salt junk and hard tack, his scintillating eyes flashed longingly up to the top shelf where stood an inviting procession of newly baked mince pies.

"Most women wouldn't make soup of that bone," he said, as he rapped a tune on the shelf with the denuded bone, "but it's a chance if Hippolyta doesn't wash and dress it and put it in a pot and make a liquor that we'll drink and all go staggering about with weakness from it. Clever woman that. Most women would have wasted a supper on me to-night, but she never thought of it. However, I'm not one to sing sour grapes. Here goes," and being too short to reach the pies he drew up his legs, sprang in the air like a jack-in-the-box and seized one of them.

"It's a good big pie, but I can manage a quarter," he said, and drawing a clasp-knife from his vest he cut out a wedge-shaped piece that he transferred by slow degrees to his mouth. "That's a superfine pie," he said, presently, "but flat,—on account of me, poor miserable sinner," and rolling his glance upward, he drew a flask from the breast of his coat and sprinkled a part of its contents over the pie.

In a few minutes the entire pie was disposed of, and he was deep in another. "Guess I'd better [44] stop," he said, presently, "or a herring with a mouth as big as a church will swallow me to-night. Is there any further iniquity I can commit? Cousin Hippolyta can't be any madder than she will be when she sees those empty plates—Oh, here's the cream for breakfast. I'll drink that," and he seized a flat-bottomed dish and carried it to his mouth.

"Now seeing I've been as bad as I can be," he said, after he had chased a remaining skin of cream around the dish until he had caught it with his little finger, "I'll go above. I wish I could put this thing on Mary," and he set one plate inside another, "but even if this crockery was found in her pocket, they'd get after me. Mary is a church-member, and I'm a reprobate," and wiping his creamy lips and gaily humming, "We were three jolly sailors," he went up-stairs.

He found the parlour deserted. The fire that he had left burning cheerily was now sulking under a heap of ashes, and the lights were turned out,—sure proofs that his Cousin Hippolyta, supposing him to be in bed, had descended and made preparations for the night.

"Just nine o'clock," he said, leaning over the grate to examine his battered silver watch by a persevering gleam of firelight. "I wonder what Justin is doing. I'll take an observation," and he [45] went up-stairs on tiptoe.

The door of a small dressing-room adjoining Justin's bedroom stood open, and Captain White, who possessed an uncommon sharpness of hearing, thought that he detected a faint noise as he peered in.

"Hello, Justin, are you there?" he whispered.

"Yes," said the young man, leaving the dark window where he was standing and coming out into the dimly lighted hall.

"Won't she let you in?"

"She isn't here, Micah."

"Where do you keep her?"

"On the flat above you."

"Up with Mary—in the attic. What's that for?"

"Well—you might be able to guess if you tried," said the young man, and he glanced toward the closed door of his mother's room.

"H'm—doesn't want to be too near her mother-in-law," reflected Captain White. Then he seized Justin by the arm as if he were a prisoner. "Come up to my den."

Marching him up another flight of stairs, he conducted him to a front room. "There, now," he said, "sit down. I know that Morris chair is in the exact place I left it, in this well-rigged house. I can give you a push that will land you in it, though I can't see a thing with those confounded [46] curtains down. You'd better keep on your feet, though, till I strike a light. Your mother'd get after me if I broke one of your legs. Jemima Jane, here we are as snug as possible," and he turned up two gas-jets to the extent of their lighting ability, and then, dropping into a chair, reached out his hand to a drawer and took from it a pipe.

Justin, who did not smoke, took off his glasses and indulged in his frequent occupation of polishing them with his handkerchief, blinking his eyes meanwhile in the strong light.

"How old are you?" asked Captain White, as he stuffed his pipe full of tobacco.

"Thirty."

"Lack-a-daisy, it seems only the other day you were born."

Justin did not reply to him. He was not much of a talker at any time, and at present he was in a reflective condition of mind in which he did not care to discuss any subject, not even the circumstances connected with his own birth.

"You have known me for a long time," said Captain White, brusquely, "do you happen to put any kind of trust in me?"

Justin struggled out of his reverie. "Yes, Micah, you know I do."

"Then for goodness' sake tell me what has brought this change in you, for, hang me, if you didn't look like all the minor prophets rolled in one when I went away. My namesake, and Habakkuk and Malachi and all the rest, would have appeared like grinning idiots alongside of you, and now I have actually seen your teeth six times since I entered this blessed door." [47]

Justin not only favoured him with another sight of his big white teeth, that were set slab-like in his square jaw, but he burst into a low, hearty laugh.

"I guess it must be dolly, Micah."

"That's your wife."

"Yes, she's my wife fast enough."

"Did you marry her in California?"

"Yes."

"When did you get back?"

"Yesterday."

"What sent you there?"

"Mr. Lancaster was there; he telegraphed for me; she is his daughter."

Captain White took his pipe from his mouth, uttered a low, significant whistle, and measured Justin with a penetrating glance, but he asked no more questions, not being one to pry into another man's secrets.

"Your mother seems a trifle put out," he observed, after a time.

"Naturally she would be," replied Justin, significantly. [48]

Captain White in his turn began to laugh, at first silently and noiselessly, then with such a hearty and irrepressible explosion that Justin gazed at him in some astonishment.

"Excuse me," said the elder man, waving his pipe, apologetically, "but it makes me curl up inside to think of you as a married man, you, a brat of a boy. I don't think I'm old enough yet to launch myself in the narrow matrimonial boat, and I've seen craft of all kinds sail in and out of this Bay for over fifty years."

"I'm not young,—I'm old," muttered the young man, suddenly getting up and stretching out his arms, "and I'm tired from that pull across the continent. I guess I'll go to bed."

"Wait a bit—what made your dolly cry to-night? I didn't frighten her, did I?"

"No; you reminded her of her father. She's been grieving all day for him."

"Her father—do I look like him?"

"I never thought so till you came in this evening. When she saw the resemblance I caught it. You are like him, only his hair isn't quite as smooth as yours, and he is taller, but he wears dark clothes like yours, and he is lean and swarthy-complexioned, and he has small eyes—"

"Small eyes—" repeated Captain White. [49]

His companion did not hear him. He had sprung up with the utmost celerity, and had hurried to the hall and up the next staircase to the floor above, from whence there had been a sound of something falling.

"It's against orders to leave that door open when I smoke," said Captain White, following him; "however, the family is a trifle upset to-night, and I might as well be hanged for a sailor as a cabin-boy," and he continued to embrace affectionately with his lips the stem of his well-worn pipe, while he paced defiantly up and down the hall.

"What was the trouble?" he asked, when Justin came presently down the steps.

"She upset a table with a jug of water on it and wet her feet."

"You get a girl in the house and you'll have to dance attendance on her, young man. Has she got comfortable quarters up there?"

"Yes; we moved some furniture into those two empty front rooms, and I'm going to get her some more things."

"Why didn't you marry a Rossignol girl? Judging from the eye-snap I had at this one, she's about as much out of your line of life as the admiral of a fleet is out of mine."

"I guess all girls have spoiled ways, Micah."

"Oh, hooks and ninepins—what a baby you are, Justin," and Captain White wagged his head and burst into an uneasy chuckling laugh. "You don't know any more about women than a moon-calf, but she'll teach you, lad, she'll teach you." [50]

Justin did not answer him. "Don't hear me," soliloquised Captain White, "the muscles of his ears are nearly tearing themselves out of place to hear if there is any sound from that girl. Oh, this is comedy to see young tombstone-face, young blank-wall prancing to the whims of a girl—I might as well retire—he don't pay any attention to me. I guess I better set my mind alarm for six o'clock in the morning. I've drunk up Pretty-face's cream, and I'll have to rise early and capture some milkman. I guess—" and he paused and raised one lean, hairy paw to the ceiling—"that you up there, young miss, won't ever sit down and cry because you threw this old sardine a sweet smile for your father's sake," and with this prophetic remark he put aside his pipe, and, stripping off his clothes with the rapidity of lightning, was in two minutes in bed and sound asleep.

CHAPTER IV. [51]

A FAVOUR SOLICITED.

Mrs. Prymmer's next-door neighbour was her clergyman,—the Rev. Bernal Huntington, pastor of the church of the United Brethren. It was an immense satisfaction to her to have so near the one who ministered to her in spiritual things, but whether it was an equal satisfaction to the Rev. Mr. Huntington that young man had never been heard to assert.

The third day after Justin's arrival home was Sunday, and a solemn quiet brooded over the little parsonage standing half hidden in the shadow of the stone mansion.

The services of the day were over, and the minister had shut himself up in his study. He had preached two moving sermons, conducted a Bible class and attended a funeral out in the country. Probably he was tired. Even his magnificent physique was capable of fatigue, and to the minds of several of his fair parishioners, whose thoughts had a trick of running toward and after him, he was at the present moment pictured in a recumbent attitude on his haircloth sofa, musing in [52] orthodox fashion on the stirring evangelical eloquence with which he had that day delighted the hearts of his hearers.

But the minister was not resting. The sly, sleepy fire spying at him from the small stove could have revealed another state of affairs. Stealthily it watched him as he inwardly raged to and fro in the tiny room, threading his way among tables and chairs, footstools, and heaped-up books and piles of manuscript. "Peace, peace to the weary," he had been preaching, but there was no peace for his soul. He was in the throes of some mental conflict that furrowed his handsome face with emotion.

Not only mentally but physically was he out of touch with his environment. The badly made clerical coat hung scantily over his athletic figure. His well-shaped auburn head almost touched the low ceiling. He seemed like a triumphant wrestler thrust from the prize-ring into the deserted haunt of a dead clergyman.

He had taken the place of a man much older than himself, a consistent saint, a model of all the virtues. He had just been thinking about this man, and an unutterable disgust of self oppressed him. "Unworthy—unworthy," he muttered," I must give it up. I shall leave here. This is unendurable."

He was stretching out his arms as if to fly away to a more congenial atmosphere when his [53] attention was distracted by a clattering outside his door and a subsequent exclamation.

"Look out, my dear boy! I'm coming; what—no light!" and a little woman bearing a huge bowl in her hands rushed in, and, stumbling over papers and books, managed to deposit her burden on the stove.

She was a very commonplace little woman. Her age hovered about the middle time of life, though she had a quick, alert, almost girlish manner. Her prevailing colour was drab,—hair, dress, and complexion. She wore a black lace cap on her head. Each side of it were pendent curls embracing her cheeks of dubious complexion. Her eyes were bright and sharp, and she had a way of holding her head well up and looking shrewdly through her spectacles at persons to whom she was talking, as if to delude them into the belief that she was a very fierce and quarrelsome little woman, a regular Tartar, a woman who could neither be deceived nor beguiled into anything approaching to softness or amiability of behaviour.

The young man sulking in a corner of the room came forward, and, running his eyes over the various articles of furniture, all veterans in the service of the ministry, chose for her a green-covered chair of an eccentric shape, known to the initiated as being fashioned from two barrels [54] and stuffed with rags.

She shook her curls, and, waving him toward it, perched herself on a stool at a little distance. "Make haste, and take your gruel. It's nice and hot now, though I had a great time to get the fire to burn up. Rebecca is so forgetful,—she always neglects to put fresh coal on before she goes to bed."

"I don't want it," he muttered. "I'm not an invalid, and I hate sloppy things."

"No, you're not an invalid, thank God, such as my dear husband became, but still you must keep your strength up. I don't know that gruel is the best thing," and she doubtfully scanned his herculean proportions. "You look as if a joint of meat would suit you better. There's some cold hash in the pantry; would you like it?"

"No, no," he said, hurriedly seating himself, and dipping a large silver spoon into the gruel. "Don't trouble yourself. I'll eat this."

"It doesn't worry me when you quarrel with your food," she said, in her sprightly way. "You just do it if you want to; I know you've been used to better things."

"This is good enough for me," he said, taking the gruel with the utmost rapidity in order to get quickly through with it.

"I often think how good you are," she went on, in a sweet, motherly tone, "you are the best of my [55] children."

"No, no," he ejaculated, suddenly putting the bowl from him and flinging himself out of his chair, "not the best."

The little woman gazed mildly into the corner where he had again taken refuge. She could not see him plainly. The lazy fire, that she had stirred, had again fallen into sluggishness and slyness. She seized a match from the mantel and lighted the gas in order that she might the better survey the cultured yet almost brutal beauty of visage that had so strange an influence over all her sex.

"My dear boy," she pursued, "you're excited. You have worked too hard to-day. You had better go to bed."

"I am not tired, I am not excited, but I hate this hypocritical life—"

She would not allow him to proceed. "I am not listening," and she put both hands over her ears. "Come, now, and sit down again and take your gruel. I've got something interesting to tell you."

Like a sullen child he allowed himself to be once more persuaded into a seat. She put the bowl in his hand, and with tears of pleasure glistening in her sharp little eyes sat down and poured forth a volume of talk.

It was not, as usual, news of the church and congregation, for her mind was running on the Prymmer-Mercer household. Years ago Sylvester Mercer had built this house for his beloved pastor, her husband. It was the smallest house on the street, but it was comfortable; and ever since she had come to it as a bride there had been a constant and friendly communication between the two houses. The clergyman knew all about Justin's journey to California, his return, and the dismay of Mrs. Prymmer at the arrival of the young wife, but he was at all times an absentminded listener, and the little woman, fearing that he had forgotten the story, was telling it to him again. [56]

"Poor Mrs. Prymmer, I'm sorry for her. She tries not to show it too much, but just fancy her state of mind,—a daughter-in-law to walk in on her so suddenly. I wish, I wish, my dear boy, that you would call on her."

She checked her busy tongue for a minute to scrutinise nervously her companion. It was no ordinary favour of an ordinary clergyman that she was asking. This haughty apostle of peace was first of all a preacher of the Word. It was tacitly understood between pastor and people, that there should be as little communication as possible in the way of visiting. Confidential communications were not to his liking, and this idiosyncrasy was pardoned in him only in view of his being the most remarkable brand snatched from the burning that had ever been held aloft in the town of Rossignol. [57]

He knew that only stress of circumstances would induce his housekeeper to ask such a favour of him as a call at a house where there was to be neither a funeral nor a wedding, and, holding this same housekeeper in an affection that was almost filial, he threw her a glance that emboldened her to proceed.

"You see, my dear boy, young men will marry. There's no use in mothers holding out; but if they are smoothed down at first it makes things a lot easier, especially if the daughter-in-law has to live in the same house with them."

"My sympathy is with the daughter-in-law in this case," said the young man, brusquely.

"Mine, too," said the little woman, then she made haste to qualify her remark, "but Mrs. Prymmer is a very thoughtful woman; only yesterday she brought over two jars of strawberry preserves."

Mr. Huntington suppressed a slight sneer as he thought of the absent Mrs. Prymmer, and, wearily trying to exhibit a little interest in the subject in order to gratify his housekeeper, asked," What is the daughter-in-law like?"

"She is like a wax doll," said Mrs. Negus, promptly, "those big ones you see in shop windows, with yellow hair and pink cheeks. I have only seen her for a minute, though. I ran in before church this evening, and Mrs. Prymmer let me take a peep at her as she sat in the parlour playing on the organ to her husband. I couldn't see her eyes. I guess they are blue— Dear me, this is very frivolous conversation for an old lady on Sabbath Day. Did you have a good service out at Indian Gardens this evening?" [58]

"Yes, very good."

"We had a very poor preacher in your place. I heard some of the people grumbling because you were away."

The cloud came back to his brow. "If they knew," he said, passionately, "if they knew—"

She jumped to her small feet. "I think I'll run away. You ought to go to bed. I'll have breakfast a little later in the morning. You'll think about calling on Mrs. Prymmer?"

"No, not think about it, I'll do it. It is only those social, prattling visits I object to. I am glad to please you,—you, who have been more like a true mother than my—than many mothers are."

"Ah, you have a kind heart," she said, slowly shaking her head, "a good, kind heart. You are a comfort to me, a great comfort, and I know it will also please you to do good to Mrs. Prymmer. She has always been so sore about that Mr. Lancaster,—and to think that her son should go and marry his daughter."

At the mention of Mr. Lancaster's name a curious gleam shot across Mr. Huntington's brown eyes. "What Mr. Lancaster do you mean?" [59]

"Dear me, you're the least inclined to gossip of any man I ever saw. Why, I heard Mrs. Prymmer myself telling you all about that rich man who is so odd, and who often sends for Justin to go away and see him. Don't you know she asked you not to tell?"

"I don't remember hearing of him."

"Gossip just goes in one ear and out the other with you," she said, admiringly. "Well, he's a man that—"

"What is the Christian name of this young lady?" asked the clergyman, as she paused to take breath for what promised to be a lengthy recital.

"Derrice; I don't know whether she has any middle name or not, but I can easily find out. I wish you would take an interest in her, for if you do, and just speak to Mrs. Prymmer a few words about submission to the will of Providence, it will comb things out beautifully. You have a kind of way with women that makes them mind what you say."

The young clergyman's face grew a yet deeper colour. "What way do you mean?"

"A kind of settling way. Just look at the quarrels you've made up in this church. You see you have had experience in life. You have been rich and influential, and you have travelled more than the [60]
most of us. That gives you weight," and in sturdy, honest admiration, her dun-coloured eyes shone briskly at him through her glasses.

"I have not had as much experience as you think," he said, with only a remnant of his irritation. She had exorcised the demon,—she could now leave him, and a sudden cry hastened her tarrying feet. "Goodness, there is that baby again. If he has croup I'll have to send out and borrow alum. I haven't a bit in the house."

Her thoughts, however, were not altogether on the baby, as her little feet pattered over the painted wooden floor of the hall. "Thank God, that fit came on him when he was alone. It is strange that he gets so dissatisfied. I wish I could always be with him, but that's impossible—Now, baby, what's the matter with you?" and she bent over a red-faced child sitting up and coughing in a crib.

Mr. Huntington closed and locked the door after she left the room. His next proceeding was to dig a hole in a flower-pot on the window and empty the rest of the gruel in it. Then he took from a shelf a small box and, drawing a key from his pocket, threw back the lid. Inside were several photographs, all of women. He turned them out to find a pencil sketch at the bottom. A young girl sat in the centre of a clearing among prairie grass, her hands crossed, her face turned up to the sky. At a little distance stood a man watching her. The girl was the young wife next door, the man [61]
was himself,—Bernal Huntington, former worldling, now a humble minister of the gospel.

"Little Derrice," he murmured, and he put the sketch back in the box and replaced it on the shelf. As he did so, his eyes fell on a framed crucifixion on the wall. His expression altered again, and ejaculating, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" he fell on his knees and sank into a paroxysm of prayer.

CHAPTER V.

[62]

A PASTORAL VISIT.

Justin Mercer's former monotonous life was at an end. With a faint red spot on either cheek, and with much internal diversion, he sat at the breakfast-table the next morning watching his wife.

At first she would eat nothing. Her disdainful glance played over the porridge dish, the slices of cold meat, and the cold bread and cheese that were all the table contained, and she successively refused every one of them. Then, just as he was deliberating what to do, Captain White came to the rescue.

"I'll toast you a slice of bread, miss," and, suiting the action to the word, he sprang at the loaf like a benevolent tiger, and hastily cutting a slice rushed to the fire with it, suspended on one of Mrs. Prymmer's best silver forks.

That lady surveyed him in speechless indignation while he nicely browned the bread, buttered it, and handed it to the girl who, thanking him by a smile, sat eating it with her gaze riveted on him. He, with eyes twinkling phosphorescently, demurely finished his porridge, and held out his [63] saucer for more, that was reprovingly bestowed on him by Mrs. Prymmer.

Justin saw that Derrice was completely fascinated by his cousin, on account of his resemblance to her father, and also because of his kindness of heart that with feminine insight she readily divined under his odd manners.

His mother repelled her, though at the same time the exaggeration of the mother-in-law attitude seemed to afford secret and irrepressible amusement to the young girl. Mrs. Prymmer's repugnance was too overwrought to be genuine, too ridiculous to be taken seriously. There were stormy times ahead for him with these two women. The daughter-in-law would ridicule the mother-in-law; the mother-in-law would, probably, fall into a rage with the daughter-in-law, and, perhaps, drive her from the house. He would have to take sides; but there was no use in anticipating the storms, and with calm but surreptitious interest he watched Derrice as she scrutinised the room.

The family had once been rich, or at least well-to-do, the girl decided. The house was large and imposing, the rooms had been well furnished, but room furniture and table furniture had sadly deteriorated. The silk coverings of the chairs were worn, the expensive china was chipped and in odd pieces. Either shortness of means or a slight parsimony had attacked the household presided [64] over by the stony dame at the head of the table.

Presently Justin saw his wife's gaze settle on the doorway, and, just as he turned to find out what new object had engaged her attention, a meek voice murmured, "The minister is in the parlour."

The rigid outline of Mrs. Prymmer's figure immediately softened into a gracious one. "Bring him in," she said, hospitably.

Mr. Huntington's stalwart form soon took the place vacated by Mary, and Mrs. Prymmer, bustling forward, with her plump palm outstretched, exclaimed in deep gratification, "This is a great honour, brother pastor. Sit down and have some breakfast."

"I have had my breakfast, thank you," and he glanced expectantly but without the slightest recognition at Derrice, who stared at him first in blank amazement, and then, springing to her feet with head thrown back, speechlessly extended both hands to him.

Mrs. Prymmer did not see the girl's pretty attitude. She had opened her mouth to make the necessary introduction, and was trying to disengage from the roof of it the tongue that so much hated the task set before it. However, there was no need for an introduction. Mr. Huntington, with more warmth than she had ever seen him bestow on any member of his flock, was shaking hands with her daughter-in-law, who plaintively murmured, "How delightful to see you! Why did [65] not some one tell me you were here?"

Mrs. Prymmer was exceedingly disturbed. The young wife was an acquaintance of the minister's former worldly days,—days that it was not wise to remember. Or was he more than an acquaintance, a dear friend perhaps, for he certainly, with great kindness and almost with authority, was begging her to continue her breakfast,—which she did, only occasionally glancing at him over her shoulder, with faintly pink cheeks.

Mrs. Prymmer, emerging from her temporary eclipse, began a conversation with him, largely of an interrogatory character.

"You don't look well," she said, at last. "I guess you tired yourself out yesterday."

"H'm, yes, a clerical blue Monday," he said, giving her his words but fixing his attention on Derrice.

At his remark, she turned and flashed him an amused, puzzled glance that took in his tall figure, his handsome head, his rather shabby black coat, and his man-of-the-world ease of position and manner, so much at variance with the awkward angularity of Captain White's attitude, and the composed rigidity of her husband's.

By and by Captain White jerked himself from the room, and soon after, Justin, with a reserved nod to the clergyman, followed him. Mrs. Prymmer assisted the maid in clearing the dishes from [66] the table, while Derrice sat down by the fire opposite the caller, and carried on with him a conversation so full of references to former days that it was quite unintelligible to Mrs. Prymmer.

However, she had not the slightest intention of leaving her daughter-in-law alone with the clergyman, and, seating herself between them after the servant had disappeared, she broke in upon a remark of Derrice's, with a suave inquiry as to how many people had stood up for prayer at the close of the service the evening before.

"Two," he replied, with a stare which caused Mrs. Prymmer to unfold her fat hands from over the long white apron she always wore, and to rise in some confusion to her feet. She was not wanted, she had better leave the room. She would not, however, be cheated out of all her rights, and in a choking voice she said, "I have some things to see to in the kitchen; can't we have a word of prayer before I go?"

"Did you have prayers this morning?" inquired her spiritual adviser, coldly.

"Yes," she faltered.

He said nothing more, and with lingering steps and a furious glance at Derrice she went reluctantly from the room.

Derrice was convulsed with laughter, some of which escaped into outward expression. [67]

"You think I am acting a part," said Mr. Huntington, dryly.

"Not acting—you are the part—it is superb. But then, you were always good at amateur theatricals. What have you turned clergyman for?"

"I had to do so."

"The coat is delicious," she said, peeping around to get a glimpse of the long black tails. "Thank Heaven for this bit of comedy in the heavy tragedy of my life during the last few weeks."

"This also is tragedy," he said, seriously.

"But why have I not known you were here?"

"No one knew that I had ever met you, and how was I to know that Mrs. Justin Mercer was Miss Derrice Lancaster?"

"And you live here?"

"Yes, next door. These people here are some of my parishioners."

"And do you—what is it you call it—preach in that coat?"

"No, I preach in my shirt-sleeves," he said, irritably.

Derrice wrinkled her forehead. Now that the first blush of greeting was over she had leisure to scrutinise him. Where was the gay carelessness, almost recklessness, of demeanour that had [68] characterise her friend in former days? Gone like a dream of youth,—this moody, reserved man with the flushed face had slipped in among the ranks of the middle-aged.

"What has brought on this metamorphosis?" she asked, dubiously.

"Don't talk about me," he said, wearily, "you will hear gossip *ad nauseam*. Tell me what you have been doing since I had the pleasure of meeting you?"

"Ah," she said, mournfully," how far off it seems. I was revelling in my release from a brief term of school life, and the freedom of renewed travel with my father. We went to Europe, then we came to New York, and after that went to South America and California. Then my father wanted me to marry—"

Mr. Huntington surveyed her keenly. Her face was distressed, her lips trembling, and she looked as if she were about to cry, yet she controlled herself, and went on in a light tone, "Isn't his mother queer,—she simply detests me. I never had any one do that before."

Mr. Huntington strode to the door, and, finding it ajar, shrugged his shoulders, fastened it, and returned to his seat. "She is a trying woman. If you are as mischievous as in former days, Derrice, I would give a year's salary to have you stay here and help me discipline her." [69]

"But I don't want to stay here," she said, pitifully. "I want my husband to go away and travel with me and my father."

"Can he do that?"

"He does not say. Just now he cannot leave the bank. Perhaps later on I can get him to do it."

"And you would not go without him?"

"Well, you see," she replied, "he is rather fond of me, and if I leave him he says— Well, I fancy he would be lonely."

"I suppose he says his heart would break."

Derrice laughed nervously, and he went on. "Let it break. Other hearts have broken. It is a shame to keep you here. You were not born for the arid atmosphere of a New England town."

Derrice stopped laughing, and surveyed the friendly, handsome face beyond her. "Have you married?"

"No."

"Why did you not ask me?" she said, mischievously.

"I knew better, and you were too young. I think your father took you to Europe to get rid of me,

though he probably did not tell you so."

Her face clouded. "My dear father—I think of him all the time. I wish to please him. I know— oh, I know, Mr. Huntington, that he would like me to stay here, but I do not wish to do so. It is such a conflict. If he only knew how I miss him,—how I hate to be away from him. He never used to have me do anything I disliked," and she tried to cover with her hands the sudden tears. [70]

"Poor child!" said the clergyman; then he rose and stood over her. "Can you not think of some worse trouble that might have befallen you?"

"No, no, no,—I worship my father,—he was so strange,—I am afraid that I shall never live with him again. I think he wanted to get rid of me. Perhaps he is going to mar—marry himself."

"You are about eighteen now, Derrice, are you not?" asked Mr. Huntington, gently.

"Yes, on my last birthday."

"Little Derrice, you are too young yet to know the priceless blessing of an unselfish love. You have married an honest man, and one devoted to you. Do not despise his affection. I have lived longer than you, and let me tell you that love is seldom found in its purity,—is seldom bestowed on a worthy object. You do well to stay here, to wait and be patient."

Derrice, in suppressed surprise, wiped away her tears. The clergyman had suddenly lost his irritable and disturbed manner. He was earnest, impressive, even ardent.

"Thank you," she said, gravely. "I will think of what you say. It is a consolation to find you here, for you recall happier days,—days spent with my dear father." [71]

She was going to cry again,—what a child she was!—and warmly clasping her hand, the young clergyman hurried from the room.

CHAPTER VI.

[72]

STERN HER FACE AND MASCULINE HER STRIDE.

Mr. Huntington, after leaving the Mercer mansion, stood for a minute on the sidewalk, in deepest thought. He turned his face toward his own house, then, looking in the direction of the up-river suburbs of the town, he turned his head back again, like one drawn two ways, and, finally coming to a decision, hailed a passing car, and was whirled rapidly in the direction his thoughts had taken.

A few minutes later he had reached the terminus of the car line, and was picking a somewhat muddy way toward a long, high-shouldered house of foreign aspect, situated on the river bank, and showing him a broad, friendly face at the end of an avenue of poplars.

"Is Miss Gastonguay at home?" he asked of an old man servant, who opened the door to him.

"Yes, sir,—she's just a-scolding of old Tribulation," said the demure old man, with ill-concealed satisfaction. "Look at him—" and he threw open the door of a near parlour.

[73]

The handsome furniture of the room was pushed on one side, and in the middle of the polished floor stood a second old man, his gray head bent over the handle of a broom, tears raining from his eyes to the floor.

"You sha'n't have one morsel of food to-day, if you don't do this room better," a decided feminine voice was saying. "Now go right over it again."

The clergyman stood silently gazing at the straight back of his hostess. She was dressed in a scant blue serge skirt, a man's coat, a man's hat, thick boots were on her feet, and she carried a riding-whip in her hand. Her hair was cut short, her sex would have been indeterminate to a stranger, but the clergyman knew her well as Miss Jane Gastonguay,—an eccentric, kind-hearted old maid, who loved to masquerade in semi-masculine garments.

Presently the ceasing of the old man's flow of crocodile tears caused her to turn around. "Oh, you are here," she said, coolly, to the clergyman, "I just want some one in your profession to hear me register a vow to send this old fool back to the poorhouse, if he does not mend his ways. This room was to have been done by eight o'clock, and my fine gentleman here lies in bed and smokes instead of sweeping it,—some day he will burn us all up. You would think he was the millionaire and I the pauper. How old are you, idiot?"

"Six—sixty," sobbed the old man.

[74]

"That's a falsehood. Tell me the truth, quick now, or you will go right out of this house."

"Six—six—ty—five, ma'am."

"A mere boy,—only one year older than I am. I know an old man of eighty who would be glad to take your place. Haven't I fed and clothed you for years?"

"Ye—yes, ma'am," he stammered.

"And this is the way you serve me. Well, as I said before, if I have any more trouble with you, back you go to the poorhouse," and, loftily holding up her head, she swaggered from the room.

"And you, too, Prosperity," she exclaimed, pausing in the hall to reprove the second grayhead, who was openly chuckling over his companion's discomfiture. "Your dusting lately is shameful; just look at this chair," and she ran her forefinger over the back of one standing near her. "Go get a cloth."

The old man, with a ludicrous descent from gratification to mortification, fairly ran down the hall, while Miss Gastonguay preceded the clergyman into a music-room, where she seated herself on a piano stool and motioned him to a monk's bench.

"I shall not detain you," he said, "I see you are going out."

[75]

"No hurry," she replied, airily. "I am just going to try a new colt in the field yonder,—you want money, I suppose."

"Not this time," he replied, in his smooth, polished tones. "I want to ask a favour of another order."

"What is it?" she said, abruptly.

"Have you heard of Justin Mercer's marriage?"

"Good gracious, yes,—is this place so large that we should miss an important piece of gossip like that? The whole town is ringing with it."

"Have you thought of calling on his wife?"

"I— Wherefore should I enter the doors of those sour-faced Puritans?"

"The daughter-in-law is different."

"Is she? I am glad to hear it."

"I used to know her two years ago. She was a charming young girl. I think possibly you and Miss Chelda would enjoy her acquaintance."

"Chelda may, I assure you I shall not trouble myself about her. Here, Chelda—Chelda—come speak to Mr. Huntington. You're somewhere near, you young sly-boots, for I hear you."

A tall, dark girl, with a graceful figure and an attractive if enigmatic face, came from the hall, and exchanged a calm "Good morning" with the clergyman.

"Chelda, will you go call on the new Mrs. Mercer?" said Miss Gastonguay, abruptly. "I don't want to be bothered with her. I know too many girls now." [76]

"Do you wish me to go?" asked the young lady, addressing their caller, and narrowing her long liquid eyes as she spoke.

"Of course he does," said Miss Gastonguay. "That is what he's here for. You only want to gain time to make up your mind. Will you go?"

"Yes, I will, aunt."

"Thank you," said Mr. Huntington, rising. "I do not think you will regret it."

"I think we should be grateful to you," said the young lady. "There are few desirable people in Rossignol, and you would not call our attention to any one who would be undesirable."

She spoke sweetly and smoothly, yet her tones flowed into her relative's ear with a hidden meaning. "Now what do you mean by that, Chelda?" she asked.

Chelda glanced at their caller. He understood her, and he at once lost the contented, almost exalted expression that he had brought away from the Mercer mansion, and took on instead his usual one of slight moodiness.

"She means," he said, hastily, "that my duties call me among a class of people with whom it would not be your good pleasure to associate."

"And I am called the most radical woman in Rossignol!" said Miss Gastonguay. "Thank you, young ecclesiastic." [77]

"I referred to your niece, rather than to you," he said, with a bow.

"Oh, Chelda,—yes, she is an aristocrat," said Miss Gastonguay. "It is born in her, she can't help it. You ought to understand her, in view of your former life. Come, now, do you love all those dirty mill hands and slovenly women you work among?"

"I do not think we need discuss that point. There is duty to be considered as well as pleasure."

"But if one can combine both," said Chelda; "it is possible."

"The question is to know your duty," he replied.

"It is our duty to be happy," said the young lady, blandly, yet with a certain boldness.

The clergyman looked straight into her eyes. They were wide open. Their usual filmy appearance was gone. What he saw seemed to fascinate and yet repel him, for with his hands he made a gesture as if he would be gone, yet his feet still lingered.

Miss Gastonguay's abrupt voice disenchanted him. "Come back to lunch, Mr. Huntington. I daresay you are taking your Monday walk in this direction."

He started slightly. "I am, yet I thought of returning to my study."

He had retreated toward the door, but the young lady moved a step toward him. "How devoted you are to that desk of yours. How you must miss your former life of freedom." [78]

The cloud on his brow grew more heavy, and seeing it, Miss Gastonguay exclaimed, hospitably, "Let the musty old Negus books alone, and go take your constitutional on the river road. Then after lunch Chelda will drive you in town and make her call on your friend, the bride. You will, won't you, Chelda?"

"Certainly," said the young lady, sweetly, but without eagerness.

The clergyman flashed one rapid glance about the quiet elegance of the room, and another at his eccentric and unconventional hostess and her graceful niece.

These surroundings were more congenial to him in his present state of mind than the dingy parsonage. "I will come back, thank you," he said, and, hurrying from the house, he went down the road at a swinging gait.

Miss Gastonguay, with her little manly swagger, followed him to the big hall door. "Chelda, that man does not seem happy lately."

"Perhaps he is working too hard."

"He isn't in love with you, is he?" asked Miss Gastonguay, sharply.

Chelda discreetly lowered her eyes. "I don't know." [79]

"You wouldn't marry him if he were. You are too fond of your own comfort to tie yourself to a poor clergyman."

"You are right, aunt, I shall never marry a clergyman."

"I believe," continued Miss Gastonguay, in a puzzled voice, "that he likes to come to this house. He once told me that it reminded him of his father's house on the Hudson. Have they ever forgiven him for turning parson, do you know?"

"No; his father has cut him out of his will, and has requested him not to go home."

"A cold-hearted money-bags, nourished on the milk of Wall Street. Chelda, do you believe that

among foreign aristocracy there is half the scorn for the lowly born, the toiling poor, that there is among our so-called American aristocrats?"

"I do not know, aunt, my acquaintance with the foreign nobility being limited."

"You have met them travelling,—those counts and countesses, dukes and duchesses,—you have seen that they have some bowels of compassion; but our rich people here,—they are grossly material. It is money, money, how much have you? What is the biggest piece of foolery you can perpetrate with it? Some day we shall have a labour war; the poor will rise up against them," and [80] shaking her head and scolding to herself she started in the direction of her stables.

Chelda, with the train of her Parisian gown rustling daintily over the bare and polished steps of the staircase, went up to the top of the house, where she sat sunning her sleek, beautiful self and observing the country for miles around. Sometimes she picked up a field-glass beside her to better watch the movements of a stalwart pedestrian on the high-road.

"He has one devil now; Heaven grant that he may return with seven more," she murmured, joyfully.

CHAPTER VII.

[81]

A DRIVE WITH A STRANGE GUIDE.

Two women—two of Mrs. Prymmer's chosen friends and satellites—were calling on Derrice. Mrs. Prymmer had sent a message to her room, and now sat smoothing her white apron, enjoyably anticipating the effect that Derrice's red silk and cashmere gown would produce on her callers, yet at the same time a prey to secret annoyance to think that she herself was only of secondary importance.

To her chagrin, the girl sauntered into the room in a dull brown walking suit, and with a single eyeglass mischievously fixed under one light eyebrow.

Mrs. Prymmer was speechless. Such a thing had never before been heard of in the length and breadth of Rossignol,—that one human being should, through a solitary piece of glass, dare to stare at, examine, and confuse another human being not blessed with a single piece of glass. "The girl was as full of tricks as a monkey," she indignantly reflected.

"Did you want me?" asked Derrice.

[82]

"Yes," stammered her mother-in-law, recovering her breath, and she waved her hand toward the little dowdy widow in the black bonnet and bead cape, and the young woman in the painful green dress, who was her daughter, and the bride of a carpenter who lived around the corner.

"You have come to see me,—how kind in you," said Derrice, in her infantine manner, and with so much sweetness that the two visitors, who were not of her world and never would be, immediately fell into a profound conviction that they were her friends for life.

The little widow, who was a kind-hearted person, but of limited ideas and education, felt a strange flutter of interest as she regarded the beautiful, gracious girl, and, losing her first fear of the eyeglass, immediately expressed a hope that Derrice felt pretty smart after her journey.

"Oh, yes, thank you, I am used to travelling."

The carpenter's wife, who had, until Derrice's entrance into the room, been troubled with a nervous choking in her throat, now lost all embarrassment, and interrupted a remark of her mother by an eager inquiry as to whether Derrice would "appear out" next Sunday.

Derrice hesitated, and looked at her mother-in-law.

"She means," said Mrs. Prymmer, solemnly, "will you attend divine service? It is the custom for brides."

[83]

"Yes," chimed in the widow, "then they stay home for three days and receive visits. Will you do so, dear?"

"Well, I don't know," laughed Derrice. "Have you any saints' bones or other curiosities in your church?"

"No, dear, no dead saints. We've got plenty of live ones."

"I like them better dead. I haven't gone into a church for years except for sight-seeing."

"Why, ain't you a professor?" asked the carpenter's bride, and in her dismay she leaned forward and laid a cotton-gloved hand on Derrice's knee.

"No, I never taught anything. I suppose teachers do have to go to church. Mine always did."

"She means a professor of religion," interposed Mrs. Prymmer.

"Oh, like you," said Derrice, innocently. "No, I have not that honour."

"I wish you'd join our church," said the widow and her daughter in a breath.

"Perhaps I will some day, if I stay here long enough," said Derrice, amiably.

"We've got such a good preacher," said the younger woman, enthusiastically.

"Is it Mr. Huntington?" asked Derrice.

"Yes; did any one tell you about his conversion?"

"No, not yet."

[84]

"I wonder that you haven't, sister," said the widow, turning to Mrs. Prymmer, "but I suppose you haven't had time to tell everything yet. Oh, it was such a remarkable thing. He was a wild young fellow. He had a friend called Denham—"

"Yes, Mr. John Denham, I have met him," said Derrice.

The little widow's eyes flashed curiously, but she would not stop to ask questions now. She would tell her story first. "This Mr. Denham was always with him. They were two reckless, careless, godless, swearing, drinking young men—"

"Oh, not as bad as that," said Derrice, mildly.

"My dear, people has told us—Well, they was going on their ways of sin when one day there come a change. They was in a railroad accident, and poor Mr. Denham he was torn almost to pieces. He lived only a little while, but his mother come to him, and before he died he repented of his wild ways, he gave his heart to his Maker, and he begged Mr. Huntington to do the same. He was shocked most to death. After he buried his friend, he did change. He went to a theological

seminary and studied for a while; then Mr. Negus died, and he was supplying for this church and we called him. Such sermons as he used to preach,—the church would be crowded twice a day and wagons standing all the way down to the stables. Now the excitement's wearing away, [85] because he's been with us for some time, but we had a powerful revival, didn't we, sister?" and she appealed to Mrs. Prymmer.

"Thank the Lord, yes,—ninety-five baptisms."

Derrice's face had grown white. "You say that Mr. Denham is dead?"

"Yes, dear, dead and buried. Was he a friend of yours?"

"Scarcely a friend; I did not know him as well as I knew Mr. Huntington. He was rather an acquaintance."

The eyeglass fell from under Derrice's brow. She seemed disinclined to talk, and her visitors rose to take leave. "You'll come see us, dear?" said the widow.

"Certainly; where do you live?"

"Here, dear, is a card,—Mrs. James, 38 Pownall."

"Pownall; is it street, avenue, square—?"

"Street, dear, always understood. Good-bye. I'm real glad to make your acquaintance," and squeezing her hand until the girl winced with pain, and recovered only to wince again under an alarming muscular pressure from the carpenter's bride, the little widow reluctantly tore herself away.

Mrs. Prymmer let them out at the street door, compressed her lips as the widow whispered, "Ain't she a beauty? What a pity she don't go to church!" and then moved slowly back in the [86] direction of the parlour. She would address a remonstrance to Derrice on the subject of the eyeglass, but on her appearance the girl lost with such rapidity her sad, reflective attitude, and putting her glass in her eye fixed it with such a defiant expression on her mother-in-law, that that good lady was surprised and confused, and could only mutter a hasty, "Are you going out?"

"Yes," said Derrice, briefly, and she was just about to sweep by her when she was checked by a question from the hall in an animated voice, "Is Mrs. Mercer at home? Mrs. Mercer, not Mrs. Prymmer,—I don't want to see her."

Mrs. Prymmer heard the clearly spoken sentence, yet she rushed forward with outstretched hand, "Why, Miss Gastonguay, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Am I?" said the lady, coolly, and overlooking the offered hand. "I don't think your eyes have ever beheld me with much favour since I sat on the bench behind you and the other small girls at school, and for the sake of example exposed your cheating at lessons to the master. Do go away, Hippolyta Prymmer,—you hate me, you know you do, and upon my word I've no love for you. What is the use of being sneaky when old age is creeping on you? We kept it up when we were young; do let us get through the death-dance honestly."

Mrs. Prymmer with an indignant face retreated into the hall, and left her daughter-in-law alone [87] with her caller.

"That's the way to manage her, my dear," said Miss Gastonguay, shortly. "She is a born bully; if you don't bully her, she will bully you. She ought to have died in her cradle and gone a happy infant to paradise. Will you come and take a drive with me? My niece was to call this afternoon on you, but she is off somewhere gallivanting with the clergyman, so I thought I'd come myself. First I said I wouldn't, then I repented, like the man in the Bible. Come, put your hat on, child. I'm all right. You needn't distrust me, I'm Jane Gastonguay, spinster, and owner of half Rossignol. You couldn't sell this house you are standing in without my permission. Mr. Huntington sent me, so he will vouch for me. I'll neither upset you nor throw you in among the ice-blocks in the river. Come, I can't wait."

Derrice suppressed the surprise with which she at first surveyed the little, gentlemanly, short-legged lady in the broadcloth coat, and with a murmured, "You are very kind," hurried up-stairs and got a hat and jacket.

A few minutes later they were going side by side down the stone steps and across the snow-covered patch of lawn to the street.

"Have you seen Rossignol yet?" asked Miss Gastonguay.

"No, except for one or two short walks up and down this avenue." [88]

"We don't call this an avenue, child, we call it a street, in spite of the magnificent elms," said Miss Gastonguay, stepping to the gutter and picking up a fur lap-robe. "Now where is that brat of a pony?" and putting two fingers in her mouth she whistled shrilly.

"Look at him coming from the parsonage," she went on, "his mouth full of bread and sugar and rattling my new cart over the gutters. I declare there is nothing bigger than his appetite but the public debt of Maine. Come here, you villain. You are worse than a dog, creeping around to back doors while your mistress is calling."

Derrice smiled as the fat white animal, with a mischievous roll of his light eyes at his mistress, hurried down the drive to the street, and, with the dexterity of a veteran, wheeled the cart directly in front of her.

Derrice got in, and Miss Gastonguay, after a soft slap on the animal's neck, followed her.

"It is 'jolly,' as English people say, that you have not seen the town," said Miss Gastonguay, picking up the lines. "I love to get hold of new people. Don't you know a thing about it? Hasn't your husband told you?"

"Well, really, I have slept the most of the time since arriving. I was tired from my journey, and I have asked few questions." [89]

"You don't want to be too communicative," said Miss Gastonguay, turning her sharp black eyes on her. "You are quite a woman of the world, baby though you seem. Well, I'll not bother you till after you have had a chance to ask some one if I am quite respectable and one to be encouraged, though it will be hard work for me to restrain myself, as I am little better than an interrogation point. You don't belong to New England?"

"No,—to New York more than any place, but I have no home. My mother died when I was a baby, and my father has had me travelling with him almost ever since, though sometimes he would put me in a school for awhile."

"You must miss him."

"I do," said Derrice, quietly.

"You won't like living here if you have been a globe-trotter."

"Perhaps I may."

"My child,—you know you can think of nothing more dismal."

"I will not say that, Miss Gastonguay."

"But you feel it. I can look into the minds of my fellow beings. The time before this when I was reincarnated, I was a witch."

Derrice looked at her in irresistible amusement.

"Come now, Miss or Mrs. New Yorker," said Miss Gastonguay, vivaciously, "tell me what is your idea of New England." [90]

"I don't know that I have ever formulated anything. I have been in Boston once or twice. I liked it."

"But you avoided the smaller places."

"Yes; though my father often spoke to me of Rossignol. What a fine street this is!"

"Isn't it?" and Miss Gastonguay requested her pony to slacken his pace. One large white or yellow house succeeded another. All stood back from the street, nearly all were perched on high banks with flights of steps approaching them, and over all hung bare yet graceful and luxuriant elms. "Ah, the New England elms, how I love them!" said Miss Gastonguay, enthusiastically. "Do you know that this country was all a forest one hundred and fifty years ago?"

"I suppose it was,—I don't know much about the history of this State."

"It seems strange now to think of those days. This lovely river had only Indians on its banks. Then, just after plucky Jacob Buswell, in 1769, ascended through the wilderness beyond here, and hewed out a place for his log cabin on a spot where a cathedral now stands in Bangor, Louis Gastonguay, a Frenchman, and relative of the Baron de St. Castin, came here, and founded Rossignol." [91]

"How interesting!"

"You must go to Bangor when summer comes. We go up to it as the people about Boston and New York go up to those cities. Rossignol is a dear little place, but small. Strangers get tired of it. Mind yourself now, Fairy Prince."

The white pony was gathering his feet cautiously together preparatory to going down a steep hill. They were leaving the stately street behind them, and were approaching the business portion of the town.

"There is our post-office," said Miss Gastonguay, "and our hotel, and lounging on the veranda is our smartest lawyer, Captain Sam Veevers, half Southerner, half Yankee,—a good combination. He lives in the hotel, and he has just been having a holiday in the woods, fishing through the ice. If you and Chelda make friends, you'll often see him up at our house. I think he is an admirer of hers, but I am not sure, for he is about as much of a sphinx as she is. Now there is our Bay, isn't it a beauty?"

They had turned a corner, and Derrice had a complete view of the town and its surroundings. It was spread over a plain by the river bank. Hills dominated it on either side, and a little beyond the town the river, that had gathered itself together and narrowed visibly to rush by shops and houses, expanded into a wide and gemlike bay. [92]

"It looks like a lake," said Miss Gastonguay, "this enlargement of the river, but there is an opening in the apparent lake,—the sea is but a short distance away. We call it Merry Meeting Bay, because out there are five little rivers leaping merrily down to the sea. In summer the hotels out there beyond the big sardine factories are opened. Lumber and fishing and the sardine industry keep Rossignol going, you know. Isn't the view lovely?"

"It is indeed," murmured Derrice, and she paused in silent admiration.

"Look at the ice-cakes, shouldering and smashing against each other to get first to the Bay,

where they will be ground to powder or sucked to pieces. Just like human beings in their race through the world."

"Have you much society here?" asked Derrice.

"My dear, we are governed socially by the seven Mrs. Potts. Have you ever heard of those ladies?"

"Never."

"Where has she been raised—this young person—that she has never heard of the seven Mrs. Potts of the town of Rossignol by Merry Meeting Bay?" exclaimed Miss Gastonguay, in comical dismay. "Look across the river at those seven domed mansions standing in solitary grandeur on those seven small hills. Talk about the seven hills of Rome! They pale before the distinction of these hills." [93]

Derrice laughed at the exaggeration of her tone, and in much interest gazed across the semi-frozen river at the glittering pinnacles and roof-tops of the seven pretentious dwellings of the seven Mrs. Potts.

"They own all that side of the river. When we want to pay court to them, or when they deign to honour the town with a visit, they drive over that bridge. But here comes rather an interesting girl that I would like you to meet. Halt, voice from the wilderness!"

The street of the prosperous little town was full of pedestrians, and numerous wagons were drawn up beside the pavement, yet, among the several passers-by who heard the salutation, a girl readily detached herself from a group and approached the cart. Derrice surveyed her with interest. She was tall and of a singular fragility and thinness of appearance, her expression was nervous and strained, and her china-blue eyes scanned the stranger's face with an eagerness that approached intensity.

"Well, Aurelia," said Miss Gastonguay, agreeably, "if you haven't gone mad yet, let me introduce you to our latest gain in the way of arrivals,—Mrs. Justin Mercer."

The two girls shook hands, and Miss Gastonguay, taking advantage of the moment that they were engaged with each other, tried to lift the cover of the basket on Miss Sinclair's arm. When she found that it was tied down, she said, "What have you got in there, Aurelia Sinclair?" [94]

"Eggs."

"For whom?"

"Old Mrs. Graile up at the poorhouse,—she's dying."

"Old humbug, she ought to have died long ago. You only want to be admired for superior sanctity to go ploughing through the mud up there. Come and have afternoon tea with me."

Aurelia shook her head.

"Then tell this young lady that I am a person to be trusted. Otherwise she will think I am a kind of ogress luring her to my den."

Aurelia's face at once took a rapt expression. Delicate waves of colour flowed over it, and in a sweet, thin tone of intense admiration she extended one hand in Miss Gastonguay's direction, and exclaimed, "I admire to give the character of such a woman to a stranger. Mrs. Mercer, this is the favourite of the town. Everybody loves her, everybody trusts her. She will speak sharply, but her tongue is always honest, and even when it is giving deserved reproof there will be tears in her kind eyes. I am proud to have this chance of telling Miss Gastonguay that I love her for her goodness to the poor of this town.—She is—" [95]

"Pony," cried Miss Gastonguay, with a furiously red face, and jigging at the lines, "will you get up?"

The pony, however, had found some delectable morsel in the gutter, and while nosing it refused to budge, thereby forcing his mistress to listen to the tide of Aurelia's eloquence, which was not easily stopped.

"When there is sickness or death," she went on, rapidly, "who is first at the bedside? Always Miss Gastonguay. She pretends not to care,—she laughs at the ministers and rarely goes to church,—but she is, I verily believe, one of the best Christians in the town. She obeys the commands of Christ,—some day she will own herself a humble follower of the One who came to minister to the lowly."

"Pony," cried Miss Gastonguay, in despair, "now I am going to beat you for the first time in my life," and leaning over the dashboard she whacked him so soundly with her umbrella that, after giving one startled glance behind, he fled madly down the street, overturning a heap of tin pans on the curbstone, and frightening a number of people who fancied that a runaway was upon them.

Derrice, clutching her hat, gave one glance behind, and saw Aurelia still standing on the sidewalk, her hand outstretched, her lips moving, her attitude that of an inspired prophetess.

Miss Gastonguay's face was still red to her ears, and she did not speak until they had passed several churches, two schoolhouses, a theatre, many shops, and the city hall, and had entered on a road bordered by shabby houses. Then she waved her hand, and said, briefly, "Our neighbours, the mill hands, the most honest people in town, but, like the Gastonguays, not fashionable; and there is our house," she went on, when they reached a place where four roads met, and the car [96]

line stopped.

"You have a charming situation," replied Derrice, keenly interested in the long, narrow house, built after the fashion of a French château.

"Not according to the Rossignol people. It is the thing to live down the river, up on Blaine Street where you do, or across it, as near the Potts as they will let you. No one lives up here but ourselves and the poor cottagers who work in the mills farther up. But then the Gastonguays never do things like other people," and she admonished the pony to take them through the gates of the avenue, instead of stopping short and staring into the cart, to see if he could find an explanation for the unexpected blow he had received in the town.

"It is curious,—the limitations in choosing a home," said Derrice. "A stranger coming into a place does not understand."

Miss Gastonguay did not reply. She had been struck with sudden taciturnity, and, throwing down [97] the lines, allowed the pony to guide them to the spot where he chose that they should alight. It happened to be in front of the lowest of the steps leading to the house, and Derrice, observing him narrowly, remarked, "This seems to be an intelligent animal."

"He isn't an animal," said Miss Gastonguay, abruptly, "he is a fairy prince. One day when I was a witch he offended me, and I changed him from a beautiful young man into this shape. Then I forgot the charm and couldn't effect the transformation, so I keep him about, hoping I may some day remember it. Here, prince, help me off with my coat," and slipping the bit from the animal's mouth, she extended an arm.

To Derrice's amusement the small animal daintily nodded his head, then deliberately drawing off the man's coat from Miss Gastonguay's shoulders, held it in his teeth, and politely extended it to her. "Now run away to the stable," she said, and lightly turning the cart on one wheel, he trotted down the drive.

CHAPTER VIII.

[98]

OF MIXED BLOOD.

Upon crossing the threshold of the house, Derrice found herself in an interior evidently copied from the French. The floors were of hard wood, a few handsome rugs lay about them; there was an abundance of carving and gilding in the drawing-room that they entered, two gilt clocks, two mirrors, and a trio of high-backed yellow silk sofas. A number of white and gold spindle-legged chairs stood in various graceful attitudes about the room; there were but few hangings and draperies, and scarcely a cushion to be seen.

"I hate dust," said Miss Gastonguay, in an explanatory way, "and upholstered furniture and gewgaws all over parlour walls make me ill. The Japanese are the only people who know how to furnish a house. You like this room, don't you?"

"Very much," said Derrice, going up to an aromatic fire of small sticks, burning on a white-tiled hearth.

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"These spring winds nip like pincers," said Miss Gastonguay, stretching out her own hands to the blaze, and stifling a yawn. "Dear me, I wish five o'clock would come."

Derrice slightly raised her eyebrows.

"That is only the second question you have asked," said Miss Gastonguay. "Yes, I always have tea at five,—a fashion I picked up in England. Whether I am here, or not, the tray comes in. If I don't get it, the twins have it."

"Ah,—you have children in the house."

"Yes, a pair, sixty-two and sixty-five,—brothers, former small and well-to-do storekeepers in the town—ruined by drink—housed in the asylum for the poor—rescued by me—faithful, but tiresome servants ever since. There's one of them."

An old serving-man came tiptoeing into the room. He pretended not to see Miss Gastonguay for an instant, then he started affectedly, made her a little bow, and, going to a distant corner, brought from it a tiny white table, and set it before her. Then lifting the top of a white silk ottoman, he drew from a box inside an exquisitely embroidered cloth, that he spread over the table.

Derrice, whose life for the last few days had been one of tedious monotony, watched with interest this self-conscious high priest, who, with his air of profound mystery, so slowly forwarded the ceremonies connected with the brewing of a cup of tea.

"Has Miss Chelda come in yet, Prosperity?" asked Miss Gastonguay, abruptly.

[100]

"No, ma'am," he said, hanging his head like a sheepish, fooling boy, and hurrying from the room.

"Let us have the table in the window," exclaimed Miss Gastonguay, "so we can take in the view," and at imminent danger of upsetting it she seized the fragile article of furniture and dragged it across the room.

The gray-haired Prosperity, coming in with a tray, looked about him in bewilderment, until, finally discovering the table near the long, narrow window, he deposited his burden on it, and tilted himself in a sideways fashion from the room.

Miss Gastonguay seated herself, silently pointing to a chair opposite. Derrice obediently took up her position close to the window. A blustering, imperial March sun was rolling a purple eye over the hills across the river as if choosing the fittest place for his descent to rest, and suddenly poured a sheaf of blood and yellow rays upon the top of the highest house.

Miss Gastonguay leaned back in her chair, her face contracted as if in physical pain. "How unearthly it is,—how pitiful are we!"

Derrice turned to her in slight surprise.

[101]

"We are nothing but earthworms," she said, vehemently, "nothing—" and the little golden spoon in her hand trembled visibly. "Crawling ignobly over the earth's surface. Here to-day, gone to-morrow, and can't get what we want while we stay—Do you take sugar in your tea?"

"Thank you—"

"We are too materialistic, too luxurious in our tastes," Miss Gastonguay went on. "I think of this great nation and tremble, so young, so prosperous,—what is to be the end of us? Are we to follow Greece and Rome?"

Derrice in quiet interest stirred her tea and examined the wrinkled, composite face opposite,—at times so square, so set, so taciturn; at others so vivacious, so mobile, so open in expression. "I have always fancied that New England was a poor sort of a place," she said, finally.

"I dare say," observed her hostess, ironically, "you thought our towns were desolate, our farms deserted, our young men gone West, that the people who remained lived in slab houses with an occasional thing called an 'apple bee' by way of amusement."

"Well, not exactly."

"I say the trouble is not poverty, but abundance," responded Miss Gastonguay, warmly. "There are poor districts, I will not deny it, especially in back-woods localities or away from railroads, but I do not know that life. I have been brought up in towns. I wish I had not. If I had my life to

live over, I would choose the cabin in the wilderness. Do you know who my most prized ancestor was?" [102]

"No, I do not."

"Go look at him," and Miss Gastonguay waved her hand toward the opposite end of the apartment.

Derrice put her delicate Limoges cup on the table, and sauntered away. There was the explanation of Miss Gastonguay's mingled masculinity and femininity. From a massive gilt frame, a magnificent specimen of physical manhood, clad in full Indian costume, looked calmly down at the Louis Quinze furniture of the room.

"Kanawita, a great Tarratine chief," called Miss Gastonguay, "in copper breastplate and festoons of beads and wampum. In early days Louis Gastonguay built a truck-house here to trade with the Indians. His son fell in love with the daughter of Kanawita. Louis promptly shut him up in a block-house fort to cure him of his madness, but the lad was too clever for him, and ran away and got the girl, who was called Chelda. He married her, and then old Louis forgave and invited them here to the log-house that stood on the site of this château. A baby was born and named Louis for him, and I am the granddaughter of this second Louis, and my niece who lives with me is the child of my late brother, Charles Gastonguay,— but do not be afraid of me, my dear, for though I am half squaw and ought to spend a part of my time in the woods, I shall not scalp you unless you contradict me." [103]

She had come to stand beside Derrice, and her face now glowed with humour and kindliness reflected from the benign, intelligent features of the aged chief above them.

"Oh, Kanawita," she continued, after the manner of an invocation, "benighted Indian, yet honest man, what deeds to make you blush have been perpetrated on this spot where you used to hunt the deer and angle for the wily fish! These Puritans,—" and she turned to Derrice,—"these sneaking, canting Puritans, ancestors of your husband, how I hate them. Their Bibles and psalm-books in one hand, their measuring tapes in the other. Singing, snivelling, cheating, and starting in horror from the French and English who drank, diced, swore, and were honest men and not hypocrites. Are you a Puritan, my dear?"

"Not that I know of. My father once said that we were of mixed French and American blood. We have no relatives—"

"French," said her companion, joyfully, and she acted as if she were about to embrace her, but was interrupted by Prosperity, who came trotting into the room.

"Mrs. Jonah Potts is coming up the avenoo."

Miss Gastonguay immediately fell into a temper. "Confusion to that woman! Chelda isn't at home and she will ask for me. She knows I hate her. Prosperity, tell her I'm out,—no, I won't lie for her, and if she wants to see me, she'll force her way in, for her impudence is colossal. But do you, my dear, escape—" and she pushed Derrice toward the door. "Run, fly, go anywhere you like. You wouldn't like her,—a great florid creature, whom I always imagine sitting on her children and killing them. I assure you, she choked and smothered and dosed the sickly creatures to death, with her perfumes and her cushions, and the heat of her house. Faugh, I loathe her. Prosperity, if you don't go tell her to take a ship for Tarshish, I'll dismiss you to-morrow." [104]

The old man, with signs of suppressed excitement, withdrew to the hall, and Derrice gazed from the inflamed visage of her hostess to the mountain of flesh waddling in, under a high-coloured bonnet and flaunting feathers.

Derrice slipped by Prosperity, who had his hand over his giggling mouth, and passed into one room after another on the ground floor of the house.

She might have imagined herself in the dwelling of a French country gentleman. The same elegant reserve in the matter of furnishing from a well-filled purse was everywhere apparent. There was enough for comfort, even for luxury, but no crowding, no superfluity of ornament. Everywhere were polished floors, handsome rugs, and carefully chosen paintings, all on foreign subjects and all brought from the mother country by the different members of the house. She looked into a dining-room, where, on a huge mahogany table, undisfigured by a covering, stood a bowl of exquisite roses from the hothouse of her hostess. Carved cabinets stood about this room, and with a lingering step she paused to examine some of their treasures of faience, these, too, brought from over the sea. [105]

Near by was the music-room, with high-backed stools, green velvet benches against the walls, and a variety of musical instruments. Derrice was no musician, and drawing her fingers gently over the keyboard of the grand piano, she went past the rows of violins, guitars, and banjos, and a recess containing a small organ, until she reached the narrow, severely carved wooden entrance to a library.

Here she lingered for a long time, but her love for adventure being stronger than her love for literature, she left behind her the cool, quiet atmosphere of the room, with its faint sweet smell of leather from the rich bindings of the books, and again made her way to the wide hall that ran through the house.

"Do you think I might go up-stairs?" she asked, pausing on the lower step of the staircase.

"Yes, miss," said old Prosperity, and he stopped his slow walk, and uncrossed the hands behind his back in order to make a gesture that would urge her on. This was an unusually favoured [106]

guest, he saw, and one whom his mistress delighted to honour.

"Miss Gastonguay likes to have people go over the house,—that is, if she asks them," he added.

Derrice went slowly up-stairs. She admired this house. Here, in the midst of a New England community, was breathed the fragrance of the Old World. It was a living expression of the tastes of the people long passed away. There was nothing glaringly new about it, there was a complete absence of anything deforming or ungraceful. Even the night lamp on the bracket in the hall above was of exquisite workmanship. By scrupulous attention to detail, a most symmetrical whole had been obtained.

She passed the open doors of bedrooms, all long, white, cool, and dainty, all having snowy beds draped with curtains in the French style. Into these she did not enter, but contented herself with pacing up and down the hall, and looking from the windows at the wintry March landscape, until Prosperity came up the staircase and spoke to her between the railings.

"If you go up to the cupola, miss, you'll have a fine view. There is the staircase," and he pointed to the back of the hall.

Derrice followed his advice. A good-sized cupola had been, by some injudicious member of the family, built like an excrescence on the roof of the old château. Going up the dark winding [107] stairway with her head bent, she was on the threshold of the cup-shaped apartment almost before she was aware of it. She heard a soft rustle, then, gazing blindly into the soft haze of red light to discover the cat or dog hidden in the room, found instead that she had invaded the retreat of two people who had evidently retired here to be alone.

With a swift "I beg your pardon," she was about to retreat, carrying with her a picture of the handsome clergyman, lounging on a red velvet sofa in dreamy, contented ease, with one arm extended in an aimless curve toward a tall young lady who stood calm, erect, and triumphant between him and the doorway.

But an appeal recalled her, "Mrs. Mercer, do not go away," and Mr. Huntington rose slowly; "let me introduce you to Miss Chelda."

So this was Miss Gastonguay's niece. Derrice shook hands with her, looked into the long, narrow eyes that had taken on their usual veiled expression, and watched her curiously, as she lifted a graceful arm to draw back some of the crimson velvet curtains obscuring the windows. Derrice sank into a low, padded seat, a contrast to the stiff-backed chairs below. Probably this was the sanctum of the petted niece, and, with inward disquiet, she wondered how soon she could with propriety withdraw.

Chelda turned to her with a conventional remark upon her lips, but it was not uttered. By mutual [108] consent no one spoke, so touching was the beauty of the twilight. A ruddy glow enveloped the light-roofed town, the ice-blocked river, the blue bay, the dull and sombre wood behind the house, and beautified even the snow and mud of the mottled landscape beyond.

"I must go," said Derrice, rising suddenly. "It is getting late."

"Nonsense," said a brisk voice in the stairway, and Miss Gastonguay came bustling up. "Good gracious, Chelda, I thought you were still out,—and you too, Mr. Huntington."

"I could not tear myself away," he said, his face illumined by a reminiscent afterglow.

"I am glad you couldn't. Did you and Chelda have your drive?"

"Yes, aunt," said the young lady.

"Then you came up here for cake and wine," said Miss Gastonguay, glancing at a bottle in a filigree case, and a silver cake basket on a tiny table. "You might offer Mrs. Mercer some. I don't believe she finished her tea."

"May I?" said Chelda, gracefully.

"No, thank you," and Derrice shook her light head.

"That whale of a woman drove her up-stairs," said Miss Gastonguay. "What do you think Mrs. [109] Jonah wants now, Chelda?"

"I could never guess, aunt."

"To give a charity ball, to relieve the distress of the mill hands burnt out at Indian Gardens. 'Why don't you put your hand in your pocket, and pull out a donation?' I asked. 'What do you pretend to be giving to them for, when all you care for is to get up a midnight frolic for a lot of old married women who want to frisk about with young men, in gowns they ought to be ashamed of? They ought to be home taking care of their children. Go away with you; I have nothing for you. What I have for the mill hands I'll send direct.'"

"You must have annoyed her, aunt."

"I did; she went away in a temper."

"It is a pity, aunt. Mrs. Jonah is the only one of the set we have not quarrelled with this year," said Chelda, with, however, but a very faint regret in her tone.

"She was delicious," said Miss Gastonguay, laughing. "She said, 'Jane Gastonguay, you had better put on your peaked cap, take your tomahawk, and point for the woods.' Now wasn't that a delicate reminder of our ancestry, Mr. Huntington?"

"Very delicate, considering its source."

Derrice got up. "Good-bye, Miss Gastonguay, and thank you for a very pleasant afternoon."

"Tut, tut," and her hostess refused to take the offered hand. "You needn't try to make me think you are anxious to get back to Hippolyta Prymmer. Dinner will be ready in an hour. You'll stay, too, Mr. Huntington?" [110]

The clergyman did not reply. Like one mesmerised he turned to Chelda. A subdued pleasure lighted up her face, and, murmuring, "Of course he will," she followed her aunt and Derrice down the staircase.

CHAPTER IX.

[111]

TELL ME YOUR SECRETS.

At eleven o'clock Miss Gastonguay's brougham stopped before the Mercer house, and the coachman, pulling up his horses, looked over his shoulder, to see whether Derrice was opening the door. She was, having been told by Miss Gastonguay that, while a coachman was a necessary evil, a footman was a blot on modern civilisation.

The man watched the girlish figure hurrying up the steps, waited until he heard the door open, then, with a disapproving smile at the dull, dark house, drove quickly away.

Derrice, excited and refreshed by her visit, and the attention she had received, almost fell into her husband's arms. "Oh, Justin, have I kept you up?"

"No," he said, and he led the way to the dining-room, where the gas was burning brightly, and a book was lying face downward on the table.

"Look at my flowers; are they not delightful?" and she displayed a bouquet of roses and geraniums.

"Very delightful."

[112]

"I've had a good time,—such a good time, but who are those people? I could not ask many questions, and I had no time with Mr. Huntington. I thought perhaps you would not like my going there. Miss Gastonguay was not very polite to your mother, but I don't think she means all she says," and she paused doubtfully.

Justin scarcely heard what she said. He was absorbed in examining her flushed, charming face, her tumbled hair, her youthful self-possession, with its touch of timidity. Not since they had come to Rossignol had he seen her so excited as she was at present.

"Did you mind my going?" she asked.

"No; nothing you could have done would have given me greater pleasure."

"You like Miss Gastonguay?"

"Yes."

Derrice's radiant eyes flashed around the room, then, shuddering slightly, she drew her cloak about her.

"It is dull for you to come back to this house," said her husband, quietly. "You feel the contrast between it and Miss Gastonguay's beautiful home."

She dropped her head to his hand that lay outstretched on the table. "It is like a stone vault," she whispered against his fingers; "can't we leave it?"

[113]

She was so chary of her caresses that Justin's blood grew warm in his veins, though his manner became troubled.

"Never mind to-night," she went on. "I don't want to vex you. Oh, I have had such a good time!" and she closed her eyes rapturously until a sudden misgiving caused them to fly open. "You didn't miss me, I hope?"

"I always miss you."

"But not with a hateful, longing miss. Do tell me that you are beginning to get weaned away from me. Oh, I should be so glad! It is ridiculous for you to be so fond of me. Really, it just makes me laugh,"—and she shook her head like a provoking child.

"You little flirt," he said, composedly. "You have gone out and got your blood stirred, and, coming back to this quiet house, you, for lack of other amusement, wish to incite me to make love to you."

"It isn't that at all," she said, poutingly.

"You are only eighteen," he observed.

"I am sorry you regret having married one so young."

"I don't regret it,—it was unavoidable."

"Why didn't you wait until I was older?"

"Ah, why did I not?" he asked, with some humour.

"Justin," she said, wistfully, "there is some mystery about you and papa and myself,—what is it?"

[114]

Her husband did not answer her. He took off his glasses, rubbed his hand over his eyes, stifled a yawn, and glanced at his watch.

"You are provoking," she said, petulantly. "When you don't want to tell me anything, you just keep still."

"I have nothing to tell you on this subject."

"You are tired,—I must not keep you, but just let me ask you two or three questions. What is the matter with Mr. Huntington?"

"Well, I think he has some mental worry."

"He acted so strangely to-day. I came suddenly upon him and Miss Chelda, and he seemed to be in a state of perfect bliss,—almost silly in fact. All through dinner—ah, what a nice dinner we had, Justin!—he was the same way. Then afterward we went to the music-room to hear Miss Chelda play. Her execution is something wonderful, but I suppose you know all about it, also that she cannot sing. Miss Gastonguay wanted me to try. I told her I had only a little faint squeak of a voice, but she insisted. I sang one song after another, and when I finished 'The Land o' the Leal' Mr. Huntington looked so strangely, and finally stepped out of the room and left the house. Miss Chelda didn't say anything, but I felt that she didn't like it. Was it not queer of him not to take leave?"

"Very."

"I would like to know what is wrong with him, but I see you won't tell me. Do you like Miss Chelda?" [115]

"I don't know much about her, except that she was fond of making faces at me when she strutted about the streets here, a little overdressed girl. My father used to be intimate with the Gastonguays before his marriage; but they have never liked my mother nor me, and I was surprised to hear that Miss Gastonguay had called to-day. One of her whims must have taken possession of her."

"Do you mean to say that Miss Chelda is as old as you are?"

"Almost."

"Why, she acts as if she were as young as I am. I dare say she takes something off her age. Girls often do."

"Would you?" he asked.

"Well, I don't need to yet. Perhaps I will some day."

His face darkened, and he absently toyed with his glasses.

"You are a very proper man," said his wife, teasingly. "I believe you would want to shake me if I told a story. I'll have to, you know. Good gracious, everybody tells stories."

"Please don't jest on such a subject."

"On such a subject,—I will if I choose, sir. Oh, what a fright you are with that ugly frown on your brow! but I am not afraid of you. I think I will go to bed, you are getting tiresome. Miss Gastonguay is so amusing," and, with a regretful sigh, she rose to leave him. [116]

"You like Miss Gastonguay," he said, with quiet eagerness.

"Yes, immensely. At first I could not make her out. Now I like her a thousand times better than that niece of hers. Miss Chelda is queer,—just like a deep, dark river. I detest people who look at me so coolly that I can't tell what they are thinking about. You are like that sometimes."

Unmindful of this thrust, Justin asked, "Did she tell you anything about her family history?"

"Oh, yes, she said her house was called French Cross on account of the cross her Catholic ancestor put up there, and she showed me the picture of the old chief Kanawita, and some day she is going to let me see the Indian relics she has stored in her attic."

"She has indeed taken you into favour," said her husband, in a tone of gratification.

"What does it matter?" said Derrice, coldly. "I shall probably soon be leaving here," and she lowered her eyes, for a sudden mist of tears made her husband's figure a blur, except for the splash of light on the glasses of his spectacles.

"You do not feel yourself growing more contented?" he asked. [117]

"Contented, no," she cried, stretching out her arms; "I am homesick,—homesick for my father. Oh, I wish he would come. I shall beg him to do so."

"My poor child," said Justin, softly, "what can I do for you?"

"You cannot do anything," she said, vehemently. "You should not have married me—" and she dashed away the tears from her eyes in order to see his shocked face.

But he was not shocked. He seemed rather to be thoughtfully following up the ramifications of some problem connected with her statement.

"Derrice," he said, abruptly rising and putting a hand on her shoulder, "you are nervous, I should not allow you to talk. Good night, my dear child."

"Good night," she said, twitching her smooth, sloping shoulder away from his hand, but without making any further effort to leave him.

His calm features became suffused with compassion. "Do you know that I came home to-day with a carriage to give my dear dolly a drive?"

"No; did you?" and her face brightened.

"Yes, and I found her absent."

Derrice breathed a gentle, "She could not help it. If she had known—"

"And all the evening," Justin continued, "the house has been so lonely." [118]

"Has it?" she said, delightedly.

"And my foolish little girl comes home from a visit to a fine house where apparently nothing but peace and happiness reign—"

"Yes, it is a charming place," and she sighed.

"And where she saw a good-looking man ostensibly making love to an interesting young lady—"

"Yes, he was, I am sure of it."

"And she is discontented because her own husband is so very commonplace—"

"Oh, no, no—"

"And this other man is so superlatively beautiful, and has such entrancing hair and such melting eyes," said Justin, sarcastically, "and also having been a former friend of the discontented doll, she suffers from the pangs of jealousy."

"She does not," said Derrice, decidedly.

"Tell me how much you knew of Bernal Huntington in former days?" said Justin. "I have not had a chance to ask you before. Come, sit on my knee, dolly, and tell me about it."

Derrice shrugged her shoulders, then shook her head so vehemently that her whole mass of light hair came tumbling about her shoulders. "I never flirted with him, Justin."

"I should hope not. You were too young. Where did you meet him?" [119]

"In western Canada. When we were travelling we often met nice girls, and my father always took me to see them if he could. Once we met an English girl on a Cunard steamer. She was going to visit her brother, who had a ranch in Manitoba. I liked her ever so much, and the next year, after we had been doing the Rocky Mountains, my father took me to the nearest town to the ranch. This girl and her brother used to drive into town,—oh, such queer sights they would be, for if they couldn't get horses they took mules. The people used to come in from all the country round about, particularly if there were dances at the hotel. Among them was a handsome New Yorker who was visiting a cousin. They called him Lucifer, or the son of the morning, from a little play they acted. How stunning he used to look, Justin, driving in with his cousin's tandem, or else riding on horseback! He had a friend with him called Mr. Denham, and finally they came to stay at our hotel. I was too young to go to the dances, but Mr. Huntington often talked to me, and I simply adored him. But one day my father suddenly said we must leave. I don't think he liked Mr. Huntington, but I am not sure. You know he never talks much."

"Yes, I know," said Justin, absently stroking her hair.

"The girls were crazy about Mr. Huntington,—simply crazy. You know there are some men that women just rave about." [120]

"And some uninteresting ones like myself that they don't care a fig about."

"No, not uninteresting," said Derrice, sweetly.

"Undemonstrative, then?"

"Yes."

He smiled, and turned his head away.

"Tell me why you were in such a hurry to marry me?" she whispered in his averted ear, "and why my father seconded you?"

Justin promptly kissed her teasing mouth.

"Let me go," she said, laughingly, "I don't like you when you are silly."

He smiled and detained her. "I must be silly long enough to tell you that it grieves me to know that my wife can look with envy upon people who are apparently happy, and say to herself, 'I am alone in the world, no one loves me.' Will you try to remember that you are the centre of attraction in this whole universe for me, and also for your father? Our hearts are bound up in you, dolly."

"Are they," she murmured, and putting up one plump hand she gently caressed his cheek.

He coloured vividly, and put her out of his arms. "Run away now, darling,—and go softly past my mother's door. This is an extravagantly late hour to her." [121]

She seemed reluctant to leave him. "Justin," she said, hanging about the threshold of the door, "I know I am not satisfactory as a wife, but I will try to do better,—I am not very old yet."

Without answering her he remained standing on the hearth-rug.

"And I like you better than I did," she said, shyly; "perhaps, when I get quite wise, you will tell me all your secrets?"

"Perhaps," he said, calmly.

She smiled her own sweet, mischievous smile, and, waving her hand to him, hurried up-stairs. He stood intently listening until the sound of her light footstep had died away; then picking up the gloves and the lace handkerchief that she had dropped, he pressed them to his lips, and late as it was, threw himself in a chair by the table, and sat staring intently at them. Some trouble threatened his young wife, and, resourceful and clear-headed as he was, his knotted brow showed that he saw but little chance of averting it.

CHAPTER X.

[122]

A REFORM IN THE BILL OF FARE.

"Justin," said Captain White, a few days later, "that child is starving herself."

The two men had just left the house, and were on their way to the town.

"I know," said Justin, in a puzzled voice, "and I am wondering what to do."

"Have you spoken to your mother?"

"Yes; I told her that Derrice was dainty about her food, and there must be a change in our diet."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing; she apparently agreed to what I said. Micah, I am afraid I have got to set up housekeeping for myself."

"You couldn't put that baby in charge of a house, Justin."

"Certainly not."

"And no boarding-house would content her; she'd want a first-class hotel."

"Yes."

"And you can't afford that."

[123]

"No."

"And you don't know what to do. Will you leave it to me?"

"Yes."

"All right," and Captain White swung himself round a near corner and disappeared. That day he came home later than usual to dinner, and standing by the table looked with a contemptuous air at the meagre roast of mutton, the half-dozen potatoes reposing in their jackets at the bottom of a deep dish, the small, uninviting slabs of turnip, and the few canned peas peeping timidly from a blue bowl.

Mrs. Prymmer glanced up pleasantly when he came in. "Give Micah some mutton, Justin."

"No," vociferated Captain White, "don't give him any."

Mrs. Prymmer was surprised. Her cousin was something of a favourite with her, in spite of his abruptness of speech, for he represented so many dollars and cents,—a most important item in her housekeeping.

"Have some potato and turnip, then," she said, agreeably.

"No, I won't have any turnip and potato," and, instead of sitting down in his usual place, he threw himself on the sofa, and sulkily surveyed the three people at the table. Derrice went on toying with her slice of meat. Justin remained imperturbable, while Mrs. Prymmer was in despair. A recalcitrant boarder,—the thought was misery, for the next step would be his loss. Justin's protestations and Derrice's disdain were nothing. They were not boarders, but her cousin must be propitiated.

[124]

"If I had thought, Micah," she said, hastily, "I would have made some caper sauce."

"Caper sauce," he said, contemptuously. "What's caper sauce when the whole dinner's backsliding!"

Mrs. Prymmer said nothing more until an attenuated jam roll came on, when she observed, feebly, "Let me pass you a bit of pudding, Micah; you'll want something to stay your stomach before night."

"To stay my stomach," he roared, with well-assumed fury. "I ain't got any left; it's all worn out."

Mrs. Prymmer subsided after this, and her son and his wife finished their meal in silence.

"Derrice," said Justin, drawing his wife aside before he left the house, "you will find some fruit in your room. Have patience, dear,—the bill of fare will soon improve."

Derrice smiled sweetly under his gentle touch, and when he kissed her, and murmured, "Patient little wife," she blushed with pleasure, and went to the window to watch him going with his slow and measured pace down the different flights of steps to the street.

Mrs. Prymmer meanwhile sat in the dining-room, trembling like a person awaiting doom, and fascinated helplessly by the strangely fiery eye of her cousin.

[125]

"Hippolyta Prymmer," he was saying, angrily, "haven't I been boarding in this here house for twenty years?"

"Yes, Micah."

"Haven't I paid you out good board money all the time,—eleven dollars a week?"

"Yes, Micah."

"Come now,—you've found counterfeit money among it,—there's been a bad quarter, a shady greenback?"

"No, Micah, there hasn't."

"Then what do you mean by treating me so?"

"Micah," she said, trembling more violently, "I don't know what you mean."

"Ain't you getting old?" he inquired, lashing himself into a yet more violent passion.

"I don't know,—yes, I suppose so."

"Ain't I getting old? Look at the gray hairs creeping in my head. Look at the tracks of the old crow. Does it stand to reason that my appetite's what it used to be?"

"I haven't noticed any difference, Micah."

"Haven't you?" he exclaimed, in violent sarcasm. "You think I can eat cold meat, cold potatoes, and porridge just like I used to twenty years ago? You've brought me up on it, and you think I can [126] stay on it."

"I—I never thought about it, Micah."

"Well, you've got to think, or you'll see a pair of soles flashing down the street. Does it stand to reason, because you've been brought up on plain food and are tough as door nails on it, that you've got to stick to it?"

"I—I don't know—" and in utter confusion Mrs. Prymmer tried to wonder whether her usually self-possessed cousin was going crazy.

"I've got to clear out," he said, suddenly rising and flinging himself toward the door. "You don't want to please me,—you don't care if I starve to death. I'll go down to the hotel. Good-bye, Hippolyta. If any one dies, send for me, and I'll come to the funeral."

"Micah, stop! stop!" cried the unhappy woman, clinging to him. "I can't spare your board money. Justin's salary isn't large, and my rents are slow coming in, and I've got to keep you. Tell me what I can do?"

"You'll not do it," he said, trying to get away from her.

"I will, I will, Micah, only try me," and genuine tears started in her eyes.

Captain White flung himself back on the sofa and tried not to look at her. "There'll be too much to [127] do," he said, gloomily.

"No, no. I'll do anything."

"Would you give me hot biscuits for breakfast, and strong coffee,—none of your slops, and you've got to rinse out the coffee-pot every morning and not hold it over from one morning to another—"

"Yes, yes—"

"Keep still till you hear what more's to come. Always hot potatoes, fried, or in chips, or some fancy way, and a chop, or steak, or liver and bacon, or some such thing, and corn bread—"

"I'll do it," she sighed, "though it will be an awful trouble, and I'll have to get up an hour earlier."

"And fruit to start with. Always apples, or oranges, or pears, grapes, peaches, or whatever's in the market."

"Yes, you shall have it, Micah."

"And for dinner, soup always, and fish, and two kinds of meat, and three kinds of pudding or pie, and more fruit and coffee and tea."

"But the money," she gasped,—"it will cost a fortune."

"Ain't I going to pay you,—just you wait; and a hot supper such as you get at hotels. None of your bread and butter and preserves and weak tea arrangements. Now, do you hear all that, and can [128] you do it?"

"Yes, Micah, I can," she said, firmly. She had grasped the situation now. "But you've got to pay me—"

"Well, how much?—name your price now, and don't cheat me."

"I'll have to reckon it up; but I should say it would be as much as fourteen dollars."

"Fourteen dollars!—call it twenty. I'll pay you twenty dollars a week if you'll set me such a table as I describe. Mind, no scrimping, and no setting before me dishes that ain't for the rest of the family, to make me feel mean. And you've got to have enough for me to bring a friend in any time I choose. And any day you don't suit me, I'll clear out to the hotel. I am going down there now to get my dinner, and you can spend the afternoon laying in supplies," and, holding both hands over his mouth, he rushed from the room.

He left his cousin standing in the middle of the floor, a prey to resentful suspicion. Her eye fell on Derrice's half-eaten jam roll, and she was just muttering, "I believe that girl is at the bottom of it," when the girl herself stood before her.

"Is Captain White ill?" she asked, in concern.

"No; he is fussing about his food. Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No," replied Derrice, calmly, and going back to the parlour she watched the lean ex-sailor rolling [129] down the street in a more eccentric fashion than usual.

He was choking and swaying with laughter. "I'm giving her something to do besides attending

divine service and bullying her daughter-in-law. She'll have to stay at home and cook. Hippolyta Prymmer, you'll find me most as hard as your other master, the devil," and, trying to suppress his hilarious amusement, he entered the hotel, where he presently had a door full of waiters gazing at him over each others' shoulders in astonishment at the celerity with which he cleared one dish after another of those set before him.

Justin, meanwhile, was having another kind of experience. The big brick building to which he turned his steps was down by the river bank. All through the town the river was bordered by a massive stone wall, upon which many of the principal stores and offices were founded.

From the windows of the cashier's room one looked directly on the river, and into this room Justin had entered upon arriving at the scene of his daily occupation. He was standing engaged in conversation with his assistant when a sudden shriek outside caused them both to hurry to the window.

A child had fallen from a house near by on one of the large cakes of ice whirling about the narrow [130]
channel. Her position was dangerous, for she was too small to understand the directions shouted to her to throw herself flat on her face and cling to the ice until an attempt could be made to rescue her. Instead of heeding the warning voices, she extended her little arms toward her agonised mother, while her pitiful cries caused tears to spring to the eyes of every one who saw her.

The ice-cake on which she sustained her precarious footing swung under the bank window. Justin looked down at the light head so strangely like Derrice's, then, without a word, he lowered himself cautiously, and dropped in the clear streak of water next the wall. Making a few strokes he succeeded in catching hold of the mass of ice and in inducing the small child to sit down.

Lower down, men with poles and ropes were waiting. The danger to the child was not as great as that to himself, for he feared to draw himself up on the raft of ice lest his weight should too much depress it and disturb the little one now crouching on it. Carefully he tried to guide it toward the rescuers, keeping meanwhile a watchful eye on other swinging, pursuing blocks behind. One, however, was too persistent for him. He tried to allow it to pass, to crowd himself against the stone wall, but it turned a ragged edge, and he received a blow on the temple. Dizzy, fainting, [131]
and with eyes full of blood, he felt himself sinking down into the river, away from light and hope, and all things pleasant and attractive.

When he came to himself he found that he was lying on his own bed, and his mother and Captain White were bending over him.

Both their faces were drawn with anxiety, but they grew relieved at his feeble smile.

"He's come to," said Captain White, gleefully.

An old man advanced from a corner. "I told you it would not be long. It was only a slight concussion."

"Slight concussion," grumbled Captain White, "combined with almost total drowning. Well, old boy, how do you feel?"

"Shaken up. Did they get the child?"

"Yes, squealing like a pig to think you'd left her."

"Who got me out?"

"I performed that little service. I was sitting, taking my dinner in the hotel, when I heard a great racket, and saw waiters running toward the pantry windows. I ran too,—saw you coming along under the hotel wall, ramming the child ahead; then, right within smell of good food, you went down like a stone. I went like another, thanking my lucky stars that I'm as much at home in the water as a rat, but I did better than you, for I took a rope with me. You know they always keep [132]
one at the hotel in case of accidents. I clutched you, and up we came together, thanks to the waiters. How are you now?"

"Better. Where is Derrice?"

"I don't know; out somewhere. I wish she would get home without hearing. Some one will have the kindness to frighten her to death. Sharks and tommy cods, here she comes! Look at your mother trying to stop her. What wild geese women are!"

There was no stopping Derrice. With a deathly white face, and round, startled eyes, she flew straight to the bed, and, seeing the spots of crimson on her husband's bandaged head, slipped down beside him, and promptly fainted.

"She ought to have been kept out," said Mrs. Prymmer, in annoyance, while she went to a drawer for hartshorn.

In a few minutes the girl had recovered, and, seizing one of her husband's hands, knelt on the floor beside him, and buried her face in the bed-clothes. Not a word would she speak, even when addressed, until an hour had passed, and Mary had rung the supper bell from below.

"Well, I suppose we've got to eat," said Captain White, sauntering along the hall, and looking in the door. "You don't feel like coming down, Justin?"

"I believe I will lie still; my head is light yet." [133]

"I will stay with him. Go down, you all," and Mrs. Prymmer stared at Derrice, whom she never mentioned by name, if she could possibly avoid doing so.

The girl raised her pale face. "I will stay with him."

"No," said Mrs. Prymmer, obstinately. "You go down. I am his mother."

"And I am his wife," exclaimed Derrice, springing to her feet.

Mrs. Prymmer quailed before her haughty gesture. She was beaten, and, while Justin and Captain White maintained a discreet silence, she precipitated herself with angry celerity toward the staircase.

Derrice waited until she heard her enter the dining-room; then she turned to her husband, who had raised himself on his elbow, and was staring fixedly at her, his breath coming hard and fast, his eyes bright with a strange expectancy.

"Justin," she said, vehemently, "what is the matter with me? I feel as if I could strike any one that kept me from you."

The jealousy of a new-born love animated the passionate, almost fierce, little figure beyond him. In secret and exultant pride the young man marked her burning eye, the convulsive heaving of her beautiful breast, and her nervously extended hands.

"Come here, Derrice," he said, quietly. [134]

She went readily to him, the young wife who had always been so shy, and, surrendering herself unheedingly to his caresses, struggled in vain for self-control.

"It was such a shock,—I heard you were dead. I ran, then I stopped; my breath was all gone. I thought of my father, but it did not comfort me. Justin, am I going mad?"

"No, no," and in intense and long-mastered emotion, he drew her head to his breast. "Lie there, dear child, and rest; you do not wish to leave me?"

"No, no," she murmured. "I have been a bad wife to you. I thought of it, and my heart stood still. I will do what you say now, I promised my father to be good."

A sigh of ineffable satisfaction escaped his lips. Very gently, in order not to startle her, he drew her closer to him, "Derrice, this is love."

"Is it? It is more like death," and, raising her head, she looked sharply at him.

"To love is to suffer, darling."

"And is this the way you have been feeling about me?"

"Yes, yes; I cannot describe the long-drawn-out misery of the past few weeks."

In proud, sweet dignity she put her arms around his neck, kissed him once, then gently forced his head back on the pillow. "I shall never make you suffer again, and now I must enforce the doctor's orders. You are to be kept still." [135]

In a fascinated, incredulous ecstasy he watched her as she took up her position at his bedside. He could not persuade her to talk, and when, with an irrepressible remark, he occasionally lifted his head, she immediately averted her own, and he had a glimpse only of a pale, happy cheek. However, she sometimes extended a hand, and, with an air quite grandmotherly, smoothed the coverlet, or pressed his fingers, in order to assure him that she was not sleeping at her post of duty.

CHAPTER XI.

[136]

IN THE MIDST OF LIFE WE ARE IN DEATH.

The day after Justin's escape from the river, he went about with an unusually thoughtful face. There was something on his mind, and, with a variation of his usually methodical habits, he several times left his desk to go to the bank door and look up and down the street.

About the middle of the afternoon Miss Gastonguay came down Main Street with her usual gait, that aimed at being a stride but ended in a trot when she went quickly, on account of the shortness of her limbs. In the middle of the street, carefully keeping abreast of her, was the white pony, neither harnessed nor saddled, and following her about simply for purposes of entertainment.

When she stopped he stopped, when she hurried on he made haste to thread his way among the various vehicles in the street and catch up to her. Upon arriving in front of a green-grocer's, he took on an air of joyful assurance, and approached the curbstone.

"Piggy," said Miss Gastonguay, amiably; then calling for a handful of apples, she spread them in the gutter before him. [137]

While he was eating them, she looked across at the bank. "If they haven't closed, I might go and get some money," she grumbled. "That girl Chelda spends it like water," and she hurriedly approached the brick building.

"So this is what you have been doing with my money," she said to the paying teller as she stood before his wicket and gazed about the freshly decorated bank.

The young man smiled respectfully, then, as he handed her a roll of bills, observed, "The cashier asked me to let him know if you came in. Would it be too much trouble for you to step in his office?"

Without saying a word she walked to the glass door beyond, and rapped briskly on it.

"Come in," said Justin; then seeing who it was he sprang up. "Miss Gastonguay, I have been wishing to see you."

"Indeed,—the road to French Cross is still open."

Justin's pale face grew red. "I should have considered it an honour to call, but there are certain reasons why I preferred seeing you here. Will you sit down?"

"Thanks, I had rather stand. I am in a hurry,—is your head better?"

"Yes, thank you." [138]

"A great mistake to jump into the river for that beggar's child. Better to have let it drown."

"I scarcely think you would have approved of that,"—then he surveyed her earnestly. "What I have to say may take some time. You had better be seated."

She dropped into a chair, and, folding her hands before her on the table, stared out the window.

She did not like him. She was annoyed at being compelled to sit and listen to him, yet Justin was full of satisfaction, and there was even an expression of wistfulness about his thin lips as his next sentence fell from them.

"In the first place, I have to thank you for your kindness to my wife the other day."

"No kindness at all," she said, gruffly. "She can come again sometime, if she likes. I dare say it is dull at your house for her."

"Dull, yes,—poor child. Miss Gastonguay, I see you are impatient to be gone, and I will be brief. Long ago you had a brother—"

"A brother, yes,—what of it?" and Miss Gastonguay brought her eyes to bear sharply upon him.

Justin was leaning forward on the table now. He had become the strict man of business; he had a tale to unfold to her that she should hear even though he compelled her to it.

"I had a brother Charles," she snapped at him when he did not speak,—"Chelda's father, now dead." [139]

"I refer to another brother," he said, calmly, "a younger brother."

Miss Gastonguay's face showed uncontrollable emotion. No one in Rossignol but this young man would have dared mention the name of this brother to her. Years ago he had been cast off by his family as an incorrigible black sheep. It was not known what had become of him. His name had been dropped, and even in gossiping Rossignol there were many people who did not know of his existence. She tried to rise and fling herself from the room, but she found herself trembling so violently that she was obliged to sit still to gather strength.

"Your brother Louis," pursued Justin, in measured tones, "named from the founder of the house."

"A villain,—a scoundrel," muttered Miss Gastonguay, flashing him a furious glance,—"a disgrace to the name, a boy that should have been strangled in his cradle."

"But never by the hand of his sister," murmured Justin, with a strange softening of his tone," his little sister Jane, whom he loved."

Miss Gastonguay turned fiercely on him. "Young man, what are you talking about? What do you

know of this affair? Have some of your strict Puritans been telling you to discipline a victim many years your senior, by tearing open this old sore?" [140]

"No, no,—Miss Gastonguay, hear me patiently. I have a message to you from this brother."

"I will not hear it—" and her stern face grew sterner.

Justin sighed, and leaned back in his chair. "Let me recapitulate,—you remember my father, Sylvester Mercer—"

"Open that window, will you?" interrupted Miss Gastonguay, "this room is stifling."

Justin hastily threw up one of the glass sashes, and allowed the cool river wind to blow into the room. Was the stoical maiden lady about to faint? He judged not, and therefore continued his sentence. "My father, who was cashier of this bank before me—"

"And worth half a dozen young prigs like yourself," mumbled Miss Gastonguay, as she mopped her face with her handkerchief. "I liked him—"

"I know you do not care for me nor for my mother," said Justin, firmly, "yet I also know that, honest as you try to be, words are sometimes but disguises for your thoughts."

"Therefore, when I say I hate you, you know I love you," observed Miss Gastonguay, ironically. The fresh air had revived her, and she felt mistress of herself again.

Justin smiled. "No, I know better than that; however, let me proceed. When I was a lad, my father, finding that I did not care for study, had me enter this bank where I could be trained under his supervision." [141]

"You'll never be as clever as he was," observed Miss Gastonguay, grimly.

"Granted," said Justin, with a slight inclination of his head. "You cannot say any good thing about my father that my heart will not echo. I loved him, and revere his memory. You will perhaps remember that, beside being a man of business, he was foremost in the charitable work of the town—"

"Yes, yes; I remember. What are you boring me with all this for?"

"Kindly have patience and you will see. One of his invariable habits was to visit every Sunday the old red prison in the woods beyond your house."

Miss Gastonguay's head suddenly became more erect, though her fingers trifled nervously with her handkerchief.

"I was often his companion. Among the prisoners I had many acquaintances. My father taught me not to despise these men whose unhappy lives had flung them for a time into such a place—"

"He was wrong," said Miss Gastonguay, angrily. "Wrong—wrong."

"Just before my father's death, he called me to his bedside, and told me that in leaving the world he had a sacred trust to impose on me. I would in his place be entrusted with the custody, the loaning, exchange, or issue of money for a certain individual whom I might hear from or see only at long intervals. This person I was to serve faithfully, without curiosity or suspicion, except in the improbable event of my being required to do anything that would be against my conscience." [142]

"Conscience!" ejaculated Miss Gastonguay. "You Puritans worship your consciences."

"I accepted the trust," said Justin, "and I have kept it."

"For some prison bird," she said, dilating her nostrils. "Your father always was soft-hearted. He believed a kind whisper in the ear would reform the prince of darkness himself."

"It was four years after my father's death," continued Justin, "before I saw this stranger for whom my father was a kind of agent—"

"I dare say," she said, sneeringly, "a wonder you ever saw him at all."

"And then he reminded me, strangely enough, of a man I had once seen for a brief space of time in—"

"The old prison, of course."

"Yes."

"And you told him of it," she said, tauntingly.

"No, I did not. The last time I saw that man was in California six weeks ago." [143]

"An ill-starred journey. You had better have stayed at home."

"I married that man's daughter, Miss Gastonguay."

She paused for a moment, and caught her breath with a choking sound. Then she exclaimed, indignantly: "Shame to you to perpetuate the breed! Close that window, will you? You young people have your veins full of hot blood. We old ones grow chilly."

Justin obediently closed it, then, reseating himself, gazed at her with a compassion and even a tenderness that her abusive words could neither change nor dissipate.

"Yesterday, when I received that blow in the river," and he lightly touched his plastered forehead, "I seemed to see in a flash the possibilities of the future in case of my death. My young wife frightened and alone—"

"Where is her father?"

"He said that he was going to Australia; and I made up my mind yesterday to speak to you,—to tell you that, spoiled child as she may appear, she is a worthy daughter of your house."

"What kind of a life is her father leading now?"

Justin took off his glasses and passed his handkerchief over his troubled eyes. "I do not know, but I am sure he solemnly promised my father that after his escapade here it would be an honest one. Knowing his family's wealth, I have thought that possibly he might be receiving money from them —" [144]

"There is not a Gastonguay that would throw him a dime if he were starving," she said, with disdain.

"But his daughter," said Justin, and his whole face glowed with such sincerity of love that his companion turned her head away, "the innocent, beautiful girl whom I married in haste, partly because my whole soul was bound up in her, and partly because I wished to snatch her while still young and docile from an environment that might at some future day mean—"

"Disgrace," supplied Miss Gastonguay, when he hesitated, "bald, black, nasty disgrace that you wish now to attach to my unspotted name,—or," she went on, irrelevantly, "is it the money you are after? We rich people can see snares and pitfalls where you poor ones would not suspect them. We are so beset and encompassed by sticky fingers that would make some of our gold pieces adhere to them that we walk with garments drawn gingerly aside. What looks to you a very pretty and flattering appeal from youth to old age, may to me look no better than one of the cunningly adjusted gins your Bible speaks of. I have the honour to wish you good afternoon, young man," and she rose from her seat and made him a low, old-fashioned courtesy. [145]

Justin rose too, and respectfully prepared to open the door for her. "May God bless you, Miss Gastonguay. My heart is lighter now that I have committed my darling's interests to you,—you know that I am not thinking solely of material interests. If I am cut off suddenly you will see that a woman's love and tenderness are not wanting. And I have a token for you from that brother. I will not offer it to you now, but when you are ready to receive it, I have it here—" and he pointed toward a safe in a corner.

Miss Gastonguay rushed by him and out of the bank like a flash, so that even the clerks who were used to her odd ways followed her with a smile.

An hour later, when Justin had his key in the lock of the outer door, she came back. Her face was calm now, and she spoke politely. "Give me that token, or whatever it is. No, I will not go in your office. Go get it, I will wait here," and she stepped inside the door.

Justin looking over his shoulder, to keep a watchful eye on the entrance door, hastened to his room, unlocked his safe, withdrew a small parcel and came back.

Miss Gastonguay tore off the folds of tissue-paper. There was nothing but a little shoe inside,— a little shoe of white velvet ornamented with gilt buttons. [146]

"Our mother was a proud woman," she said, calmly, as she surveyed it. "Louis and I were shod in velvet, while our playmates had to be content with leather. We always played together," she went on, holding up the shoe, and speaking in a voice of unnatural calm. "He was a handsome little lad. Though I was much older, he used to put his arm around my neck and call me his little Jane."

Justin silently pointed to the tiny sole. On it was written in a faltering hand, "Little Jane's shoe,— carried over half the world by her unworthy Louis."

"Oh, my God," she said, suddenly. "I loved him so!" and staggering against the wall she burst into violent and painful weeping. "My poor lost brother—and I would have died for him— Go away, young man, don't look at me in my misery."

Justin's own eyes were full of tears. In distressed sympathy he went for a glass of water that she would not drink. "Go away, go away," she said, waving her hands at him, so that at last he was obliged to take his station on the street where the white pony stood gazing at him in reproachful anxiety.

In a quarter of an hour Miss Gastonguay came out. Her face was more stern than usual, but bore no traces of tears, and without a word to him, and looking neither to the right nor to the left, she took the road to French Cross, followed by the pony with sympathetically drooping head. [147]

CHAPTER XII.

[148]

IT IS ALL TRUE.

After Miss Gastonguay left Justin, his long legs carried him rapidly in the direction of his own home, over the sidewalks, steaming in the hot March sun, and cooling again in the wind.

There she was, waiting for him by the letter-box on the corner,—the rounded girlish figure, whose sight always made his blood quicken in his veins. His eye ran approvingly over her trim green suit, and the round hat set so daintily on the fair head, and with a few quick strides he was beside her.

"I have kept you waiting, Derrice. I had an important interview."

"You need not apologise. I knew that you would have come sooner if you could."

He gave her so eloquent a glance that the blood rushed to her face, yet she did not shyly avert her blushes from him as she once would have done, but returned his look by one full of a passionate and steady devotion.

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He did not speak again until they were walking down the steep hill toward the town, when he asked her, "Which way shall we go?"

"Not by the river," and she shivered, "out toward the prison."

It was his turn to shiver now; however, he made no protest, and they were soon well on the way toward French Cross.

"I forgot," she said, suddenly pausing, "one can still catch glimpses of the river from here, and I can not bear it to-day. Can we not strike out toward the blueberry barrens?"

"Certainly, but the mud."

"I have rubbers," and she held out one foot. They plunged into a country road and walked steadily on. Both were accomplished pedestrians, and having found out that for some unknown reason her husband had rather walk than drive, Derrice usually expressed a preference for the former exercise.

For some distance she walked a little ahead of him, and, in order to escape the slush of the road, traversed the length of an icy ridge, her hands in her jacket pockets, her body carefully balanced. When she paused to allow a muddy wagon to pass, he caught up to her.

"Derrice," he said, "let us go back. You are as pale as a ghost."

"No, no,—it is only that I cannot help thinking about yesterday."

"My darling, suppose I had been drowned."

[150]

"Drowned—" and she stopped and turned to him in blank horror. Then she lifted her eyes to the chill, blue sky above them. A new world was opening on her. She might have been left alone on its threshold, left alone to struggle with the problems of life and death, and human mysteries with which she had been confronted in her swift transition from girlhood to womanhood.

She could not answer him, and with a dumb and mournful gesture continued her walk.

"Death is to a Christian only the closing of the eyes," he went on, softly, "a waking up in an atmosphere infinitely more happy than any earthly one."

She brushed away the tears from her eyes. She did not understand him.

"My body would have been in the river, my soul with God."

"And I,—what should I have done?" she asked, wildly.

"Derrice, do you know what I resolved yesterday?"

"No, Justin."

"That, God helping me, I would leave no stone unturned to secure your soul's salvation."

"My soul's salvation,—am I then so wicked?"

[151]

"No, no, not wicked, but almost spotless and innocent to human eyes, yet all—all are guilty in the eye of infinite holiness."

"If I had been drowned in Southern California, where would my soul have been?"

A mute agony took possession of him, and in spite of the icy wind great beads of perspiration stood on his forehead. "I do not wish to pain you," she said, earnestly, "but I want to know. Am I to go to one place and you to another?"

After a time he found his voice. "Day and night I have no peace. Walking the street, sitting at home, in the midst of my business, my heart goes up to God,—save my darling from the lions."

"Then your religion is stronger than your love?"

It was. His Puritanism was ingrained with his very being. "My love is stronger on account of my religion," he said, warmly. "Can you not understand that reverence for God and a pure system of faith heighten and do not lessen one's moral obligation toward one's fellow creatures?"

"It has a reasonable sound," she said, wistfully, "but I do not understand fully about these things. Will you teach me?"

There was a flash of worshipful affection in the granite-coloured eyes behind his glasses. He enwrapped her in one ardent look, then, in subdued, glad eagerness, he launched himself on an explanation of the various tenets of his faith.

Not a word was lost on her. In a silence varied only by a brief occasional question, she walked slowly by his side over the lonely road, until finally they turned and retraced their steps toward the town. [152]

He escorted her to his own door, then he left her, and she thoughtfully went in, and telling Mrs. Prymmer that her son had gone to the hotel to meet some mill official, she abstractedly partook of dainties urged on her by her staunch friend and admirer, Captain White.

"Will you please tell me when you are going to have your prayers this evening?" she said to him after supper.

He gave her a brief "Certainly," then, sitting down opposite Mrs. Prymmer, he devoted himself to summing up accounts in a note-book.

At ten o'clock he ran up-stairs and knocked at Derrice's door.

"Coming," she replied, and made haste to descend with him.

She had not before been present at this ceremony of family prayers, and to her unaccustomed eyes Mrs. Prymmer, Captain White, and the maid servant Mary seemed to be engaged in a kind of contra-dance, in which they walked to and fro, seizing certain books and certain chairs, and arranging them carefully in certain places.

"Have some books," said Captain White, handing her two, as she sat down in the place indicated by Mrs. Prymmer. [153]

The first one given her was a hymn-book, and Mrs. Prymmer, selecting a trifling and unimportant jingle of religious rhymes, began in her hard voice, and with only slight assistance from Mary and Captain White, to utter a succession of unmelodious sounds. The hymn was not a success, and Derrice was glad when it was over.

The Scripture reading was announced from Jeremiah. Derrice, having never before heard of the weeping prophet, gazed helplessly at her mother-in-law, whose eyes were glued to the ponderous family Bible on the table before her.

Captain White politely found her place, but the prophecy was unintelligible to Derrice, and she fluttered over the leaves of her Bible until she came to the Song of Solomon. Here was something interesting, and in a few minutes she was utterly oblivious of her surroundings until aroused by a gentle tug at her dress from Captain White. They were all on their knees but herself. She hastily slipped down and listened to the words pouring from Mrs. Prymmer's florescent lips.

The good woman was praying for a brace of reprobates,—two beings ordained to everlasting and eternal punishment unless they indulged in a speedy and effectual repentance. Derrice, in mild wonder, followed her, until the startling discovery dawned upon her that she herself was one of the subjects of the petition. She was the stiff-necked sinner, the scorner of grace, the vessel doomed to everlasting wrath. And was it Captain White who was to go down to destruction with her? She cast a glance toward him, and was answered by a reassuring nod. [154]

"She don't often get the chance to hold forth," he whispered, behind his uplifted hand. "Justin usually takes charge."

Derrice felt herself growing angry. How different was the mother from the son! She indignantly got off her knees and sat in her chair, and when the others rose she confronted Mrs. Prymmer with a stormy brow. Only waiting until Mary left the room she exclaimed, "You were talking about me just now—"

"About your immortal soul," said Mrs. Prymmer, pursing up her lips.

"Don't you do it again," said Derrice, wrathfully. "I will not be called by those names. You ought to be ashamed of yourself," and she swept out of the room.

"Serves you right, Hippolyta," remarked Captain White. "You brought it on yourself."

Mrs. Prymmer's countenance expressed unmitigated indignation.

"Hadn't you better give up that style of praying?" he inquired. "It's a trifle old-fashioned. They don't herd sinners into the kingdom that way now, and besides, see what poor success you've had with me. Twenty years you've been praying at me, and I drink, and dance, and fight just the same as ever. 'Pon my word, it makes me want to act worse to listen to you." [155]

Mrs. Prymmer was not convinced. She began putting out the lights for the night, thinking thereby to force her cousin to beat a retreat into the hall.

"Quit that," he ejaculated. "Am I a twenty-dollar-a-week boarder to have the gas turned off in my face?"

"I didn't mean to rile you, Micah," she said, immediately lighting up again.

"All right, Hippolyta,—I'll not be long. I just want to discuss this reprobate business. You've got to stop calling me names. If you can't pray like a lady you can hold your tongue."

"Micah," she stammered, "it is for your soul's good."

"Soul be fiddlesticked! Can you doctor a sick soul when you send a body's temper flying all over the place?"

"I—I don't know."

"Well, you find out. Sister Negus doesn't pray that way, nor Sister Jones, nor Sister James, nor any other sisters that I can hear of. It's just your darned old-timed way of holding sinners over [156] the pit to see 'em squirm. Now, will you let up on it?"

"Micah, it is hard to teach an old dog new tricks."

"Then the old dog can go lie down in a corner and hold his tongue. Will he now, or shall I go down to the hotel where the waiters won't be running at me with hymn-books and Bibles?"

"Micah, when Justin's away I'll just read the Scriptures and not pray."

"All right, peony face, I'll stay," and, clapping her heartily on the shoulder, he took his hat and went for a stroll through the town before going to bed.

Derrice went into her husband's room, and, taking his Bible from the stand by his bed, carried it up-stairs.

When he came in a few minutes later he found her sitting by a table in her sitting-room, deep in the story of the creation.

"Who wrote all this?" she asked, looking up.

It seemed almost incredible to the young man that she should not be professing an ignorance she did not possess, yet he knew that she was honest. The Bible had not entered as a factor into her wandering life. He was a product of religious elements, she of worldly ones. In her training religious obligations had been ignored. She was a sweet moral blossom only; it rested with him to [157] add the fragrance of religion to her other attractions.

"Shall I read to you, dolly?" he said, in quiet delight; and, taking the book from her, he explained its source and inspiration, and then plunged into the recital of God's early dealings with men.

He read on and on, until he had finished Genesis, his wife meanwhile making no comment, but listening with a flushed and eager interest.

He paused when he reached Exodus, but a gesture from her urged him on. At last she took the book from him. "You are getting hoarse, I will read to you."

It seemed to Justin that he would never grow weary. The exquisite glow of happiness that pervaded him would keep him awake till all hours of the night, yet after a time he felt himself flagging; and, seeing that she was unwilling to go to bed, he slipped to the sofa for a brief nap.

After what seemed to him a few minutes, he opened his eyes. But the night was over. Daylight was creeping into the room; and there at the table still sat Derrice, her head dropped on her arms, the book pushed from her, and the gas burning in a sickly glare above.

He sprang up and shook from him the rug she had carefully tucked about him. She was asleep, and her hands were cold. The fire had long ago died out, and the room was chilly. She had not [158] been able to tear herself from the book, whose pages were full of such entrancing novelty. It was open at the account of the crucifixion. The thin leaves were blistered and her cheeks were tear-stained. Stumbling over the law and the prophets, she had probably turned to the New Testament for clearer reading. Perhaps, too, she wished to see for herself whether the prophesied One had really come, and what was the manner of his coming.

His own eyes grew moist. He softly dropped the rug over her shoulders, and set himself to the task of rebuilding the fire. Intense gratitude and thankfulness and such a flood of tender emotion overspread him that he could scarcely control himself. When a blaze sprang up from the wood, he rose and hurriedly paced the room. His ardent looks, like rays from burning glass, played over the head of the sleeping girl, and at last she stirred with an uneasy mention of his own name.

He was at her side in an instant, soothing her and kissing the heavy, swollen eyelids, but she seemed only partly aware of his presence, and writhed in his arms as if in bodily pain.

"Oh, it was so horrible, here alone in the night! Why did they kill Him? He was so holy!"

Justin gave her only the mute consolation of his presence. What words of his could soften the old, [159] old tragedy of the cross,—so familiar a story to him, so startling and awful an occurrence to her? Alone in the midnight hours she had read the account of eye-witnesses, and their words had entered like iron into her sensitive soul.

"I heard something of it in a church once," she said, with closed eyes, "but I did not dream it was like that. Oh, how wicked they were! I would have fought for Him had I been there."

"His kingdom was not by the sword, my darling."

"Oh, I am so tired," she said, wearily, "so broken-hearted!"

"But you believe it?" said Justin, in a trembling voice. "It appeals to you as the truth?"

"Oh, yes, yes, that is truth. But they killed Him."

"He rose again, my darling. Did you read beyond the crucifixion?"

"No, no."

He reached past her for the Bible; and, in a solemn ecstasy, reverently unfolded to her the marvellously sweet and beautiful occurrences of the first day of the week so long ago.

Her distress left her little by little, and when he concluded with the words, "And they were continually in the temple praising and blessing God," she started up. "Now I understand. It was

all planned. What those men called prophets spoke was all true. But, Justin, why have I never heard before? It is so wonderful, so astonishing! My father must have read this book,—he never told me." [160]

Justin was silent. This book was a sealed mystery to her father. He did not care to know what was in it.

"Derrice," he said, at last, "when I married you I knew that I could not keep you wholly to myself. There are people who will tell you to beware of this book, that its teachings are narrow and hard to obey, that it is the work of men's hands, but you,—you see its divine origin. Now you are armed, I do not fear for you."

"I believe that there was never a man like this man," she said, softly, "I never heard of any one like Him; not even you, dear, dear Justin, though you are so good."

In unspeakable happiness he scrutinised her suddenly calm face, then murmured, "You love Him, you will serve Him?"

"Yes, yes, and I will not believe anything against Him; you will teach me more things, Justin. Will you tell me why some of those good people were so bad?"

"Ah, the deficiencies of the saints," he muttered. "Discrepancy most puzzling to human minds. Yes, I will teach you, little one, and you, too, will teach me many things. I am not the perfect being you think me. I, too, wish to improve, to become more compassionate, more tender, more like our Great Pattern. But what a load is off my heart. Your feet are on the everlasting rock, my Master will be your Master." [161]

"Is this your rock?" she asked, laying her hand on the Bible.

"Yes,—the rock of our forefathers, the foundation on which the prosperity of New England is built, the rock scorned by unbelievers."

"It is a good rock," she said, seriously. "I have heard of the forefathers of New England. I have married one of their sons. I choose his faith."

Justin, overcome and subdued by the unutterable joy that had come upon him, rushed to his own room. He did not wish to break down before her. Later, he went down-stairs, and carried to the morning devotions, through the breakfast hour, and to his place of business, a face that was absolutely radiant. He was walking on air. A holy calm brooded over him, and in his manner was such an exquisite and gentle sympathy that even those men who had the briefest business transactions with him went away with a feeling of refreshment, and a frequently expressed opinion that young Mercer was growing more like his father every day.

CHAPTER XIII.

[162]

A DINNER-PARTY.

A week later Miss Gastonguay was giving a dinner-party. She had begged the favour of Mr. and Mrs. Mercer's company, and Derrice at the present moment was standing before her husband's wardrobe.

"Don't you have an evening suit, Justin?"

"No, little girl."

"You must get one," and she surveyed his light trousers and black frock coat.

"Do I look badly?" he asked, in some anxiety.

"No, you are very manly and good-looking, and your feet are well-shaped, though the soles of your boots are a trifle thick, but I shall have to change my gown."

"That overpowering creation," and he stared admiringly at her cream satin dress,—a triumph of some foreign dressmaker's art.

"Yes; we are too strong a contrast. I shall not be long."

"I am sorry to give you this trouble, Derrice."

"It is not a trouble. I am satisfied since you have seen how grand I am," and laughing gaily, she caught up her train and ran away from him.

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Justin in the utmost satisfaction descended to the hall and put on his overcoat. Derrice was becoming more and more in love with him every day. He certainly was a very happy man, and in beatific silence he gazed at his mother, who was standing in the dining-room doorway, divided between gratification at his invitation to French Cross and annoyance that she should not be included in it.

"I suppose you know this is prayer-meeting night," she said.

"Yes, mother."

"You can't go to it."

"Why not?"

"Why, you are going to a party."

"I can leave the party."

"Will she go?" and Mrs. Prymmer designated Derrice, who was coming down-stairs.

"I think not."

"Well, I'll see you there," and she went back to her well-spread table, where Captain White was rioting among supper enough for a dozen men.

"Has the carriage come?" asked Derrice, when her husband, after running his eye approvingly over her ruffled muslin gown, laid his fingers on the door-knob.

He blushed slightly. "I did not order one. I thought perhaps you would not mind taking a car."

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She laid her hand on his arm with a pretty, confiding gesture, and said, as they passed out the doorway, "You have some reason for wishing to economise."

He reluctantly admitted that he had.

"Tell me," she whispered.

He hesitated. "You will be sure to learn of it."

"I wish you to tell me."

She was sweet and womanly, yet insistent. How she was developing, this young wife of his, and pressing her little hand closer to his heart, he said. "There are some debts hanging over me."

"Whose debts?"

"My late stepfather's,—Zebedee Prymmer. He was a lawyer here, who made a failure of the end of his life."

"In what way?"

"He ran away," said Justin, as hurriedly as if the words scorched his lips. "He invested trust money in speculations of his own and lost. He would have been prosecuted had he remained."

"And you are trying to return this money to people who gave it to him?"

"To their heirs."

"And he was only your stepfather?"

"My mother's husband."

"He was a villain," said Derrice, with animation.

[165]

"A semi-villain. He hoped to return the money."

"That is villainy."

"Yes, of a certain kind."

"Some of those people in the Bible were also villains. Jacob was a sneak, David was a murderer, and Solomon ought to have been shut up in prison."

Her tone was severe, and Justin forbore to answer her.

"Yet God loved them," she went on, reverently. "Justin, how wicked can we be, and yet escape consequences?"

The wind was bitterly cold, and he paused to wrap her cloak more closely about her before answering. "We must not consider that question. One can love and serve God, fall into sin, and repent. Our finite minds cannot take in the depths of his compassion."

"Did your stepfather repent?"

"It is not for me to judge him, but if he did, we received no word of it. His attitude was that of an injured man, and when he died, after a few years of exile, he left us his body as a precious legacy. We had him brought home and buried, and I hope his soul is with God."

"Curious," said the girl, under her breath. "Justin, are we all links in a chain? I must walk to-night to help pay the debts of a man I never saw."

"You shall not walk if you had rather drive." [166]

"Hush, my husband, and put up your hand to stop that car."

Not many minutes later they were walking briskly up the avenue leading to French Cross. The old château was brilliantly lighted. Miss Gastonguay loved to entertain the people who pleased her, and Prosperity, throwing the door wide open to Derrice and her husband, begged them to walk up-stairs, where his brother Tribulation smilingly assigned them to respective dressing-rooms, and presented Derrice with a loosely tied bunch of carnations.

Derrice, in secret amusement, was obliged to summon her husband to her assistance, in arranging a refractory ruffle.

"Why is it," she whispered as he gropingly tried to fasten a pin over one of her smooth shoulder-blades, "that one sees no women servants about this house?"

"Because," he whispered back, "Miss Gastonguay is a rabid champion for men. She says one hears nothing but arrangements for women's homes and asylums, and women's work of all kinds, and she believes in looking out for some of the neglected ones."

Derrice put her flowers to her diverted face, and together they went down-stairs.

The night was an unpleasant one, and the sight in the drawing-room was one calculated to cheer two people who had just struggled through the mud of the avenue. [167]

The long room was flooded with soft lamplight. Chelda, sinuous and graceful, was standing on the white fur hearth-rug, talking to a tall, lanky young man with a sallow face, whom Derrice knew to be Capt. Sam Veevers,—his title a legacy from a brief time of service in one of the regiments of his native State of Kentucky.

Mr. Huntington was in a far corner of the room, his hands crossed behind him, his resplendent head shining against a white window curtain, as he talked to Aurelia Sinclair.

Derrice was glad that she had not worn her gleaming satin. Neither Mr. Huntington nor Captain Veevers was in evening dress. Aurelia wore an old-fashioned, high-necked purple "silk shiver" gown, Miss Chelda one of figured velvet, while Miss Gastonguay had on a kind of men's smoking jacket.

"Well, young people," she said, coming forward, watch in hand, "you are five minutes late. A bad way to begin your married life."

"We are five minutes early," said Justin, seriously, but respectfully, as he drew out his own watch.

"You are a bold lad," said the maiden lady, "to try to beard a lioness in her own den."

"I appeal to the rest of the company," said Justin.

Captain Veevers and Mr. Huntington drew out their watches. Miss Gastonguay would not believe them until she had had all the clocks in the house consulted. Then she admitted herself mistaken, and asked Justin's pardon. [168]

"You are one of those uncomfortable people," she said, wagging her head at him, "that one always finds in the right. I should hate to live with you—don't you?" and she wheeled suddenly toward Derrice.

Derrice, to her husband's mingled delight and anxiety lest others should perceive the resemblance, wagged her light head in the same fashion that the old lady wagged her grizzled one. "Yes, but I cannot get away from him."

The girl's tone was so ludicrous that every one smiled except Chelda, who favoured her with a long and searching glance. She wished to discover whether she loved her husband. She could not tell. Justin was impassive, and Derrice was conventionally girlish. She would leave the question open for future consideration.

"Come, let's go to dinner," said Miss Gastonguay. "There is Prosperity swaying his head like a Chinese idol. Give me your arm, Justin Mercer. We will pretend we are royalties and go ahead. The others may follow."

Justin was not comfortable during the dinner, although he went through it with a composed face. [169] His life hitherto had been so quiet, his wants so simple, that this elaborately served meal made him impatient, almost irritated. He begrudged the length of time spent at the table, and inwardly disapproved of the amount of money represented by the hand-painted china, the gold and silver dinner service, and yet, when he glanced at his wife's happy face, he became calm.

"Some men would spoil her," said Miss Gastonguay, in an undertone, "you will discipline her."

Justin did not look up from the plate on which he was eating something out of season, he scarcely knew what it was.

Miss Gastonguay was gnawing a chicken bone with her strong, white teeth, although she would have warmly recommended any one else who should do such a thing to leave the table.

"And she will discipline you," she went on, in the same tone. Then, as he did not reply, she became impatient with the bone, and, dropping it on her plate, called for a fresh napkin to wipe her fingers.

"She looks like a doll," she continued, after a time, "but if she is what you say she is, you'll not find any doll's blood in her."

Justin smiled. "She is brimful of character; she reminds me of—"

"Well?" said his hostess, picking up her napkin and holding it over the lower part of her face. [170]

"Of you."

She dropped the napkin. "You want to flatter me, and I—old fool—like to hear you." In her interest she raised her voice, and every one at the table looked at her except Chelda, who, with the briefest, most surreptitious flash of her eyelids, continued an animated flow of talk addressed to Captain Veevers.

"Nothing, good friends, nothing for general entertainment," said Miss Gastonguay, waving her hand. "My voice ran up because I thought I heard Captain Veevers make a remark, and I wished to drown him."

Every one looked amused but Derrice. Captain Veevers's taciturnity was a standing joke in Rossignol, and it was said that only the general-in-chief of an army, or the chief judicial officer of the nation, could wring a whole sentence from him.

The Southerner subdued the slight crease that formed itself about his silent lips, then he again turned his sallow face toward his brilliant neighbour. He was deliberately and calmly in love with her, and his chief pleasure in life was to hear her talk.

Miss Gastonguay could not help discussing Derrice, who had been thrown like a bombshell into her quiet life. "What a contrast she is to Chelda," she purred in Justin's ear. "My niece is a woman of the world; your wife is an emancipated baby. Chelda is devoted to me, and will be jealous of [171] any attention I bestow on an outsider. I wish they could be friends. I suppose we could not tell her?" And the wistfulness of an advancing old age that would fain lean upon youth crept into her tone.

Justin was alarmed. He had confided his secret to Miss Gastonguay as he would have confided it to another man. He had supposed her strong-mindedness to be invulnerable, and now she was proposing to unfold this secret to some one against whom he had a secret and unconquerable prejudice.

"Most decidedly not," he replied.

"You are a time-seeking, mercenary young man," said Miss Gastonguay, slapping about on her plate an unoffending morsel of potato. "You favoured me with your great mystery in order that I might remember your wife in my will. I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Any one who shirks a duty is sure to suffer for it sometime or another," he said, calmly, "but I am not afraid of your forgetting that my wife has an equal claim on you with your niece."

"Well, I shall have a thorny road to travel," said Miss Gastonguay, with unexpected submission. "Chelda will rebel."

"I beg that you will give her no cause to do so. My appeal was made to you for protection in the event of my death. There is no favour I am willing for my wife to accept from you now, beyond a friendly recognition. You can understand that I wish her to lead a quiet life." [172]

"I like her," said Miss Gastonguay, stubbornly. "I shall do what I please for her."

Aurelia Sinclair, who was Justin's left-hand neighbour, suddenly turned to him with some curiosity painted on her transparent face, and warned that he was carrying on a dangerous conversation, he abruptly addressed a question to her.

"Where is the pudding?" said Miss Gastonguay, suddenly.

The joints had been removed, and a long and awkward pause had ensued. Tribulation stood in the doorway, trying to hide behind and restrain his brother, until Miss Gastonguay's lordly, "Come forward," brought them near the table.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Has the cat run away with the creams and the ices?"

"It's O'Toole, ma'am," said Prosperity, readily.

"Well, what about him? Come, speak out. We have no secrets in this house."

"He's under the kitchen stove," blurted Prosperity, "and the pudding's with him, and we don't know what he's done with the shapes."

"Did you ever hear of the Maine liquor law, my dear?" asked Miss Gastonguay, addressing Derrice with suspicious sweetness.

"Never," said the girl.

"Well, it is a peculiar law. You know there are some States that try to restrain the sale of intoxicants. We don't here. They are as free as water. My cook can order them over the telephone. Unfortunately, he has a weakness for them." [173]

A suppressed smile went around the table, and Derrice saw that some sarcasm was intended.

"There's fruit, I suppose," said Miss Gastonguay to Prosperity; "get us some, if O'Toole hasn't taken it under the stove; and you had better get him out and put him to bed. Chelda, you go look after things, will you?"

The young lady left her seat, and as serenely and gracefully as if intoxicated cooks were every-day occurrences made her way kitchenwards.

"Now what is the matter with you?" said Miss Gastonguay, directing her attention to Justin, who had risen, and was standing beside her.

"I am due at a prayer-meeting."

"A prayer-meeting! What did you accept my invitation for if you couldn't stay?"

"I will come back if you will permit me," he said, in a manner quite courtly.

"Well, go. You will graciously allow your wife to remain?"

"Certainly; we should not have come if she had not decided to do so," and, with a bow, he left the room.

"What about you, Mr. Huntington?" asked Miss Gastonguay. [174]

He shrugged his shoulders. "To tell the truth, I forgot about it when you sent me your note to-day. However, it is only a young people's meeting. I do not need to go."

There was a slight levity in his tone, and Miss Gastonguay, after a keen scrutiny of his flushed face, turned to Derrice. "Do you ever go to prayer-meetings?"

"I was at one last evening."

"What did you think of it?"

"It was very interesting."

"Come, now, tell me what it was like."

"There was a large room under a church," said Derrice, seriously, "with seats. Mr. Huntington was there," and she indicated him as he sat gazing with a softened expression at her.

"Of course; what next?"

"He read a hymn and some one played an organ accompaniment and the people sang."

"'Hark from the tombs a doleful sound,' I suppose, or, 'High o'er my soul damnation's waves do roll.'"

"Miss Gastonguay," interposed Aurelia, "those are very old hymns; no one sings them now."

"What did you sing?" persisted Miss Gastonguay.

"We sang something beginning 'Jesus, lover of my soul,'" murmured Derrice. [175]

"Never mind the rest. Tell me how the meeting impressed you. It was your first, I suppose."

"Yes, I never was at anything of the kind before. May I speak freely?" and she doubtfully scanned her audience.

"Of course," said her hostess.

"I am new to what is called religious life. It seemed marvellous to me that men could get up one after another—and even women—and talk so openly of what was in their hearts."

"Cant,—a great lot of it, cant and rubbish. They would cheat you the next day."

"My husband would not cheat," said Derrice, mildly.

"He is an exception."

"I will tell you what I thought," said the girl, encouraged by Aurelia's breathless admiration and Mr. Huntington's subdued interest. "It seemed to me that they were out of themselves,—that their strength to reveal their faults was supernatural. I never before heard people say, 'I am imperfect,—I do not lead as holy a life as I might,' and they were very full of pity. They spoke of doing more good to others."

"Words only, not deeds."

"My husband visits the poor," said Derrice, sturdily.

"Well now, young lady, what do you think of me? I am not religious, I play cards all day on Sunday if I choose. I do not believe in what you call revealed religion. What is to become of me?" [176]

"It would be hard for me to believe anything against you," replied Derrice, with quiet grace.

"But what will become of me when I die? Your preachers send me right down, down, down,—direct. What do you think about it?"

Derrice silently appealed to Mr. Huntington, but he would not reply, though his kind smile urged her on.

"Where am I going?" pursued Miss Gastonguay.

"How can I tell?"

"But you have your little narrow creed all made up. Saints this way, sinners that. I am no saint, yet I am not an out-and-out sinner."

Derrice stirred uneasily in her seat, and earnestly longed for her husband. At last a solution of the difficulty occurred to her. "What kind of people do you like to be with in this world, Miss Gastonguay?"

Her hostess looked around the table. The way of sinners, the seat of the scornful, had never been hers. These people about her board were all serious, thoughtful, and worthy of respect.

"If you like good people," said Derrice, "then you will be with them in the world to come."

"Child, you are too liberal, too generous for your creed. Morality does not save,—I have had that shrieked in my ears ever since I was born. You must have religion." [177]

"Perhaps you have it and do not know it."

"What is religion, according to you?"

"I know very little. I have not learned much yet. Is it not that one must have faith in the Bible, and believe in one God and in his Son?"

"I do not believe in the inspiration of the Bible; it was written by men like ourselves."

Derrice shrank back. "But would you be happy in heaven, then?"

"But would I be happy!" muttered Miss Gastonguay, "and this is the girl I am to remember in my will," and she closed the conversation and abruptly turned to her niece, who had just come in, and was taking her place with an amused, cynical expression of countenance.

CHAPTER XIV. [178]

UNQUIET HEARTS.

Two hours later Justin returned. "You will find the company in the library, sir," said Prosperity, with dignity, as he helped him off with his coat.

On passing through the music-room, Justin found Chelda alone there, playing dreamy waltzes with the intention of bringing Mr. Huntington to her side. She had made a mistake in diplomacy, or, rather, had overlooked a homely maxim, that circumstances alter cases. The flashing of brilliant conversational wit in the face of a rival usually brought the clergyman to her side, and anchored him there. This evening she had failed, owing to Derrice, who seemed to have fascinated, for the time, the man whom she considered to be her own property.

As Chelda softly played, she meditated deeply. But for Derrice she would have received a proposal of marriage in the cupola, from the only person in the universe who had ever touched her cold heart.

Derrice went much to the parsonage, she knew that. She had found a congenial spirit in Mrs. [179] Negus, and ever since the day Mr. Huntington had come to French Cross and besought the interest of the ladies there in his former friend, Chelda had found him more difficult to manage, more unreliable and provoking. How strange it was that he clung so steadily to the rags of his religious life! Would she ever be able to detach them from his nervous grasp? She must make new plans. Her first move must be to make a friend of Derrice, and she gave Justin a gracious bow of welcome as he passed her.

He paused on the threshold of the library. This room was more grateful to him than the drawing-room, with its many lights, and its gleam and glitter of gold. Here the tints were more subdued, more sombre, from the dull rich colouring of the tiers of handsomely bound books.

Aurelia and Captain Veevers were deep in a game of draughts in a corner where Chelda had arranged them. Derrice, sitting bolt upright on a carved bench, was earnestly unfolding some tale to the clergyman, while Miss Gastonguay, buried in the deepest shadow of the room, pretended to be absorbed in a book.

"Come here, deacon," she said, crooking her finger at Justin, "sit in that old cathedral chair and talk about that girl. She has settled her affair with me. You have schooled her admirably. I am marked, labelled, and sent to perdition. This is your last visit to this house." [180]

"Unless you repent,—'While the lamp holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return.'"

"Young man, don't jest. Tell me truly, do you believe that I am going to be condemned eternally?"

"Certainly, if you do not believe in the Son of God."

"Just what your wife says,—little witch,—and this is your Christianity, your loving-kindness."

"Pardon me, it is not *my* Christianity."

"If there is one thing in the world that I hate more than another it is a Puritan," she said, shaking with a hastily evoked wrath.

"If there is one thing that I admire it is a Puritan," he said, coolly, "of late it is so much the fashion to berate them. Puritan is a synonym for priggishness and general narrow-mindedness. The people are mad. Do they forget the stern stuff to which they owe their country, their liberties, their very existence? Away with this sugared sweetness of, 'No matter what one's faith is as long as one lives properly.' I say, one's faith is one's life."

"You are quite excited," said his hostess, becoming calm herself.

"It always excites me. New England is burnt over with heresies. I long for the day of awakening, for the wave of enthusiasm that will spread over this country and bring back the people to the [181] faith of their forefathers."

"You are a fanatic."

"I wish I were."

"You are also an egotist. If you believe what you say you do, if it was really your firm conviction that my soul was in danger, there would be no getting rid of you. Night and day you would roam around French Cross, calling on me to repent."

"True, true," he said, "I acknowledge it with shame. Were I what I ought to be I would leave my desk to-morrow. Paltry worldly affairs would sink into insignificance. I would start on a holy crusade."

"Whereas you sit quietly here and will go quietly to your bank to-morrow, when if you and your church were carrying out the doctrines you profess you would have all Rossignol beating its breast,—but I am wearying you, let us talk on other subjects."

"First, Miss Gastonguay," he remarked, in a lower voice, "let me add a word that I have often wished to say to you. You do not care for me, and I do not blame you, but let me assure you of my respect and interest in you. You only lack personal religion,—will you not submit your heart to God?"

"No, I will not, Justin Mercer."

His face softened still more. "Once, long ago, when I was a boy, I heard my father's voice in the [182]

night. You know what a saintly man he became,—it was his frequent habit to rise from his bed and pray for the souls of his fellow men. That night I heard the mention of your name. He was praying that you might be saved. Miss Gastonguay, I believe you will."

She put her hand to her head. How many more blows was this young man to inflict on her. "I suppose you know," she said, with a sickly smile, "that I might have been your mother."

He smiled too.

"How long ago it all seems, and yet how recent. It might have been yesterday that slim young Sylvester, in his Sunday coat, and with his best stock about his neck, went with hanging head from this house, and my father, red with rage, stood brandishing his cane at him for daring to aspire to the hand of his daughter; while I, poor fool, looked from a window above and laughed. I had so many lovers that I could afford to surrender one. However, I liked him more than I at the time suspected," she went on with more vigour, "though you must not tell your wife any story about a spoiled love match. I have not married because I have chosen to remain single. Middle age and old age are practical. Youth is a far away dream. I did not suffer much, and your father certainly soon consoled himself with a woman better fitted to be a Puritan's wife than dancing [183] Jane Gastonguay ever was. Don't you think so?" and she peered into his face.

Justin, in his stubborn honesty, would not discuss the matter with her. She had flirted with his father and broken his heart, thereby promoting him to saintship gained through much suffering, and he strongly suspected that she had also broken her own heart, and that her peculiarities were the result of this perversion of her feminine nature. She should have married and become the contented mother of a family.

Miss Gastonguay, as if comprehending his thoughts, changed the subject of conversation. "Has my brother Louis any children beside this one?"

"No."

"Who was this girl's mother?"

"A fair-haired German girl with a beautiful Christian character. She was a school-teacher whom my wife's father met in some boarding-house. I gathered from what he told me, that, having learned after marriage what he really was, she faded away and died, first making him promise to carefully educate her child."

"Did Louis love her?"

"He broke down in telling me about her."

"He always had a long head, had Louis. It looks to me as if he deliberately laid a scheme to have you marry his daughter."

"I think he did." [184]

"And you lent yourself to it?"

"I should most certainly not have done so had she been other than she is."

"You have gained a prize matrimonially."

Justin's face glowed. "I am not a man of easy speech," he said, simply, "but I can speak freely to you, and I know you will be interested in hearing that no opinion you can form of my wife will be too high a one. I wish I could describe to you her gentleness and amiability. Little by little she has undertaken the duties of a wife that I was slow to urge upon her. I wished to keep her a happy girl for a time, but the torture of leaving her father brought on a crisis. She began to ask questions, to examine herself, to study me and my relations to her, and now she has put girlhood far behind her, and is getting a firm grasp of things material and spiritual."

"Religion and love," said Miss Gastonguay, with a sigh, "you have both,—or think you have. You ought to be happy."

"We are," said Justin. Then he was reminded of a duty. He first glanced about the room. Captain Veevers's head was bent over the draught-board. He was beating Aurelia now at every game, for her blue eyes had been wandering distractedly toward the music-room ever since Mr. Huntington had sauntered there.

Derrice was engrossed in a book of old prints, and smiled to herself at quaint gods and goddesses [185] riding on clouds, and surrounded by suites of attendants in mid-air.

"Little idiot," said Miss Gastonguay, wrinkling her brow in Aurelia's direction. "Wears her heart on her sleeve. The women here make a simpleton of that minister just because he has legs as long as stilts and hair as pretty as a wig."

"Miss Gastonguay, will you pardon me if I make a suggestion?"

"You may make it,—I don't promise to act on it."

"You have taken a liking to this man," said Justin, earnestly; "you who rarely entertain ministers of any denomination."

"Ministers,—I detest them all! The same type: men old in the work, or fledglings fresh from the theological seminaries,—strict, narrow-minded, uninteresting, knowing nothing outside their denomination, whatever it happens to be, and yet dripping with conceit. Why, this man can talk. He has travelled, he understands music, books, pictures—"

"But, Miss Gastonguay, you are clever enough to perceive that he is at this time undergoing a

severe struggle with himself."

"There is something the matter with him. I don't know what it is. I only see that he goes about with a red face and sulky eyes. He is really losing his good manners." [186]

"Suppose you were to know that it is a struggle between his good and his bad angel,—mind, I tell this in strict confidence."

"Your confidence shall be respected, but how can I help him? I thought perhaps he was in love with Chelda. She usually has a dozen admirers about."

How blinded she was by her partiality for her niece; and Justin could not enlighten her, could not say, "I have studied your niece. With a cunning born of her infatuation for this man, she is deliberately setting herself to wean him from his allegiance to the Church back to the fleshly pleasures of the world."

"Miss Gastonguay," he said, slowly, "the man, as I understand him, is not thinking of love or marriage. You can imagine such a thing as the conversion of the intellect and not the heart?"

"Easily."

"I must not judge," said Justin, struggling to select only the most fitting words; "but I fear it has been something like this with Mr. Huntington. He was shocked into religion, he was convinced of his own sin and the sin of the world, and he has lifted up his voice to save sinners and with success. But now his religious duties pall upon him. I have opportunities of studying him [187] intimately, and I fear he is about to break down."

"This is very shocking, but less so when one considers his upbringing. Let him go back to the world. It will only be one more soul to be lost."

"Miss Gastonguay, you are kind-hearted. Don't think it strange of me if I beg that, for a time, you will not exercise your hospitality so freely with respect to him."

"Hoity-toity, am I a frivolous snare to the rising generation? Go to Mrs. Jonah Potts, young man."

"It is not that,—you understand me. Your surroundings remind him of former days. If he is left to his flock for a time he may—"

Miss Gastonguay would give him no promise. "Stop, Justin Mercer, there is your wife closing her book; it is time for you to take her home."

Justin got up, waited until Derrice said good night, and then followed her from the room. Captain Veevers took charge of Aurelia, Mr. Huntington remained leaning on the piano and listening, without speaking, to Chelda, who played interminably.

Derrice was very quiet on their way down the avenue, and Justin at last asked the question, "Did you enjoy yourself, dolly?"

"Oh, yes,—I go out so little now that I appreciate small pleasures,—not that I am unhappy," she added, clinging closer to him. "Oh, no, I like to live quietly. I was thinking of Miss Chelda. She [188] was so sweet, asking if she might come soon and see me, yet I have an impression that she does not like me. She seems to be always watching me."

"She reminded me of a snake as she moved about the room in that spotted gown," said Justin, musingly.

Derrice, at this, laughed so heartily that Aurelia, coming behind with Captain Veevers, begged to know the cause of her mirth.

"Only a ridiculous speech of my husband," she said; "not worth repeating."

Justin paused, in order to allow the others to catch up to them. How strange were the differing mental characteristics in one family. Derrice and Miss Gastonguay were singularly alike in their honest vivacity. Both were incapacitated by their intellectual make-up from understanding the hidden motives of so deep a soul as Chelda's.

Derrice was gazing back at the lighted house. "How delightfully foreign it is!"

Aurelia, too, looked back, but her thought was not of the house, and her thin lips trembled as she murmured, "Yes." Captain Veevers did not speak, but Justin said, decidedly, "I do not like it."

"Why not?" asked his wife, in surprise.

"Because I do not believe in Americans aping foreign architecture. We have our own style, the [189] colonial. Why should we not cultivate that? We are neither Dutch, nor Chinese, nor French. Why should we live in their houses? They do not live in ours."

"I never thought of that," said his wife. "I like the sentiment."

"And educating children abroad," continued Justin, "I think it is a custom fraught with bad results. Boys and girls educated abroad wish to stay abroad, or they come home prating as Chelda Gastonguay used to do of 'perfect Europe,' and 'charming foreign manners.'"

"'If it only came from Paris, darling Paris, lovely Paris,
I would buy it,' said Miss Harris,
'If it only came from Paris.'"

As Derrice chanted the jingle, Aurelia and Captain Veevers laughed and passed by, while Justin continued, "Chelda Gastonguay detests Rossignol. Nothing will hold her here when her aunt dies."

"They have travelled a good deal?"

"Constantly. Miss Chelda was educated abroad. She has always been unhappy here until lately."

"Why does she like it now?"

Justin could not tell her, but Derrice rushed to a satisfactory conclusion. "I believe she likes Mr. Huntington," she exclaimed.

He neither contradicted nor confirmed her assertion, but a sudden relief came over him. In Derrice's friendly liking for the man, might be found an antidote for the subtle influence of her cousin. [190]

CHAPTER XV.

[191]

A FAMILY CEMENTED BY LOVE.

"Hippolyta Prymmer, I've come to ask your pardon. Let bygones be bygones. I've been ugly, and I acknowledge it. I'll try to do better in future. Let's shake hands."

Mrs. Prymmer stood slowly opening and shutting her mouth. Was it really Jane Gastonguay—rich Jane Gastonguay—that stood in her parlour thus humbly suing for forgiveness?

"You see," Miss Gastonguay went on, "there has always been something in our two natures that clashed. I have been the worst, I acknowledge it, and now I want to know if you will forgive me, and come to see me sometimes,—not too often, for it is dangerous to see too much of people."

Mrs. Prymmer usually put her worst foot foremost. Down in her heart were hidden depths of kindness never explored by herself or by others. Something away down there now stirred tentatively. "We were girls together," she said, simply, as she took the hand of her former schoolmate.

"And now we will be old women together. Thank fortune, this scene is over. Where is your daughter-in-law?" [192]

"Next door."

"Ah, she likes that conglomerate family."

"And the minister," said Mrs. Prymmer, dryly. "I suppose it's all right. Married women usen't to run about so much in my day."

"Fie upon you, let others criticise your daughter-in-law."

"You always had a free-hung tongue, Jane Gastonguay," said Mrs. Prymmer, with spirit.

"True, true, you've got the whip-hand of me now, Hippolyta. My niece is out in the carriage, she wants to see your daughter-in-law. We'll run in to the parsonage. Good-bye," and she bustled out of the house.

Derrice was sitting on the well-worn sofa in the parlour of the little house, awaiting the return of the various members of the family. So much at home was she that she had picked up a book and was quietly reading when Miss Gastonguay burst in upon her.

"How do you do, child. Why haven't you been to see me?"

"I don't like to go too often."

"But you enjoy visiting me?"

"Very much indeed."

Miss Gastonguay looked around as if to make sure that she would not be overheard. "You will not tell any one if I favour you with a confidence?" [193]

"Certainly not."

"Well, you remind me of a former dear friend. I like to have you with me. Come to French Cross as often as you will, and never be frightened by my gruff ways."

"And you," said Derrice, playfully, "you also remind me of some one."

"Who is it?"

"My father."

Miss Gastonguay immediately became interested in an adventurous fly who, thinking spring had come, had sallied from his retreat in the wall, and was pursuing a shaky course toward the ceiling.

"Your voice is like his," said Derrice, "particularly when you lower it. I am fortunate in having Captain White to remind me of his appearance, and you to call up his very tones."

There were tears in her eyes, and Miss Gastonguay, suddenly losing interest in the fly, gently patted her head.

"Is there not some one in the hall?" asked Derrice. "I thought I heard a step."

"No, child. You hear my niece in the kitchen talking to old black Rebecca,—tell me about this father of yours."

Derrice was only too glad to do so, and, launching herself on a full tide of happy reminiscences, she soon presented to her interested hearer an almost perfect picture of an indulgent father who had presided over her pleasant wandering life. [194]

At last she was interrupted by the entrance of two demure rosy little girls who came running down the hall to salute her with cries of joyful welcome.

"Well, papooses," said Miss Gastonguay, as she watched Derrice taking off their woollen caps and smoothing back their tumbled hair, "are you not glad to see me?"

"Oh, yes, yes, Miss Gastonguay," they hastened to assure her, "but you don't come so often."

"My niece does."

"Yes, Miss Chelda," they repeated, without enthusiasm. "She comes often. Rebecca loves her."

"Rebecca has cause to," muttered Miss Gastonguay. "I suspect a good many of Chelda's silver pieces find their way into her bag of a pocket," then, sinking back on the sofa, she allowed her eyes to wander about the room.

There were no grand apartments at Number 50 Blaine Street, no luxuries in the way of furnishings and decorations, but the small house possessed something that many of the finer houses of the town could not boast of,—an air of quiet cheerfulness and homeliness that made Miss Gastonguay murmur restlessly, "The woman who presides here is happier than I am." [195]

"You know the history of that eldest girl," she said, when the two children ran away to hang up their caps and jackets.

"Yes,—she was taken out of some dreadful house in this town."

"A house—a den, and in it her childish eyes once witnessed a murder. One would never think it to look at her now. Mary Potts Negus is a genius at rescuing and bringing up children. One would fancy that she had had enough trouble in raising her own and settling them in life."

The two girls soon returned. One of them, Marion, excused herself on the plea of housewifely duties; the other, Bessie, remained with her callers, and in a gentle and motherly manner received the other children as they came in.

The baby of the family, laughing and crowing with delight, arrived first on the shoulder of the eldest lad, who had been giving him an airing on a hand-sled. This child, Bessie drew to the fire, and with careful fingers divested him of manifold wraps, much interrupted during the process by his persistence in throwing his arms around her neck.

Following the baby and the lad came two other boys, orphan twins deserted by their parents and adopted by the charitable Mrs. Negus. They stopped long enough in the hall to pull off the fur [196] caps drawn down over their foreheads, then, with unmitigated pleasure overspreading their freckled faces, they, too, entered the room, and greeted Miss Gastonguay with deference, and Derrice with an air of comradeship.

Miss Gastonguay stared with interest at them, while Derrice said,"What have you been doing to-day, boys?"

"Trying a new sport,—skeeing. You tie things something like toboggans on your feet and you slide down hill like the wind. It's great fun. Will you come and try it to-morrow?"

She was just assuring them that she would do so, when the mistress of the house entered the room. Derrice had much ado to preserve her gravity, though she was by this time well used to the sight of her philanthropic neighbour.

Mrs. Negus was nothing but a bundle of wraps. Broad she was about her shoulders and chest, tapering gradually down to a scant black dress and a pair of small feet. After the unwinding and unfolding of several scarfs, a woollen shawl, and a long veil, she stood revealed,—beaming face, spectacles, and pepper and salt curls surrounded by a heap of newspapers that had fallen from her garments.

"Heat preservers, my dear Miss Gastonguay," she said to the elder of her callers. "When I dress to go out, I run some *Expresses* up my back and a couple of *Globes* over my chest. Then I am a [197] Republican-Democrat, and between the two political parties you have no idea how warm I keep. Bessie, will you please look in the dictionary and see what 'napiform ' means. I met Cousin Jonah Potts to-day, and he muttered something about my being 'napiform.' I know he doesn't approve of my style of dress, but as I am rheumatic I have got to stick to it, for who would attend to my family of mixed pickles if I were taken away?"

"Who, indeed?" said Miss Gastonguay. "There's no one in the town would put up with them, but you, Mary Potts Negus."

"Napiform," said the child, slowly reading from a dictionary that she had taken off the bookcase, "from the Latin *napus*, a turnip, and *forma*, a shape. Having the shape of a turnip, or swelled in the upper part and becoming more slender below."

Mrs. Negus shook her curls. "Saucy Jonah! if any one else had said that about me he would have been angry. Now I'll go up-stairs. We all have a bad habit of rushing into the parlour when we come in. We go so fast when we are out that we have to sink down into the first resting-place we see when we get home. Bessie, my dear, did Marion put extra tea in the teapot?"

"Yes, auntie."

"And get a clean cloth?" [198]

"Yes, she did."

"Well, cut some cake, not in too large pieces, and I'll be down presently," and she was about to dart toward the door when Miss Gastonguay recalled her.

"Mary Potts Negus, I'm not going to stay to supper."

"Now, now," and the little woman exhibited so much disappointment that Derrice laid a pleading hand on her new friend's knee.

"I never do such a thing in the world."

"Make a beginning, then, I'd love to have you, particularly as you send me such good checks for these little ones."

"But I've got my niece here."

"That is no matter; she often comes."

"Very well," said Miss Gastonguay, with resignation. "Go, one of you boys, and send my carriage home."

The twins whipped out-of-doors, and Miss Gastonguay thoughtfully watched Derrice, who had seated herself on the hearth-rug and was tickling the baby's dimpled chin until he shrieked with delight.

"Where's your husband, child?"

"In Bangor," said Derrice.

"And do you always get your meals here when he is absent?"

"Nearly always." [199]

"You must make it up to Mrs. Negus. Her purse isn't very deep and she keeps on adopting children."

"I have written to my father to send me some money for her."

Miss Gastonguay hastily opened her mouth, then closed it again, for Chelda stood before her. "You are going to stay, aunt?" she asked, in slight surprise.

"Yes."

Chelda made no comment, and even went to play with Derrice and the baby on the hearth-rug, but Miss Gastonguay saw from her manner that she was not pleased.

CHAPTER XVI.

[200]

A PARTIAL SURRENDER.

In the midst of Derrice's frolic with the baby, Captain White appeared in the doorway. "Good night," he said, composedly.

"Just as if he were going to bed," Chelda superciliously reflected. This assemblage was becoming altogether too plebeian for her taste.

Derrice turned around in reproachful surprise. "Captain White, I particularly hoped that you would not come."

"Did you, Cousin Derrice? I guess you haven't a monopoly of this house. Mrs. Prymmer's off to a religious tea-party with some of the sisters, and Mrs. Negus, seeing me on the steps and thinking I looked lonely, asked me over. Please give me that baby."

"I am just having a little play with him myself."

"Keep him if you can," said Captain White. "Come, beauty," and he held out his arms to the child. "Look at him now."

Hobbling over the floor, helping himself along by means of a hand and a foot, waving his other hand in the air, chuckling and choking in babyish delight, the tiny creature made his way to [201] Captain White's feet, and attempted to climb up his legs.

The man tossed him to the ceiling, laughing meanwhile at Derrice, who sat in pretended dejection at the baby's desertion of her.

Captain White's twinkling eyes danced over every person in the room. He possessed no organ of reverence. Miss Gastonguay and her niece were no more to him than the humblest persons in the town, and, coolly tripping away to the hall, he engaged in a long conversation with the baby, of which such highly intelligible scraps as "Linktum, toddyum, widdy wee Bootses—" occasionally floated to the people left behind.

"Why didn't you want that man to come?" asked Miss Gastonguay, curiously.

"Because," said Derrice, "we become so riotous when he is here. He is like a magician among the children, and they get so noisy and I—sometimes I forget to be as dignified as a married woman ought to be."

"Where did that baby come from?" said Miss Gastonguay. "I haven't got on the track of this latest one."

"Nobody knows. Captain White brought him here. His past history does not matter, Mrs. Negus says, for he will be well looked after now."

"Good for you, Cousin Derrice," said Captain White, returning unexpectedly. "Some women adore [202] a mystery. They fork it over and look under and over it, and smell about it to see if they can't catch a whiff of something more than they ought to catch. Now to reward you, I'll tell who he is. I had the pleasure of making his acquaintance down on one of the Boston wharves where he was about to attend his own drowning, and was grinning like a Chessy cat over it. 'What are you going to do with that baby?' I asked his mother. She was drunk as an owl, and told me she was about to throw him to the fishes. No one would give her work with that great baby hanging on her, and she was too proud to starve him. 'How much will you sell him for?' I asked. She steadied herself against a cask, and swore that she wouldn't sell her own flesh and blood. 'Then give him to me,' I said, 'and I'll take care of him.' The mother spirit cropped up in the drunken witch. She rolled aboard the schooner, asked a few questions as to my character from the men around, then, without a word, put the child in my arms."

Miss Gastonguay was listening in grim interest. Derrice had her face buried in the child's pink neck, and even Chelda exhibited signs of sympathy.

"Go on," said Miss Gastonguay, after a time. "What did you do for the mother?"

"Nothing much," he said, sheepishly. "Only gave her address to some folks who look after such [203] like,—and of course I'll let 'em know how the child gets on."

"Oh, oh, oh, Captain White!" and an avalanche of children descended upon him. "You're going to stay to supper,—you're going to stay to supper,—what fun!"

"Hello, you fellows, get out." And wheeling suddenly, he drove them all into the hall and to the upper regions of the house, from whence sounds of a wild frolic soon floated down below.

"Supper is ready, ladies," said Mrs. Negus, returning to the room. "We won't wait for Mr. Huntington. Hark though, isn't he coming now?" and she ran nimbly to the front door.

It was Mr. Huntington returning from a solitary walk. "We'll go right on, dear boy," said Mrs. Negus. "Please send the children down-stairs, and I'll get them to the table, and do you come as soon as you can."

Mr. Huntington did not look into the room as he went up the staircase. Presently, at his bidding, the merry group of children came filing down, breathing hard and fast, and making vain efforts to subdue their high spirits.

Mrs. Negus scanned them through her glasses, shook her head till her curls danced, and said, apologetically, to Miss Gastonguay, "They are always frisky in frosty weather." [204]

"So are my horses," said Miss Gastonguay. "And remember, Mary Potts Negus, that I was once a child."

Mrs. Negus marshalled her family to the table, requested Captain White to take the baby to Rebecca in the kitchen, then invited Miss Gastonguay to say grace.

"I'll not do it," said her guest.

"Captain White, then," said the little woman, again nodding her head.

Captain White also refused, so she was forced to ask for a blessing on the food herself, which she did with great amiability and reverence.

When a few minutes passed and Mr. Huntington did not come, she sent one of the twins for him.

"He was reading," said the lad; "he had forgotten all about supper, but when I told him who was here he wouldn't come."

"Flattering for us," said Miss Gastonguay, with such appreciative irony that the children, thinking a joke was intended, laughed uproariously.

Captain White in some anxiety was surveying the table. There were on it sundry stacks of bread and butter, that would fly like chaff before the whirlwind when the boys got at them, a small pyramid of cheese cut in squares, and only part of a plum loaf in wedge-shaped pieces. Miss [205] Gastonguay, as the most honoured guest, had been asked to carve, and sat in composed gravity behind a joint of cold beef that, judging from its appearance, had already figured at the dinner-table. She was also, being unused to planning, carving it in too generous slices.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," he remarked, "but you're not going to make this spin out. This family is larger than usual this evening."

Sensitive, gentle Marion quivered with excitement. She it was who had proposed having the cold meat for supper.

"Cheese is good enough for a relish," Mrs. Negus had said during the progress of a somewhat impassioned interview in the pantry.

"But those people are accustomed to late dinner," Marion had pleaded. "I think we ought to have meat and potato for them."

"Well, you may have the meat," Mrs. Negus had said, "but you can't have the potatoes. If they want dinner at night let them stay at home. I am very glad to see them, but they must accommodate themselves to our ways. Bread and butter and cheese and apple sauce are good enough for anybody."

And now the beef was going to give out and Marion would be covered with confusion, for Aunt [206] Negus would be sure to say, in her good-natured, stubborn way, "You shouldn't have proposed it."

"I have a plan," said Captain White, his downcast face clearing as he watched Miss Gastonguay's knife wandering vainly around the promontories and head-lands of the joint, searching for meat and finding none. "Pass me the plates, children, I'll doctor them."

When they stood in a row before him, he seized a fork, and expeditiously lifting the slices from one plate to another, got at last an equal quantity on each one. "Now we ought to have some potatoes. I'll fry some. Marion, come help me."

"Micah White," ejaculated Mrs. Negus, "you impertinent boy."

"I saw them in the pantry," he said, "a whole dish full. Here, Cousin Derrice, is another piece for you. I've too much on my plate. Good Aunt Negus, forgive me, and come too;" and as he passed her place he stretched out his muscular arms, lifted her bodily, chair and all, and carried her out to the kitchen with him, she meanwhile clutching at the little cap set over the knob of hair on the back of her head, exclaiming loudly at his foolishness, and trying to control the shrieking crew of children behind her.

"That wild sailor," said Chelda, scornfully.

"He is not as bad as O'Toole," said her aunt. "I'd rather have a sober riot than a drunken one. [207] What, has Derrice Mercer gone, too? She likes a bit of fun. Well, as they have all deserted us, it is not worth while for you and me to stay," and seizing a newspaper she threw herself into an armchair and began to read.

Captain White was addressing Mrs. Negus. "You see, auntie, we must do something to flank that supper. There are the cat and dog to come yet, and also Rebecca," and he pointed to the old black woman holding the white baby and grinning at the invasion of her kitchen. "You draw the line a little short. If you and John Gilpin's wife could have set up housekeeping together you would have died millionaires," and humming, gaily, "She was of a frugal mind," he turned up his coat-sleeves, sliced the cold potatoes rapidly, and tossed them to Marion, who put them into a hot frying-pan.

In ten minutes they returned to the dining-room, flushed and happy, and bearing between them a huge platter of smoking hot potatoes with a ring of fried onions around them.

"Who is for onions?" asked Captain White. "Miss Chelda Gastonguay, you must have some. Great beauty-feeders are they. Ugly girls can become pretty by eating onions—"

Miss Gastonguay suppressed a smile. The sharp-eyed captain had discovered Chelda's disdain.

"Aunt Negus," he rattled on, "don't water that teapot before you pour my cup. I take it stronger than the children." [208]

She paused with the cover of the teapot in her hand, and, after filling his cup, went on with the watering process.

"Auntie's tea-tray looks like the square when a parade is going on," said the more waggish of the twins. "See how the cups are drawn up in battle array. Those that don't take sugar, bayonets at the side,—that is, spoons in saucers. Those that do, present arms,—spoons upright in cups. Then quick, march,—here they come," as she started on their way the rows of cups she had filled with precision as to the exact quantity of milk and sugar desired by each person.

Derrice and Captain White talked to the children. Chelda took what little she ate in silence, and Miss Gastonguay addressed her conversation to Mrs. Negus, who gave her various items of information with regard to a busy life of sewing, darning, baking, shopping, and caring for the children cast off by relatives, but now happy objects of her affection.

After supper, Captain White fled to the attic, pursued by the children and Derrice, who half-shamefacedly said that she would go to keep them quiet.

"She likes a romp," said Mrs. Negus. "She was pretty young to be married." Then following the law of association she turned to Chelda. "My dear girl, I am thinking of that poor boy shut up in his study. He must have one of his gloomy fits on him. Would you think it a liberty if I asked you to take up a supper-tray? He would not be vexed with you, for he likes you." [209]

"I should not mind it at all," said Chelda, graciously, and she followed her to the kitchen.

A minute later, Mrs. Negus, after giving some directions, hurried back to Miss Gastonguay, and Chelda stood gazing at the black woman who was phlegmatically disposing of the remnants of the beef and potatoes.

"Mrs. Mercer comes here pretty often, I suppose," said the young lady.

"Oh, law, yes, miss,—every day an' mos' evenin's, an' I'm always ponderin' an' ponderin' about her."

"What are you pondering?"

"'Cause she's the moral image of a lady I onct knowed."

"Where?"

"In Boston city. Yo know, miss, I was onct a housemaid thar in a boarding-house on Beacon Hill. Law me, them houses roun' about was a sight to see at meal-times. People comin' out of 'em like rats out of holes. Every room plum full."

"Who was the lady?"

"German born, American married. Her husband warn't no good,—he favoured Cap'en White somewhat." [210]

Chelda's face did not alter, but her questions did. They had been prompted by a subtle wish to acquaint herself with every detail of life in the house of the man she loved. Now she was reminded of the conversation between her aunt and Derrice that she had overheard a few hours before, and she at once became keenly interested, and asked, sharply, "What do you mean by no good?"

"I dunno, miss. I jus' heard his wife goin' for him one day."

"Didn't she say what he had done?"

"I jus' misremember."

Chelda drew a dollar bill from her purse, rolled it up and tucked it between some dishes on the dresser.

Rebecca's thick lips moved greedily. "I'll tell you all I know, miss, but I ain't got no more memory nor a badger. She was a German an' her hair was so light it was mos' white. She was pretty, too, and w'en her husban' used to stay out late she'd cry an' talk, but I never heard what she said; but I knew she was good, an' if she cried he mus' be bad."

"Have you told Mrs. Mercer this?"

"Law, no. I asked her what her name was before marriage, an' she said somethin' different. Lan—Lan—"

"Lancaster?"

"That's it; now the name of my folkses was different. Jones or James or some such, so it ain't the same 'ceptin' her mother had a sister, an' she says she hadn't." [211]

"Probably it is a case of casual resemblance."

"Prob'ly, miss."

"I don't think Mrs. Mercer's mother was a German."

"Yes she were, miss, she tole me."

"Indeed—oh, well, it is a coincidence, you had better stop pondering over it."

"I guess I will, miss."

"By the way, what was the address of that boarding-house?"

"Persia Street. I misremember the number, but it's writ down in my Bible. I'll get it," and she hobbled up a back stairway.

Chelda glanced once at the title-page of the shabby volume held open before her, and with an assumption of perfect indifference took the tray that Rebecca made ready for her, and went to Mr. Huntington's study.

"Who is there?" he asked when she knocked.

"Chelda," she replied, in a soft, low voice.

He immediately threw open the door and presented to her his flushed face and burning eyes.

"May I come in? I have brought you something to eat."

"You are very kind," he said, but there was no gratitude in his tone. [212]

"We have missed you;—the table is nothing without you," she said, gently.

"I could not go down," he muttered.

She sat down, and with her whole soul in her dark eyes looked up at him. "You wished to avoid me."

His silence was an answer in the affirmative.

"Have you no pity for me? Do you think I have no shame? Who is there in your church that has your interest at heart as I have?"

There was no one. Her love for him was unwomanly in its forwardness, yet it was sincere.

"Come away from here," she said, pleadingly, "come with me. My aunt likes you. We can go where we will. You need never see this place again."

He clenched his hands at her words, and his face, in his mortal struggle with himself, was more like the face of a beast than a man, yet she did not quail.

"It disgusts me," she cried, springing to her feet and laying a hand on his quivering breast, "the way in which these uneducated people order you about. It almost makes me despise you. Are you willing to pass your life here? Can you be content to live in this poor way—these howling children surrounding you—in these stuffy rooms? You who are so, so—" and her head sank on his arm —"you who would become a palace."

"And after death the judgment," he said, in a husky voice. "Do you know the vows that I have taken? Can you promise me peace of mind after I have broken them?" [213]

"Yes," she said, boldly. "I can promise you more than you have now."

"An easy promise," he said, bitterly.

"Come while you have the privilege," she urged. "They are going to drive you out. I hear complaints. They say your manner is strange, your words severe. Even the saintly Mrs. Prymmer has lifted her voice against you, and yesterday I overheard two of your lambs. They spoke of your coming to French Cross and taking a friendly glass of wine with us. They called you a wine-bibber. It makes my blood boil that such ignorant creatures should have you at their beck and call,—you, who used to be so free."

Her sufferings were as deep, and even deeper than she described them; and making no attempt at disguise, she dropped her hands that he might see how distorted was her own face.

"Two human beings on the rack," he muttered, "and we could so easily put a stop to it. If it were not for the pangs of conscience,—absence will not blot out remembrance. There are some people here that I cannot leave. What would they say?"

A feeling of triumph took possession of her. Formerly his answers to her pleadings had been altogether of his obligations to his Maker. In spite of unhappiness, mental disgust, and seasons of torture, he must struggle on, hoping for light and a clearer understanding. Now he had descended to the lower level. He feared the voice of men more than the voice of God. [214]

"Bernal," she whispered, pleadingly.

She had reached up and put a hand on his shoulder. He did not love her. His whole being was merged in his life and death struggle for the losing or gaining of his soul. Yet she exerted a strange fascination over his senses.

"Poor girl," he murmured, stroking the hair from her hot forehead. "If you were only—"

"If I were different. Ah, yes, for your sake, but I love you, Bernal, I love you."

He could not repel her. It was not in his nature to be unkind to a woman, and she spoke truly. She loved him. Never again would he meet with such devotion.

"Chelda," he said, hoarsely, "I cannot marry you and stay here. You would not be willing. If I were to give up this church, if I were to go to some other—"

"Never, never," she said, vehemently. "You are not fitted for a clerical life. You are too high-strung, too proud. They are killing you here. They would do the same elsewhere." [215]

He groaned miserably. Had the time come for his surrender? This fever of unrest was killing him, and if he persisted in staying he would rend his church in pieces and bring dishonour to the

cause of religion. And yet, in spite of his proposal, he could never leave here to roam from place to place in search of a new flock.

"Chelda," he stammered, "I will decide to-night. Give me a little further time."

She pressed her glowing face against his arm. "No, Bernal, now, now—"

He was about to yield, to give an unconditional assent, when a voice came gently up the stairway, "Miss Chelda, Miss Chelda!"

The impassioned woman trembled in her lover's arms. Always an interruption from that persistent girl. Some day she would be revenged on her.

"I must not keep you," said Mr. Huntington, hurriedly. "I will see you to-morrow."

She went reluctantly from the room, casting a backward glance at him as he turned his nervously working face to the window.

"To-morrow, to-morrow, always to-morrow,—would to-day never come?" She passed a hand over her dark features. They resumed their usual expression of calm disguise, and she rejoined the [216] circle below.

"Yes, aunt, I am ready. Mr. Huntington and I were talking theology. I really think I must become a member of his church."

Mrs. Negus was the only one who received her words with unbounded faith. Miss Gastonguay looked doubtful, Derrice was non-committal, while Captain White winked openly at the hall light.

CHAPTER XVII.

[217]

CAPTAIN WHITE CHOOSES A MONUMENT.

"Now if they were only like the two little nigger boys that used to go to school with me, I could crack their heads together and make them kiss and be friends, but you can't very well do that with ladies," and, in comical perplexity, Captain White surveyed his two cousins,—one genuine, the other by adoption, as the latter quickly withdrew from the room on seeing the former enter it.

"Hippolyta," he said, wheeling around upon Mrs. Prymmer as she established herself in the sunny window, knitting in hand, "that daughter-in-law treats you very civilly now, doesn't she?"

"She does," said Mrs. Prymmer.

"You haven't anything to complain of?"

"No, I haven't."

"She doesn't make fun of you?"

"No, she don't."

"Then for the land's sake why don't you talk to her?"

[218]

Mrs. Prymmer calmly began to set the heel of a sock for Justin. "What have I to talk about, Micah?"

"To talk about,—bless my heart, your tongue runs fast enough at other times. Talk of the weather, the fall of snow, last year's catch of herring,—anything except such cemetery stillness whenever that girl is about."

"Well, Micah," she said, diplomatically, "I'll try to oblige you, but it will be hard work."

"You'll not try," he muttered, "you don't want to,—you're the confoundedest, most stubborn, pig-headedest sort of a woman I ever saw. There's nothing for it but my master stroke," and with a happy indrawing of his breath, he began, "Hippolyta, do you know what I'm thinking of?"

"No, Micah," she said, placidly.

"Well, I'm thinking of putting up a monument to myself."

"A monument?"

"Yes, a good respectable monument. You see I'm alone in the world. Suppose I die to-morrow, what do I leave to remember me by?"

[219]

Mrs. Prymmer did not venture an answer to this question, so he went on. "I'd be wiped out,—forgotten. The hands down at the sardine factories would say, 'He was a finicky boss, we're glad he's gone.' Some of the boys would remark, 'A queer coot that, he always held a good hand at cards, and didn't like to play against the grain of the table.' But for the general public,—now say, Hippolyta, what would keep my memory green with them?"

"Your monument," she said, with a flash of inspiration.

"Precisely; my monument, my good, walking, sober, respectable monument. It would mourn, and it would weep, and folks would see that I was well advertised."

Mrs. Prymmer did not exactly take in his conception of a walking monument, but she held her peace and calmly picked up a dropped stitch.

"Now, in order that my monument should be able to know something of me and take some interest in advertising me after I'm gone, it's absolutely necessary that it should know something of me while I am alive, Hippolyta."

"Oh, yes," she said, as indulgently as if she were speaking to a child whose mind was taking a wandering and aimless ramble into unknown fields of speculation.

[220]

"Therefore, I've got to make acquaintance with it; it has got to make acquaintance with me. Now some people—French people in particular—go and sit in their tombs and look at their coffins. I've no fancy for that. Let my friends attend to all that after I'm gone, but I've saved a smart sum, and I've no objection to cultivating this monument a little bit while I live."

"Micah," said Mrs. Prymmer, in a curious voice, "what is this monument?"

"And what should it be but a nice healthy widow? What better advertisement does a man want after he's gone than a good sizeable woman walking into the biggest church in town with her eyes cast down and her veil streaming after her? Suppose I'm a stranger in a pew, 'Whose widow is that?' I ask. 'Captain White's.' 'Who was Captain White?' 'Potts's boss down at the sardine factories.' 'How much did he leave?' 'So much.' 'What kind of a fellow was he?' 'Not bad.' 'Tombs and gravestones, that's a fine-looking widow. You'll not forget him while she's about.' Do you catch on, Hippolyta?"

She did catch on. He had planted a mine at her feet, he held a match in his hand, he was about to apply it to the fuse, and where would she be?

"Yes," he continued, in assumed dejection, "in order to have this monument I've got to make it fast in my lifetime by the lashings of matrimony. What do you say, Hippolyta, do you think it a good scheme?"

She could say nothing, for she was in utter consternation.

"And then," he continued, reflectively, "I've no objection to a little happiness before I slip over the side of this shaky old ship of Death in Life. I've been watching this son of yours. He likes to be razzled-dazzled, and I'd like to be razzled-dazzled, too, when I come home from the factory after the moil and toil of the day, and the breakneck work of trying to upset every other man in my chase for that last dollar. I'd like to find a comfortable little creature ready to chuck me under the chin and say, 'Lovey dovey, you're the smartest boy of the crowd.'" [221]

This talk seemed immoral to Mrs. Prymmer, yet she was too dazed to resent it. She was going to lose her boarder, and her fingers suddenly grew cold and nervously unplucked the bars of her knitting.

"Lawks-a-daisy!" he exclaimed. "See what you're a-doing, Hippolyta. Here, drop that," and, taking her ravelled work from her, he deposited it on the table.

"Micah," she said, running her tongue over her dry lips, "Micah, who is she?"

"This little monument,—oh, a snug-sized woman a thought over my own age."

"A bold-faced hussy," hissed Mrs. Prymmer.

"Soft, now, soft—don't be hard on her. You may have to live with her, and she's made of the best Maine blue-black slate, warranted to outlast any slate in the world, and that will give you some sharp notches if you run against it." [222]

Mrs. Prymmer's lower jaw got beyond her control, and began to sag hopelessly. If another bride were introduced into her house she might as well be thinking of her own tombstone.

"Come, now, what'll you take her for?" said Captain White, waggishly. "Your lowest bid."

The mention of money was a slight restorative. "Twenty dollars apiece," gasped a cracked voice, "twenty dollars apiece."

"Come, now, Hippolyta, that's hard on her. She'll be as mute to you as a stained-glass window. She ain't like me. She'll never trouble you coming in late at night or nagging about her food."

Mrs. Prymmer angrily hurled a boarding-house sentiment at him, "I'd rather take twenty men than one woman."

"That don't sound proper," he replied, rebukingly, "and shows a staggering amount of ignorance of men-critters. Why, if you knew the badness of me, for example, you'd turn me out of your house to-morrow."

"I don't believe it," she said, stoutly.

"It's true, Hippolyta. If you knew what diabolical, heathenish things men are up to you'd scream from morning to night, and only stop long enough to take refreshments."

Again her husky voice assured him that she didn't believe him. [223]

"Do you believe the newspapers?"

She told him that she did.

"Who writes all those awful things?"

She did not answer, and he exclaimed, triumphantly, "Men,—men write 'em, men do 'em, and worse things,—things so hair-lifting that they dassent publish 'em. If I could reveal to you the secrets of this here breast," and he struck himself a smart blow on the chest, and looked fearfully over his shoulder, "you could keep me from ever raising a monument to myself, for they'd have me shut up in a place where they'd never let me out to choose one."

"Micah," she said, with a shriek, "get out! I'm afraid of you," and she retreated precipitately from him toward the table, where she dropped into a chair.

A sudden change came over her companion. He struck an attitude of exaggerated admiration, and exclaimed, "Hippolyta, you might go on the stage,—I never saw such acting."

In fascinated confusion she stared speechlessly at him.

"You're an astonishing woman," he cried, skipping to the hearth-rug, and extending both hands toward her. "I never saw such nerve, such coolness."

She looked in her lap for her knitting, and seeing it was not there picked rashly at her apron. [224]

"For," he went on, with a final flourish, "bad as I am, black as are my vices, they are a pale cream-colour beside yours, for there is one crime I have not dared to commit, and it lies light as a feather on your soul.

"Why don't you ask what crime it is?" he inquired, after a short period of silence.

She replied convulsively that she didn't want to know.

"But you've got to know. It's for the good of your soul. Hold up your head now, and I'll whisper it in your ear. It isn't a word for housetop use," and, creeping close to her, he uttered a ghostly "Murder!"

She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came from it, and in terrified, fascinated speechlessness she began slowly backing away from him, propelling her chair on its hind legs around the table and followed by him airily perched on another.

Micah had gone crazy. There was no doubt about it. He had no thought of marriage. Her best plan was to escape from the room without irritating him. Now he was silly, and, with his head on

one side, was speaking in a foolish voice, "Cousin Hippolyta, who sits behind the parlour window curtains, pretending to knit, and casting sly looks at the old widowers and bachelors as they go by?" [225]

These were pretty sane words for an insane man, for they described her favourite occupation, and she blushed slightly as she looked away from him.

"Who counts 'em up head by head," he went on, remorselessly, "and reckons up chances of marriage. Who makes eyes at the old men, Hippolyta?"

"Hold your tongue, Micah," she said, hysterically.

"Who goes further than that?" he inquired, in a voice so low that it dropped into an accusing growl. "Who has a prime favourite among the old men? Who forgets what the good Book says about, 'She that looketh on a man and planneth on his sick wife's death is a murderess in her heart.'"

At this merciless exposure of the most hidden secret of her breast, scarcely breathed even to herself, Mrs. Prymmer collapsed. In her progress around the table she had reached the point she started from. Here the upper part of her body subsided in a heap on the table, and she burst into a flood of tears.

"Good girl," said Captain White, patting the back of her head. "I've been wanting to see you do this for many a day. There's nothing so improving as to get down in the gutter with the rest of mankind. You've been too stuck on your own virtues, Hippolyta."

She continued to weep, and finally, to sob bitterly, and he changed the tone of his advice. "Hush [226] up, now, hush up. You can't help your thoughts running ahead to old Deacon Turner's widowship. His wife has got to die. All the doctors say so, and the woman hasn't got sprawl enough to live after that. And you needn't bother with the old deacon. Here's a ready-made bachelor just to hand. It knocks me silly to think, with your nuptial inclinations, you've never singled me out. You never thought of me, because I was your cousin. But it's quite fashionable to marry your cousin, especially in English ports. Hush up, now, Hippy, hush up, I've got something to tell you."

Mrs. Prymmer would not hush up. No one had ever talked to her like this. He had shattered the very foundations of her self-righteousness, and had reduced her to the lowest depths of humility. She felt as if she could never lift her head again.

"Well, then, go on," he said, agreeably, "but keep one ear open for what I'm going to say. I've got my weather eye open in the Turner direction, and I'm not going to let that old man dash in ahead of me. And you're so everlasting quick in your matrimonial didoes that I've got to catch opportunity's forelock. Twice you've got ahead of me and made me mad, though I didn't blame you so much for jumping at Sylvester Mercer, for you were young and giddy. But you showed a most ugly haste in flirting your widow's veil at old Zebedee Prymmer. Bad luck to him, he [227] encouraged you— Don't stick out your hand; I'll run him down all I like,—a low, base cotton-seed imitation of genuine olive oil, singing in his silky voice about 'mansions in the skies,' and then coming out of prayer-meeting to cheat his neighbours like a house afire. Folks say to speak no evil of the dead. I say, give it to 'em. Hold 'em up and rake and rattle 'em. They're where you can't harm 'em, and you may benefit the living. Spare the living, I say, but rap the dead over the knuckles if they have deserved it. Hippolyta, will you be my little monument?"

Her portly frame trembled, and she turned her swollen, comely face toward him, in dazed inquiry.

"Yes, it's you I want to represent me after I'm gone," he said, affectionately stroking her hand. "You, with all your faults. My fancy has run after you ever since you were a dumpling of a girl, with your hair switching down your back, and I'm not going to lose you a third time. I'm sorry you've had such a long spell of this confounded hypocrite business, but I'll knock it all out of you. A little trip around the world, and a little taste of a few devilries, will make you have more pity for your fellow creatures, and you'll save your own soul quicker than you're likely to do now. You've always pretended to be religious, Hippolyta. You've never enjoyed it, you want to be converted all [228] over again. It's hateful, narrow-minded saints like you that keep broad-minded sinners like me out of the kingdom. Do you suppose I'd go into a church with such as you?—not by a long shot. You've got to be made over. I'll help you sow some wild oats, and in the act of reaping maybe you'll repent."

Mrs. Prymmer could not answer him, neither could she lift her head from the table. However, the sense of what he said pierced her clouded brain, and she faintly returned the pressure of his hand.

"That old Prymmer spoiled you," he muttered, wrathfully. "You didn't put on half as much till you married him. Listen, Hippy, till I tell you the way he was converted. The old fellow was rather ashamed of it himself, because it was old-timey, but I got it from a lumberman back in the woods. You remember hearing of the time the New Lights came in and stirred up the Congregationalists?"

Mrs. Prymmer moved her head.

"Well, old Father Bronson, raging through the woods like a converted bear and doing lots of good, be it understood, came upon Zebedee Prymmer's father's log house. He talked conversion and damnation, and clutching up young Zeb held his little squirming carcass over the open fire and asked him how he would like to roast in the bad place. Young Zebedee naturally said he would prefer not to, and then the rascal thought he was converted, though Father Bronson never [229]

told him so. Now that's the way you've been frightened out of your seven senses. You don't want to roast, but bless you, Hippy, that ain't conversion. You want a gentle spirit like your daughter-in-law Derrice, and your son Justin. Do you suppose he could stand your naggings if he warn't a Christian? Not a bit of it,—go on now, and try to be a proper one. I'd like some religion, too. Good life,—it's all we've got here below that's worth having, except a little love from some creature—Hippy, you'll be my little monument?"

"Yes, yes," she murmured, feebly, "but, Micah, maybe I'll go first."

"Then I'll be yours," he said, cheerfully. "But bless you, widows never die. Come on down-town, Hippy, and we'll choose the ring."

"Micah, I couldn't walk. My limbs are as weak as wool. I guess I'll go to bed."

"All right, Hippy," he said, "but don't go so far in your humility that you'll get the pins knocked out from under you. I didn't start to do that. Cheer up, you've got a soft spot somewhere. You'll be a saint yet and wear a crown with seven stars," and he gallantly escorted her to the staircase, admonishing her to tell no one the subject of their conversation.

CHAPTER XVIII.

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A STEP IN ADVANCE.

A week or two went by, and all who came within the circle of Mrs. Prymmer's influence noticed a change in her, although not one of her friends or relatives ascribed the change to its real cause.

She was softened, humbled, and quiet, and Justin, in the midst of his perusal of the evening paper, would often hold it aside and look at her with a puzzled face.

One day the enlightenment came, precipitated by an attack of nightmare on the part of Captain White.

One hour after midnight the family was alarmed by a frantic screaming and a sound of running feet. Justin and his wife, Mary, and nervous and shrieking Mrs. Prymmer rushed to the doors of their respective bedrooms, and found the curious spectacle presented to them of a figure clad in white running, darting, leaping, kicking up its heels, and apparently trying to scale the wall of the lower hall.

"Micah," called Justin, "what is the matter with you? Come back to bed."

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"He's in his bare feet," cried Mrs. Prymmer, tearfully, leaning over the banisters. "Go down to him, Justin. He'll catch his death of cold."

As his relative showed no signs of abating his extraordinary gymnastic performances, Justin was obliged to go down, and the feminine portion of the family hurriedly retreated behind doors as the distracted man was led up-stairs.

Justin found him trembling violently and dripping with perspiration. "What has got into you, Micah?" he said.

"Nightmare, boy, nightmare," replied Captain White, sinking in a heap on his bed. "Haven't had such a thing since I was a boy, and used to dream every night that the devil had got me."

"Was he after you to-night?"

"No, boy, no," and Captain White laid his exhausted head on the pillow. "It was a nameless horror. I don't know what it was. Don't leave me for awhile."

Justin had never before seen his composed relative in so disordered a state, and in quiet sympathy he sat down beside him.

Captain White was silent for a long time, then he started up in bed and shook his fist at some invisible enemy. "I'm blest if I let this happen again."

"What did you say, Micah?" inquired Justin.

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"Nothing, nothing," replied the elder man, evasively. "You can go now, I'll not fall asleep again. I've got some plans to lay for to-morrow."

Justin thought no more of these plans until he was leaving the breakfast-table, when Captain White coolly observed that at eleven o'clock he was going to take the train for Bangor and he would like his cousin Hippolyta to go with him.

Justin turned around in surprise. Mrs. Prymmer blushed and hung her head, and Derrice, with a woman's wit, at once guessed the situation of affairs and had much ado to keep from laughing.

"Yes, I'd like her to go along with me," said Captain White, "there is a little business transaction I want her to figure in."

Still Justin did not understand, and Derrice had to come to his relief. "Don't you see, you stupid boy," she whispered, "they're going to be married."

Justin was thunderstruck. If Captain White had proposed to marry Miss Gastonguay, or one of the rich and haughty Misses Potts, he could not so thoroughly have lost his composure.

"Say something, dear," prompted Derrice. For a minute he could not speak; then, with a ludicrous resemblance to his mother in her moments of embarrassment, he stammered that he hoped they had considered well the step they were about to take.

"I've considered it for nearly forty years," said Captain White, shortly, "but never got further than consideration, the party not being open to proposals."

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Derrice turned to her mother-in-law and impulsively threw her arms around her neck. "He is a dear good man, and will make you as happy as the day is long." Then, to Captain White's secret delight, she shook hands with him, and shyly offered her cheek for him to kiss. "I had rather have you than any one for a father-in-law."

"Come, Hippolyta, we must start," said her fiancé. "Justin will find his tongue by the time we get back."

"He has found it now," said Justin, firmly, "and he bids you Godspeed."

"I guess we can go on with that clerical blessing," observed Captain White. "Now, Hippolyta, run up-stairs and get into that black silk of yours."

"You don't care to be married here?" said Derrice.

"Not by that clip next door," replied Captain White, "and then the boys would roast me to death. Hippolyta and I will keep out of the place for a week or two, and don't let 'em know when we're

coming back. Good-bye."

Derrice and her husband stood in the doorway and watched them depart. With ready adaptability, she declared they would find the new state of affairs a vast improvement on the old. With more worldly wisdom, and with a strange sense of having lost some valued possession, [234] Justin shook his head and foresaw that the change meant a new master for the house, and the consequent removal of himself and his wife. And yet he was deeply attached to his cousin Micah, who certainly had a wonderful and beneficial influence over his mother. It was all for the best. He was glad and thankful, and yet he went to the bank with a drooping head.

Derrice darted into the parsonage and imparted her news with a most gratifying and electrical effect to Mrs. Negus, who sat alone in the parlour over a basket of torn stockings.

After a time, and when they had fully discussed all phases of this surprising occurrence, Derrice seized a darning-needle and a ball of wool, and made haste to assist her busy neighbour. Then her thoughts reverted to the condition in which she had found her. "Dear Mrs. Negus," she said, softly, "you were crying when I came in. I have never seen tears in your eyes before."

"They are not often there," said the little lady, taking off her glasses and wiping them, "but I am sick at heart, dear."

"About Mr. Huntington," said Derrice, in a low voice.

"Yes, dear."

For some time they kept to their work in silence, then Derrice spoke again. "Is there anything we [235] can do?"

"I have thought of talking to your husband, but perhaps I had better leave it to you. I'll tell you how things stand. I have made such a mistake,—such a mistake," and her lips quivered so convulsively that she could hardly articulate.

"We all make mistakes."

"Yes, dear, but this was such a stupid one. I have made mistakes all my life, and I have said, 'Help me, Lord, not to make this one again,' and he does help me, but I tumble into a new one. I will never be fit to live, till I am ready to die."

"You dear little woman, you sha'n't talk that way about yourself. Why, the whole town considers you a saint. Didn't you leave your rich family and marry a poor clergyman, and, not content with bringing up your children well, you just set to work to bring up another family of orphans, and have been so sweet and good that everybody helps you, and your relatives give you money—"

Derrice stopped, choked by her volubility, and Mrs. Negus ejaculated, "It is nothing, nothing, if I could only help this one soul."

"Don't cry, please tell me about it. Perhaps Justin can assist, he is so clever."

The little lady dried her tears, and, speaking rapidly, for she was at all times subject to an irruption of children, began: "He is so handsome, and such an attraction for the girls, that I [236] thought it would be well to have him married. Chelda Gastonguay fancied him,—I knew it from the way in which she began to pay me attention, and I encouraged her, for I thought, Here is a girl who will have plenty of money. She will be able to give him comforts he has always been used to, and that he will never get on his small salary. True, she was not converted, but she began coming to church, and I thought she soon would be, for she would not be able to withstand his burning, loving words. My dear, I must not be uncharitable, but I fear hers is a deadly love. I have studied her, and I see that from the first she deliberately chose that man for herself. She set herself to weaken his religious life, to turn him against his people, and to lead him back to the life he once led. He could not be unkind to a woman,—that is, what he calls unkind,—and he has let her go on instead of sending her to the right-about. She is very clever. I am so frightened of her that I tremble when she comes slipping into the house. I overheard her the other day,—she wants him to give up his church and marry her and go away."

"How dreadful!"

"And worse than that, the love is mostly on her side. She was petting and coaxing him. I was going through the hall and the study door was open. She thought I was out, but I wasn't, and I [237] stopped as if I had been paralysed. He would fling himself away and she would come back with her wheedling ways."

"Would she do that?" said Derrice, angrily. "Oh, how could she? Has she no pride?"

"She is mad about him, and when a woman loses her head about a man she will do anything."

"I would not have her come here. I would forbid her the house."

"The next time she comes I must talk to her. I dread it, but it is my duty. If she would only let him alone for a time he might recover himself."

"He is a coward,—I have no respect for him."

"Ah, my dear, we all have our temptations. We must not be hard on each other. My poor boy is broken-hearted. I knew weeks ago that he was discouraged about himself, but I did not know what it was. I thought he was too sensitive, and I would not let him talk to me. Yesterday afternoon I went to him,—poor boy, poor boy! He has tried to save others, and he is not saved himself. He says his heart has never been touched. After the shock of his friend's death he made up his mind to lead a better life. With grim determination he entered the ministry, but he had not

the power to endure. He has not been born again,—until his whole soul is stirred by divine grace he will not be happy."

"She is a wicked woman to tempt him." [238]

"Pity her, too, dear. She has lived only for her own gratification, and though she has had many admirers she has been cold-hearted."

"He ought to go away."

"Yes; I said that to him yesterday, but he is torn by misgivings. This church is his last hold on spiritual life. The instant he gives it up that girl will marry him. I dread to see him rise in the pulpit now. I fear he will cry out that he is a hypocrite."

"That would be honest."

"Yes, yes, but he thinks of the young trembling souls and hesitates. Many have entered the church truly saved by his faithful ministrations; should he proclaim himself unsaved, they will say, 'Then where are we?'"

"What do you advise, then?"

"He is going away, he says that himself, but if we could only get him off quietly. If some one could go with him. He is not fit to be alone. He walks his floor at night and groans—"

"I will tell Justin at once. This must be attended to," said Derrice. "I know he will find a way out. Now what can I do to help you? I have finished these stockings. Ah, there is the baby crying. I will go take him up," and she ran up-stairs.

Derrice was alone with her husband at dinnertime. In rather deeper gravity than usual he [239] watched her presiding in his mother's place. How dear that mother was to him in spite of her failings, and he hurriedly began a conversation in order to forget the tug at his heart-strings.

Derrice over dessert told him what Mrs. Negus had said.

"I am not surprised," he remarked. "I would have helped him before, if I had had any assurance that I would have been of assistance. Now the time has come," and instead of going to the bank he went to the house next door.

Mr. Huntington was just going out, but on seeing Justin he turned back and preceded him to his study. Then he closed the door and confronted him. His face was worn and there were dark circles under his eyes. He had the appearance of a man on the verge of a serious illness, and yet Justin had never before been so struck by his remarkable physical beauty. Possibly this effect was aided by his involuntary pathos of expression. He had no idea that he was appealing to his junior deacon, that the look in his fine brown eyes was like that of an intelligent and beautiful dumb creature about to receive a blow.

Justin saw it and was profoundly touched. This was no time for exhortation nor for reproof, but it certainly was a time for consolation from man to man. Bernal Huntington had had feminine [240] sympathy. He now craved recognition from a member of his own sex.

"I suppose you have come from the church," he said.

Justin shook his head.

"I have expected you for some time," said Mr. Huntington, wearily, "you who ought to be pastor, and I your henchman. It is to you the people now go for spiritual help. I am not jealous, I assure you. Come,—you have some message from your brother deacons. They wish me to resign."

"I am no formally appointed messenger, yet, now that you mention the brethren with whom I am associated, I may say that, although we have had no consultation, I know every one of them recognises the fact that you are troubled and out of health. Every one of them would be pleased to see you take a brief holiday. You have served us faithfully so far,—no formal complaint is made as yet. On the contrary, you have our deepest sympathy, and I can assure you in all sincerity that, in times when you may feel yourself alone, there are interested hearts watching your struggles and praying for your happy issue out of them."

The young man put out his hand and gripped Justin's. "You understand?"

"I understand," said Justin. "May God help you, my dear brother. I am going to Boston to-night. [241] Will you go with me?"

Mr. Huntington suddenly turned from him and hid his face against the rows of musty books on the wall.

"It was such a good man that used to tenant this room," said Justin, softly. "I can imagine him grieving with you in your perplexities. You will give me the pleasure of your company to-night?"

"I will," said his companion, in a choked voice. "You are going purposely to take me— How can I thank you?" and he groped blindly for the friendly palm that he knew was once more outstretched toward him.

Justin went quietly down-stairs and told the agitated Mrs. Negus that the clergyman was going on a short trip to Boston with him, then, returning to his own home, he broke the news to Derrice.

"What—really going?" she said, growing quite pale and cold.

"Yes, darling; why are you so disturbed? It is what you wished. I am sorry that it is not expedient

to take you."

"Going away," she reiterated; "that means not coming back."

"My dear girl, what are you thinking about?"

"Oh, not you, not you,—but that poor girl, what will she do? If he has reached the point of going away, she will see that it means a parting for ever. Suppose I were in her place, Justin, and you in Mr. Huntington's." [242]

"So this suffering is vicarious; well, you must try to comfort her, and let me suggest that it be not done openly, but in some of the subtle, sweet ways known to your sex. And Mrs. Negus invites you to stay with her while I am gone."

Derrice still remained pale and cold in spite of all her husband could say to comfort her. With a passionate introspection, she comprehended the depths of suffering awaiting the unhappy Chelda.

CHAPTER XIX.

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THE CHURCH OF THE UNITED BRETHREN LOSES ITS PASTOR.

Up at French Cross Miss Gastonguay was playing dominoes with Aurelia Sinclair, who could never be induced to engage in a game of cards.

Chelda sat at a little distance, her hands folded in her lap, a far-away look in her eyes.

Presently Miss Gastonguay good-humouredly addressed her. "You appear so still, child, that I guess you must be restless. Did you expect any one this evening?"

"No, aunt."

"I thought Mr. Huntington said he would be up," observed Aurelia, timidly.

One of Chelda's peculiarities was a most Indian-like unsmilingness. However, at this remark, she favoured her guest with her nearest approach to an amused contraction of her features.

"What do you want, Prosperity?" asked Miss Gastonguay, pointing a double-six domino at him as he appeared in the doorway.

"Miss Chelda, ma'am. The old black woman from the parsonage would like to see her."

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Chelda rose, and walked carelessly to a small reception-room off the hall. She only stayed a short time, and, on coming back, twirled a small note in her fingers, and sank into her former seat.

"There is no one ill at the parsonage, is there?" asked Miss Gastonguay.

"No, aunt.—Mr. Huntington has gone to Boston. Aurelia was right. He did speak of coming here this evening, and has written a line to explain his non-appearance."

"This is surely very sudden," said Miss Gastonguay, curiously. "What does he say?"

"You may read the note."

"Read it to me, child, I haven't my glasses."

"'Dear Miss Chelda:—I am leaving for Boston with Mr. Mercer. I will write from there and express my regret at not seeing you and your aunt.'"

"'Yours truly, B. H.'"

"Very abrupt," remarked Miss Gastonguay, "and very much in the nature of a farewell. Do you suppose he is not coming back? Taking Justin Mercer with him looks like it. That worthy young man may want to convey his body around the world by way of doing good to his soul."

Chelda did not venture any supposition of her own. She stared curiously at Aurelia, whose face had gone from crimson to a deathly pallor.

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Miss Gastonguay's anxious and critical attention was diverted from her niece. "Good gracious!" she exclaimed, "the girl is going to faint."

Before she finished her sentence Aurelia had fainted, and falling forward crashed the inlaid domino table to the floor, and broke a portion of its dainty top.

"Here, Prosperity," called Miss Gastonguay, "some water quick,—and take that table away so she won't see it. Bother the girl, why doesn't she pray and fast less and eat more, so as to keep strength in her body."

In a few minutes Aurelia revived, and in a pitiful, trembling voice apologised for the trouble she had given.

"Fudge and nonsense!" said Miss Gastonguay. "We all have times when if we don't faint we'd like to. Here, drink this; and, Prosperity, go telephone to Doctor Sinclair that his daughter is going to stay here all night. Don't say she doesn't feel well."

"I had rather go home," said Aurelia, feebly.

"You'll stay here. We'll put you to sleep in the Marie Antoinette room off mine, and I'll call to see how you are through the night. Chelda, you see to getting her to bed now. I have some letters to write."

Chelda willingly assumed the care of the suffering girl, who had suddenly become possessed of a peculiar attraction for her. Her black eyes fastened themselves on the pale face on the sofa cushion. Not a look, not an action escaped them, and she made not the slightest effort to control her eagerness as she hung over her guest.

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"Your distress is mental, not physical," she murmured, when Miss Gastonguay and Prosperity had left them. "Tell me about it."

Aurelia, naturally frank, was in her state of exhaustion doubly open to persuasion, and yet her bloodless lips could not frame the secret of her distress.

"It is Mr. Huntington," said Chelda, "you are sorry to think he has gone away."

"Sorry!" and Aurelia made a weak gesture expressive of lack of appropriateness in the adjective. Then, coaxed and allured by Chelda, she whispered a tearful tale of a hopeless infatuation for the young clergyman.

"Did he know it?" asked Chelda.

Aurelia opened wide her innocent blue eyes. "Oh, no, no,—how could he?"

Chelda pressed her handkerchief to her lips. Aurelia herself was the only person in Rossignol unaware of her childishly open admiration for the handsome young man. "How could you reconcile it with your conscience?" she asked, mildly, "to fall in love with a man who never [247] showed you the slightest attention?"

"I could not—I did not," and Aurelia tried to hide her distressed face against the back of the sofa. "I knew it was wrong. I have suffered, oh, how I have suffered! And I prayed about it, but I couldn't seem to help it. He was so—so attractive, and he was in such trouble."

"Did you ever pray for him?" asked Chelda, in her gently inquisitorial manner.

"Every day of my life—every hour."

"Did you tell him?"

Aurelia shrank from her. "How could I do that? We never talked about anything but the Sunday school and the mothers' meetings."

Again Chelda's face contracted with amusement, and, leaving her, she went away to have a bed made ready for her.

Twice a day a woman from one of the neighbouring cottages was permitted by Miss Gastonguay to come in and give to Chelda, who was not a champion for the rights of men, any services that she might require. But the woman was not allowed to sleep under the roof, and Chelda was now in haste to find her before she left for the night.

In a short time Aurelia was comfortably installed in bed. Chelda in morbid curiosity hung over her as long as she could extort a remark from her. But when the sleeping-draught administered [248] by Miss Gastonguay began to take effect, the young lady sought her own room, detained first by Miss Gastonguay, who asked, with determination, "What does this mean?"

"What, aunt?"

"You know. Mr. Huntington's departure. Are you worrying about it?"

"A little, aunt, not much."

Miss Gastonguay had her glasses on, and she looked straight into Chelda's eyes. There was no veil over them now. They had never appeared more clear, more honest, more heart-whole.

"I never understand you," she said, impatiently. "I thought you were beginning to take an interest in that young man. He seems to have been dangling about you a good deal lately."

"Well, to tell the truth, I was beginning to like him a trifle, but this settles it," and she scornfully filliped the note she still held in her hand. "He does not know his own mind. He is as fickle as the wind. Really, I do not think I care to marry."

"Child, I would like to see you with a husband and children of your own. The Gastonguays are dying out."

"What does it matter who comes after us?"

"Well, please yourself, I don't want to get rid of you," and Miss Gastonguay went thoughtfully to [249] her own room.

Chelda locked her door, picked a disfiguring thread off a delicately woven rose on the carpet, moved about the room with exceeding quietness and stealthiness, stopped occasionally before the dark reflection in her mirror, but in no way gave outward signs of any violent internal emotion.

After a time she put her hand to her throat as if something choked her. A turn of her head had entangled a jewelled pin in the lace about her neck. With infinite patience she detached the pin, then standing with her eyes fastened on it as they had been fastened on Aurelia's face, she gently insinuated its point under the velvety olive skin of her wrist.

One drop of blood came, then another and another, until finally, from the little slit that she continued lengthening, a soft continuous flow of crimson fell on the roses of the carpet.

This was barbarous,—a lapse into the torture customs of her forefathers. It did not hurt her, but her feelings were too fine to permit the disfigurement of her carpet, and, getting a basin of water, she went on her knees and carefully removed the stain.

Then walking back on her heels she gazed steadfastly at the reddened water. The towel fell from her hands, every muscle in her body relaxed. After the lapse of a few mesmerised minutes she fell [250] heavily to the floor, her face turned up to the French cupids on her ceiling.

Hour after hour she lay there. The wind blew in through an open window on her rigid limbs, occasionally a distant bell chimed the hours from the town, but she neither felt the wind nor heard the bell. She had not fainted. Her senses were painfully, acutely alive, yet she paid no heed to any of the sounds of the night, and only stirred when darkness passed away and morning came, and a knock at her door proclaimed the arrival of Prosperity on his tour of arousing the family and depositing the hot water pitchers outside their bedrooms.

She must get up, or her aunt would come to seek her. She gradually raised herself, stood upright and motionless for a few minutes, then began a short halting approach to a mirror. One step at a

time she took, and sometimes her reluctant feet carried her backward. The nearest mirror to her was one set in the wall, and surrounded by a carved wreath of flowers. It was small, yet it would serve her purpose.

At last she arrived before it. She shut her eyes to put off the moment for glancing into it. When she did look, when she saw what was revealed, she struck it sharply with her hand and cracked the oval face across its delicate curve.

However, the shock was over. Her fertile brain must now plan a way to shield herself from the outward avowal of her night of repressed mental anguish. [251]

She went boldly up to a cheval-glass, and pulling the long pins from her hair, let it fall down over her gown. Its luxuriant masses were streaked with gray. In front, where it was brushed back from her aching forehead, it was snow-white. In a few short hours she had added ten years to her age.

She went to her dressing-table. In a drawer there was a bottle from which she had been in the habit of taking a few drops daily to spread over one tiny gray patch that had persistently grown over one temple. She held the bottle up to the light. There was not much in it, yet she would see how far it would go. With a steady hand and without wasting one drop she quickly stained the locks most in need of disguise. There was not enough left to colour all her length of hair. Seizing a pair of scissors, she remorselessly cut away the soft gray strands and set a match to them in the fireplace, and responded calmly to her aunt's impatient summons. "Presently, aunt, presently, don't wait for me."

"Did you not sleep well?" asked Miss Gastonguay, when she finally made her appearance at the breakfast-table.

"So soundly that I did not turn on my pillow."

"You look fresh and alert," said Miss Gastonguay, complacently. "How are you, Aurelia?" and she addressed her still nervously upset guest. [252]

"I am better," said the girl, "but I think I would like to go home, please."

"Very well, I'll drive you down as soon as we finish breakfast. Prosperity, order the carriage, the victoria—"

"Aunt," said Chelda, "this coffee is delicious. Will you please give me another cup?"

"Certainly. I wonder what Derrice Mercer is doing while her husband is away?"

"Rebecca told me that she is staying at the parsonage," replied her niece.

"Mrs. Negus has enough to do without taking care of her. Suppose we have her up here, Chelda?"

"An excellent plan, I should like it above all things," said the young lady, with unusual sprightliness.

"I'll go ask her this morning," said Miss Gastonguay. "I want you to know her better, Chelda. Aurelia, you must come up while she is here."

"Thank you," murmured Aurelia, choking over a morsel she was forcing herself to eat, "but I shall be very busy with church work for some time to come."

Miss Gastonguay said nothing more at the time, except a warning, "Moderation, Aurelia, moderation," but when she left the girl at her own door she whispered, "Keep up a brave heart, you'll get over this in time; and don't torture yourself. You've done nothing wrong. Half the girls in town are red-eyed this morning." [253]

CHAPTER XX.

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BURGLARS AT FRENCH CROSS.

Derrice readily accepted the invitation to French Cross, but found her services as a comforter in no wise required.

Chelda seemed absolutely indifferent to Mr. Huntington's departure. She was ready enough to discuss him when his name was mentioned, but all her utterances were so calm and dispassionate that Derrice often found herself obliged to check the look of wonder with which she found herself gazing at the enigmatical girl. Was Mrs. Negus mistaken? She pondered the question for some time, then in disquiet put it out of her mind and devoted herself to being quietly happy.

Miss Gastonguay took an undisguised pleasure in her company. She conducted her all over the estate, showed her the wood and the French Cross graveyard from which the house had taken its name, and where the first Catholic settlers of the town lay buried.

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Miss Gastonguay had had a stone wall put around it, and had replaced the old wooden cross with a stately marble one that could be seen gleaming from its gentle hill for miles about the country.

They also made excursions together to the town, and Miss Gastonguay took Derrice in her carriage to return the calls that had been made upon her.

The seven Mrs. Potts, after a family conclave, for they stood or fell together, had resolved to extend the light of their countenances upon Derrice. True, she was not strictly within the circle of those whom they patronised, for society was formed along church lines in Rossignol, and she belonged to the Church of the United Brethren, or the orthodox and unfashionable clan, while they as Unitarians represented the liberal and broad-minded set of the community. However, the blood of the Potts was getting thin, their tribe was becoming more and more reduced, for but few strangers made a permanent home in Rossignol. It was therefore absolutely necessary to introduce some new elements, and they began with the wife of the bank cashier.

A week previous they had all called, and Miss Gastonguay, in her interest in Derrice, even went so far as to humble herself before the seven ladies, and crave forgiveness for her latest sin against them in likening them to the seven wifes of Saint Ives with their seven bags and seven cats. This she did in order to enter their houses with her guest.

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She really was growing very much attached to this young girl, yet there were times when her sturdy good-humour ceased, and she shut herself in her room in an unapproachable temper.

Chelda never varied in her treatment of Derrice. She sought her company, she was always good-tempered and agreeable, interested and never jealous, and at frequent intervals made ingenious suggestions that started the girl on her favourite topic of conversation,—her life with her idolised father.

Justin was still away, but one day, after a fortnight's absence, a letter was received from him. Mr. Huntington had been summoned to the bedside of his dying father. Justin was therefore at liberty to return to Rossignol.

Derrice, with eyes full of tears at the thought of Mr. Huntington's affliction, was yet conscious of a singing at her heart at the thought of her husband's return. However, she showed no sign of emotion, and Miss Gastonguay, who had been watching her, said, "I believe that young man has frightened all the spirit out of you."

"What young man?" asked Derrice, in surprise.

"Your husband, of course."

"Why, I have been trying to be proper and dignified. I have been afraid you would think me giddy."

"Giddy,—good gracious, I like to see young people frisk a bit."

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"If I might," said Derrice, cautiously, "if I might, I should like at this present moment to do something."

"What is it?"

"I should like to run around the house the way the Negus children do."

"Come along," said her hostess, laconically, and marching to the hall she threw open the large front door.

Derrice caught up the train of her evening gown and disappeared like a flash around one end of the house.

March was over, with its alternations of heat and cold, snow banks and running rivulets. The gravelled walks were now dry and firm after the warm April sunshine of the day, and Derrice ran until she was tired, then fluttering her precious letter in her hand she sank on the steps at Miss Gastonguay's feet.

"Come in, child," said that lady, "and have your evening cup of tea, and then play a game of bagatelle with me. That will keep you on your feet. I think I'll change my mind; your spirit is not all gone."

Later on—in the middle of the night—Miss Gastonguay emphasised this decision. Derrice's spirit

certainly was not gone.

For the rest of the evening the girl was like one moving in an enchanted dream. Her eyes shone, [258]
her cheeks glowed, her hair glittered in the lamplight like a crown set over her fair brows. Miss Gastonguay, fascinated by her beauty, could not keep her gaze from her, and even Chelda threw her a frequent glance of an apparently generous admiration.

They did not go to bed until a late hour, but Derrice was too much excited to sleep long. She dropped into one short nap, then her excited brain, having thrown this sop to her fatigued body, woke her up and drove her to the window.

She stood in its embrasure, a dove-coloured dressing-gown thrown over her shoulders, her face turned toward the town, her whole attitude one of charming expectancy. To-morrow he would be at home,—her own adored husband.

The night was not very dark. There was no moon, but the stars were shining brightly, and some light was afforded to the atmosphere by the shining bosom of the river.

Across the face of her musings there suddenly drifted the fat figure of the pony. Either allured by the calm beauty of the night, or disturbed in his slumbers by some remembrance of a too hearty supper, he had left his loose box, whose door was always open, and was employing his time by strolling about the lawn and the gravel drive.

Derrice knew that in his younger days he had been a circus pony, and although long since [259]
rescued from that life by Miss Gastonguay, he yet retained some habits not in general peculiar to the equine race.

He could neatly brush Miss Gastonguay's coat by means of a whisk held between his teeth, he could also look for a hidden handkerchief, and upon one or two occasions he had been ignominiously expelled from the house while indulging in an interested search for a sugar-bowl.

To-night he was evidently uneasy, and Derrice watched him compassionately as he walked slowly up and down before the house, and presently, by way of quieting his nerves, went to practise his steps on a trick ladder that Miss Gastonguay had had erected on the lawn for him.

Up and down the steps he went, carefully balancing himself on his dainty hoofs, but he found no peace for his troubled mind in the exercise, and soon returned to the pawed spot on the grass below his mistress's window, where he stood nervously throwing his head in the air and seeming to catch it as it came down.

"Poor pony, he is unhappy and I am so happy," murmured Derrice, and hastily thrusting her arms into the sleeves of her gown, she drew on a pair of shoes and resolved to go down and beg him to return to the stable.

Of a singularly fearless disposition, it never occurred to her that there could be any danger to [260]
herself in following the pony's example by prowling about the large and lonely house at the dead of night. She did not even think of a light, and, stepping to the doorway of her room, she was just about to hurry through the hall when a sudden discovery brought her to a standstill.

Her room was just across the hall from Miss Gastonguay's, and according to a mutual agreement both slept with their doors open, "Lest you should be lonely," Miss Gastonguay said, "And lest any one should run away with you," Derrice often rejoined.

Miss Gastonguay was not one to break a promise, even of the most trifling nature, and, with a low, "Perhaps she has gone down to the pony herself," Derrice pushed open the door of her room. Usually she could look right in and see the uninterrupted shadowy outline of the big white bed at the end of the room. Now there was an obstruction.

Two dusky shapes stood by the bedhead, and their position with regard to the small table with many drawers standing by Miss Gastonguay's pillow speedily revealed their errand to Derrice.

In her frequent meetings with people possessed of an abundance of this world's goods, she had heard stories of burglars and their ways. She knew at once, without the slightest speculation, that here were two scoundrels tempted by the lonely situation of French Cross, the wealth of its [261]
mistress, and her well-known carelessness with regard to surrounding herself with able protectors.

Prosperity and Tribulation were no better than two children. These men were resolved to possess themselves of some of Miss Gastonguay's valuables.

Derrice was nearly blind with indignation. Her whole body shook. Would these men dare to lay unholy hands on the property of one so good and generous? They had probably chloroformed her before they began their work of rifling the drawers.

She sprang forward. Oh, for a weapon with which to punish the vile invaders! Nothing came to her hand but a silver bedroom candlestick gleaming on a table by the door. She seized it, rushed forward, and, with a cry of rage, precipitated herself on the two men.

They had indeed been trying to prolong Miss Gastonguay's natural slumber into an artificial one that would last until they had had time to examine the room, but just at the moment of Derrice's appearance a singular change had come over them.

They had been doing their work with the rapidity of lightning. The contents of all the drawers but one had been transferred to their pockets, but, at the discovery of the few valueless articles in this drawer, they had exchanged one amazed glance, and then as quickly as they had taken their [262]
booty they returned it.

Money and jewelry went noiselessly back, the lantern was turned with a rapid flash on Miss Gastonguay, the handkerchief was lifted from her face, and they were just about to beat a retreat from the room, when Derrice threw herself on them and inflicted a smart blow with the candlestick on the head of the one nearest her.

Prepared for all contingencies, the one attacked threw a somewhat comical glance at his associate. Old people slept lightly. They had not thought of drugging this young healthy person, indeed they had not planned to enter her room, and, calmly putting her aside, they vanished into the hall.

Derrice turned her attention to Miss Gastonguay, who was sitting up in bed, stupidly ejaculating, "What—what's all this? Is that your husband, Derrice Mercer? Who's pounding below?"

"No, no," shrieked the girl, "it is the pony. They have put out their lantern. They are thieves and robbers; come, let us try to catch them,—I cannot leave you," and she half dragged, half conducted her bewildered friend to the hall.

There a curious scene was taking place. Chelda, who slept with one ear open in a cat-like fashion, had heard Derrice's first cry, and, leaping from her bed, had run to the head of the staircase, where she now stood with a revolver, calmly popping away at a confused jumble in the hall [263] below, consisting of two men and a mass of something white.

"Stop, stop, Chelda," cried Derrice, "the pony has come in!"

The Fairy Prince had indeed, in his anxiety about the strangers who had been gliding around the house, mounted the front steps and pushed open the hall door, whose bolt the strangers had shot back to provide for speedy escape if necessary. The Fairy Prince had entered upon a tour of discovery through the hall, and, not finding them, had ended by placing his fat body immediately at the foot of the staircase.

One of the men had slipped in his rapid descent, and had inflicted some injury upon himself, for his companion with many oaths was adjuring him to come on, and, finding he could not, promptly snatched at the pony's forelock, forced him aside, and rushed away.

"Come, girls,—we've got one of them," cried Miss Gastonguay, triumphantly. "Chelda, put up that revolver. You don't want to shoot a man in the back,—give it to me. You young villain, if you move I'll shoot you dead!" and valiantly charging down the staircase with Derrice in close attendance, she hurled herself on the suddenly crippled man, who stood holding to the polished railing.

He had twisted his foot, and at her words he made a last desperate attempt to get away, but fell [264] headlong, whereupon Miss Gastonguay promptly placed a hall chair on his back.

Derrice wrenched the cord from her dressing-gown, and with Miss Gastonguay's assistance tied firmly together the hands that he only pretended to withdraw from them. He was a cool and self-possessed stripling, by no means vicious in appearance, but rather of a philosophical composure, for, in spite of the pain in his foot, he seemed to take the accident of his capture as rather a humorous one.

When Prosperity and Tribulation arrived on the scene,—both fully dressed even to their watches,—their eyes as big as saucers took in the awe-inspiring sight of a gentlemanly-looking lad with bound hands stretched on the hardwood floor, while their mistress, her niece, and her guest, in startling costumes, held a consultation in the background.

"Prosperity," said Miss Gastonguay, "go heat some water, bathe that villain's foot, and put some liniment on it."

Prosperity, keeping at a safe distance from the prisoner's heels, put down his candle, lighted the hall, and prepared to do as he was told.

"Then take him out to the laundry," said Miss Gastonguay, "carry him if he can't walk, and do you and Tribulation keep close behind him so he can't get away; and you girls come to bed."

They went up-stairs with her. Chelda, strange to say, chattered excitedly, and did not want to go [265] to her room. Miss Gastonguay and Derrice did not respond, and she was forced to leave them. They were both sombre and regretful, and neither of them could sleep, although they both threw themselves upon their beds.

Toward morning, Derrice saw through the open door that Miss Gastonguay was leaving her room. She sprang up, and, running out to the hall, found she was fully dressed.

"What do you want, child?" asked Miss Gastonguay.

"I want to ask you to let that young man go," said Derrice, firmly. "I believe he is sorry by this time."

"Little fool, would you have crime stalk unpunished through the land?"

"No, but he is so young."

"Go back to bed. I will see to him."

"You will let him go," said Derrice, snatching her hand and pressing it to her lips. "I see it in your eye."

CHAPTER XXI.

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MISS GASTONGUAY INTERVIEWS HER PRISONER.

Miss Gastonguay found Prosperity sitting in the shadow of the wash-tubs, holding one end of a long rope that he had knotted firmly around his prisoner's waist.

The young burglar, seeing that nothing could be done, had fallen asleep. Prosperity was presiding over his slumbers in fascinated awe, and nearly jumped out of his skin when Miss Gastonguay touched him on the shoulder.

"Go join your brother," and she pointed to Tribulation, who was patrolling the kitchen passage, holding over his shoulder a Revolutionary musket that he had brought from the attic.

"You'll hold the prisoner?" said Prosperity, surrendering the rope to her.

"Yes, I'll hold him. Go away now, and shut the door, and don't listen."

Prosperity tiptoed out, and seating herself on an upturned firkin, she seized a stick used for agitating clothes in boiling water, and gently stirred the sleeper with it.

He opened his eyes and calmly stared at her.

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"You're a nice young man," she said, ironically, and turning a lamp bracket nearer his face and farther away from her own.

He made no reply to this remark, beyond cautiously moving his foot.

"Is it any better?" she asked.

"Yes, that old coon rubbed it. I'm much obliged, ma'am."

His manner was slightly conciliatory, yet she broke into denunciation. "You need not try to soften me. You ought to be hanged. If a few young rascals like you were strung up, you'd save a million others following in your steps. Now what have I ever done that you should break into my house, and try to rob me of hard-earned money,—money earned by the sweat of the brow of my ancestors. Who are you, I say, that you should deprive me of it?"

"The world owes me a living," he said, sullenly.

"A living—an honest living. Now what do you make out of your line of life,—just tell me?"

"Lots of fun, when I have any luck."

"You are lazy," she said, angrily, "too lazy to put up with quiet toil and small results."

"Quiet toil," he replied, with a sneer. "Some capitalist gets hold of you. He sucks all the life out of you. Hard work, small pay, no play. When you're old, you're kicked in the gutter to die. I was once in a factory—"

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"What is the merit of your present occupation?" she asked, grimly.

"You work when you like, you're your own boss; you have travel, and a kind of feeling of free drinks in you all the time,—sprees and a chance for rest when you make a good haul, and the country to take care of you when you're old. The worse you do, the better you're looked after. I'm going to help some likely person off the boards when I'm sixty. Some one like yourself, ma'am. Then I'll have good lawyers, and new trials, and soft food, and flowers, and ladies to visit me, and maybe go bang free."

Miss Gastonguay had fallen into a kind of waking trance. Her eye pierced the young man's face,—looked through it to some scene unknown. He saw that she was not thinking of him, and he favoured her with a curiously appreciative and intelligent glance.

Presently she roused herself and said, solemnly, "Young man, I am going to trust you. Here, take this rope off your waist," and she tossed him the end. "Sit up on that bench and look me squarely in the face. Here I sit, your best friend at the present minute. Talk freely to me. We are two erring mortals; get out of your mind that I am any better off than you. If you open your mind to me you will not regret it. I ask you now in the sight of God, do you like your present life?"

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The young man sat down in the place indicated, and scrutinised her sharply and narrowly.

"Time is precious," she said, warningly, "I mean what I say. Tear off your disguise. We all wear one,—I do. Here I show you my naked heart. I am going to let you escape. If you linger, you may be caught. The townspeople will not be so merciful. If you're a bad fellow, tell me so, and go. If you want help, I'll give it to you."

The young criminal smiled slightly, then his cynical expression faded away, and he took on an air of sincerity. "I believe you, ma'am. I've reason to. I'll talk straight. Yes, I like my life good enough."

"Where were you brought up?"

"In New York,—in what you call the slums."

"What made you a criminal?"

"I didn't want to work."

"Oh,—you wanted luxuries?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was ambitious. I hadn't anything. I might get everything."

"Who was that man with you?"

"A pal; you wouldn't know him if I told you."

"A curious pal to run away from you!"

The burglar smiled again. "What good could he do by staying? He's only skedaddled to lay plans [270]
to get me out of your gingerbread jail here if I choose to go into it."

"Then you criminals stand by each other?"

Her morbid curiosity did not surprise him.

"I guess we stand by each other as well as the capitalists."

"Did you ever hear this sentence, young man,—'Whatsoever a man soweth, that also shall he reap?'"

"Often, ma'am, in the training-school."

"The what?"

"The school for crime, where I learned my trade, a steamboat that used to hang round New York in the dark, and pick up pupils at different wharves. Some of the big crooks used to come on board, and give us talks. We had gambling games, and all kinds of instruction given. We kept the windows covered on account of the harbour police, then toward morning we went ashore."

Miss Gastonguay, trying to subdue the loathing that overpowered her, was silent for a few seconds; then, urged on by the inexorable flight of time, she lifted her eyelids, and burst out with a fascinated question, "Did you ever kill any one?"

"No, ma'am; I'm a business criminal."

"What drew you to Rossignol?"

He laughed stealthily. "Curiosity, ma'am. I heard the place had some sheep worth shearing, and [271]
then our biggest swell made your town famous."

"What do you mean?"

She spoke with haughty severity, but he was not impressed.

"Gentleman George's caper, ma'am,—the smartest bank burglar in this country or any other. This was the end of his famous New York glide, when he had all the police after him. I guess you know him, ma'am. You've got some souvenirs of him up-stairs in that drawer of yours."

A cold, agonised perspiration broke out on the unfortunate lady's forehead, but she bravely maintained her composure, and, as if he had noticed nothing amiss, her prisoner went on, flippantly. "He came here slap after the big Leslie bank haul in New York. The cops suspected him and broke into his house, and sure enough, they found his workshop for making burglars' tools. They were red-hot on his track, when Gentleman George went plump down a hole in the earth, and they lost him."

Miss Gastonguay could not speak, but made a feverish gesture for him to continue, which he did, nursing his injured foot, and staring coolly sometimes at her, sometimes at the increasing light stealing through the windows.

"The hole in the earth was here," and the young burglar chuckled at the remembrance. "Gentleman George boarded a train for Maine, dropped into this place, grabbed at a fat mill- [272]
owner's purse in broad daylight, and got locked up here for a fool hobo, while the police were scouring the earth for him."

Miss Gastonguay leaned forward, propped her trembling chin on her hand, and ejaculated, "What does this man look like?"

"I guess you know as well as I do," he said with quiet impudence, "but in case you haven't seen him for a spell, I'll say he's more of a high-roller than ever. You'd think him the latest duke from Europe."

Miss Gastonguay subdued her almost mortal agony. "Go on," she said, with a ghastly smile. "Tell me some more about this criminal life, I'm interested in it."

"Well, ma'am, I'll talk some more about Gentleman George, for he's the boy for my money. No one knows where he started from, unless I could make a guess now, but he's a gentleman born, and welcome in every hang-out in the Union. And he's smart," and the young man swore a delighted oath. "To find out how safes were made, he got work with the Densmore Safe Company till there wasn't a lock he couldn't duplicate. And he's got an ear as fine hung as thistledown. By the turning of the dial he can tell at what numbers the tumblers drop into place."

"Young man, what do I know about tumblers?" [273]

"Nothing, ma'am, I'm forgetting you're not with us. If you want to know about Gentleman George, he's rolled up two or three fortunes by bank-breaking, but he's such a confounded gambler that he out-points himself."

"Where is he now?" articulated Miss Gastonguay, with difficulty.

"Now that's one thing, ma'am, I can't tell you. I'm sorry to disoblige a lady, but it can't be helped."

"Has he repented? Is he leading an honest life?"

"Yes, ma'am, just now he has to. The police are after him again. He breaks out in spots, then he lies low. For the last few years you might have heard of him in California, in Mexico, in Europe, always in big hauls, always looting something worth looting. There was the California Star Bank Vault robbery where he got a clean half million, the Belgium Bank affair—"

"Do they never catch him? Is he never shot at,—hurt?"

"Catch him, yes, but no prison holds him. He's got good friends. After the California swoop they shut him up in jail, but he had a partner outside who had a masked hole made in the gate of the jail. Next day Gentleman George broke loose from a marching line of convicts in the jail yard, made a dash for the hole, jumped into a wagon his partner had waiting, and got out of the way in [274] double quick time."

Miss Gastonguay had had about all she could endure. "Daybreak is coming," she said, abruptly. "You must get away; is there anything I can do for you?"

"You could give me ten thousand a year," he said, composedly; "you are a rich woman, you would never miss it."

"I will give you enough to get to some philanthropists, who will teach you to live an honest life."

"Thank you, ma'am,—we've got enough of them in New York. They go to the low-down streets and preach, 'Lead an honest life, and you will star it through the world,' but no fellow those praying folks ever took has got as high up in the sky as Gentleman George."

"He is your model?"

"He's the biggest man in America," said her companion, with quiet enthusiasm.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

Her convulsed face showed that she pitied him, and with his small and ferret-like eyes gleaming approvingly on her he continued, "You're a lady, ma'am, and I'll tell you what I'm aiming at. I don't want to give up this life. If I did, I could earn ten thousand dollars to-morrow by going to the detectives in New York and splitting on Gentleman George. But I'm not anxious to play spy. [275] I'd be found out, and I've just been watching a young crook, that turned State's evidence in a Boston jail, come out and go crazy on account of the whole gang turning against him. He slunk round the streets like a sick cat, and he squealed in his sleep. No one spoke to him, and he died in the horrors."

"Can't you run away from them?" said Miss Gastonguay, with a burst of impassioned appeal. "Leave the atmosphere of crime. I'll send you anywhere."

"Anywhere; I don't want to go. Would you be happy in my hang-out? No, ma'am. Would I be happy in yours? No, ma'am, again. You rich people don't know what liberty is."

"Liberty—liberty," she repeated, warningly. "A liberty that ends in a prison."

"You straight people make queer mistakes. I'm a better lot than my family. They don't live by rule as I do. They'll lie and pick at small truck. They haven't any ambition. I've got my life chalked out. I'm not going to get a prison face, I sha'n't go beyond the limit."

"The limit?"

"The fifteen or twenty year limit. If you keep out of jail, well and good. If you get too long sentences your health breaks down, and you get the shivers."

"What are they?" [276]

"Nerves; you think, 'S'pose the cops catch me.' You may be in the midst of a fancy job. Everything in you trembles, even your eyeballs, and you'd best quit and run, for if the shivers get fastened on you, you're no good, and might as well take to the tomato can tramps. I'm going to knock off before I get 'em. I've been lucky about jails so far, and if you'll help me out of this now—"

He spoke suggestively, and Miss Gastonguay tried to bring back her strained and wandering attention to him. "When you go away, will you see this man,—this Gentleman George?"

"I'm sure to pretty soon."

"Will you give him a message from me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tell him that though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they are always going. Retribution will come—"

Her severe voice faltered, and while she was recovering breath the young criminal observed, curiously, "Gentleman George is a pretty close connection of yours."

She saw that he did not know what the connection was, and would not enlighten him.

"I wish you'd let me carry back to him that little shoe mascot."

"Never."

"Most all gamblers have something they hang on to," he said, with a disappointed air. "Gentleman [277] George's shoe is known by all his pals. It used to bring him luck, and when he'd be caught and searched he used to beg to have it back. I carry a rabbit's foot."

Miss Gastonguay was conscious of a feeble passing surprise at his superstition, but she was not

able to discuss it, and pointing to his foot asked, "Can you walk on it?"

"No, ma'am, I guess you'll have to provide the means of locomotion."

"Come out to the stable, then."

"First let me return some of your property," and he gallantly extended her handsome gold watch and chain.

She slapped her side, "I had it here just now."

"Yes, ma'am, I wanted you to see how easy I could get it from you."

"Have you any more of my property?" she asked, harshly.

"Not a stiver. We tumbled things back pretty quick, when we found Gentleman George's picture by your bed. He'd get after us if we meddled with you. You're not his sister, are you?"

"Come with me to the stable," she responded. "I will lend you a horse. Ride him to any of the near stations. Dismount when you get there, and turn him loose. Have you money enough for a ticket?" [278]

"Yes, ma'am."

His spirits were rising, now that there was a sure prospect of his escape, and he even grinned facetiously at Prosperity and Tribulation, who shrank in dismay from him, and hid the musket between them.

Miss Gastonguay went swiftly to the stable, followed closely by the limping burglar, and at a little distance by her two servants. A few minutes later her departing prisoner threw her a civil farewell as he clambered on the back of the tall black horse. "I'm obliged for your interest, ma'am. I've talked pretty freely to you. If you ever see Gentleman George again, I wish you'd speak a good word for me. I'd like to join in some of his big propositions."

She fell back in disgust, and as the gray morning swallowed his figure, she passionately muttered, "Moral obliquity,—just like the other,—youthful, enthusiastic,—a face set to do evil. God pity him."

With hanging head she went slowly to the house until startled into a peevish exclamation by the sudden appearance of her niece.

"Chelda, what are you doing here?"

"I was going to see if our prisoner is safe," replied the young lady, smoothly. "I have just been telephoning to the police station."

"And pray, who told you to do that? This is my house. Go telephone back that the policemen are not to come until I send for them." [279]

"Very well, aunt," she replied, submissively, "but can you stop them?"

"You are a meddlesome girl," said Miss Gastonguay, and she gave relief to her overwrought feelings by stamping her foot at her.

Chelda said nothing, but her expression was not a pleasant one as she gazed after the retreating figure. "You let that burglar go," she murmured, revengefully, "why did you do it? It is really quite puzzling,—and who is to be pitied? One should really look into so interesting a matter. There is such a lack of pity in the world."

CHAPTER XXII. [280]

CRIMINAL RECORDS.

There was great excitement in Rossignol over news of the attempted burglary at French Cross, and coupled with it was a mild indignation at Miss Gastonguay for allowing the disabled burglar to escape.

She was saluted by a volley of remonstrances from every friend and acquaintance who called during the day to offer congratulations on her safe issue from the perils of the night.

"Why did you allow him to hoodwink you?" inquired Mrs. Jonah Potts, warmly.

"He didn't hoodwink me," said Miss Gastonguay, obstinately, "and he was my burglar, I had a right to do what I liked with him."

"But one burglary is always followed by another. He will be breaking into our houses next."

"He will not," said Miss Gastonguay, wearily. "I talked the matter over with him. He will attempt no more robberies in Rossignol."

"You—talked—with—him!" ejaculated Mrs. Jonah, in long-drawn-out dismay. "With—that— [281]
wretch!"

"No more wretch than you and me. He's made of the same flesh and blood. He steals in one way, we in another."

"I—steal!"

"Your husband does."

"Thank you, Miss Gastonguay. Good afternoon."

"Don't be precipitate. I don't mean to offend you. Your husband ought to give the mill hands a share in his profits."

"They are well paid, Miss Gastonguay."

"Well paid? Would you like to change places with them?"

"Certainly not."

"Then you're stealing from them. You are bound to look out for them. Your husband needn't give them as much as he takes himself, for he supplies the brains and they only the labour, but for charity's sake, Dorinda Potts, go and visit some of these cottages where children are pale and puny from lack of the necessities of life."

Miss Gastonguay turned away to another caller, and Mrs. Jonah went uneasily home.

Jane Gastonguay was haggard, almost broken down, and with what unusual softness had she spoken of the mill hands. The tiny seed of compassion stirred restlessly in the untilled ground of Mrs. Jonah's heart. Some day it would grow into a large and generous plant, and would extend its [282]
healing leaves over some unhappy mortals scorched and tortured for lack of a comforting shade.

The young burglar, in the meantime, sat reading a novel in a parlour-car, his foot comfortably extended on a cushion, his ears tingling not at all as he became more and more of a topic of conversation in Rossignol.

Prosperity and Tribulation, frightened into silence by Miss Gastonguay, said nothing of the manner of his going; and while the astute police of the town scoured the country to find some footprints of a limping burglar, the black thoroughbred cantered gaily homewards with hanging bridle, and whinnied joyfully as the coachman greeted him with a peculiar smile.

Justin arrived early in the morning, and took his wife home. He was considerably alarmed when he heard of the risk she had run in attacking two full-fledged burglars; but so full of glee was she over his return, Miss Gastonguay's safety, and the escape of the burglars that he could do nothing with her in the way of extorting a promise for more cautious behaviour in future.

"It is your own fault for leaving me," she said, stopping his reproving words by laying her soft cheek against his lips.

Justin would never leave her again. He did not say so, but he made the resolve as he watched her [283]
flying about the house. She was in wild spirits, and when evening came she demanded to be taken up to French Cross to find out whether Miss Gastonguay's nerves were in good order for her night's sleep.

He willingly complied. He had only had a brief glimpse of his wife's aunt in the morning, and he felt a real and sympathetic concern with regard to her.

Derrice, without waiting to take off her wraps, ran into the drawing-room as soon as they reached the old château. "Dear Miss Gastonguay, I have thought of a notice for the newspapers, —'Warning to Burglars. I, Miss Jane Gastonguay, truthfully declare that all my silver and gold plate and other valuables will be from this time forth locked in a burglar-proof safe during every instant they are not in use, and I also declare from this time forth I will only keep in my possession enough money for daily expenditure. The rest must be obtained by application to Justin Mercer, cashier National Bank, Rossignol.'"

Miss Gastonguay, still pale and shaken, became cheerful as Derrice rattled on. "There, silly child," she said, at last, "go take off your cloak, and come talk to Chelda and Captain Veevers.

They seem to be having a dull time in that corner."

Derrice did as she was told, and coming back, was quietly appropriated by Captain Veevers. He took a keen interest in criminal law, and hoped to get a full account of the attempted robbery of the night before, but Chelda, instead of being brilliant and dramatic this evening, was strangely vague and unsatisfactory. This eager girl would follow his lead; and, calmly placing his long, lank figure in such a position that she would naturally look at him rather than at the other occupants of the room, he startled her with a question, "What was the first sound to waken you last night?" [284]

Chelda took up her embroidery and seated herself within hearing distance, and in a spot from which she could command a view of Miss Gastonguay and Justin.

The latter was answering questions about Mr. Huntington. "Yes, his father has forgiven him. The man knows he must die and has broken down."

"And what is Mr. Huntington's state of mind?"

"He is calmer," replied Justin. "He was ill for a week after we went away,—slight fever and light-headedness. I have brought back his resignation from the pastorate of the church."

"That's a good thing; he was in no condition to preach."

"He will come back sometime for a visit," Justin went on. "Through me he sends kind messages to all his friends. He hopes to see them at some future time." [285]

As he spoke, he raised his voice in order to include Chelda in his remark, but she went on serenely with her work and made no response.

"So he is not coming back," mumbled Miss Gastonguay, "not coming back," and leaving Justin she began an aimless ramble about the room. The restlessness of premature old age was upon her, and Chelda waited patiently for her to make a certain discovery.

In the meantime, Justin Mercer must not sit there staring so persistently at the little manly figure, and rising she presented to him in a natural and easy manner the evening papers from Bangor that Prosperity had just brought in.

Justin, glad to be relieved from the necessity of talking to her, buried his face in the freshly folded sheets, just as Miss Gastonguay stopped in the place where Chelda wished her to stop, and ejaculated, "What's this? Who has rammed this volume behind my Rouen bracket? It is almost impossible to get it out. Was this your doing, Chelda?"

Chelda lifted her long black eyelashes. "Yes, aunt, I wanted to get the stupid thing out of the way. I thought it was a story when I bought it, but it is only some accounts of criminal life."

Justin's paper rustled slightly in his hand. Chelda heard it, but did not look at him, neither did she look at her aunt, whose sudden subsidence and sudden click of her eyeglasses against the buttons of her house coat told that she was sitting down to examine the volume. [286]

For some time there was silence. Miss Gastonguay was uttering words below her breath. "Criminals have usually chestnut brown eyes,—no, not all criminals, only thieves, and murderers. How interesting. What is this? 'Career of the most celebrated criminal of modern times, the inventor of the modern kit of marvellously small and fine burglars' tools that can be carried in a hand-bag, the versatile Henry Jones *alias* Thomas Martin *alias* James Smith and half a dozen other aliases, but known to his confederates as Gentleman George. A perfect gentleman.' Gentleman, indeed," she repeated, and without the quiver of a muscle, the flutter of an eyelid, she ran over the account of a life that she knew was in reality the life led by her long lost brother.

"Very clever," she ejaculated when she had finished, then raising her head she saw that her niece and Justin were both gazing at her.

"You made a mistake not to study these worthies, Chelda," she said, ironically. "Just listen,—'Uncle Sam's Hawkshaws in secret service work. An ingenious organisation of counterfeiters. Thefts of valuables. Eight hundred post-offices robbed every year. New ones constructed with peep-holes enabling detectives to watch clerks and carriers at work. Secret passages and stairs connected with basement.' I wonder what century we are in? This sounds like the Middle Ages,—'Extraordinary tale of a postal clerk who rifled letters by his sense of smell.' I don't wonder he could smell some bank-notes. But he knew fresh ones, too. Clever man, and misplaced ingenuity. I should not like to get my living that way. Come, listen to this,—you can discover a bank-note in an envelope by drawing a thread through with a knot in it." [287]

"Can you? In what way?" asked Chelda, without raising her head from her work.

"Some of the fibre paper of the note will come out with the knot. Ah, here is the cut of a sneak thief who dropped his hat over a package of three thousand dollar notes in the issue room of the Treasury and carried them away without being discovered. Here also is a lady who added to her small income in the redemption division by raising dollar bills into tens. Accomplished young person,—sure to get on until discovered. That is the drawback connected with all this smartness. My dear, don't you want to go into opium smuggling? You can hollow out a cargo of logs and fill them with the drug and make your fortune. You can bribe firemen and stokers to hide it in coal where it is almost impossible to find it. You can put it in between the walls of state-rooms. You can drop it overboard in cans with sinkers and floats attached, or carry it in buckets with false bottoms. Perhaps, though, you will want to go into the diamond business. In that case, you can invest abroad in the gems and bring them to this country under a porous plaster on your back, or in the heels of your shoes, or inside the Paris doll you are bringing to your niece, or you can get a pet pelican and feed him with diamonds until his pouch is full. Bah! take the book away,—it [288]

sickens me. No, Derrice, you cannot see it. You are too young to read of such rascalities. Captain Veevers, I give it to you. Take the pitchy thing out of my house."

"What would you do with those people?" asked Chelda, softly drawing a silk thread out of her work.

"With what people,—criminals, you mean?" asked her aunt.

"Yes,—those low creatures who prey on society?"

"I would do with them just what is done now; only I should be more severe."

"As you were last night," remarked Chelda, in a low voice.

Her aunt did not hear her. She was addressing a question to Derrice, "Child, suppose all the criminals in the world were suddenly thrown into your power; what would you do with them?"

Derrice had some time ago finished her conversation with Captain Veevers, and had been listening to the extracts from the book. Her face now glowed vividly at the possibility suggested. "Oh, I would put them all together—no, I would scatter them. I would put a few here, a few there, all among good people. I would beg them to change—" [289]

"And suppose they would not," pursued Miss Gastonguay.

"They would change, dear Miss Gastonguay. I am sure they would, but if there were some who were very bad I would have a nice little prison for them where they would be happy, but that they could never get out of."

Miss Gastonguay smiled grimly, and turned to Chelda. "And you, my niece, what would you do?"

Chelda's soul was steeped in the very bitterness of hatred as she surveyed the compassionate face beyond her, but she gave no outward sign of it, and responded with her usual composure, "Such people all seem like vipers to me. They are not of our kind. I should not allow one to run loose, not one. I would severely isolate them so that they might not bite me."

"You are wrong—wrong!" interposed Derrice. "They are like ourselves. They are not different. Once when I was going along a street in New York with my father I saw a poor man being arrested. My father said—" [290]

She stopped short, overpowered not by the remembrance of the criminal, but by her loss of the dear companionship of former days.

"Well, what did your father say?" asked Miss Gastonguay, in a hard, dry voice.

"He said," Derrice continued, with difficulty, "he said, 'They have got the wrong man.' I tried to drag him forward to tell the policeman, but he held me back. 'You can't get the real criminal,' he told me. 'Probably you would have to dig him out of some grave. This man is what his parents have made him.'"

"Now that is not so," said Miss Gastonguay, angrily, "that is nothing but a lie. I say degeneracy is innate in some mortals. Nothing takes it out."

Derrice scarcely heard her. "My father went on to tell me," she continued, in a dreamy voice, "of a man he once knew who did not want to be bad. There was something in him striving, protesting, fighting with evil, but he had no powers of resistance. He said that the man had had a father who indulged him, and a mother to whom his wish was law, because he was her youngest child. I can remember my father's very words,—he said that the child was encouraged to trample on domestic law, and when he grew up he could not keep the public law. It was a very sad case, for my father almost broke down when he told me of the spoiled boy grown up and going raging out into the world. He said he was lost, hopelessly lost, and I cried dismally, for my father said that I might have met him, or if not him, many another like him, in the throngs of people in great cities. Would you call that young man a viper?" and she turned to Chelda. [291]

"Yes, a viper, a degenerate," said Chelda, sweetly. "I dare say his family was highly respectable. He had probably deceived your father. We make ourselves."

Derrice's eyes flashed. She forgot the new ornament of a meek and lowly spirit that she had lately put on, and was just about to make an irritated retort when her husband's paper rustled again. It called her attention to him. She felt his unexpressed and heartfelt sympathy, and, choking back her emotion, she silently sank back in her seat.

Miss Gastonguay had left the room, ostensibly to see why Prosperity had not brought in the tea on the stroke of ten.

She met him in the hall, but she did not turn back. "Tell them I have gone to bed," she said, shortly. "I have a headache." Then, going on her way up-stairs, she soliloquised, wearily, "Not heredity, but environment. Environment only,—then are my skirts clean? Louis was nine—no, ten —when our mother died. I had a hand in his upbringing. Bah! I will not believe it. Not environment, say I, but heredity only. Heredity and individual responsibility. There is bad blood in the family. He knows it as well as I do." [292]

CHAPTER XXIII.

[293]

WHEN A MAN'S HAPPY.

April drifted after March. May came, then June and July, and with them the opening of the summer hotels on the Bay, and the usual influx of visitors.

Derrice was very much occupied now. She knew nearly all the residents of the town, and a great many of the visitors, and Justin was obliged to check her in her too great devotion to literary clubs and social gatherings, and to work for the church of which she was now a zealous member.

With more pleasure than he had ever before experienced in holiday-making in his busy life, he often started from home with her in the morning, and installing her in his blue-lined boat would row across the Bay and out its mouth to the wild and rocky shore beyond.

Out there were green islands, white villages hidden in smiling coves, passing ships, and many excursion boats. He knew well every point of interest, but each successive discovery was a new pleasure for Derrice, and, filled with the rapture of exploration, she would urge him on until the [294] shades of evening warned them to return.

In spite of her appreciation of the world outside the Bay, she liked better the five small rivers with the Indian names that went leaping merrily down into it. Only one was navigable,—its rapids were far up,—and of this one she never tired. Day after day when bank hours were over she begged Justin to conduct her to it, and when she found herself alone with him in its sylvan solitudes she invariably fell into a state of mental intoxication.

With her hat off, one hand trailing behind her in the cool black water, shafts of sunlight flickering down between jealous leaves that endeavoured to screen from them the flaxen head and white dress, she babbled joyous self-revealings whose lightest phases were treasured by the quiet young man who sat opposite her.

She was as free and as gay as the fishes below, the birds above, or the shy wild creatures peeping timidly at her through the underbrush. Why had she been given to him? Would he ever lose her? He was not worthy of such a blessing! And sometimes he trembled in an excess of happiness that was not happiness until he had tortured himself with some suggestion of pain.

When she gently rallied him on his seriousness, he explained that at all times he experienced the deepest awe when in the presence of works fresh from the hands of the Creator. A budding tree, [295] an opening flower, charmed him into an ecstasy beyond expression, and, although only vaguely comprehending this ecstasy, she would smile sweetly and relapse into silence herself.

Sometimes she would motion to him to change the boat's course. He did not at all times care to run into the lively picnic parties from the hotels, the sole thought of whose members was to utilise the most exquisite retreats of the river for purposes of eating and drinking. Yet he was glad to see them come,—all those strangers who made Rossignol so prosperous. He was an enthusiast on the subject of the development of his native State, and talked at length to Derrice of the great tide of travel floating ever northward, of the millions of dollars brought annually into the State by summer visitors, of the building of hotels and cottages, and of the quantity of game slaughtered in the wildernesses up the great rivers. All these were sure and certain signs that his beloved Pine Tree State was to become more and more the pleasure-ground and place of relaxation for the denizens of other States less favoured by nature.

Derrice always listened intently, then becoming a greater enthusiast than he was himself, she, to his diversion and gratification, retailed among the many strangers thronging the place, not only what he had told her, but also a vast deal of miscellaneous information that she collected relating [296] to the industrial progress of the State, its old and successful enterprises and its new and tentative ones.

The comparatively new sardine industry she was most interested in, first on account of Captain White's connection with it, and secondly because she had in her Sunday School class some young "dressers" from the factories.

She begged Captain White to conduct her over one of the factories, and in great good-humour he complied with her request, whereupon for some days she discoursed learnedly of the various methods of catching and packing the wary herring, of the difference between home-made "Russians" and foreign "Russians," of "bar," "channel," and "shore weirs," and of other technical matters that filled her husband with amused admiration.

She was essentially domestic and home-loving in her instincts, and Justin was amazed at the rapidity with which this new trait in her character had developed.

She had submitted to a wandering life on account of the innate sweetness of her disposition, and because she had known no other life. Happy now in the love of her husband and the co-operation and not obstruction of her mother-in-law, she was gathering around her a circle of staunch friends, and her dearest wish now was to attract within this circle the father whose absence was [297] the one dark spot in her life.

Would he ever come? He had partly promised her to do so, but she rejoiced in fear and trembling over the partial promise, for her husband preserved an ominous silence.

Poor unhappy wanderer. There was no quiet haven for him. His bark had been trimmed for stormy seas. He had cast behind him his last anchor to peace and respectability. The dearer his idol to him, the farther must he keep from it, and Justin's heart grew sick as he contemplated

future possibilities.

In mid-July the first boating carnival of the season took place. The Casino, already too ornate but re-embellished every year, was a-flutter with flags; guests poured from the hotels, and Captain White, standing on a wharf with eyes screwed up in the bright sunshine, quizzically watched the procession of young men and girls filing into place under the snowy canopies of the white-draped boats.

He waited until the boats like a bevy of white swans went dipping and gliding out to the Bay, then he hurried home as fast as his feet would carry him to relate this latest bit of news to the partner of his bosom.

He found her in a sedate attitude beside one of the open windows of the dining-room. Existence had recently shed its dull gray hues for the late Mrs. Prymmer and present Mrs. White, and had taken on an exquisite tint of rose-colour. She was permeated with bliss, absorbed in admiration for this peculiar man, her sailor-cousin. She was superlatively happy in his presence, superlatively lonely in his absence. He fascinated and entertained her. He was never still, never dull! Was always laughing, joking, teasing,—why, she might be a young girl judging by the amount of attention he paid her, and in placid rapture she listened to his statement that he had taken in the carnival on his way home from the canneries. [298]

"Did it look pretty, Micah?"

"Pretty?—a hundred thousand pretties. I say there is no sight ahead of a flock of girls dressed in white, with flowers in their hair, sitting in boats that look like nests of snow. They might have been angels, Hippy, let right down out of the sky, and our Derrice was the cutest of all. Hello, there's the postman's ring. I'll go," and he rushed from the room.

Mrs. White put down her knitting, and, resting one elbow on the window-sill, enjoyably inhaled the delicious perfume from her garden of roses below.

"Only a newspaper for me, Hippy," said her husband coming back. "Just stop talking for a few minutes, will you?" [299]

As Mrs. White since her marriage rarely opened her mouth, this injunction was an easy one for her to obey, and she again turned her attention to the roses until her husband began to kick out his feet and to exhibit other signs of mental disquiet.

"You're wondering what's the matter with me, Hippy?" he said, at last.

"Yes, Micah."

"I believe I'll tell you," he said; "let me look at you."

Emitting light without heat, his dancing eyes played over her face. "You've nothing to hide from me, Hippy?" he said, at last. "Your heart lies bare before me, just like that," and he made some cabalistic signs on his palm.

"Does it?" she replied, tranquilly, then she asked, with some anxiety, "What is worrying you, Micah?"

"I'll tell you,—I'll cleave my mind open just like a herring. You'll not tell what you see inside,—will you hold my feet while I talk?" and he tentatively laid one slim ankle across her lap.

"Yes, seeing you are troubled with rheumatism, I will," she said, affectionately smoothing his instep.

"Stop that,—you're tickling me," he ordered, then he went on. "Hippy, are you happy?"

"You know I am," she said, phlegmatically. [300]

"Do you like me better than you liked Zebedee Prymmer?"

"Yes, Micah, I do."

"Better than Sylvester Mercer?"

She hesitated, not in any doubt of her own feelings on the subject, but from anxiety as to the propriety of answering such a question.

"Do you?" he asked, peremptorily.

"Sylvester is dead and gone to heaven," she remarked, with extreme amiability.

"Yes,—peace to his ashes,—he'll not care. Answer me, Hippy."

"Yes," she said, blushing and bridling a trifle. "I like you better than Sylvester."

"Do you like me better than Justin?"

She nervously leaned over and picked a hair off his coat sleeve. Surely this was a cruel question.

"Do you like me better than Justin?" he repeated, tyrannically.

She did, but she did not like to say so.

"Go on, Hippy," he commanded. "You're dead honest now, you know."

"Yes, I do," she whispered, with hanging head.

"Kiss me," he said, unexpectedly.

She meekly embraced him, then his countenance cleared, and he vouchsafed her an explanation.

"I just wanted to make sure of you, dear. This is a serious matter, and women's tongues are such delicate things that a secret trembles off them as if they were oiled. I've known a woman mad with another,—so mad that she'd vow to die rather than tell her a certain thing that would be to her interest to know, yet she'd run faster than a deer and tell her that very thing." [301]

"Some women are as safe as a bank," observed Mrs. White, mildly.

"Yes, ma'am, and you're one of them. Listen now, till I make those plump ears of yours rustle with curiosity,—you see this newspaper?"

"Yes, Micah."

"I sent to Boston for it. What do you suppose I did that for?"

"I don't know."

"Do you remember seeing Derrice come in a week ago with some books wrapped up in a newspaper?"

"No, Micah."

"Well, she did, and I picked up the paper, and in that paper was a piece cut out."

"Was there?"

"Yes, and if there's one thing more than another that stirs the old Adam in me it is for a man to hand me a paper with a piece cut out."

"But a man didn't hand you this, did he?"

"No; but that don't matter. The piece was gone. I turned the paper over. I found written on it, 'Miss Chelda Gastonguay, Rossignol.' Now, what do you suppose was my next move?" [302]

"You tried to get another like it."

"Precisely. You caught your fish that time. I sent to Boston for another copy of that same paper. Now, here's the ad. that was cut out. I've marked it with my pencil. Read it, Hippy."

"'H. Robinson, private detective, 10 Smith Street, Boston. All communications strictly confidential. Secret and expeditious service.'"

Mrs. White was in the dark, and without a word returned the newspaper to him.

"Now, what does a young lady in Chelda Gastonguay's position want with a thing like that?" he asked, severely.

"Perhaps she didn't want it."

"She did. The paper was addressed to her. She cut the ad. out. I'll shift my ground a little, Hippy. What makes this same young lady come to this house so much?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied his wife, with some warmth. "She don't like me."

"Does she come here to look at my lovely countenance?"

His wife's face was a study. She tried not to express resentment, she tried to think graciously of the absent Chelda, but her effort was not crowned with success.

"You feel just the least little bit mad with her, Hippy, don't you?" asked Captain White, kindly, "because she don't treat your husband as if he was king of this castle." [303]

Mrs. White did not speak, but her hand again encircled his arched and aristocratic instep, and this time she was not checked.

Captain White burst out laughing. "It's queer how these human beings play at fox and geese with each other. The stunning Chelda thinks it a mighty condescension to come here, and be friendly with Justin and Derrice. She thinks it don't matter about you and me, but if she's up to any tricks, we'll trap her yet. Hippy, that girl comes here for no good. I've watched her, and I'm sure of it."

His wife's expression gradually changed to one of mild protest against this suspicion.

"You're a good woman," he said, appreciatively. "You don't want to be sneaky, and I don't want to set you to spy on another woman, but if we let ourselves be fooled too easy, we are fools. Now Derrice ain't the kind to smell any kind of a rat but an honest rat, nor is Justin blessed with a much smarter nose in the Gastonguay direction, but I know something of that lot. They've cut some pretty tricks here in Rossignol, and I say, don't shut your eyes too tight when there's any of 'em round, and keep your nose wiggling just like a rabbit's. That Chelda has got some object in coming here, for she hates us all, kit and bunch, and without running afoul of the sacred laws of hospitality, I want you, Hippy White, to keep one of those handsome gray eyes of yours on her, 'cause you're older than your daughter-in-law, and know more of the world." [304]

"I can't stop her from coming here, Micah. I like Jane Gastonguay."

"Jane Gastonguay's all right. She ain't Gastonguay at all. She's Harper, like her grandmother's folks, and you let her niece come here all she likes, but keep a kind of oversight of her, the way we do the weather after close time. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, Micah; but what do you think she is up to?"

"I don't know," he said, gloomily.

"Micah," she said, with some timidity, "I've got a kind of worry about Derrice's father. Sylvester was always so short about him, and what makes Derrice never write direct to him, but always

send her letters to some friend in New York? And why don't he show himself here if he is so fond of his daughter? He hasn't any business to do that I have ever heard of. And what did he want to make Justin marry her for? I thought maybe he wanted to get rid of her, but I guess he likes her well enough."

"You've got questions enough there to keep you busy for some time, Hippy, but 'pon my word, I believe you've got the clue. There is something queer about the father, and Chelda's on the track of it." [305]

"The witch!" ejaculated Mrs. White, in mild indignation. "What has Derrice done to her?"

"What made that young high-stepper next door go away?"

"I guess he wanted to get rid of his church. He acted as if he despised us."

"I guess he wanted to get rid of Chelda Gastonguay, and I guess Derrice and Justin helped him off. And what kind of a feeling do you suppose Miss Chelda has inside her when she sees her old aunt petting Derrice?"

"Well, why don't she keep out of their sight, if she don't like it?"

"That's where she's clever, my dear. A jealous woman's jealousy will slip into as many shapes as there are pebbles on the beach. Sometimes it's a sea-monster. Sometimes it's a sly little eel,—will you watch this particular eel?"

"Of course," she replied, in a tone that showed surprise that there should be any question about it.

He threw off his anxiety, and fell into an immediate ecstasy. "It's my belief, Hippolyta White, that there ain't one mite of happiness in the world for the average man till he gets one thing." [306]

"What is it?" she asked, demurely.

"Some woman to boss just as he likes; none of your up-standing, high-headed creatures that won't bear a curb, but a nice, modest, good pink of perfection little creature just like—just like—"

"Like Derrice," continued his wife, with as roguish an accent as late middle age could attain.

"Like you," he roared, leaning forward and giving her a resounding and loving smack on her ruddy cheek.

Surprised by her sheepish expression, he looked round and found Justin regarding him with a dubious expression from the doorway.

The young man did not like to see his mother holding Captain White's feet, and furthermore, to see her taking such evident pleasure in the honour.

"I've got rheumatism most gripingly," explained Captain White, lifting the offending members to the floor, and twisting his face in pretended torture. "By the way, you're to take your boat and meet young missis down at Gull's Island, where the carnival suppers. She wants to come home with you, and left that message. Whew! there's a strange cat in the garden," and forgetting his rheumatism, he darted from the room, and went to whistle the intruder over the fence.

CHAPTER XXIV.

[307]

AN INVITATION TO A PICNIC.

During the fine summer weather Miss Gastonguay spent a great part of her time on horseback.

Her straight figure was becoming bent, her short grizzled hair was more thickly mixed with white, her hand was less steady than it used to be, yet she persisted in her long rides, and for miles around Rossignol the farmers' wives would run to the window as they saw her pass, and exclaim, "There goes the rich old lady from the Bay, with her niece and her pony dog."

The latter was the name by which the Fairy Prince was known, and he did indeed look like a lazy dog as he trotted far in the rear of the tall black steeds on which his mistress and her niece were mounted.

If the weather were too warm for his liking, he often pulled up at some of the farms where he was known, and where he was sure of a welcome from admiring children. There he would await Miss Gastonguay, and in the cool of the evening joyfully rejoin her, and return to his stable and his epicurean diet.

One day, when far from home, Miss Gastonguay, who happened to be alone, met Justin Mercer, who was also on horseback, his face, however, being set toward Rossignol, while hers was away from it. [308]

She reined in her beautiful black animal with an imperative "Where have you been?"

"To Cloverdale on business. A farmer who is ill sent for me."

"What is your wife doing?"

"She is yachting to-day."

"What with her shore dinners, and her clambakes, and drives, and sailing parties, and golf, and tennis, and visits to the poor, I never see her now," grumbled Miss Gastonguay." I want her to myself for one afternoon. Will you all come up next Thursday and have a picnic in my woods?"

Justin assured her that they would be glad to do so.

"And have your mother come, and that extraordinary man, her husband."

Justin's big white teeth gleamed approvingly, then a silence fell between them. They were on the summit of a bluff one hundred feet above a flat, white beach. As from the height of some battlement they looked out on a wide blue stretch of water. The view was one of exquisite peace and beauty, yet Miss Gastonguay's eyes came drearily back to her companion's quietly happy face.

"You don't let that child spend any of the wanderer's money?" [309]

"Not a cent."

"That's good, but how do you explain your economies when she knows he has money?"

"I don't explain them fully."

"And she submits?"

"Yes."

"You must have been very much in love to have married the daughter of such a man," she said, with a curious wonder in her voice.

He had been, but he said nothing, and quietly restrained his horse, which was impatiently pawing the ground in the direction of Rossignol.

"You are not willing for me to give her presents," Miss Gastonguay went on.

"I had rather you would not do so."

She left him with as little ceremony as she had greeted him; and, with all the gladness taken from the bright summer afternoon, he went sadly on his way.

Miss Gastonguay was not an old woman, yet she was breaking up. The discovery that her long-lost brother, whom she had hoped was dead, was living as a prey upon society had humbled her pride and broken her spirit. The black shadow of disgrace hung continually over her, and Justin uneasily wondered whether he had done right to give her the shock that had eaten the heart and comfort out of her life. [310]

He thought he had. He had fulfilled his duty; he had kept his promise to the unhappy man who wished his daughter to come under the protection of the sister so long separated from him. This had afforded Miss Gastonguay the consolation of Derrice, and a day might come, a day would come, he feared, when her ministrations and forgiveness might be needed for the wanderer himself. It was better for a woman of her temperament to have time to brood over a matter than to have it suddenly announced to her.

Then, too, in spite of her trouble, she had become softened,—more womanly, less hard,—and she had gained either an additional devotion, or a wonderful simulation of it, from her elder niece, the one upon whom she had lavished her wealth and affection for so many years.

Derrice's sudden establishment of empire over Miss Gastonguay had struck a spark of jealousy from Chelda's cold heart. To counterbalance this influence she had partly abandoned her selfish

and solitary mode of life, and had given herself up to her aunt. To please her she cultivated Derrice; to please her she shunned the summer visitors among whom she usually found congenial associates. True, she was possibly becoming more deceitful; but if she were, Justin could not help [311] it. He had done what he thought was right, and he must patiently await results. It was an involved affair. Only one thing was clear; and, as he went quickly on his way, his horse's hoofs seemed to beat from the hard and stony ground the inexorable words: "Retribution, retribution,—for one man's sin many must suffer."

Upon reaching home, he made haste to deliver Miss Gastonguay's invitation, lest any member of the family should make other arrangements for the day mentioned.

His mother was tranquilly pleased, Derrice was delighted; for Miss Gastonguay had, since the summer began, shown a perverse inclination to keep to herself, and, although glad to see her at French Cross, had not favoured her with many special invitations.

Captain White was non-committal until urged by his wife to make some response. "Of course I'll go," he then said. "Haven't I been longing for a small picnic all summer? I hate those caravans of things where food and people are all jumbled up together."

Accordingly, after an early dinner on Thursday, the Mercer-White household set out in an electric car for French Cross.

They found Miss Gastonguay waiting for them on the steps of the château. "Chelda isn't going," she said. "Some tiresome person is coming to see her." [312]

At that moment the young lady herself made her appearance, and politely expressed her regret that she was unable to accompany them.

"Such a stupid thing," said Miss Gastonguay, impatiently. "One would think Chelda was an advertising agency,—but come, we might as well be going."

Chelda stood watching them filing through a gate in the wall that led to a garden across which was a short cut to the wood. No one was sorry that she was not going, and all had been too honest to profess a disappointment that they did not feel. Only Derrice had uttered a surprised and regretful "Oh, we shall miss you, Miss Chelda."

Chelda did not resent their lack of interest. She was utterly indifferent to the good or the bad opinion of any one in Rossignol, and she calmly continued to watch them until a sudden impulse made her saunter after them.

Captain White had placed himself beside her aunt, and as they went through the gate she heard him say, "I know you're often on the lookout for a situation for some man, and if you've got an able-bodied fellow in mind I might get him in as a sealer,—wages three dollars a day."

"This is some city-bred man that is coming to see Chelda," said Miss Gastonguay. "What is his [313] name?" and she looked over her shoulder at her niece.

"Smith or Jones, or something of the sort."

"Robinson—that's it," said Miss Gastonguay. "Some friend of Chelda wrote her about him. Miss Rose, wasn't it?" and she turned again.

"Yes," replied Chelda, pleasantly; "she wrote me some long story about this man. I think she said he had been a butler in their family. I really forget what it was, for I lost the letter. If she wishes employment for him, I wonder she did not apply to you, aunt."

"And his name is Robinson?" asked Captain White, carelessly.

"Yes."

"And he telegraphs to Chelda as big as a lord," continued Miss Gastonguay. "Will call on you Thursday, at 3 P. M.,'—a peremptory butler that."

"Perhaps he is hard up," suggested Captain White.

To his regret the conversation was here broken off, for Derrice exclaimed, suddenly, "Can't we go through the graveyard?"

The old French cemetery, with its graves clustering around the hill on which gleamed the marble cross, was a little to their left, but Miss Gastonguay willingly made the détour. Justin did not go in. He stood silently by the gate, his gaze wandering after his wife. Dear little feet slipping so [314] reverently between the grassy mounds. How far was their owner from suspecting her relationship to the weary sleepers below!

Lingeringly she went from one marble slab to another, touching with gentle fingers the flowers laid upon them, or pausing to read the inscriptions carved to the memory of Gastonguays, De Lisles or De Saint Castins.

The small cemetery was exquisitely kept. Miss Gastonguay possessed an almost Chinese reverence for the last resting-places of her ancestors, and one of her favourite occupations was to pace slowly to and fro in the green enclosure that had almost fallen into oblivion when she began her reign at French Cross.

Justin saw that her piercing glance was bent approvingly on his wife, and that her eyes filled with tears when Derrice knelt beside the tiniest grave of all,—that of a little child Gastonguay,—and tenderly laid on it a rose that she took from her breast. There was a lamb on the grave, a sculptured lamb of white Maine granite, and above towered a colossal figure in flesh-red stone of the founder of the house,—stout-hearted Louis Gastonguay, who stood as in life, his back to the

sea, his trusty musket in his right hand, his left pointing urgently toward the interior of the vast country whose exploration was the chief topic of conversation in his day.

Derrice and the lamb, and old Louis and his musket, stood in fine contrast. Chelda, looking on and suppressing her disdain, could not, however, conceal from Justin her conviction that his wife's attitude was one chosen for subtle effect rather than one of unstudied simplicity. He smiled slightly, called Derrice, and the picnic party took up its way to the wood, while Chelda returned to the house. [315]

She was not lonely, although she had never in her life been as much cut off from society as she was this summer. She despised Rossignol, she disliked the people in it. Only one person had made the place endurable to her, and that person had been driven from her. She had now but one desire,—to accomplish her vengeance, to see Derrice unhappy, one-tenth as unhappy as she was,—and then to take her aunt to some place nearer the man without whom her life was unendurable.

He would never return to Rossignol, she felt persuaded of that. She had been patient and stealthy in waiting for the time to come when she might go in search of him, and something told her that this time was now approaching.

Her interview to-day would probably close her dealings with H. Robinson, and calmly making her way to the library, she took up a book and sat down to await his coming.

CHAPTER XXV. [316]

IN THE FRENCH CROSS WOOD.

In early days old Louis Gastonguay, who had no mind to be teased by the Indians as were other less shrewd settlers, purchased from a band of Penobscots their summer camping-ground, consisting of a strip of beautiful woodland extending along the river bank behind his log cabin.

To ensure peaceful possession, he paid what was considered an exorbitant price for two hundred acres of land, but time proved that the price he paid was not a ruinous one, for during the long Indian wars not a Gastonguay lost his scalp, though there were some members of his family little liked by the red men.

This wood had been, through successive generations, the pride of the Gastonguays, and it had been cleared and embellished by various members of the family until at this time it was famed throughout the State for its combination of natural and artificial beauty.

Miss Gastonguay and her guests strolled in a leisurely way through its shady alleys, crossing and recrossing at intervals the one broad avenue that ran through it. The sun was hot overhead, but protecting pines and spruces interposed verdant and sheltering arms, and gently waved toward the pedestrians a river breeze that caught and carried to them a dozen spicy odours from the forest paths. [317]

Justin went with his hat in his hand, his mother on his arm. Captain White kept up an animated conversation with his hostess, who seemed to have some particular attraction for him, while Derrice, with the pony, wandered erratically behind, sometimes in the path, sometimes far from it, in search of some shy wild flower that had stretched out a slender neck to look at them, and then had vainly tried to hide itself from her vandal fingers behind some leafy fern.

The pony adored Derrice, and he was greatly interested in the wild flowers. As he stood with his delicate hoofs planted in mossy beds, his fat knees hidden by branching brakes, he often extended his head over her shoulder, and if he approved, by his sense of smell, of the blossom she was gathering, he immediately appropriated it as a dainty morsel for his own delectation.

Derrice playfully slapped his face, and finally taking off her beflowered hat perched it on his head, whereupon, having something else to think of, he left her alone and stood sheepishly waiting for her to rejoin the rest of the party.

After a time she threw an arm over his neck and hurried after the others. Miss Gastonguay had been looking for her herd of tame deer, but was just giving up the quest. "It is too hot," she said, "they have probably gone across the swamps. Shall we sit here?" and she indicated a circular seat about an enormous oak-tree. [318]

"Have you ever favoured Derrice with the story of this tree?" asked Justin, as they sat down.

"I believe I have."

"Yes, ever so long ago," said Derrice, shaking the sunbeams from her uncovered head. "See if I have it right,—the Gastonguays in Revolutionary time warmly espoused the cause of the colonies. They considered one of their sea captains a traitor, so they tied him to this tree and whipped him soundly until he took an oath of fidelity to his country, and promised to fight against the 'Bands of Tyranny,' whose 'Plodding Pates' had long projected methods to enslave his countrymen. He took the oath and they set him loose, and drank several draughts of toddy with him and lived in 'Peace and Harmony' ever after. I saw the record in the French Cross attic. Dear Miss Gastonguay, tell some other stories of the olden times."

Miss Gastonguay happened to be in a humour for reminiscences, and, without further persuasion, she launched into a recital of her family history through the cruel Indian wars, the days of painful adversity that fell upon the colony, the stirring episodes of the Revolutionary War, and the War of the Rebellion, in which four Gastonguays, who served in the gallant First Maine Regiment, were killed and buried in Southern soil. [319]

"You forgot about the black day of 1780," Derrice reminded her when she stopped.

Miss Gastonguay patiently went back and related the story of her family's sudden exodus from Rossignol during a brief occupancy by the British, of their sojourn in the wilderness, and of their fright on a certain dark day when candles were lighted at noon, and the whole country sat in terrified expectancy of the sudden ending of the world. This story ended, she closed her lips and refused to talk further.

"It is too fine to sit still," said Captain White, who had been listening to her words with breathless interest, but who found the spell broken when she ceased to speak. "I'm going up river to see if that old prison is still scowling at your property with its hangdog face. Does any one want to go?"

"I do," said Derrice, springing up and catching her hat from the pony who had been standing with pink ribbons hanging foolishly over his ears. "Won't you come, Miss Gastonguay?"

"Not to that place."

"Why not?—the river is superb from there." [320]

Miss Gastonguay obstinately shook her head. Never again in her life would she look on the old red-shingled building. "Perhaps I'll come to meet you," she said, when Derrice made no pretence at concealing her disappointment.

"I guess you'd better stay behind, too, Hippolyta," said Captain White to his flushed spouse. "You look as if you'd been having a staring match with old Sol and he'd beaten you. What are you for, Justin?"

"Nothing, but to be let alone," said the young man, enjoyably. He had stretched himself out on the bench behind the giant tree, and only his head was visible to the people on the other side of it.

"Take off your glasses and rest your eyes," said Derrice, going to him and putting his spectacles in his pocket. "We won't be long," and, surreptitiously kissing the ear in which she whispered the words, she hurried after her escort, who was walking briskly along with both elbows cutting the air in his usual fashion.

"They're as lively as two mosquitoes," observed Mrs. White, amiably.

"And I'm as sleepy as an owl," said Miss Gastonguay. "I haven't been resting well lately. If you'll hold your tongue for ten minutes, Hippolyta Prymmer, or rather White, I believe I'll drop off," and she drowsily laid her head against the hard tree trunk.

"I guess I'll copy you," said Mrs. White, phlegmatically, but in making her arrangements for a nap she selected a spot where pine-needles most thickly strewed the ground. [321]

Justin laughed in his sleeve, but in two minutes he, too, had joined the ladies in a brief nap, and only the pony was left to gaze amiably from one sleeper to another, and guard them from intruders.

CHAPTER XXVI. [322]

THE PICNIC AND THE OLD PRISON WELL.

Derrice and Captain White jogged merrily on. "Do you know what makes Justin so sluggish?" asked the latter, after a time.

"Yes, he sat up last night with that poor sick man."

"Sick!—crazy drunk," reflected her companion. "Justin don't tell her everything, and thank Heaven she ain't curious. She don't guess Bob Wallis put in the night trying to brain her husband with the lamp, and run him through with the poker, and play any other pesky tricks on him that came in his mind. Justin had to keep his eyes open to keep alive. Soho, this is a bad world," and he gazed keenly into the depths of the underwood, where he thought he saw a pair of liquid brown eyes.

It was Orono, Miss Gastonguay's pet moose, whose age was seven months, and whose weight was four hundred pounds. He would, however, not come at Derrice's coaxing, and they plunged deeper and deeper into the thicket after him.

"Go on, don't turn your back on a few trials," Captain White encouraged Derrice, and finally they [323] emerged scratched and breathless upon the high river bank, where Derrice ruefully surveyed her torn gown.

Captain White laughed at her, drew from his pocket the key Miss Gastonguay had given him, and unlocked the padlocked gate in the high fence bounding the wood.

They were now on town property, and almost opposite them was the prison. The river here took a sudden bend, and the old red building crowned, or rather disfigured, a slight eminence on a spur of land running out in the water.

Its ugly old face did indeed, as Captain White said, scowl at the surrounding landscape, and its most malevolent glances were bestowed on the magnificent property of French Cross that followed so smoothly the curve and graceful lines of the wandering Rossignol. The sullen, low-browed structure was fortunately going to ruin. Many years had elapsed since the prisoners had been removed from it to a smart new building of gray Albert freestone, erected in the centre of the town.

The windows were broken in, there were great holes in the overhanging roof that was placed like an extinguisher atop of the red walls, yet the prison was in its decay a more favourite haunt of the towns people than it had been in its prime.

Owing to its situation, the view from its ruinous tower was far-reaching and unique. It was the [324] vantage-ground from which to survey the towers and steeples of Rossignol, the opening of the verdant Bay, French Cross and the wooded country beyond, and more extensive still, the low green fields across the river, swelling up to the fertile farms and beautiful rolling country stretching far away to the horizon.

Derrice and Captain White entered the prison yard, once high-walled and guarded by a ponderous gate, but now broken down as to its walls, and unprotected as to its gate, that lay ignominiously on its side, spurned by the foot of every passer-by.

They went lightly over the gate and across the wide yard, then, entering the tumble-down door, looked into a small room on the right, formerly the office for receiving and discharging prisoners.

"No prison smell now," said Captain White, sniffing the air. "The wind of heaven blows through empty sashes. See that three-legged table hipping into the corner. You've had to come down in the world, old fellow. Many a time I've seen unlucky fellows propping themselves against you. Now you'd be glad of a leg yourself."

"Dear Captain White," cried Derrice, "don't, don't speak of those days. I love to think of this place as deserted, the prisoners dead or happy. Don't tell me stories about them."

"All right," he returned, gallantly. "We'll say angels dwelt here. Poor, misguided angels with a [325] dash of saints among 'em— Just wait a bit before you go up aloft. I've not been here for some time. I want to have a look at the old feeding-place,—beg pardon, their dining-saloon,"—and advancing along the corridor he struck his fist against a door, massive in appearance, but in reality rusting on its hinges, and yielding readily to his assault.

"This is where they used to be sprawling, or rather reclining, when you came in," he said, indicating a small space dominated by open galleries. "Black, white, and gray, in their dirty prison dress, or rather their beautiful white gowns, with their pretty wings folded so tight you couldn't see 'em. They manage these houses of detention for martyrs differently now, thank Heaven. Come on here, little girl."

He walked for some distance below the hanging galleries, resounding so often, in days gone by, to the heavy tramp of prisoners marching to their cells.

"It was in here they feasted," he said, indicating a long dismantled room. "Can't I see 'em now, poor devils, each with his bowl of porridge and spoon? No knives because they got into a nasty little habit of laying open each other's blessed visages. Look at the rats banqueting here, whoop!" and he jumped and frightened a squeak from an old graybeard darting by him, and caused [326] Derrice to fall back and shriek nervously.

"Silly child," he said, penitently, "you shouldn't be so nervous. Let's get out of the ugly hole," and

he made rapidly toward the stone staircase at the other end of the building.

Derrice ran after him, then drank in the view from the tower, until he challenged her to a return race to the old well in the prison yard. The handicap in their race was twenty seconds, yet he made a wild rush by Derrice on the staircase, and when she arrived at the goal he was leaning coolly on the broken well rim.

She sank breathlessly on a heap of stones, and after laughing at her he wheeled and stared into the well that had long since gone dry.

"I'd like to know what's down there," he said. "It used to be a famous chuck-hole with the blessed martyrs. Every little while the prison authorities had to clean it out to the tune of several bucket loads of souvenirs."

"But what about polluting their supply of drinking water?" asked Derrice, rising, and also leaning over it.

"Jack-knives and letters and photographs and jewelry wouldn't poison them—Hello, what are you trying to do?"

"Oh, my watch, my watch!" uttered Derrice, with a cry of despair." The watch my father gave me." [327]

"What did you throw it down there for?"

"I didn't throw it. It slipped from my belt. What shall I do?" and she buried her face in her hands.

Disturbed by a kicking of the stones, she presently raised her head, and saw Captain White taking off his coat. "You must not try to get it," she exclaimed. "You might slip. Wait until you get a rope."'

"That's what I'm going for," he replied. "There's a carpenter's cottage over there on the road. You stay here, and I'll soon be back."

He bounded away like a deer, and in a short time returned with a man almost as active and lithe as he was himself.

"I guess I'm the most of a cat," he said, measuring his companion by a glance. "You hold the rope and I'll go down."

"Oh, do be careful," entreated Derrice. "Those stones may be loose. I had rather lose my watch than have one of them roll on you."

"We're agreed then. I've no ambition to turn into a pot of jelly," and he cautiously poised himself on the shaky well mouth.

The whole structure was loose and crumbling, and every stone or brick touched took a malicious pleasure in falling upon him. In his haste he scratched his hands considerably in his descent, and upon arriving below had to move about with extreme caution. [328]

"Whew!" he exclaimed, as a brick put out the candle he had just lighted, and then fell on his toes. "I must be brief."

A swing of his light, a rapid flash of his eyes, and he gave the signal to be lifted above.

"Here," he said, extending the watch to Derrice as he crawled up to brightness. "It's pretty well battered, but you can have it mended. Don't wear it in such a mighty careless place again."

She thanked him fervently, lent him her handkerchief to tie around one of his bleeding hands, and then accompanied him back to the wood.

As soon as they entered the gates they saw Miss Gastonguay coming to meet them. Her surprised glance went from one to the other. Derrice was torn and dishevelled, and her hair was tumbling about her shoulders; while Captain White was decidedly battered in appearance, and added a slight limp to his usual gait.

"Have you been in a fight?" she asked.

"No, no," laughed Derrice, "first in a spruce, then in a bramble thicket, and afterward Captain White went down a well. See how his hands are bleeding,—and oh, let me tell you about my watch."

Miss Gastonguay listened in silence to the tale of the misadventure; then she handed the bruised ornament back to Derrice and remarked, "You say your father gave it to you?" [329]

"Yes, my dear, dear father."

"Let me have it when you have finished exhibiting it, and I will send it to my jeweller in Bangor."

"Thank you, thank you," said Derrice, squeezing her hand. "And now may I run on to tell Justin?"

"Certainly," said Miss Gastonguay, shortly. "You will find him in the gazeebo."

Derrice tapped the pony on the neck by way of challenging him to keep up with her, and went with flying feet toward Miss Gastonguay's gazeebo, which was a summer-house situated in a clearing by the river.

The pony went with her, for he knew that supper-time was approaching, and Miss Gastonguay, left alone with her guest, walked silently on beside him.

After the lapse of a few seconds he drew a small object from his pocket, with a calm, "I found something beside Derrice's watch down the well."

"Did you?" she said, politely.

"Yes,—something with the Gastonguay crest on it. The watch was lying snuggled up to it just as if it had gone down there to find it. There was only this one clear place on the top of a flat rock. The rest was choked with rubbish. I guess the ring had been down for some time," and he handed the [330] small article to her.

Miss Gastonguay glanced sharply at him. His expression was composed, and by no means curious. He gave the ring to her as if she had a right to it, but he seemed to have no desire to question the strangeness of its discovery.

"Did you tell Derrice?" she asked.

"No."

"How do you suppose it got there?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess some thief stole it and on his way to be searched chucked it in there."

"It is a man's seal ring," she said, turning the discoloured ornament round and round in her fingers.

"Yes, ma'am, I see that."

She stared at him from head to foot. He was walking lightly and swiftly beside her in spite of his limp. She struggled with some emotion. "I have seen you all my life,—have always known you well; yet lately you seem to dawn on me with a strange familiarity. Tell me, is there any reason for my suspicion—"

He stopped short in his halting walk and blushed with the faint, evanescent blush of composed middle age. Then he said, shortly, "There is, ma'am, you've caught something you might have caught before if you'd had any dealings with me. I guess Derrice has started you in it by bringing [331] us together."

"Then some of the blood of this unhappy family does run in your veins."

"A little," he said, modestly. "It ain't a pretty subject to talk over with a lady, but you understand the Gastonguays. You know that ever since the priests hauled old Louis's sons and the young De Saint Castins over the coals for lying in bed in the mornings and keeping the Indians waiting about the truck-house and then selling 'em rum in buckets, that they've had a wild streak in 'em. I feel it in me. Sometimes there is a striped devil takes me by the hand and drags me through a dance that I'm but a half-hearted partner in."

Miss Gastonguay groaned, but continued her walk with determination. "What is the precise relationship?"

"It begins with your grandfather, who, more's the pity, ought to have lived in Mormon days and been a high-class elder. The priests would only allow him one wife and he wanted several. He couldn't get banns for my grandmother and she couldn't get banns for him, for she also had a partner. Anyhow, they had a kind of liking for each other, and my mother ought to have had the same outspoken relation to your grandfather that you have, but she hadn't, and it's just as well."

"Man, you confuse me with your relationships. Your mother was the illegitimate daughter of my [332] grandfather?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Does any one else know of this?"

"No, ma'am, no one. My mother told me on her death-bed. I needn't say the secret was kept from my grandfather and father. The women seemed to take a sort of devilish pride in even a left-handed connection with such a distinguished family."

"Have you no pride in it?"

"Yes, ma'am,—lots in this way. I'm getting on in years, and being lonely I kind of hanker after extending my trailers to other families, just like some old weed that's soon going to be rooted up."

"You shall not regret telling me," she said, brokenly, "though it is one more load for me to carry. Man, I am very unhappy."

"I know it," he said, under his breath.

She took a swift resolution. There was something in this man,—she did not know what it was,—possibly it was the tie of blood, possibly because in him she felt the French life and vivacity, and tenacity of purpose under seeming frivolity that was so strongly akin to her family, and so unlike the cold, frigid resolution of Justin, the descendant of the Puritans. At any rate, she liked him, liked him far better than the more polished Justin, and without resolving to entrust her secret to [333] him, she yet started to play the dangerous game of recalling her lost brother to his memory.

"It is your cousin's," she said, suddenly, holding up the ring. "It belonged to my unhappy brother Louis. Do you remember him?"

"Am I likely to forget my relations?" he said, keenly. "There is not a man Jack nor a woman Jill of all the Gastonguays that I've not watched. Yes, I call up your brother Louis, the gamiest of the lot. He used to stone me, because his friends said I favoured him. Once I fetched him a sly snowball behind the ear, but I didn't put a stone in it because he was of my blood— Hold on a minute, for

mercy sakes, ma'am. Hold on—hold on!"

Miss Gastonguay drew back. Was there a snake in her path that this excitable man behaved so strangely? They were close to one of the rustic seats placed at intervals along the walks of the wood, and on one of the seats he suddenly sank, guarding his eyes with one bandaged hand and stretching out the other as if to keep her away.

"Oh, crimini fish skins!" he ejaculated. "I see it now. What a fool I have been! That little chirrup of a girl harping on my look of her father—old Sylvester's visits to the prison—I see it now, I see it now. I thank you, ma'am," and, springing up, he seized Miss Gastonguay's hand and shook it [334] warmly.

"Get out with you!" she said. "Do you want to call attention to us?" and yet she was not annoyed, but rather gratified, and watched with pleasure the rapidity with which his mind ran back along the thread of recollection she had given him.

"Louis running away—Louis missing—Louis said to be dead, not dead but living, and cutting up as usual. Under Sylvester's wide-spread wing—Justin's darling—Justin's father-in-law. All very natural. Thank you, ma'am, thank you. I'm glad Derrice dropped that watch. Tell me some more, —tell me some more."

She sat down beside him on the bench, and relieved her overburdened heart by talking freely. They seemed an incongruous couple, the grizzled lady in her broadcloth suit and the sailor in his blue serge, yet their relationship drew them together. In former days she would have repudiated it with scorn; now her enlarged and wandering sympathies went out to this man with cousinly interest.

She talked freely to him of her fears with regard to her brother, of her failing health, if means might be taken to protect Chelda and Derrice from the knowledge of their connection with the criminal, until at last, warned of the flight of time by the sun dipping lower behind the pines, she rose. "We must go," she said, regretfully, "but remember, I want to see more of you. I have not [335] much longer to live. The doctors say I am mistaken, but I don't believe them. I know what this thumping, fluttering heart means. Come often to French Cross while I am here,—you and your wife, of course."

CHAPTER XXVII. [336]

H. ROBINSON AND HIS REVELATION.

Chelda, meanwhile, was having her interview with H. Robinson.

Captain White had not told her that the Bangor and Rossignol train was two hours late. She had only found that out by telephoning to the station.

She was considerably annoyed by it. She was also annoyed by the detective's presumption in coming to see her, and when he did arrive she confronted him with a cool and haughty stare.

Yet she was slightly curious with regard to him. The whole criminal world was unknown to her, but it possessed a strange fascination for her, and this small experience had convinced her that she would have made an excellent detective herself, one better qualified by nature than this puffy, red-faced individual, gasping for breath in the cool library.

He was by no means her ideal of a detective. She had imagined that he would be tall and lean, a serpentine kind of a man, capable of twisting himself into innumerable Protean shapes, whereas he was short and stout, and of a fiery redness of complexion.

How could he ever disguise those cheeks of alarming hue, those sausages of arms and posts of legs? She did not like him. It irritated her to have him sit gazing at her with his moist, gooseberry-coloured eyes, while he mopped his perspiring face with a new handkerchief stiff with the creases in which it had come out of some second-rate Boston store. [337]

She was in haste to get him away from the house. Her aunt might return unexpectedly, and her restless curiosity would be sure to result in disagreeable discoveries, therefore she opened the conversation by saying, "If we are interrupted and you are questioned, I wish you would let it be supposed that you are some one in search of employment."

"All right," he said, with an unctuous laugh, and twisting his head all around his shoulders in order to reach the regions of neck behind. "I ought to apologise for being here, but I had something to communicate,—something I wouldn't trust to no letter."

The reserved young lady vouchsafed him no reply; and, restoring his handkerchief to its proper place, he took up the tone of their correspondence, and went on, briskly, "Yours of the tenth was duly received."

"Indeed," said Chelda, as calmly as if it were a matter of surprise that her letter should not have gone astray.

"I filled your little commission about the key, but that ain't what brought me here," and he immediately inflated his whole body in a manner that betokened a high state of gratification. [338]

"What did bring you?" inquired Chelda, with an impatient desire to bring him to the point.

"Let me recapitulate," he replied; and he ticked off his words with the bursting forefinger of one hand against the bursting forefinger of the other. "Three months ago you gave me your clue. I followed it up. I tracked Jones, *alias* Martin, *alias* Smith, *alias* Lancaster, from Persia Street to New York, from New York to Chicago, from Chicago to San Francisco,—lost him there,—by a regular jumped-up miracle stumbled on his tracks again of fifteen years later, then burst into a regular mine, a regular mine. Madam, I have the honour to inform you that you have laid this great American nation under a debt of gratitude," and, getting up with difficulty, he made her what he considered to be a very profound and gentlemanly bow.

It was lost on Chelda. She was ineffably disgusted with him, and took small pains to hide her disgust.

H. Robinson assumed an injured air. For her sake he was trying to restrain himself, for her sake he was courting dangers of suffocation and strangulation from the retention of his great and sensational discovery, and he was appreciated not in the slightest degree. He would try again to overawe her. [339]

"You put me on the scent of a gambler," he said, tragically; "I have run into the biggest bank-breaker in the world. We've done what all the police forces in the Union couldn't do."

Still Chelda was not impressed. She was startled, slightly startled, and increasingly annoyed. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Look here," he said, and he whipped out some papers and spread them on his fat knees. "Look,—'Rewards Offered,'—'Descriptions Given'—'Cut of Gentleman George in beard and whiskers.'"

"Is that his name?" she asked, and her mind went back to the book of criminal records.

"Yes, ma'am. You've read of him, of course. All the world knows him,—the civilised world, of course. I don't see why he didn't take to China. I should think some big hauls might be made there," and he became thoughtful until roused by a peremptory question from Chelda.

"Yes, ma'am, it's sure enough. Your man is Gentleman George, and when we catch him, if you care anything for getting before the public, you'll figure in the daily press from Maine to Texas."

Chelda's lip curled. It was not worth while to argue. Not all the tongues of men and angels could make this man understand the inherent differences between her nature and his. He would revel in notoriety, she would loathe it. [340]

"Do you mean to say," she asked, deliberately, "that this man I set you in search of is really the

celebrated criminal called Gentleman George?"

"I do,—I've said it, and I say it again. Your married man with the German wife that boarded in Persia Street, Boston, in a respectable boarding-house, is the high-roller Gentleman George."

This man was honest, Chelda knew that, for, true to her instinct to trust no one, she had taken pains to ascertain his character before she entrusted her case to him. H. Robinson was not a genius, but a man discharged from a regular police detective force on account of insubordination and inability to work under orders. Singly, he did pretty good service and could be trusted. But for the latter assurance she would never have gone to him.

While she studied his face, he composedly studied hers. He was hurt, but not made angry by her disdain. H. Robinson was first of all a man of business; he did not allow private likes and dislikes to stand in the way of professional advancement.

"If you've a mind to carry the affair through," he said, with some sympathy in the depths of his pair of matched gooseberries, "you'll get used to it. You ought to see some women in court for the first time, and then see 'em for the last."

"You know that I will not carry it through," she said, with arrogance. [341]

He could not conceal his satisfaction. For a few seconds he silently expanded and contracted his rounded chest, then he burst out with a relieved, "I expected you'd back out. It ain't an affair a lady ought to glory in."

"I began the thing from curiosity," she went on. "I am going to wash my hands of it now."

He choked back his delight, and energetically repressed the words of thankfulness gurgling in his throat. In imagination he saw himself hurling his grand discovery at an aggregation of detective forces, and thereby triumphing gloriously over his former unappreciative associates.

Chelda was becoming increasingly anxious to get rid of him. "I requested you at the beginning to keep our correspondence strictly private," she said, hastily. "Have you done so?"

"Yes, ma'am; I'll take my Bible oath on it."

"No one has seen my letters to you?"

"Not a soul, nor a body either."

"You have all the letters?"

"Every one,—filed in my safe."

"You could return them to me?"

"Yes, ma'am, I could," he replied, with a strong emphasis on the *could*.

He had not had much success until this young lady had fallen into his hands. He knew that she was rich, and he was prepared to make a very good thing of the affair. [342]

"You shall be paid," she said, loftily, "but there are certain things I wish you to promise me."

In spite of the shortness of time, she fell into a brief reverie. Her active brain was running over the possibilities of the future. She wished to humiliate Derrice, to poison slightly for her the springs of happiness, and to survey from a distance the uneasy struggles of this victim who had so deeply angered her.

But suppose she crushed her. Suppose her aunt would not leave Rossignol,—would stop to comfort her favourite, and investigate the cause of the disgrace overwhelming her. Vexatious circumstances might arise; something unforeseen might happen to implicate her in the matter. Her first duty was to herself. She would at this moment give up her vengeance, dear as it was to her, if it stood in the way of her personal advancement. She had better do so. The detective had taken a most unwise step in coming to see her. She must shake him off at once and for ever.

"I will be frank with you," she said, hurriedly. "I had reason to suppose it would be a good thing to have this man exposed, but he has a relative,—a young woman who is sensitive. The shock of hearing what you have told me might be disastrous for her. I did not dream that he would prove to be so renowned a criminal." [343]

"It's a life sentence, ma'am, if we catch him."

"We must not catch him," she said, haughtily. "I wish you to let the pursuit drop at once."

"You do," he said, in a thick voice.

"Yes,—I will make it up to you."

"How, might I ask?"

"I will pay your bill twice over."

He chuckled huskily. "You might fill this house with bank-bills. You might cover old Katahdin with gold plate,—you couldn't move me any more than you'd move that same old mountain. I'm a Maine man, and when a Maine man makes up his mind you know the old saying about might that goes with it. H. Robinson don't go back of his word, and he's sworn to hunt this man down."

There was a detestable sickening crease in his fat lips, and Chelda turned her head away for an instant.

"It ain't your picnic now, you see," he went on, persuasively. "I've done your job. You pay me and I'm done with you. I'll follow this up on my own hook, and you needn't be one mite afraid of

getting dragged in."

If a look could have killed him, he and his secret would at once have sunk through the floor and nevermore been heard of. The look, however, did not kill, and in obstinate pride and with repressed self-satisfaction he presented a folded bill. [344]

Chelda looked over it. "I cannot pay you now," she said, cuttingly.

"No odds,—I don't expect it. It was in the agreement that I'd wait, but you spoke of part payment. My travelling expenses ain't no flea-bite."

Chelda slowly drew her purse from her pocket. "Where is this man now?"

"We've located him in New York."

"We?"

"I,—we is professional. You're inclined to mistrust me, but I swear I'm alone. I'll have no meddling with this job till I'm ready to spring it. I'm planning to trace his exact hang-out through this relative you speak of."

"You know who she is?"

"Yes, ma'am, though you didn't take the pains to tell me, no offence either. You're not bound to tell all you know. I found out all about her. She's the apple of Gentleman George's eye. Of course he writes to her. We'll strike at him through her. I I've a little scheme for scrutinising her husband's mail, but—" and H. Robinson suddenly folded his lips. This young lady was now out of the combine, and he did not like too well the expression in the depths of her inscrutable eyes.

After several efforts he succeeded in rising from his chair, bobbed his head thankfully as she placed some bank-bills in his hand, then sank back again to write a receipt. [345]

"Here's your key," he said, suddenly, "I most forgot."

Chelda took the small, oddly-shaped piece of metal from him. Ever since childhood she had known that her aunt kept her dearest possessions in the little table at the head of her bed. In the lower drawers were her family jewels. In the upper one were treasures beyond the treasures of gold or precious stones.

The contents of this upper drawer had never been shown to Chelda, and she had never had any curiosity to examine them, for she knew pretty well that they were heart souvenirs,—old profile pictures, daguerreotypes, and badly painted miniatures, locks of hair, scraps of satin and velvet from wedding gowns, faded letters, and withered flowers, taken from the hands of the dead.

But lately there had been some additions made to this store of treasures,—something that drew her aunt to frequent contemplation and meditation behind closed doors. There had also been a new lock put on the drawers, and Chelda had become possessed of a teasing curiosity to know what this concealed mystery foreboded. She was continually in fear of a new heir. Her aunt had always treated her as her adopted daughter, yet she had never bound herself by a sure and certain promise to leave all that she possessed to her favourite niece. And now—would the key fit? It was exceedingly peculiar in shape, and if there were any flaw in it the detective must take it back to Boston to have another made. [346]

She hastily drew out her watch. The picnickers would probably not be returning for some time yet. "Will you wait for one minute while I try this?" she asked of H. Robinson.

"Cert'nly," he responded, and, folding his fat hands behind him, he strolled to the window and gazed out at the blue sky and the bluer river.

Chelda assured herself by a glance from the back of the house that there was no one approaching from the direction of the wood, and then going swiftly to her aunt's room, she knelt before the table and fitted the key to the lock in the upper drawer.

It worked smoothly,—she had a week previous taken a successful impression,—then, unable to withstand the temptation of casting one glance in the sliding receptacle open at last before her, she delicately insinuated her fingers among its miscellaneous articles, in search of some object of enlightenment.

The velvet shoe first caught her attention. "Little Jane's shoe,—carried over half the world by her unworthy Louis."

Jane was her aunt. Louis, Louis,—who was he? [347]

Ah, her scapegrace uncle, dead long since. He had run away from the parental roof, and had subsequently been much of a traveller.

Here was a letter, a half-open letter, the paper yellow, the ink pale, in which the closing words related to this same uncle. "If Louis should come home."

She wondered how long Louis had lived after leaving home. He had apparently survived his father's death, and she carefully restored the letter to the exact spot from which she had taken it.

"Gentleman George and His Gigantic Games,"—this was a newspaper extract. Her aunt knew, then, that Derrice's father was a criminal. How had she found out? Did Justin Mercer know? Surely not; he would never have married the daughter of a man who had violated the law of his country.

Her surprised mind ran off in this new field of conjecture, until, suddenly remembering the necessity for haste, she laid the extract back beside the shoe, and was about closing the drawer

when one of the flippant head-lines arrested her hand.

"The Bank Burglar a Fetich Worshipper. Undertakes No Job without His Charm of the Velvet Shoe."

She caught the paper up again, and breathlessly read through the article, in which was jauntily [348] outlined the phenomenal career of a man who had successfully carried through some of the greatest bank robberies the world had ever known.

The reading finished, she sank back on the floor and stared in blank horror before her.

Gentleman George was Louis Gastonguay. The errant son had never died. Derrice Mercer was her cousin. Fool! Fool that she had been! and she clasped wildly her beating breast.

A hundred confirmatory occurrences flashed into her mind. A long chain of evidence linked itself before her eyes. She had thought herself so clever,—how unutterably stupid had been her proceedings! She had set a ball rolling that would crash in pieces this ancient house. She saw herself discovered and dishonoured, her aunt's gray hairs brought down in sorrow to the grave. She herself had pointed out the game to the hunter below. Nothing would stop him. Nothing could restore her to her lost estate of guiltlessness.

This was revenge,—revenge indeed,—a blow that would strike her as well as her victim. She would lose French Cross. Her aunt would cast her off; she would be a beggar. The thought was maddening, stunning. She had never had any sorrow like this. Bernal Huntington's loss had occasioned her sullen grief,—and even in the midst of her terror a passionate remembrance of [349] him swept into her mind,—but that was grief of the mind only. She had suffered then, but not like this, not like this.

Her whole body was now in agony,—the delicate pampered body that might soon be snatched from the luxuries so necessary to it. It would have to suffer privations that would be strange and fatal.

A deathly sickness overpowered her, and she buried her face in her hands. Relentless figures flitted, before her,—Miss Gastonguay grim and inexorable, Derrice agitated and weeping, Justin with a face turned sternly from her.

Her mind gave way under the strain imposed on it, and her shrinking body grew weak. The pale faces grew black, faded into mist, and she fell headlong on the floor.

CHAPTER XXVIII. [350]

CAPTAIN WHITE'S BALL PLAY.

Prosperity and Tribulation had set out a prettily equipped table on the patch of green grass beside the tranquil river.

Capacious baskets stood beside them, and their slow moving figures showed slim and black against a dull green background of firs.

Miss Gastonguay would not allow these servants to wear livery. Her coachman was obliged to do so. He had always been an underling, but tyrannical as she often showed herself with these two favourites, she never allowed them to forget that she remembered a time when they had been in a position of independence.

Therefore their lives were happy. They followed the whims of their mistress with childish enjoyment, and just now they were as frolicsome as two schoolboys over this departure from the usual order of the day.

The cold dishes were all arranged carefully on the table. Flaming cardinal flowers and spikes of blue pickerel weed lay loosely about the white cloth; the hot dishes watched by the cook O'Toole [351] were growing hotter by a leaping fire, yet Miss Gastonguay would not give the signal to serve the meal.

"Hush," she said, at last, "Mrs. Mercer is going to recite to us."

Prosperity and Tribulation demurely seated themselves and listened to the young lady as she drew herself up erect on her heap of cushions, and, with eyes wandering across the river, declaimed in a girlish way Whittier's exquisite lines on the fabled city of the early Maine Voyagers.

Captain White could not listen. He tried to follow the fortunes of the Christian knight, "who, with his henchman bold, sought through the dim wood the domes and spires of Norumbega's town," but the effort was a failure.

Just as Derrice was plaintively revealing the heart-sickness of the disappointed knight, Captain White wriggled toward his wife. "Hippy," he whispered in her ear, "that supper looks good, but you will excuse me from it. I must have a look at H. Robinson."

She nodded, and followed him with her eyes as he stole out of sight.

On occasions like the present, when the three house servants were withdrawn, the woman from the cottages took charge of affairs at French Cross. This woman Captain White found in the [352] kitchen, gazing at a row of tin covers on the wall as fixedly as if she were mesmerised by them.

When he saluted her with a sudden "Good afternoon," she turned slowly.

"You might 'a' startled me. It's mortal quiet."

"No one round?" inquired Captain White, in his easy manner.

"Nobody but a man."

"Been here long?"

"Nigh on fifteen minutes."

"A stranger?"

"Yes, powerful fleshy,—more fleshy than I be," and she again fell into a reverie.

"Can you give me some warm water?" he asked, pulling the bandage off one of his scratched hands.

"You've been a-ripping of yourself," she said, with stupid interest.

"Yes; why don't you ask how it happened?"

"What odds, so long as you've did it!"

"You ain't curious," he remarked, as he splashed his hands in the water she presented to him.

"I ain't no call to be. Things get did. What matters how?"

He silently washed and dried his hands, and by dint of long staring at them she evolved a proposition. "I'll go get some of that sticky stuff I see in Miss Gastonguay's room."

Captain White walked to one of the windows from which he could command a portion of the [353] avenue. No one left the house, no one approached it, and after what seemed to him to be an interminably long time Mrs. Stryper came waddling back.

"I ain't got your plaster," she said, deliberately, "'cause Miss Chelda's swounded, and I can't bring her to."

"Where is she?"

"In her aunt's room."

"Where's the stranger?"

"I s'pose he's in the library."

"Can I do anything?"

"Be you good at swounds?"

"First-class."

"Come on, then," and she began a return trip at a snail's pace.

Captain White wound an intricate pattern of footsteps all around her as they went up-stairs. He had never before been in the upper part of this house, and he gave himself up to admiration until he reached the long white bedroom. There he was shocked. Chelda looked badly, and he knelt hastily beside her, and laid his hand on her heart.

"Get me some of those bottles, can't you?" he said, pointing to a table,—"something strong. Never mind—I'll do it myself."

Some smelling-salts, that made him throw his head back with a jerk, had something of the same [354] enlivening effect upon Chelda. She gasped, made a painful movement of her forehead, and began to lose the sickly pallor overspreading her olive complexion.

Captain White's fears on her account were at once put to rest, and he resumed his scrutiny of his surroundings. This was Miss Gastonguay's room. That was her bed. Close beside it was the table against which the burglar's efforts had been directed. If then its contents were valuable, why was the upper drawer open, the key falling from it?

He took the liberty of gently detaching the newspaper cutting from Chelda's clasped fingers.

"Gentleman George"—Oh, here was the solution of the mystery. Chelda had been electrified. She had to-day, strange to say, made the same discovery that he had, but she had made hers by dishonest means. She had taken advantage of her aunt's absence to rummage the hiding-place in which, with a woman's tenderness, were kept some remembrances of the disgraced brother.

Unfortunate aunt! Unfortunate girl! She was recovering. He would be able to question her; but first he must get rid of this lout of a woman, and, turning abruptly, he said, "Have you got any pickled quinces in the house?"

"I dunno," she said, stolidly.

"Go and see. It's the best thing for faint spells. There is a peculiar juice in the quince that puts [355] life into the patient."

Mrs. Stryper, without the slightest sign of doubt, went obediently to search in closets and storeroom for something that could not be found.

"Well," said Captain White, when Chelda at last sat up on the floor, and put her hand to her head, "has the world straightened itself out again?"

Without replying to him her gaze went to the open drawer.

"We'd better shut that thing's mouth," and, springing up, he restored the piece of newspaper to its place, locked the drawer, and put the key in her hand.

Chelda took it, feebly tried to reach a chair, and falling over in the attempt, was assisted by Captain White.

"You're as weak as a kitten," he observed. "You've had a great knock-over."

All confusion was rapidly clearing from Chelda's mind. She tried to wither him by a glance, but she had not yet got her bodily faculties under control, and the effort ended in a weak facial contortion.

"You're in trouble," he said; "is there anything I can do for you?"

Chelda found her voice. The exigencies of the case demanded nerve and coolness. "I am not in trouble," she said.

"You are," he replied, bluntly, "and I know what it is. I expect you feel pretty well ashamed of [356] yourself, but it's never too late to turn. Give up this sort of business," and he scornfully pointed his thumb over his shoulder.

"What do you mean?"

"Picking and feeling round other people's property."

"Do you dare to insinuate that I have been doing so?"

"It looks mighty like it," he said, slightly uplifting his shoulders.

"If my aunt chooses to go out and leave an unlocked drawer, you have no right to assail me with base suspicions."

"Did your aunt go and leave an unlocked drawer?"

"Ask her."

"You're clever," he said, admiringly; "you can figure to a dot what folks will do. You know I wouldn't ask a fishy question like that. You know you're lying at the present moment. You know out of jealousy you set H. Robinson on the track of your cousin Derrice. You know you're most dead to think of the shame you were about to bring on this house. 'Pon my word, I wouldn't change places with you for all the gold in the State. Go to bed, you wretched girl, and think over your sins. When you get out of this white heat of fright, tell me anything I can do for you and I'll [357] do it. First, though, have you broken off with H. Robinson?"

"Yes, I have. Tell him to go and—" she said, making an imperious effort to subdue the sudden

shaking of her figure, "I have nothing to say to you. I do not wish to see you again."

"Unhappy girl," he said, mournfully, "you don't understand my interest. I shall not explain it, but you have given me a blow to-day. Sometime you may find out why I surprise you by ferreting out your plans. In the meantime, good-bye; rest if you can," and without a trace of his usual vivacity he left her.

The sight of the stranger's hat lying on one of the massive tables of the entrance-hall at once changed the current of his thoughts from dull melancholy to active hostility,—and there was H. Robinson himself peeping from the library.

The detective was hot and tired and inwardly displeased with this house, in which he had been offered nothing to quench his thirst,—not even a drop of water. He was afraid also of losing his train. It was an extremely strange thing that the stuck-up young lady should keep him waiting such a length of time, and he was just making up his mind to leave, when, to add to his troubles, this stranger came spying about him.

He did not like the twinkle in Captain White's eye, yet he felt constrained to answer him when he leaned politely over the carved railing of the staircase, and said in an interrogative tone of voice, "H. Robinson?" [358]

"That's my name."

"Occupation?" inquired Captain White.

"Haven't got any."

"Glad to get something?"

"Wouldn't mind a soft snap."

"Fishing, for example?"

"Fishing what?"

"Herring,—know anything about them?"

"Not much."

"Know anything about blacksmithing?"

"No."

"Can't make keys,—false keys, nasty, low, picking keys?"

"No, I can't," said H. Robinson, sulkily, and advancing to the table he seized his hat, and began a retreat toward the open hall door, through which a southern breeze was peacefully stealing.

Captain White followed close behind him. "Ever coming here again?"

"I'll come if I like," said H. Robinson, over his expansive shoulder, and with the same manner in which he might have thrown a bone to an impudent dog.

Standing with his foot on the floor of the French Cross hall, Captain White easily imagined himself a champion for the ladies of the house. It was his duty to frighten away this intruder who had been leading the younger and more foolish of the ladies into by and forbidden paths of unlawful curiosity. [359]

"Better give up this little affair," he said, persuasively.

The detective easily lost his temper. However, he controlled himself, and set his foot on the door-sill.

Captain White gave him a playful tap on the shoulder. "Don't come again. As a friend I advise you."

The detective stopped. Short as was his time, and prejudicial as it might be to his interests, he would love to punish this little whipper-snapper of a man.

"Get out," he said, unexpectedly thrusting forth an elbow in close proximity to Captain White.

"Oh!" responded the latter, and one of his elbows flew out with such directness of aim that it sought the detective's hidden ribs with the precision of a dagger.

H. Robinson choked and sputtered with rage, yet in the midst of it remembered that it would be madness for him to indulge in an altercation, and clutching his fat hands he sidled down the steps, his good genius telling him not to present the broad target of his back to the teasing companion crowding against him. [360]

"That was a low thing for me to do," said Captain White, tauntingly.

"You bet it was," returned H. Robinson, with feeling. "I'll do as much for you some day."

"Ever hear of the Pope's mule?" asked Captain White, softly.

The detective muttered something under his breath, and continued edging toward the poplars of the avenue.

"The Pope's mule," went on Captain White, pushing along beside him, "was a peculiar mule. He got mad with a man once, but he couldn't get a kick at him for seven years. Then the kick was a revelation,—to the man of course. Afterward he understood mules better. I blame that mule. He was too patient. He might have kicked some of the man's connections, or his partner in business. That would have scared the man green, and kept him from nagging mules. You can always

manage men if you take 'em in time, and are any kind of a decent mule yourself— Hurry up! what are you crabbing it so slow for?" and he slightly assisted the detective with his shoulder.

H. Robinson hastened his steps. He felt strangely calm; he was forgiving this man.

"We might be brothers or twin dogs in this lockstep," said Captain White, affably. [361]

This remark was comparatively unoffensive, yet it caused something like lightning to dance before the eyes of the fat man. His wrath blazed high and fierce, and wheeling around he whacked Captain White soundly over the head with the small cane he carried.

"Whew!" ejaculated Captain White, delightedly, and drawing back he ran at his victim like a combative sheep.

H. Robinson was rolled off his legs, and for a few minutes he had a confused vision of a sky hung with Captain Whites, and an earth gay with the same decorations. There were Captain Whites to the right of him, Captain Whites to the left of him, Captain Whites behind and before, and each figure was frisking, jumping, rolling up its sleeves, and making a pretence of spitting on its hands. The figures tapped him, pushed him, bowled him over, helped him up, but kept him steadfastly moving in the direction of the big iron gates.

A kind of warning chant accompanied the dance, "Don't come back—better stay away," and as the chant grew louder some of its echoes floated to the ears of a quartette of people emerging from the wood.

Miss Gastonguay was escorting her guests to the terminus of the car line, and at a sudden exclamation from Derrice she turned her eyes toward the enormously fat man being propelled like a rubber ball down the gravelled road. [362]

A slim figure leaped about it. Sometimes the figure was beside the ball, sometimes beyond it,—running at it, trundling it in the gutter, helping it out again, guiding it in the middle of the road, incommoding it in every possible way, yet keeping it moving.

A hat and a cane were accompanying articles, and went spinning through the air like jugglers' toys.

"Has that quirky captain gone crazy?" exclaimed Miss Gastonguay.

No one spoke but Mrs. White. "If that man is getting kicked," she observed, with deliberation, "and Micah's doing it, he deserves a kicking."

Her sentiments were clear, though the construction of her sentence was slightly equivocal, and without contradiction her hearers continued to watch the ball play until the ball arrived at its destination, and was caught up and whirled away by a car into which it was politely assisted by its attendant demon.

Then they remained spectators of a joyful hornpipe danced by the superintendent of the sardine factories, who joyously communed with himself, "First round with H. R. I lead and force him from ring,—what'll be the end of the bout?"

CHAPTER XXIX. [363]

NEWS OF THE WANDERER.

Dog-days had come, and on one of the days when the dogstar rose and set most persistently with the sun Miss Gastonguay was strolling toward the avenue gates.

The day had been too hot to walk, too hot to ride. Now at approaching evening she felt restless, and looking searchingly at the road wished that Derrice or her now frequent visitor, Captain White, would come to see her.

Their well-known figures were not in sight. Only a young man on a bicycle was coming down the road. He was barely moving, and, with a thought of the heat of the evening, Miss Gastonguay murmured a listless, "Simpleton."

He was the first bicyclist that she had seen for three days and, as he drew near, she examined him curiously.

There was something familiar about his appearance, yet for a few minutes she was puzzled. Where had she seen before the straight figure in the smart knickerbocker suit,—a figure so [364] straight and so lean that in a girl it would be called "willowy."

Ah, she knew now. The pale face, too pale for a habitual bicyclist, gave her the needed suggestion.

"Young man, your way lies there," she said, pointing to the road when he dismounted and approached her, cap in hand.

"Not for a minute, if you please," he said, taking a small piece of paper from his pocket.

She refused to touch it, until he said, impatiently, "It's a message from your brother. He's dying, and I haven't time to make hay."

She took it at this, but returned it immediately. "Have I eyes like microscopes that I can read these scraggy lines? Why didn't he send me a proper letter?"

"It's for your sake it's small," replied the young man, with a covert sneer, "I might have had to make my supper off it, if I'd been overhauled."

A sickening dread came over Miss Gastonguay, and she averted her head with an imperious, "Read it to me."

He ran glibly over the words, "'My dear Jane—if I may call you so, but my mind is not on small matters.—I have come to the end of my rope. Let me say what I have to say and be done. I have about four weeks to live, possibly three,—it does not matter. In view of this, let the dead past [365] bury itself. I want to see you, but especially my girl. I cannot die without it, yet the hounds are on my track. I have been dragging myself from place to place, but the chase will be over after I see you both. This is my only desire,—to see you, then to bestow myself in some safe place.'"

Miss Gastonguay interrupted the reading, "What does he mean by a safe place?"

"I don't know,—that river, I dare say."

"Go on," she said, sternly.

"'I must come soon or I cannot come at all. Everything is misty and faded but bygone days and the necessity of keeping out of sight. I am tired like a child. If I don't come soon I shall have no strength to leave you, but I shall not disgrace you, don't be afraid. You will agree—you must. Keep at home for a few days. Be surprised at nothing, but don't have too much communication with J. M. He is watched. Yours wearily, L.'"

"Tear it up," said Miss Gastonguay.

The young criminal tore the paper into fifty pieces, and scattering half on the ground put the rest into his pocket.

"Can he come?" he asked.

"Yes; where is he now?"

"Not far away."

"He is still your hero?"

"Well, he's having a pretty tough time of it now," said the young man, thoughtfully. [366]

"What's the matter with him?"

"Consumption,—a churchyard cough; it nearly chokes him."

"Will you come with him?"

"It depends on his disguise."

Miss Gastonguay steadied herself against one of the gates, and put her hand against her side. When this disgraceful thing was over, would her heart be at rest?

"There's some private party after him," said the young man, thoughtfully. "We can't make out who, but they're not regulars. We nearly got tripped in New York. You've no more to say to me, ma'am?"

"No; there is the chief of police driving by in that buggy."

The young criminal turned and gave him a cool stare.

"How dare you?" she said, wrathfully.

"Madam, one of the first points given in my school was never to play faint heart. Act suspicious, and you'll be suspected. If you have no further commands I have the honour to wish you good evening," and bowing like an embryo Chesterfield, he mounted his wheel, and rode away as deliberately as he had come.

Miss Gastonguay retraced her steps. The warm beauty of the approaching night had no power to [367] penetrate her soul. The enchanting scene of lawn and garden, stately house and river, was as unattractive to her as a desert would have been. Nothing relieved the unspeakable desolation of her heart; nothing lifted the heavy shadow from her brow.

Chelda, too, was moping. What had come to the girl? and she paused beside the reclining chair in which she had been sitting motionless for two hours.

"Chelda, are you ill?"

"No, aunt, I am not."

"You act ill. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Rossignol oppresses me. Would you care to go to Europe?"

Miss Gastonguay laid her hand kindly on her shoulder. "My dear, I shall not be much longer with you. When I am gone, go where you like. While I live, let Rossignol be your abiding-place. When we were last in Paris, I looked one day at the crowds surging through the streets, and a great fright came over me. Who among all that horde of strangers would care if I were to drop dead? Here in my own State would be some to say, 'So Jane Gastonguay has gone. I am sorry to hear it.' Later on, you, too, may feel this love of country. I have misgivings about you. I have not trained you aright, but I have got to leave it all. You have been patient with an old woman's whims. Think [368] kindly of me when I am gone, and, if you wish, go now for a few days to visit some of your friends."

"I do not wish it," said Chelda, in a dry, hard voice, and turning her head away.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "You will not regret your devotion," said Miss Gastonguay, softly, and leaving her she continued her walk in the direction of the stable.

The coachman was just locking up for the night, only leaving open the pony's private door.

"Jones," said Miss Gastonguay, "tell McTavish to bring up the steam yacht from the town and keep her at my wharf. I may want a trip at any hour of the day or night. Let Stevens stay with him."

"All right, ma'am," replied the man, touching his cap. Then he ventured a question. "I'm afraid you don't feel as spry as you might?"

"No, Jones, I don't."

"It makes me feel bad myself, ma'am, to hear it," he replied, with so much feeling that she turned abruptly away.

"Somethin's gnawing at her," he continued, uneasily, "and she's freakish. She ain't been in that little puffer all summer, and now she wants it handy all the time. Folks that has things don't enjoy 'em, and those that hasn't 'em would. It's a queer world."

CHAPTER XXX.

[369]

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERER.

Chief of Police Gordon stood on the station platform of the Rossignol branch of the Maine Central Railway.

He had been earnestly warned, adjured, and bribed to trust no deputy, but to scrutinise himself the arrivals in every train-load of visitors to Rossignol.

A certain criminal, whose full description was given him, might appear before him at any time. He was also to keep under constant espionage the households of Miss Gastonguay and Justin Mercer, for with one of these two persons the criminal might be expected to communicate.

Chief Gordon did not know what the criminal's name was. The detective with whom he had been corresponding called him "Blackhead," and for "Blackhead" he was therefore looking as he stood in the sunshine with hands clasped behind him, his gaze going quickly from one to another of the members of an excursion party from up in the woods, who had come to spend a day by the shore.

"Blackhead" would probably not be among them, although he might be. He also might be in any [370] disguise. The detective had warned him that there was only one other being who could compete with him for dissimulation, and that being was not an inhabitant of this mortal sphere.

He was in reality a man of middle age, but he might descend upon Rossignol in the guise of an old man, an old woman, a bride, or a bashful youth.

However, transformed as successfully as he might be, he surely would attempt nothing as loud as this, and the chief smiled broadly, and glanced past rows of happy farmers' wives tugging along swarms of children, and accompanied by husbands stiff and uncomfortable in Sunday coats and stiff collars, to a group beside the hack drivers.

These latter were splitting their sides in amusement. An old woman from far away up the line had come to town for the day. Her dress reminded the chief of pictures of his grandmother. How natural and old-fashioned it was. Verily, reality was stronger than art. No one could counterfeit so naturally an old resident from some clearing among the pines, a little "high" from the prospect of her day's outing.

Her daughter, who was with her, was suffering agonies of mortification. She was a pale, consumptive-looking girl with big feet, a scant dress, and a white veil reaching only to her nose. [371] This veil she kept twitching nervously as she plucked at her mother's shawl and begged her to come on.

The old mother, whose poke-bonnet was pushed far back from her crop of bushy white hair, would not give up the pleasing excitement of making a scene. Her cheeks grew redder and redder while she chaffered with the hackmen. For how much would they take her out of town to see a friend?

Who was her friend, they asked, and how far was it?

This the old woman would not commit herself to revealing. She was not going to walk in any trap with her eyes open, and, catching sight of the chief, and impressed by his air of authority, she appealed to him.

He good-humouredly asked her where she wished to go.

To pay the interest on her mortgage, and she shook her bag.

"But where, to whom?"

"To the rich old lady, the French one."

"Miss Gastonguay,—yes, she has mortgages in plenty, but you want to see her lawyer."

The old woman said she would see no lawyer. Her business was with Miss Gastonguay.

The chief of police was not surprised. Miss Gastonguay's good nature was well known. She had a large number of hangers-on.

"I guess you can make a special bargain with her, can't you, boys?" and he appealed to the [372] hackmen.

"I'll take you for fifteen cents apiece," spoke out one bolder than the rest.

"Ma, ain't there a car line?" interrupted the girl, in a sudden access of economy.

"Go 'way," exhorted her mother. "We don't have no fun only once in a dog's age," and she sidled her hoop-skirted, beshawled figure into the hack indicated, and dragged her protesting daughter after her.

The chief of police smiled and strolled away. "Blackhead" had not arrived on this train. He would go down to the city hall, write up yesterday's report, and then come back in time for the "noon" from Bangor.

Meanwhile the old woman was lying in a corner of the vehicle, her face like death, her hand pressed convulsively on her chest.

The hackman chuckled when he drew up his horse before the stone steps. He would have some more fun here. To his disappointment, Miss Gastonguay was in one of her grim humours. Remorselessly suppressing the old woman, who had again grown hilarious, she speedily

conducted her into the house. There was nothing revealed to the hackman's backward glance but a big closed door, and with no further news for his comrades he drove slowly back to town.

Miss Gastonguay led the way to her own room. With an unfaltering step she walked across it, threw open the door of her dressing-room, and pointed to the pale daughter, no longer shrinking but kicking manfully against her petticoats. [373]

"Go in there," she said, "and stay till you are wanted. You will find food and drink."

The pale girl went in, tossed her hat and veil in a corner, and, seizing a handful of fruit, threw herself down on the lounge.

"When you take off those trappings, I will speak to you," said Miss Gastonguay to her remaining guest, then, turning her back, she stared at her empty hearth.

The old woman sank into a chair, detached her bonnet strings and white wig, took off her shawl, then, getting up, stepped out of her widespreading gown.

Miss Gastonguay looked around. Her first sensation was not one of bitter shame and disgrace, but rather one of dull surprise. Was that old man her brother?

He was doubled up in a paroxysm of coughing. When he recovered himself, and the colour faded from his face, he asked, peevishly, "Will you get me something hot?"

"Louis," she said, like one in a dream, "Louis, Louis."

"Yes, Louis,—and you are Jane. Good Heavens! Do I look as old as you do?" [374]

"And yesterday we were children," she said, with a gesture of unspeakable despair. Her misery of expectation and sickening apprehension was all gone. The trivial thought of his personal appearance drove all deeper emotion from her mind. And in spite of the change, how natural it seemed to have him here. How natural to take up her old role of indulgent sister.

"Lie here," she said, arranging the pillows on a sofa, "and what shall I bring you?"

"Brandy, brandy—and hot water. Be quick."

He was gasping for breath, and she hurried away.

"Chelda," she said, pausing an instant in the music-room, "I have some guests. I do not wish to be disturbed."

Chelda bent her head lower over the broken string that she had just discovered in her violin, and only waiting until her aunt's footsteps had died away, she hurried out-of-doors.

Presently she saw Prosperity coming toward the avenue. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"To send a boy from the cottages to Captain White with this," and he displayed an envelope on which something was written.

"Give it to me. I, too, have a message to send him."

She read the scribbled words, "The two express parcels for Derrice have arrived. Let her come up to lunch and see them." [375]

"On second thoughts I won't send any message," she said, handing the envelope back.

Prosperity trotted on, and Chelda, biting at her under lip, paced nervously to and fro under the poplars.

The envelope was handed to Captain White, as he stood on one of the wharves, vigorously scolding the crew of a sailboat for heating and spoiling their fish by carrying too many in a load. It was a very busy morning for him; yet, after reading the few lines, he left the boat's crew, and, hastily making his way to Justin's bank, exchanged a few words with him.

His second call was on the chief of police. He wished to find out whether that official was displaying any unusual amount of energy. No, he was not. He sat quietly at his desk, and only looked up with a yawn when Captain White's head was stuck in the doorway, with a query as to whether there was anything new going on.

There was nothing beyond the usual routine, and Captain White strolled up to the station.

The telegraph operator was not a particular friend of his. Indeed, they had lately quarrelled over some delayed telegrams with regard to an order for sardines, and the red-headed operator glanced curiously at the usually busy captain, who, in a strangely lazy way, lounged about his office for the space of an hour and a half. [376]

At the end of that time, however, Captain White disappeared. He had been stretched on a bench reading a newspaper, but at the stroke of twelve he got up, looked at his watch, and dawdled outside.

Once around the corner of the brick building, however, he hastily entered a carriage, made some remark in a low voice to the driver, and was conducted at a smart pace through the town, and at a rattling one outside it, until he reached French Cross.

Without the formality of a ring he entered the old château, and ran up-stairs to Miss Gastonguay's room.

"H. Robinson is on his way down!" he ejaculated, when the door was thrown open. "He has got wind of the affair. I learned telegraphy when I was young, and just heard the message humming over the wires. We must get you out of this," and he looked at the man on the sofa as if he had

known him all his life.

The latter got up, and, in weary haste and without surprise, donned his feminine garments.

Miss Gastonguay grew deathly pale. "What about Derrice?"

"What about Derrice's good name?" said Captain White, sharply. "Come, let us get out of this. [377]
Where is the other one?" and he brushed past her to the dressing-room.

Miss Gastonguay stared helplessly at her brother. His shaking hands were pinning the shawl together. With a groan she seized a hat and wrap for herself, and followed him as he slipped noiselessly down the staircase.

CHAPTER XXXI. [378]

H. ROBINSON AGAIN.

Justin would not permit Derrice to go alone to French Cross. Captain White had assured him that he had better allow her to do so; that to accompany her at such an unusual time would be sure to call attention to them, but Justin would not be persuaded.

He relied on the presence of the large number of strangers in the town to avert observation from their movements. In any case, he would not leave his young wife to face alone this crisis in her life. And now he must tell her of their mission. She knew that her father had not been well, but she did not dream that his illness was serious.

"Derrice," he said, looking into her quietly smiling face, "I have not told you why we are going to French Cross."

"No; you are strangely mysterious, but I always like to go with you whether I understand or not."

"Darling, there is some one waiting to see you,—some one whom you dearly love."

"Not my father? Oh, not my father,—my dear, dear father?" [379]

His manner was convincing. For a minute her joy overcame her, then she burst into questions. "Why had she not known,—why had he not come to her?"

"You shall ask him, Derrice, but you will be cautious. He is ill."

"Yes, yes, but what do you mean by ill,—not very ill?—oh, don't say that, Justin, dear Justin," and in a tremor of fear she clung to his arm, and wildly scrutinised his face.

"Rather ill, I fear, but you will be brave. You will not make him worse. Come, let me see you compose yourself; we shall soon arrive."

She hid her face on his shoulder, and cried quietly, but when the carriage stopped she put her handkerchief in her pocket, and took on a resolute expression.

Prosperity ushered them into the untenanted reception-room, and said that his mistress had gone out.

"She has some guests?" said Justin.

They had gone with her, Prosperity assured him, also Captain White.

"Is Miss Chelda at home?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just ask her to see us."

Prosperity disappeared, and Justin uneasily surveyed Derrice, who stood with clasped hands near [380] the door.

Presently Chelda came to them. She was as composed as usual, but there were two red spots high up on her cheeks, and her lips were nervously compressed.

"Oh, Chelda, where is my father?" cried Derrice, running to meet her.

Chelda glanced at Justin. How much did he know? His expression told her that Captain White had revealed everything to him, but his slight nod toward his wife warned her to be careful.

"Your father has gone away," she murmured. "I think something recalled him."

"Gone—and without seeing me! My poor sick father! Oh, how could you let him go? Did he not want to see me? Will he not come back?"

Derrice was feverishly awaiting a reply, when an extraordinary change came over Chelda. Her puzzled gaze had gone wonderingly out the window. It now came back with rapid alarm.

"Derrice," she said, sharply, and seizing her by the shoulder, "do you value your father's life,—his reputation?"

"Oh, yes, yes," replied the startled girl. "What do you mean?"

"Then dry those tears," said Chelda, sternly, and with her own handkerchief she wiped Derrice's burning cheeks. "Say nothing of your father; you know nothing about him. He has not been here. [381] You are merely making a call. Sit down and occupy yourself with that book,—or, better still, go to the music-room. You will find a sonata open on the piano. Play, play as you value your father's safety. Do you hear me?" and she gave her a slight push toward the door.

"I do," said Derrice, in terrified accents, and appealing to her husband, "but what does this mean? Can you not explain?"

His lips formed the words, "Not now; go, my darling," and with inexpressible sadness he waved her from him.

Derrice went stumbling through the doorway. She had one glimpse of another carriage being driven furiously up to the door, and an inflamed crimson visage peering from it, then she dizzily found herself seated at the piano, her fingers tremblingly picking out the harmonies of an immortal composition.

Justin marvelled at Chelda's self-possession. In icy dignity and haughtiness she stood in the centre of the room, confronting a man who was an embodiment of enraged and speechless

vulgarity.

Behind him lurked the chief of police of the town, looking slightly ashamed of himself, and throwing an apologetic glance toward Justin.

H. Robinson had no time for civilities to-day, and he was much too angry to be overawed by Chelda. "Where is that man?" he gasped, after a time. [382]

Chelda in superb disdain looked over his head at the chief of police. How much did he know?

He knew but little. With professional jealousy and contrariety H. Robinson had kept the main part of his secret to himself. He had, moreover, been bullying his partial colleague. Chelda knew it by the sulky expression of her fellow townsman.

"Good morning, Mr. Gordon," she said, cuttingly ignoring the remark just made to her. "Will you not sit down? Mr. Mercer will entertain you while I talk to this—this—"

She hesitated, and her hesitation and failure to characterise her caller were more stinging than any spoken words could have been. "Will you follow me?" she went on, loftily, and she swept from the room.

H. Robinson thought it better to obey her, and with a furious backward glance at the chief of police, who was snickering openly, he clumsily endeavoured to keep off the train of her gown as she ushered him into the dining-room.

"You had better get yourself something to drink," she said, waving him toward the sideboard.

He laid his hand on a silver tankard, and his small eyes rolled menacingly at her over the glass he raised to his lips.

"Where is Lancaster?" he ejaculated, as he set it down. [383]

"You are very foolish to mention names."

He with difficulty withdrew a paper tightly wedged in his pocket. "I'm at the end of my patience,—it's only out of respect to the family we come quietly like this. Where is our prisoner?"

"Not here."

"He's in this house, or mighty near it. He might have been nabbed this morning if it hadn't been for that blatherskite in there. He come on the train. He ain't left. You've got to give him up. Two minutes to decide. I've got a patrolman outside. It won't take the three of us long to go over this house. You can't resist law, young woman."

"Do you really expect that Mr. Lancaster is in this house?"

"Oh, come off the roof!" he said, wrathfully. "You can't fool me. The old woman game won't work."

"Is it that poor old woman you are suspecting?"

"That poor old woman! Blankety blank, yes. I'm going for the chief. The two minutes are up."

"Wait one instant. My aunt and her friends are walking in the wood. You had better go find them and ascertain for yourself that the old woman is a veritable old woman."

The detective smote the table with his fist. "Is that true? You ain't foolin',—they're actually out of the house?" [384]

"It is quite true."

H. Robinson lost control of himself, and began to swear fluently and to blindly search for the door.

Chelda slipped before him, but she was as a straw in the fury of the wind. She would be forced to allow him to go raging through the house, when to her relief there was a pressure from the hall and Captain White insinuated himself into the room.

"Hello!" he said, deftly shutting the door behind him. "So you've turned up again, piggy."

H. Robinson hurled an offensive epithet at him and ordered him to let him pass.

"Not so fast," said Captain White, gripping him by the arm. "You just sit down and talk this affair over with me. It ain't one to be left to ladies. Now, what do you want, Solomon Thundercloud?"

"I want that man," said H. Robinson, shaking his blue paper in his face.

"H'm—Louis Lancaster—accused of so and so—wanted for so and so. Well, you've come to the right place, my friend."

"He's here. I knew it," and the detective gave Chelda a sullen glare.

"Sit down, sit down," pursued Captain White. "Don't get in such a heat. He'll be back soon."

"Where is he?" vociferated the angry man. [385]

"Just taking a little turn with Miss Gastonguay. You know she's got a soft heart for rogues."

"A turn where? I've got to arrest him."

"Yes, yes, I know. You've got a very decent four-wheeler to take him to jail. You shall have him this time, sure pop. I guess our chief of police ain't as smart as you are."

"He's a—" began the detective, then he looked at Chelda and stretched out his hand toward the door.

"If you don't keep still and discuss this matter," cried Captain White, falling into sudden excitement, "I'll give you a walloping compared with which our little play the other day would be but the breath of a suggestion. Keep still, you idiot. You've got the day before you, and I'm on your side. I vow to you, you sha'n't leave French Cross till you lay your hand on that man's shoulder."

H. Robinson sulkily lowered himself into a chair.

"First and foremost, I'm not bamboozling you. Lancaster is here. He wanted to have a talk with Miss Gastonguay, and she's taken him out in her steam yacht."

H. Robinson put his hands up to his head and clutched his scanty side locks.

"They're coming back, they're coming back. I'll stake all I have on it. You wait here. I'll wait with you."

"I must go out on the river," said the detective, in a hollow voice. "I must follow." [386]

"Hold on," ejaculated Captain White, pushing him back on his seat. Then he opened the door.

"Gordon, Gordon, come here."

The chief of police came hurrying to the spot.

"Look here," said Captain White, "tell that man I'm not a fake."

"What's up now?" asked the newcomer, eyeing the detective.

"He's after a bank breaker," pursued Captain White, "and I'm trying to give him information, and he thinks I'm lying."

"Oh, he is, is he? I didn't know but that he was dreaming with his eyes open," said the chief, superciliously surveying the purple-visaged man on the other side of the table. "He don't belong to any staff. I never heard of him before."

"He's all right," said Captain White, generously. "Tell him I ain't a liar by profession."

"Which is more than he is," said the chief, angrily pouring out his accumulated vials of wrath on the stranger, "considering all the names he called me half an hour ago."

"And here's my gold watch, worth one hundred and fifty dollars," continued Captain White, "seals and chain, if the absentee, whom I guess we'll not name, ain't forthcoming within twenty-four hours."

"He's a sick man, he may die," sputtered H. Robinson. [387]

"Sick man—ho, ho! I like that," and Chief Gordon, remembering the vigorous old woman at the station, began to laugh uproariously, but checked himself at the sight of Chelda's motionless figure, as she stood at one of the windows with her back to them.

"All right; go out on the Bay," said Captain White, restoring his watch to his pocket. "Go with him, chief. You'll find him easy among the hundreds of yachts from the cottages and the hotels, and he'll come back while you're gone, and I'll help him give you the slip."

H. Robinson was on the horns of a dilemma. He squirmed uneasily, but finally decided to trust Captain White.

"Done," he muttered. "But you've got to stay with me, you local man."

"All right," said the chief, laconically.

"And as two able-bodied men might, with a little help, manage to grip one sick fellow, I guess you'll send that patrolman back to the city hall," said Captain White.

The chief went outside, and Captain White addressed the silent figure at the window. "Miss Chelda, we want to have as little fuss about this thing as possible. Will you give orders to have some fishing-rods for us to thrash the river, while we wait for the return of that party?" [388]

"Yes," she said, walking quickly past them, "and I will have lunch served here for you at once."

There was a suspicious readiness in the young lady's manner, and H. Robinson restlessly addressed his companion. "I guess she's told you what a fine bird your friend Lancaster is?"

"Right you are."

"It's an offence to interfere, obstruct, or oppose an officer—"

"Skip that," interposed Captain White. "You've got sense enough to know that the mistress of this place is an exception to all rules, and she's wrapped up in Lancaster's daughter."

"So, so,—I know it."

"And ain't you always coming to places in your practice or profession, or whatever you call your dirty work, when a few bank-bills spread out will cover a lot of iniquity that poverty would expose?"

"You bet I do, but this ain't a job for buying off."

"Who said it was? You get through it, though, without so much quacking, and you'll find it will be worth your while."

The detective went for a stroll through the hall. The door of the music-room was closed. If he could have looked inside, he would have seen the half-fainting daughter of the man he was in [389]

search of, lying on one of the green velvet benches.

Her husband was on his knees beside her. He had come to the room just in time to catch her as she fell from the piano stool. Now she had recovered and was whispering passionately, "Justin,—if I should ever grow weak and nervous, and ask you to tell me anything you might know to the prejudice of my father, you would not do so?"

"No, darling; no, no."

"I would not really wish to hear it. I could not bear it. He was so good, so perfect. I never found any fault in him. You liked him, Justin?"

"Yes, my own wife, I did."

"And Justin, if ever we should have a little child, or if I should have to die and leave it, you would never tell it anything against the father of its mother?"

"Never, never, God helping me. I will guard his reputation as I would my own; but do not speak of leaving me. I cannot bear it," and gathering her exhausted figure in his arms, he carried her to the open window.

CHAPTER XXXII. [390]

A BRANCH CUT OFF.

At ten o'clock that night, there was not in all the State an uglier and sorer man than H. Robinson.

He impatiently thumped Miss Gastonguay's binocular on his fat knee. All the afternoon he had been searching the glittering surface of Merry Meeting Bay. There was no steam yacht in sight carrying a blue flag with a pine-tree on its fluttering folds. No brace of blue lights appeared now that soft darkness had enveloped the Bay, although various yachts and boats bearing lights of every other colour of the rainbow had come slipping in from the sea to their resting-places beside the wharves.

He had been tricked. The treacherous young woman and the slippery sailor had thrown dust in his eyes. Well, he would make them pay for their trickery before the dance was over, and he ground his teeth and glowered at his two companions.

The chief of police, soothed by the calm beauty of the moonless night and happy from the elaborate dinner that had been served to them here on the roof of the boat-house, was peacefully [391] snoring in a hammock. He only partly understood the affair. There was some humbuggery about it, and he could not rid himself of the conviction that H. Robinson was slightly cracked, and that the volatile Captain White for some hidden reason was aiding and abetting him in his delusion. Anyway, he didn't like being sworn at, and although he would by no means defeat the ends of justice, he earnestly hoped that Miss Gastonguay would land her mysterious old woman and girl at some port down the coast, and let this Boston fellow go home with his tail between his legs.

Captain White was not asleep. H. Robinson knew that he was only pretending to nap in his big wicker chair, and that he heard every one of the occasional sentences growled at him.

The detective fumed and fretted. He would wait one hour longer. He would wait half an hour. He would only wait ten minutes. He would announce his secret and receive city aid to go in search of the criminal. But suppose he had lost him? At station one, station two, and three, up to the last number of stations, he would be jeered at in the city of Boston. Why had he not called in the help of some of his former colleagues? Served him right for playing dog in the manger. No one would ever trust him again. And he mused on miserably, his wrath burning higher and higher. At last it [392] reached a point where it began to flicker. Self-pity and deadly weariness were overcoming him. His throbbing head sank lower and lower, his aching limbs grew less remindful. He thought drowsily of his subservient wife, his quiet home, his comfortable bed. He would give five dollars for an hour's rest, and with a gradual blending of all his emotions into peaceful oblivion he fell sound asleep.

He slept he knew not how long, but he waked up with a jerk, and turned his rubicund face up to Captain White's strangely pale one.

"Your prisoner has come," he said, in a low voice.

H. Robinson tottered to his feet and looked over the roof railing. Down there was a smooth-lined, shapely yacht rubbing herself like a snow-white duck against the narrow wharf. Two or three people were standing about,—he could just make out their dusky outlines. They were all wonderfully quiet. He must get below, and he hurried down the steps, carefully placing his feet on the bright places indicated by the lantern held up to him by Captain White.

Upon arriving on the wharf H. Robinson warily looked about him. Two men who were evidently servants remained on board the yacht. An old lady, who was Miss Gastonguay, the chief of police, and a pale youth known in criminal circles as Sideboard Charlie stood on the boat-house veranda.

This latter had been a favourite and companion of the noted bank breaker. He was not wanted [393] now on any "count" of his own, and the detective did not concern himself about him.

But where was his prey,—the lion of the chase?

Captain White pointed to the yacht. A motionless figure wrapped in a cloak lay on a bench.

H. Robinson suspected a trap. It would not be like the matchless dissembler to fall into his arms. "You come with me," he said to the chief.

The latter stolidly accompanied him. "There is your man," he muttered.

The lion was asleep. H. Robinson could wake him, and he laid a hand on the stiff shoulder, and drew aside the fold of cloth from the marble face.

Then he stepped back, his face working stupidly. "Dead,—and I am fooled." He had half suspected this, and he gave place to the two young men who noiselessly and swiftly placed their hands under the dead man's body and carried him on shore.

No one spoke; matters must have been prearranged, and in sullen silence the detective kept up with the party, who in a body marched toward the house.

To his surprise they did not enter it, but passed through a garden toward a hillside. Here was a small cemetery. They entered the gate, their burden was deposited on the grass, then the [394] different members of the party scattered.

The detective watched the austere old lady who remained by the dead body. He had made it his business to inquire into her peculiarities, and it did not altogether surprise him that she should take an interest in a criminal. But would she allow him to be buried in her private cemetery?

An eerie shiver ran up and down his backbone. He did not like this midnight work. The solemn quietness, the air of respectability and yet of secrecy about this last act of a criminal career offended him and grated against his official sense of propriety.

He approached Captain White, who had just reappeared, carrying a spade in his hand. "You lay out to bury this man?"

"Yes."

"I protest—" the detective was just beginning when Captain White put up his hand.

"Hush up; wait a bit."

Several lanterns stood about on the grass, and some one had hung the largest of them on the projecting toe of Louis Gastonguay's granite boot. By the reddish yellow glare of this light on the monument, H. Robinson saw a white figure approaching. The white figure was supported by a dark one. Ah, here was the daughter. She certainly was no shady character, and his eye ran [395] critically over her snowy figure.

But what distress!—he had never seen anything like it, and a secret thrill pervaded him. That little beauty had lost her father. Bank robber or no bank robber, he must have been all the world to her. What would she say if she knew he had been the one to run him down? and he uneasily stepped behind one of the Scotchmen from the yacht.

He had witnessed some pretty trying scenes, but he had never seen anything like this. The Longlegs with her was her husband. Reverently he escorted her to the dead body and put a supporting arm around her as she fell on her knees.

This was awful, and the detective turned away. Then, compelled by the same fascination, he looked again. So young to suffer. Poor slip of a girl,—not more than half as old as his wife. Evidently she had been told not to shriek or cry out. Her fingers were locked in a painful grasp, her pitiful moans were barely audible. Frantically and repeatedly she kissed the cold face, and her tearless eyes sought her husband's in dumb entreaty.

Why had it happened? Who was to blame? Why had she not been with him? Her father—oh, her father! and the detective, though not a man given to much emotion, involuntarily voiced her mute and heart-broken pleadings.

"Do you still protest?" asked a grim voice in his ear. [396]

"Confound you, no," he said, snappishly, to Captain White.

One of the Scotchmen quickly ran his spade over a scant grass plot designated by Miss Gastonguay. When the first earth was turned up, the girl sprang to her feet with an agonised cry, "Must I forgive them? Justin, I cannot."

H. Robinson watched her husband trying to comfort her, then crossing his hands behind his back he went for a short turn around the outside of the cemetery. Forgive whom? The man who had hunted her father to death. Poor thing,—she did not know what a villain he had been. Women were unreasonable. Well, the same end came to all. Some day some one would be digging a grave for him, and he uneasily surveyed his ample proportions. He had had some queer pains about his heart lately. Bah! what was the good of living anyway? What was the good of anything? Why had he been following up this affair at such a breakneck pace? For money, celebrity,—a paragraph in the newspapers.

Here in the solemn stillness of the night, and under the melancholy mystery of the stars, the chase seemed fruitless, the rewards worthless. He would go home to his wife. Let the poor devil sleep in peace. Why didn't they take that girl away? and he peered through the iron railing at her. [397]

He was quite near her now. "I forgive, I forgive—" he heard her articulate. "Dear father, they did not mean to make you suffer."

The tearlessness of her grief was over. Her whole frame was shaken by violent weeping. Soon she would sob hard enough to tear her in two. He had seen women in crying spells before.

"I guess I'll go," he muttered, and pulling out his watch he entered the cemetery and approached one of the lanterns.

The grave was nearly ready. Captain White, the two Scotchmen, and the pale young man worked by turns, and the soft earth of the hillside was easy to move.

Why didn't they take that girl away? and in nervous irritability he was just turning on his heel when the austere old lady spoke in his ear. "Wait—I wish to speak to you."

He shrugged his wide shoulders. He guessed he could stand it if women could, and he again went outside the iron railing and took his place where no sickly gleam from the lanterns played over the moist grass.

When the men went to take her father from her, the girl's sobs died away. With marvellous composure she kissed his face for the last time. "So thin, so pitifully thin," the detective heard her [398] murmur. "You will rest now, my darling. Good-bye, good-bye," and she crossed his hands and folded them on his breast, then unwinding the silken sash from her waist she wrapped it tenderly around his head.

A knot formed in the detective's throat. And now the old lady was going at it, too. She did not do the affectionate like the girl, but she took a rug that some one had brought her from the house and folded it all around the dead man's body. There was no time to have a coffin made. They must

do the best they could. The rug was a costly one. The detective could see the gold threads shining in it. Foreign work probably. She was burying up a poor man's salary with that rogue.

Stay,—they were going to have a burial service. The girl's last lingering caress was over. She had fallen on her knees on the soft earth, and was looking down into the yawning cavity. The men stood around with uncovered heads, while her husband repeated from memory portions of the burial service.

It was a long time since he had been to a funeral,—not since his old father died up in Aroostook County, and the detective drew the back of his hand across his eyes as he listened to the words spoken in a choking voice.

"'If a tree fall toward the south or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth there it shall be. [399]

"'There is hope of a tree if it be cut down, that it shall sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.... Man's days are as grass, as a flower of the field so he flourisheth.... I am the Resurrection and the Life. He that believeth on me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. I know that my Redeemer liveth, and though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God'—"

The speaker's words ceased suddenly. His young wife had fallen fainting at his feet, and hurriedly lifting her in his arms he started toward the house.

A few minutes later the little group stood silently beside the heaped-up grave. The old lady was going to speak now.

"Friends," she said, sadly and harshly," we separate now. I thank you all. Captain White will speak to you on my behalf. One favour I have to request of you six men. Let this night's occurrence rest in oblivion. For the sake of that heart-broken girl I ask you. I have no doubt you will respect my request. Good-night and good-bye. There are some of you I shall never see again. Lead honourable lives; there is no happiness in any other."

She went from one to another with a stern, immovable face, shaking hands in a manner that made the detective's flesh crawl nervously. Was she, too, going to give up the ghost? [400]

"McTavish and Stevens," whispered Captain White to the two men from the yacht, "call on me in a day or two. There are pretty considerable sums to be placed to your credit in the bank. Look here you, H. Robinson," and he approached the detective, "what are your sentiments now?"

They were all struggling toward the house, with the addition to the party of a ghostly white pony, who thrust his nose over Captain White's arm.

"My sentiments are to get to bed," said H. Robinson, peevishly.

"You are afraid you'll do something unbusinesslike while you are feeling soft," said Captain White, "but let me ask you a question. What do you expect to get out of this thing now?"

"Satisfaction, if I like," snapped his companion.

"Satisfaction, yes,—you can blurt out what Mrs. Mercer's father was. What follows? Remarks to the effect that you were a hound and your hare escaped you. What then? You think you have disgraced a family, but Justin Mercer will jump himself and his wife to some place across the world so quick that you couldn't see 'em go."

"Don't she suspect anything?"

"Not a syllable. Couldn't a man that gulled a man like you easily fool a girl? Call her up as she knelt there just now. Think that some day she may have children of her own. What kind of satisfaction would it give you to think you'd made that pretty head hang down in shame?" [401]

The detective grunted something unintelligible.

"Miss Gastonguay approves of you so far, but she's mighty clever, and she is figuring this whole thing out. I guess from something she let slip she suspects her niece. Anyway, she thinks you have done your duty, but if you'll let everything slide and go home quietly, like a good boy, I'm instructed to give you a little sweetener, a check for—" and he murmured the rest of his sentence in his companion's ear.

The sum mentioned in one instant consoled H. Robinson for loss of sleep, loss of celebrity, loss of temper, and all other losses. He had been soaring above things mercenary during the last few hours, but now he felt himself speedily drawn back to them.

"All right," he said, "but one question,—did he suicide?"

"No, he did not."

"What was he going to be fool enough to come back here for? I guess he knew I was on his track."

"He wasn't coming,—he was going to be brought."

"Oh! that's why you were so plumb sure."

"What made you so plumb sure he would come here?" [402]

"I've heard how he was set on his daughter, and a sick man like a sick animal runs for his home."

"His home?"

"By home, I mean family. He came of a swell lot according to himself; but those fellows always like to strut. I guess he was a Westerner."

"I guess so. Look here, I'll tell you how he died. His pig-iron will kept him up till he got here; when he heard you were coming it nearly finished him. But he was a cool one. He managed to get on the yacht; then he told me the doctors said, if he had an attack like the one he'd just had, he could only last a few hours after it. When all was over he would get Miss Gastonguay to chuck him in the sea. I was to stay and keep you at bay. He held on till they got abreast of Dove Harbour, then,—well, I don't know what happened. Miss Gastonguay was alone with him. She's a good lot,—I knew she'd bring him back to bury him."

"That she is," said the detective, cheerfully. "You needn't bother with any more explanations. So long," and he stepped ahead in order to give his companion a chance with the chief of police.

"Chief," said Captain White, diplomatically, "you can't explain everything on this globe, can you?"

"I guess not."

"If a rich old lady chooses to bury nobody knows who in her cemetery, it's just as well to have nothing said?" [403]

"I'll agree to that."

"You've got a wife?"

"I'm pretty sure of that."

"You don't tell her all your secrets?"

"Couldn't very well."

"Then keep on not telling her. Don't drop a hint that I'm going to call to-morrow at eleven about this business of to-night, and, by the way, help that tired butter-tub roll himself down to the hotel."

"All right," and Chief Gordon hastened to overtake the stranger.

The pale youth plodding seriously through the darkness did not avert his face from the lantern held up to scrutinise it.

"You've followed that man," said Captain White. "You've been faithful to him. What are you going to do now?"

The young man's labouring heavy step did not become more light, but his face became illumined by a cynical gleam. "I'm not at the end of my resources."

"What's your name?" asked Captain White abruptly.

"I'd be a fool to tell you."

"I'll tell you," said Captain White, shifting his lantern from one hand to the other, and giving him a resounding slap on the back. "Charlie White—own cousin to me, Micah White. Just from his home in the West—sad on account of his guardian's death. Is it a bargain, young man?" [404]

The criminal stopped short. "Do you mean it?"

"Am I in a humour for jokes with that behind me?" and Captain White pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "Isn't my blood going creepy, crawly through my veins? Come on, young man. Behind you is death, damnation,—a cursed life. Before you is honesty, a chance to win men's approval, a loophole to enter kingdom come."

The young man paced slowly on. The weird cry of a bird disturbed by those in front pierced the night. Something rooted in his nature called as shrilly for the troubled mystery and excitement of his city life. He hated the quiet, the unintoxicating calm of such a peaceful place as this, and yet —and yet—suppose he plunged again into his criminal career. He would go down, down to what? To a hunted life, to a dishonoured grave.

"I'll try it," he said, at last, and without enthusiasm. "Have I to thank the old lady?"

"Yes," said Captain White, briefly, and seizing him by the arm as if fearful that a delay might change his resolution, he fairly ran him through the dark streets to the parsonage.

The young criminal forbore to ask a question even after a long delay at the door. Captain White rang the bell persistently and loudly, and at last an upper window was opened. "Who's there?" [405]

"Micah White."

"Oh, I'll be right down," and in a few minutes Mrs. Negus, smiling, and shading a candle in her hand, appeared in nondescript costume.

"A new boarder for you," ejaculated Captain White, pushing the young man in. "Own cousin of mine—used up from a journey—going to be assistant superintendent in the canneries, to fill the place Pottses have long been clamouring to fill, and that I out of obstinacy wouldn't. A good clean boy, but delicate. Coddle him a bit, let the children play with him. Name, Charles White."

The new Charles White bit his lip, and in a tired fashion shook hands with the beaming Mrs. Negus.

"I'm real glad to get a boarder," she assured him. "I've been lonely since my minister left. Here's his room," and conducting him up-stairs, she opened the door of a nestlike apartment with pink roses on the wall, and mild-faced china figures of lambs and dogs on the mantel.

CHAPTER XXXIII. [406]

THE PURITANS HAVE TRIUMPHED!

The early afternoon sun was streaming in the library windows. Miss Gastonguay's carved chair was placed in the full light of its rays. Her gray head and velvet jacket were resplendent, and her wrinkled face glowed with an unearthly lustre.

She was making her will. Captain Veevers sat at the big table in the centre of the room. He was reserved and taciturn as usual, yet he glanced at her occasionally with some anxiety. He had deep respect for her as an old friend and substantial patron, and he saw that he was going to lose her.

She dictated in a firm and collected voice, "First, I revoke all wills and codicils by me heretofore made."

He repeated the words after her, and a number of bequests to servants and friends followed. Captain Veevers was surprised at none of them, until he came to one in which the sum of twenty thousand dollars was ordered to be paid to Captain Micah White.

However, he took pains not to exhibit his surprise. The captain had probably been executing some commission for Miss Gastonguay. [407]

But a greater surprise was to follow. "Now that I am about to die," continued Miss Gastonguay, "and, wishing to gratify my earnest wish that some of my own townspeople may reside under my roof, and raise up a Christian family to bless the State, I give and bequeath to my friend Justin Mercer my house, furniture, and estate of French Cross, together with the sum of—" and she paused, while the scratching of Captain Veevers's pen ceased.

She was making a calculation on a scrap of paper she held in her hand, and when she finished, he, to his astonishment, was directed to name an amount representing one-half the value of her entire property.

Self-possessed as he was, he could not suppress a slight sneer.

Her deep set eyes caught it. "What is it?" she asked, gently. "You would like to make an observation?"

His concentrated malice and implacability found expression in a murmured sentence, "So you too have found her out?"

"Who—Chelda?"

"Yes."

She waved her pencil at him with a melancholy smile, and continued dictating, "To my beloved niece, Chelda Gertrude Gastonguay, who has been my companion and solace since her childhood, I give and bequeath the remainder and residue of my real and personal estate, and direct and authorise my executors to collect the income derived therefrom, and pay said income in quarter-yearly payments to said Chelda Gertrude Gastonguay during her natural life. And it is further my will, and I do hereby authorise and empower the said Chelda Gertrude Gastonguay by her last will and testament duly executed by her, according to the laws of this State, to bequeath, limit, and appoint the said rest and residue of my estate in any way and for such objects as she may deem best." [408]

Here she broke off. "Young man," she said, abruptly, "come with me."

She rose from her seat, and extended a hand to Captain Veevers, who left the table, and accompanied her into the adjoining music-room.

She pointed to a bevelled glass panel. "Look in there, will you?"

He looked in, and saw his sallow face disfigured by an expression of inexorable contempt.

"It grieves me," she said, simply. "You are angry with my niece."

"Not angry,—I despise her. I despise myself," he continued, in a low voice, "for letting you know."

His head hung down. He would fain have covered his wound, but it was too new, too painful. [409]

"She has had you dangling about her for years," said Miss Gastonguay. "She has deceived you,—hurt your feelings."

"She has made a fool of me," he articulated. "When I marry,—if I marry,—I shall look for a stupid woman. I am tired of clever ones."

"This is not love," continued Miss Gastonguay, "it is self-esteem. Let me speak to you as if you were my son. I like you—I pity you. Thank Heaven that Chelda does discard you. Such a match would have been most unsuitable. Pay court to some gentle girl like Aurelia Sinclair, who will love and admire you. Chelda is, as you say, insincere and she loves another man. Dear young man," and she suddenly laid her hand on his shoulder, "let me say a last word to you. I am soon to shake off this world and its troubles. Already I feel myself in it but not of it. Nothing burdens me, nothing vexes me. I have had worries and trials. They have all rolled from me. With unspeakable longing I look forward to another existence. Let me have one more consolation before I depart. Let me plant a little seed of forgiveness in your heart."

Her face was transfigured. With something like awe the young man felt his own face clearing, and the cloud lifting from his mind.

"Forgive her, forgive her," she murmured, "as you wish to be forgiven. It is the great secret of life. No happiness without forgiveness. Alas! we are none of us perfect, but resentment is so trivial, so petty." [410]

Captain Veevers moved back into the library. He was strangely uncomfortable. Miss Gastonguay's mind seemed wandering. "Shall we finish our business?" he said.

"Yes, yes," and like one in a dream, and yet with entire composure, she continued the work in hand, spoke a few words to the witnesses called in, and then after signing the will, and seeing it laid away in a safe place, rang the bell and requested her niece's presence.

"Chelda, my dear," she said, softly, "you have something to say to this young man."

The feverish flush on the young lady's face deepened. Her head was not held as high as formerly and her manner had become nervous and startled.

"Captain Veevers," she said, moving toward him in an automaton-like fashion, but keeping her eyes fixed on her aunt, "I wounded your feelings in an interview you sought last week. I deeply regret it."

"She wishes to curry favour with her aunt," the young man sneeringly reflected. Aloud he said, "The matter had better be left buried."

"If you knew how I have suffered!" said Chelda, with agitation. "How I have suffered!" [411]

A quick gleam sprang to his eyes. Had she repented? If so, though he was very angry, he might possibly forgive.

She retreated from him, and drawing up her slender figure against the dark panelling of the wall, hastily ejaculated a few sentences divided between him and her mildly observing aunt.

"I did not think when I began—I only sought my own gratification. Then—then it was too late. The agonies of fear, of apprehension, of mortification, that I have undergone, I cannot describe. If you knew, you would not scorn but pity me. I have had no sleep—my food is like ashes. You think you suffer," and she bestowed a glance of mingled fear and aversion on the man, "you know nothing of it,—a little wounded vanity, that is all. I cannot describe what I endure—I cannot describe it," and she buried her face in her hands. "Such days of misery—such nights of pain!"

Her agitation was intense—almost too intense for the occasion. Captain Veevers looked at Miss Gastonguay, around whose lips a curious tremor was stealing. There was something tragic and overwrought in her niece's despair,—almost as if she were speaking of one thing and thinking of another.

Miss Gastonguay waved him to depart. With a last glance at Chelda, he obeyed her. That woman's sentiment was dead and buried. She only felt remorse. She had flirted with the clergyman; she had been playing with him. Both had found her out. His heart felt lighter. She was too much like a woman with a past. Possibly he had been favoured in being delivered from her. [412]

"Chelda," said Miss Gastonguay, softly, "have you anything to tell me?"

"No, no," said her niece, in an unhappy, terrified voice, "nothing, nothing. I have behaved badly to Captain Veevers,—I am ashamed."

"I am going to take a walk in the wood," said Miss Gastonguay, in the same grave, kind way. "Possibly when I come back you will talk freely to me."

"Talk freely—" stammered her niece, raising her head, but her aunt was already gone. She hurried to the window. "Oh, if I dared—if I dared! She might forgive me. She is so changed now, but I cannot, I cannot," and hiding her face in the back of a chair she writhed in an agony of doubt and contrition. "If I were a child or a girl, but I am a woman. I should have known better. If I had only thought—if I had only thought!"

Miss Gastonguay went first to the cemetery. The newly made grave could not be seen. Every morning, long before the household was astir, Chelda left her bed, and her aunt sometimes secretly watched her as she went toiling from grave to greenhouse, her delicate hands bearing unaccustomed burdens. This grave was her special charge, the one spot at French Cross to be tenderly cared for and unceasingly beautified, and she ruthlessly stripped the most costly exotics and most precious of house flowers of blossom and leaf. [413]

To Derrice, lying pale and languid ever since the night that made her an orphan, Miss Gastonguay daily bore a description of Chelda's latest designs in ornamentation. One day it was a huge white cross outlined in a bank of ferns; another, a white heart covered the rooting sod and gaping earth-seams.

To-day there was a carpet of variegated bloom scenting the air for yards around with a delicious perfume. With dry eyes, but with the same unearthly brightness of face, Miss Gastonguay stooped and passed her hand caressingly over a pillow of flowers laid at the head of the grave, then talking softly to herself she proceeded to the wood.

She had no pain, no distress. Soon—perhaps in the night, perhaps next day—would come the terrible anguish in her chest, the wild struggle for breath. She must not go far from the house, she would halt by the old playground where she had romped with her little brother, and barely entering the wood she sat down in the shade of some underbrush beside the pond. [414]

How fair was this world! How transcendent must be the beauty of the other world to eclipse this! She leaned back against a tree and mused on deep and unutterable things until there was a soft

footfall beside her.

"Dear pony," she said, and, with a new fondness added to her old fondness for all created things, she stroked the head dropped caressingly before her.

After a time she started to get up, but could not do so.

"Ah," she said, quietly, and she lay back against the tree.

A carpenter going home with his tools a few minutes later had occasion to pass the pond. He touched his hat when he saw her, and was greeted calmly and called to her side. "Can you give me a pencil and a piece of paper, Mr. Munro, and if you are not in a hurry would you be kind enough to go and sit yonder for a short time? If I do not speak at the end of ten minutes come to me. I want to send a message to my niece, and shall be obliged if you will leave it at the door as you go by."

The man cheerfully complied with her request. In common with the whole town, he had heard that she was not likely to live long, but she looked better to-day than he had ever seen her before. Her eye was bright,—almost triumphant. Perhaps she had conquered her complaint. [415]

Miss Gastonguay fingered the broad-pointed pencil. "Only ten minutes, perhaps less. I am not mistaken this time,—let me make haste," and, laying the paper on a flat stone beside her, she wrote firmly: "To Chelda, my beloved niece. The conversation will not take place, but I forgive, fully, freely. May God bless you. Forget the past,—forget, forget. Look steadily forward. Leave French Cross and be happy. My blessing always,—always. Never forget it. Nothing would change it, nothing you could say or do. No one has told me anything, but I suspected and know the truth."

She stopped for a few minutes. The pain was coming on. One look she cast up at the brave blue of the sky, then she went on, "Derrice Mercer, my dear friend. Good-bye, good-bye. Keep clean your sweet soul. Train wisely all who may come to you. Do not forget me. We shall meet again. Do not lose heart. Trust your husband; he will advise."

This time the pencil fell from her grasp, and an acute spasm of pain contracted her features. She pressed her hands to her throat, and gasped for breath. When it came, she seized the pencil and wrote, hurriedly, "I have offended some. I pray all to forgive me. In this last hour I think kindly, so kindly of all. Would that my poor death could bring happiness to all I know. Good-bye, dear [416] townspeople. On the whole, we have lived happily together. I beg you, I pray you, I beseech you to meet me in a better world. Would that I could comfort some sore hearts before I go.

"Chelda, once again,—do not grieve that I am alone. I thought to have you with me at the last, but it would have been hard for you. It is better so. Bury me beside the wanderer."

Here she broke off. The pencil rolled away. She hurriedly thrust the paper in the bosom of her coat, and fell on the ground in a paroxysm of pain.

The carpenter sitting by the pond with his back to her heard nothing. He had become absorbed in a newspaper that he had taken from his pocket. The pony uneasily touched the back of her head with his nose, and when she presently revealed her exhausted face he whinnied joyfully.

Her strength was all gone. She was reclining on the moss, her hands full of violet leaves that she had grasped in her excess of pain.

She drew herself to her old position against the tree, and straightened her clothing. Now she felt nothing but weariness, deadly weariness.

She drew one hand caressingly over the ground. "Good-bye, good-bye," she murmured, "dear old Pine Tree State. *Dirigo*—motto of staunch hearts. Pony, kiss me—" and she tried to upraise a feeble hand.

She could not. The pony rubbed his velvet nose over her forehead. "And this is death, no [417] blackness of doubt and unbelief. All peace. The Puritans have triumphed!"

Her voice rose suddenly. The carpenter heard it, and threw down his paper. He ran to her, then retraced his steps to the pond and filled his hat with water.

He was too late. The old lady was dying. Her glazed eyes were fixed on the sky. She could not see him, but he caught her murmured words, "I believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his Son—Dear Lord, open the gates of heaven and let a tired old child creep in."

There was a wistful pleading note in her voice. The carpenter, leaning over her, tried in vain to revive her. She fell back, and a smile of unutterable joy lighted up her face.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

[418]

THE SON OF THE MORNING.

The French Cross pony had always been regarded as an intelligent and highly cultured animal, an amusement to his mistress and the town in general, and by no means a source of melancholy.

Yet such he became after Miss Gastonguay had been laid to rest by the largest concourse of people that had ever assembled to do honour to a citizen of Rossignol.

The pony did not understand that his dear mistress lay under the green mound in the cemetery. He had seen her carried to the house, he had never seen her come out, and his mystification was complete. Where was she? How had she the heart to elude him? He was getting thin and doleful, and his tiny hoofs ached at night from his constant trottings to and fro.

She was not up among the grand houses across the river, for he daily craned his neck over their garden hedges until different members of the Potts family would come to stroke him kindly, and murmur, "Poor pony, she is not here."

Perhaps then she was among the poor people, and in joyful expectation he would hurry across the [419] bridge to the canning factories. Sometimes the herring boats would be nearing the wharves, and the factory whistles would be sounding in a deafening chorus. She used to enjoy seeing men, women, and children running to their work. Perhaps he would discover her standing in some doorway, and he earnestly scanned the passing faces.

No, she was never there, and disappointedly he would drag himself through the town, stopping at the stores, the bank, and the office of Potts Brothers, where Mr. Jonah Potts would wink his red eyes and mutter that he wished some one would shoot that pony.

The whole town wished him dead,—the little lean animal with the pitiful eyes and weary manner,—yet there was not a man in Rossignol who would have pointed a revolver at him.

Poor pony! his life was indeed a hard one, and if it had not been for Chelda, he would have died.

This afternoon he had returned home from a long expedition into the country. He had had a sudden thought of a distant farm on a bleak and barren hillside. Alas! his mistress was not there, and now he stood listlessly regarding the sugar-bowl that Chelda offered him.

All his life he had longed for a whole bowl of sugar. Now he had it and he did not care for it. [420]

"Take it back to the house," said his new mistress, and Prosperity mournfully obeyed her.

Chelda resumed her former position. She always sat here when the weather was fine,—here in her aunt's favourite summer-house that faced down the river toward the sea. She neither read, nor worked, nor saw visitors. She was always alone. Sometimes she smoothed her black dress and thoughtfully turned the mourning ring on her hand, while she gazed at the pony, but she rarely spoke to him. She only caressed him, and he broken-heartedly felt that the house was melancholy, and that with her he was losing interest in life.

On this day there was a kind of inexorable sparkle and brilliancy on land and sky. Everything shone and glittered, and Chelda's weary eyes were dazzled, yet she gazed steadfastly and immovably out at the rippling Bay.

The pony languidly went down to the river to get a drink, then, as he came up with the water dripping from his mouth, he slightly moved his nostrils and stared down the avenue.

His quick hope died within him. The manly step belonged to a man; but it was no stranger that was swinging himself over the gravel. The handsome figure had formerly been well known at French Cross, and only a few months ago those firm white hands had gone all over his trim white [421] body while their owner examined his points.

The man with the radiant, glowing face stopped suddenly. Himself the embodiment of life and hope and perfect happiness, he was inexpressibly touched by the pathos of the little lean pony.

If the pony had changed so completely, what would he see when the gray-haired woman turned her head? Well, no matter, pony and woman would soon belong to him. He would take them both away.

"Chelda," he said, wistfully. "Chelda, Chelda!"

She would not turn. He caught only a convulsive movement of her beautiful shoulders.

He must see that face bent so fixedly on the Bay.

"My darling," he murmured, stepping close beside her. He saw her now, thin, wistful, pitiably changed, yet more attractive in her haggard looks than she had ever been in her composure and brilliancy.

In speechless compassion he approached her.

She did not give him her hand. "Were you not told at the house that I preferred to see no one?" she asked, in a dull voice.

"Yes, yes; but I did not heed the warning."

"And you force your society on me?" she said, in the same monotonous way.

"Force it," he repeated, with tender reproach, "Chelda, have you forgotten?"

"I have forgotten nothing," and she again turned her face toward the Bay. [422]

She was painfully weak and nervous. Successive waves of colour were hurrying over her face, and her breast rose and fell convulsively.

"I also remember," he said, masterfully, "and, Chelda, you must listen to me."

He took a seat near her and laid his hat on the table.

"I shall speak frankly," he said, "to you, the woman I love and am going to marry. No, do not take your hand from me. You are mine, if ever a woman belonged to a man. Let me tell you what has happened since I left you."

She allowed him to retain her hand, but kept her face averted while he gave her an account of his father's death and his reconciliation with his family.

"And," he went on, "when I once more saw eye to eye relatives who are dear to me, a great happiness came over me. Duty and the possession of wealth seemed to point to a life with these same relatives, but something urged me on. Chelda, I have at last found peace in religion,—the true, not the spurious religion. My heart became humbled. Not to crowded cities but to the wilderness a call came to me. I have been among the Indians in the West. If I could describe to you the joy of my life, the ecstasy, not of renunciation, but of participation in their lives! Only one [423] thing could draw me from them. Do you know what that one thing was?"

She tried to answer him in a conventional tone, to assure him that she did not know, that she would be interested in hearing, but her breath came and went in fluttering gasps, and she could not speak.

"You, my darling. I have been kept informed of your movements. I know everything. At this juncture you need me. I am here,—here to take you back with me.

"My darling, my darling!" and gently putting his arm around her trembling form he kissed her feverish cheeks.

She drew away from him. "I murdered my aunt," she said, in a hollow voice.

"Hush, hush!" and as tenderly as a parent would soothe a child he stroked her unbound masses of hair.

"I do not love you," she stammered.

"My poor girl," and he folded her fluttering hands. "You are on the brink of losing your reason. I wish to alarm you. They have written of your strange state of mind. That your conscience is awakened is my keenest delight, yet I would not have you gratify your sacrificial instincts. You have done wrong, very wrong. You have been contemptible, my darling. I also have been contemptible. Our most merciful Father in heaven forgives us. Shall we spurn the joy of [424] acceptance? We truly repent. Let us atone for the past. We are tired of the world,—you and I. Let us live apart from it. I claim you as my wife. You are mine, and I will take you from all former haunts. There is much good in the world as well as evil, but we have shown ourselves weak. Chelda, will you come?"

She collected herself. "I beg that you will go away," she said, rising, and trembling from head to foot.

"Very well," he said, composedly, reaching for his hat, "I do not wish to distress you, but you will not forget what I have said?"

Forget it,—when her eager eyes were devouring him, and her fingers were clasped convulsively to prevent them from seeking the shelter of his strong, inviting hands. She loved him more intensely, more devotedly than ever before, but she was punishing herself for her forwardness in days gone by. If he had said then that he loved she would have been ready to die with joy. Now—and her passionate hungry eyes left his face and went to the cemetery.

"Let us walk there," he said. "I cried like a child when I heard that that true heart had been laid to rest. But, Chelda, she is not lost to us. We shall spend eternity with her. Let us do what she would have us do if she were here."

"Go," said Chelda, wildly, "go, I cannot endure this." [425]

"I will, but remember, darling, I am here in the town. I am preaching again in the church. Send for me at any time. I shall not leave you."

She threw herself down by the table, shaken and torn by hysterical weeping, and with a last embrace and many a backward glance he left her.

"Thank God I have broken the ice, she will not lose her reason. She is mine already."

That evening a special service was announced for the Church of the United Brethren. Their former pastor was to preach a sermon. There had not yet been a new pastor engaged, but there was no hope of getting again this man who, after a rebaptism of zeal, had been consecrated as a missionary to the Indians.

The people of the town flocked to the church to hear what he had to say. With shining face the ardent and still young apostle stood in the pulpit. "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," was his theme, and he presented to his hearers the most sublime conception of duty, of love, and of service for others. Sound, zealous, rooted in the faith,—what a career was spread before him! The old people wiped their eyes, and the young ones winked away surreptitious tears. Surely life was worth living with such an inspiration as this.

"Christ who died for us, who lives for us,—our great Pattern and Redeemer,—take him with you," exhorted the preacher, "and before all, above all, with all, a change of heart,—the removal of the stony heart, the planting of the tender one alive with love for the brethren, forgiveness for sinners, pity for the fallen. Pity, pity, always pity,—unlimited, full, free! [426]

"When your pastor, I preached to you the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the sublime morals of the Christ. But the Bible to me was not wholly a revelation from God. The book of Genesis was a revision of ancient myths adopted by the superstitious descendants of Abraham. The flood was one of the historic fictions commonly afloat among the nations of antiquity. Abraham's call and the supernatural in his life were begotten in the heated imagination of one of his descendants, a true Eastern hero-worshipper. The book of Jonah was a myth produced by a man of an imaginative temperament. Job was a grand epic,—a poem of the patriarchical age. Solomon's Song was sickly, Oriental sentimentality. Isaiah was the work of more than one author.

"The miracles of the New Testament came from the mythical lore of the Orient; the Revelation was a vision of a poet and a religious fanatic seen while in the reverie of a prolonged trance. In a word, the Scriptures were an admixture of truth and error, and it was the work of the Higher Criticism to separate the one from the other. [427]

"But, thanks be to God, I now know that the light that was then in me was darkness; my natural man did not discern the things of the Spirit; they were foolishness unto me. Now I am spiritual, and I discern all things, yea the deep things of God,—the substitution of the innocent for the guilty, regeneration by the Spirit, the way of life through Christ, living in Christ, for Christ, and thus for others,—the only genuine altruism in the world.

"This is life from the dead,—life eternal. Now all the books of the Bible are a symmetrical whole,—God's revealed will to man.

"And, with our great President Abraham Lincoln, I accept all,—what of it I can by reason, and the balance by faith.

"Enlightened scholars will weed out any errors that may have crept in by successive transcriptions, and help us in parts difficult of interpretation; but they must leave to us the grand old Bible, defended by its own internal evidence, and by the evidence internal to all in whom is the new light,—the new life. To all such 'it will be the Impregnable Rock of the Holy Scriptures.'

"Deep down in my heart, during my pastorate among you, there was a current of fear lest I might be wrong, and this is the reason why I concealed my views from the public. My only confidant was Mr. Justin Mercer, and may God save him from any harm on account of it." [428]

At the end of an hour he paused, but the congregation would not go home. Were they to have one of the old-fashioned, much-sneered-at revivals,—the revivals that left good, and good only in their train?

The minister came down from the pulpit, and took his stand by the communion-table. One after another of his old deacons rose and testified to the pleasure it gave them to have him again with them, of their sense of his loss, and their prayerful wishes for his prosperity in the new field he had chosen.

Justin Mercer was present, and after his short, manly address, Captain White rose beside him.

This man, so well-known, had never before lifted up his voice in a religious service, and all eyes were turned curiously upon him.

"Friends," he said, seriously, "I don't know much about church services, but I'll tell you what has come to me since I've been sitting here. This world is a pretty decent old world, but when you come to think about dying, a good many of its affairs seem vanity. I've just been thinking,—suppose I die to-night. I might. Death comes pretty sudden. Where am I going? It will be a long voyage I'm setting out on. I want to know my home port, I want to know my pilot. I want to know the number of his boat. Friends, I think I've found it out to-night. The boat is the old boat of Salvation, and the name of the pilot is Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. I am a poor sinner, but I repent of my sins, and if there's any good in sinners getting together and trying to do some work with the help of the saints, I want to join along with you here." [429]

"Amen," said Mr. Huntington, softly, "that boat is wide and deep, there is room for others."

There were others who wished to enter, and the meeting did not close for another hour. Then there were hand-shakings and greetings, and Bernal Huntington's face shone with happiness, until Captain White whispered something in his ear, when it took on a hue of anxiety.

He slipped through the throng of people to the door. There, toiling up the steps at this late hour, was a dark-robed, slender figure, alarmingly pale, even through her veil.

"Chelda," he ejaculated.

"I have come," she said, giving him her hand with weary, child-like trust. "Let me tell the people how bad I have been. Perhaps it will make my heart lighter."

"Not to-night, my darling," he murmured, "you are not quite yourself. We will talk over just what you are to say." [430]

She sat down on the steps in a dazed manner.

"Did you bring your carriage?" asked her lover.

"No, I did not think of it, but I am not tired."

"Poor soul," muttered Captain White. Then he turned to the pale young man at his elbow. "Run for a hack, Cousin Charlie, will you?"

"Are you going to stay with me, Chelda?" whispered Mr. Huntington.

She looked up, her face lighted by a gleam of inextinguishable love. "Yes, Bernal, if you will have me. I fell asleep after dinner and dreamed of my aunt. She told me to trust you."

Captain White exchanged a few words with the clergyman, then rattled down the steps. A few minutes later he rushed into the room where his wife sat gently dropping tears on her death-book.

"Put it away, Hippy,—put it away. The saints in there would all rejoice if they knew. Young Huntington is just bringing Chelda Gastonguay to you and Derrice to comfort, till he marries her. Start a new book, Hippy,—the book of life,—and start it with the sweetest word in the language."

"That word is love," she said, quietly.

"No, Hippy, no; and yet yes, for it's forgiveness, forgiveness,—the blotting out of sins, our minds at peace. Hippy, I feel a new man, but I haven't time to tell you now. I hear them at the door. Come, let us go welcome them." [431]

THE END.

Transcriber's Note:
Page 296: the dieresis in co-operation has been replaced by a hyphen.
Page 297: the dieresis in re-embellished has been replaced by a hyphen.

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