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GEOFFREY STRONG

By

Laura E. Richards

Author of

"Captain January," "Melody," "Marie," etc.

TO

Richard Sullivan,
KINDEST OF UNCLES, FRIENDS, AND CRITICS,
THIS STORY IS AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED

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ILLUSTRATIONS.

He paddled on in silence

The young doctor glancing around saw all these things.

He stood looking at her, his hand still on the hammock rope.

"There he comes, full chisel!" cried Ithuriel Butters.

CHAPTER I.

THE TEMPLE OF VESTA

"That's a pleasant looking house," said the young doctor. "What's the matter with my getting taken in there?"

The old doctor checked his horse, and looked at the house with a smile.

"Nothing in the world," he said, "except the small fact that they wouldn't take you."

"Why not?" asked the young man, vivaciously. "Too rich? too proud? too young? too old? what's the matter with them?"

The old doctor laughed outright this time. "You young firebrand!" he said. "Do you think you are going to take this village by storm? That house is the Temple of Vesta. It is inhabited by the Vestal Virgins, who tend the sacred fire, and do other things beside. You might as well ask to be taken into the meeting-house to board."

"This is more attractive than the meetinghouse," said the young doctor.
"This is one of the most attractive houses I ever saw."

He looked at it earnestly, and as they drove along the elm-shaded street, he turned in his seat to look at it again.

It certainly was an attractive house. Its front of bright clean red brick was perhaps too near the street; but the garden, whose tall lilac and syringa bushes waved over the top of the high wall, must, he thought, run back some way, and from the west windows there must be a glorious sea-view.

The house looked both genteel and benevolent. The white stone steps and window-sills and the white fan over the door gave a certain effect of clean linen that was singularly pleasing. The young doctor, unlike Doctor Johnson, had a passion for clean linen. The knocker, too, was of the graceful long oval shape he liked, and burnished to the last point of perfection, and the shining windows were so placed as to give an air of cheerful interrogation to the whole.

"I like that house!" said the young doctor again. "Tell me about the people!"

Again the old doctor laughed. "I tell you they are the Vestal Virgins!" he repeated. "There are two of them, Miss Phoebe and Miss Vesta Blyth. Miss Phoebe is as good as gold, but something of a man-hater. She doesn't think much of the sex in general, but she is a good friend of mine, and she'll be good to you for my sake. Miss Vesta"—the young doctor, who was observant, noted a slight change in his hearty voice—"Vesta Blyth is a saint."

"What kind of saint? invalid? bedridden? blind?"

"No, no, no! saints don't all have to be bedridden. Vesta is a—you might call her Saint Placidia. Her life has been shadowed. She was once engaged—to a very worthy young man—thirty years ago. The day before the wedding he was drowned; sailboat capsized in a squall, just in the bay here. Since then she keeps a light burning in the back hall, looking over the water. That's why I call the house the Temple of Vesta."

"Day and night?"

"No, no! lights it at sunset every evening regularly. Sun dips, Vesta lights her lamp. Pretty? I think so."

"Affecting, certainly!" said the young doctor. "And she has mourned her lover ever since?"

The old doctor gave him a quaint look. "People don't mourn thirty years," he said, "unless their minds are diseased. Women mourn longer than men, of course, but ten years would be a long limit, even for a woman. Memory, of course, may last as long as life—sacred and tender memory,"—his voice dropped a little, and he passed his hand across his forehead,— "but not mourning. Vesta is a little pensive, a little silent; more habit than anything else now. A sweet woman; the sweetest—"

The old doctor seemed to forget his companion, and flicked the old brown horse pensively, as they jogged along, saying no more.

The young doctor waited a little before he put his next question.

"The two ladies live alone always?"

"Yes—no!" said the old doctor, coming out of his reverie. "There's Diploma Crotty, help, tyrant, governor-in-chief of the kitchen. Now and then she thinks they'd better have a visitor, and tells them so; but not very often, it upsets her kitchen. But here we are at the parsonage, and I'll take you in."

The young doctor made his visit at the parsonage dutifully and carefully. He meant to make a good impression wherever he went. It was no such easy matter to take the place of the old doctor, who, after a lifetime of faithful and loving work, had been ordered off for a year's rest and travel; but the young doctor had plenty of courage, and meant to do his best. He answered evasively the inquiry of the minister's wife as to where he meant to board; and though he noted down carefully the addresses she gave him of nice motherly women who would keep his things in order, and have an eye to him in case he should be ailing, he did not intend to trouble these good ladies if he could help himself.

"I want to live in that brick house!" he said to himself. "I'll have a try for it, anyhow. The old ladies can't be insulted by my telling them they have the best house in the village."

After dinner he went for a walk, and strolled along the pleasant shady street. There were many good houses, for Elmerton was an old village. Vessels had come into her harbour in bygone days, and

substantial merchant captains had built the comfortable, roomy mansions which stretched their ample fronts under the drooping elms, while their back windows looked out over the sea, breaking at the very foot of their garden walls. But there was no house that compared, in the young doctor's mind, with the Temple of Vesta. He was walking slowly past it, admiring the delicate tracery on the white window-sills, when the door opened, and a lady came out. The young doctor observed her as she came down the steps; it was his habit to observe everything. The lady was past sixty, tall and erect, and walked stiffly.

"Rheumatic!" said the young doctor, and ran over in his mind certain remedies which he had found effective in rheumatism.

She was dressed in sober gray silk, made in the fashion of thirty years before, and carried an ancient parasol with a deep silk fringe. As she reached the sidewalk she dropped her handkerchief. Standing still a moment, she regarded it with grave displeasure, then tried to take it up on the point of her parasol. In an instant the young doctor had crossed the street, picked up the handkerchief, and offered it to her with a bow and a pleasant smile.

"I thank you, sir!" said Miss Phoebe Blyth. "You are extremely obliging."

"Don't mention it, please!" said the young doctor. "It was a pleasure. Have I the honour of speaking to Miss Blyth? I am Doctor Strong. Doctor Stedman may have spoken to you of me."

"He has indeed done so!" said Miss Phoebe; and she held out her silk-gloved hand with dignified cordiality. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, sir. I shall hope to have the pleasure of welcoming you at my house at an early date."

"Thank you! I shall be most happy. May I walk along with you, as we seem to be going the same way? I have been admiring your house so very much, Miss Blyth. It is the finest specimen of its kind I have ever seen. How fine that tracery is over the windows; and how seldom you see a fan so graceful as that! Should you object to my making a sketch of it some day? I'm very much interested in Colonial houses."

A faint red crept into Miss Phoebe's cheek; it was one of her dreams to have an oil-painting of her house. The young doctor had found a joint in her harness.

"I should be indeed pleased—" she began; and, being slightly fluttered, she dropped her handkerchief again, and again the young doctor picked it up and handed it to her.

"I am distressed!" said Miss Phoebe. "I am—somewhat hampered by rheumatism, Doctor Strong. It is not uncommon in persons of middle age."

"No, indeed! My mother—I mean my aunt—younger sister of my mother's—used to suffer terribly with rheumatism. I was fortunate enough to be able to relieve her a good deal. If you would like to try the prescription, Miss Blyth, it is entirely at your service. Not professionally, please understand, not professionally; a mere neighbourly attention. I hope we shall be neighbours. Don't mention it, please don't, because I shall be so glad, you know. Besides—you have a little look of my—aunt; she has very regular features."

Miss Phoebe thanked him with a rather tremulous dignity; he was a most courteous and attractive young man, but so impetuous, that she felt a disturbance of her cool blood. It was singular, though, how little dear Doctor Stedman had been able to do for her rheumatism, for as many years as he had been attending her. Perhaps newer methods—it must be confessed that Doctor Stedman was growing old.

"Where do you intend to lodge, Doctor Strong?" she asked, by way of changing the subject gracefully.

The young doctor did not know, was quite at a loss.

"There is only one house that I want to lodge in!" he said, and his bold face had grown suddenly timid, like a schoolboy's. "That is, of course there are plenty of good houses in the village, Miss Blyth, excellent houses, and excellent people in them, I have no doubt; but—well, there is only one house for me. You know what house I mean, Miss Blyth, because you know how one can feel about a really fine house. The moment I saw it I said, 'That is the house for me!' But Doctor Stedman said there was no possible chance of my getting taken in there."

"I really do not know how Doctor Stedman should speak with authority on the subject!" said Miss Phoebe Blyth.

Young doctor! young doctor! is this the way you are going to comport yourself in the village of Elmerton? If so, there will be flutterings indeed in the dove-cotes. Before night the whole village knew that the young doctor was going to board with the Blyth girls!

CHAPTER II.

THE YOUNG DOCTOR

"And he certainly is a remarkable young man!" said Miss Phoebe Blyth.

"Is he not, Sister Vesta?"

Miss Vesta came out of her reverie; not with a start,—she never started,—but with the quiet awakening, like that of a baby in the morning, that was peculiar to her.

"Yes! oh, yes!" she said. "I consider him so. I think his coming providential."

"How so?" asked the visitor. There was a slight acidity in her tone, for Mrs. Weight was one of the motherly persons mentioned by the minister's wife, and had looked forward to caring for the young doctor herself. With her four children, all croupy, it would have been convenient to have a physician in the house, and as the wife of the senior deacon, what could be more proper?

"I must say he doesn't look remarkable," she added; "but the light-complected seldom do, to my mind."

"It is years," said Miss Vesta, "since Sister Phoebe has suffered so little with her rheumatism. Doctor Strong understands her constitution as no one else ever has done, not even dear Doctor Stedman. Sister Phoebe can stoop down now like a girl; can't you, Sister Phoebe? It is a long time since she has been able to stoop down."

Miss Vesta's soft white face glowed with pleasure; it was a gentle glow, like that at the heart of certain white roses.

Mrs. Weight showed little enthusiasm.

"I never have rheumatism!" she said, briefly. "I've always wore gold beads. If you'd have tried gold beads, Phoebe, or a few raisins in your pocket, it's my belief you'd never have had all this trouble."

It was now Miss Phoebe's turn to colour, but hers was the hard red of a winter pear.

"I am not superstitious, Anna Maria," she said. "Doctor Strong considers gold beads for rheumatism absurd, and I fully agree with him. As for raisins in the pocket, that is nonsense, of course."

"It's best to be sure of your facts before reflecting upon other folks' statements!" said Mrs. Weight, with dignity. "I know whereof I speak, Phoebe. Father Weight is ninety years old this very month, and he has carried raisins for forty years, and never had a twinge of rheumatism in all that time. The same raisins, too; they have hardened into stone, as you may say, with what they have absorbed. I don't need to see things clearer than that."

"H'm!" said Miss Phoebe, with the suspicion of a sniff. "Did he ever have it before?"

"I wasn't acquainted with him before," said Mrs. Weight, stiffly.

There was a pause; then the visitor went on, dropping her voice with a certain mystery. "You may talk of superstition, Phoebe, but I must say I'd sooner be what some folks call superstitious than have no belief at all. I don't wish to reflect upon any person, but I must say that, in my opinion, Doctor Strong is little better than an infidel. To see a perishing human creature set himself up against the Ordering of Providence is a thing I am sorry to meet with in *this* parish."

"Has Doctor Strong set himself against Providence?" asked Miss Phoebe, her back very rigid, her knitting-needles pointed in stern interrogation.

"You shall judge for yourselves, girls!" Mrs. Weight spoke with unction. "At the same time, I wish it to be understood that what I say is for this room only; I am not one to spread abroad. Well! it has never been doubted, to *my* knowledge, that the lower animals are permitted to absorb diseases from children, who have immortal souls to save. Even Doctor Stedman, who is advanced enough in all conscience, never denied that in *my* hearing. Well! Mrs. Ezra Sloper—I don't know whether you are acquainted with her, girls; I have my butter of her. She lives out on the Saugo Road; a most respectable woman. She has a child with a hump back; fell when it was a baby, and never got over it. I found she wasn't doing anything for the child,—nice little boy, four years old; hump growing right out of his shoulders. I said to her, 'Susan,' I said, 'you want to get a little dog, and let it sleep with that child, and let the child play with it all he can, and get real attached to it. If anything will cure the child, that will.'

"She said, 'Mis' Weight,' she said, 'I'll do it!' and she did. She thanked me, too, as grateful as ever I was thanked. Well, girls,"—Mrs. Weight leaned forward, her hands on her knees, and spoke slowly and impressively,—“as true as I sit here, in three months' time that dog was humpbacked, and growing more so every day."

She paused, drawing a long breath of triumph, and looked from one to the other of her hearers.

"Well!" said Miss Phoebe, dryly. "Did the child get well? And where does Doctor Strong's infidelity come in?"

"The child *would* have got well," said Mrs. Weight, with tragic emphasis. "The child might be well, or near it, this living day of time, if the Ordering of Providence had not been interfered with. The child had a spell of stomach trouble, and Doctor Strong was sent for. He ordered the dog out of the house; said it had fleas, and sore eyes, and I don't know what. Susan Sloper is a weak woman, and she gave in, and that child goes humpbacked to its grave. I hope Doctor Strong is prepared to answer for it at the Last Day."

Miss Phoebe laid down her knitting-needles; but before she could reply, Doctor Strong himself came in, bringing the breeze with him.

"How do you do, Mrs. Weight?" he said, heartily. "How is Billy? croupy again? Does he go out every day? Do you keep his window open at night, and give him a cold bath every morning? Fresh air and bathing are absolutely necessary, you know, with that tendency. Have you taken off all that load of flannel?"

Mrs. Weight muttered something about supper-time, and fled before the questioner. The young doctor turned to his hostess, with the quick, merry smile he had. "I had to send her away!" he said. "You are flushed, Miss Blyth, and Miss Vesta is tired. Yes, you are, Miss Vesta; what is the use of denying it?"

He placed a cushion behind Miss Vesta, and she nestled against it with a little comfortable sigh. She looked at the young doctor kindly, and he returned the look with one of frank affection.

"Your mother must have had a sight of comfort with you," said Miss Vesta. "You are a home boy, any one can see that."

"I know when I am well off!" said the young doctor.

Geoffrey Strong certainly was well off. In some singular way, which no one professed wholly to understand, he had won the confidence of both the "Blyth girls," who were usually considered the most exclusive and "stand-offish" people in Elmerton. He made no secret of being in love with Miss Vesta. He declared that no one could see her without being in love with her. "Because you are so lovely, you know!" he said to her half a dozen times a day. The remark never failed to call up a soft blush, and a gentle "Don't, I pray you, my dear young friend; you shock me!"

"But I like to shock you," the young doctor would reply. "You look prettiest when you are shocked." And then Miss Vesta would shake her pretty white curls (she was not more than sixty, but her hair had been gray since her youth), and say that if he went on so she must really call Sister Phoebe; and Master Geoffrey would go off laughing.

He did not make love to Miss Phoebe, but was none the less intimate with her in frank comradeship. Rheumatism was their first bond. Doctor Strong meant to make rather a specialty of rheumatism and kindred complaints, and studied Miss Phoebe's case with ardour. Every new symptom was received with kindling eye and eager questionings. It was worst in her back this morning? So! now how would she describe the pain? Was it acute, darting, piercing? No? Dull, then! Would she call it grinding, boring, pressing? Ah! that was most interesting. And for other symptoms—yes! yes! that naturally followed; he should have expected that.

"In fact, Miss Blyth, you really are a magnificent case!" and the young doctor glowed with enthusiasm. (This was when he first came to live in the Temple of Vesta.) "I mean to relieve your suffering; I'll put every inch there is of me into it. But, meantime, there ought to be some consolation in the knowledge that you are a most beautiful and interesting case."

What woman,—I will go farther,—what human being could withstand this? Miss Phoebe was a firm woman, but she was clay in the hands of the young doctor,—the more so that he certainly did help her rheumatism wonderfully.

More than this, their views ran together in other directions. Both disapproved of matrimony, not in

the abstract, but in the concrete and personal view. They had long talks together on the subject, after Miss Vesta had gone to bed, sitting in the quaint parlour, which both considered the pleasantest room in the world. The young doctor, tongs in hand (he was allowed to pick up the brands and to poke the fire, a fire only less sacred than that of Miss Vesta's lamp), would hold forth at length, to the great edification of Miss Phoebe, as she sat by her little work-table knitting complacently.

"It's all right for most men," he would say. "It steadies them, and does them good in a hundred ways. Oh, yes, I approve highly of marriage, as I am sure you do, Miss Blyth; but not for a physician, at least a young physician. A young physician must be able to give his whole thought, his whole being, so to speak, to his profession. There's too much of it for him to divide himself up. Why, take a single specialty; take rheumatism. If I gave my lifetime, or twenty lifetimes, to the study of that one malady, I should not begin to learn the A B C of it."

"One learns a good deal when one has it!" said poor Miss Phoebe.

"Yes, of course, and I am speaking the simple truth when I say that I wish I could have it for you, Miss Blyth. I should have—it would be most instructive, most illuminating. Some day we shall have all that regulated, and medical students will go through courses of disease as well as of study. I look forward to that, though it will hardly come in my time. Rheumatism and kindred diseases, say two terms; fever, two terms—no, three, for you would want to take in yellow and typhus, as well as ordinary typhoid. Cholera—well, of course there would be difficulties, but you see the principle. Well, but we were talking about marriage. Now, you see, with all these new worlds opening before him, the physician cannot possibly be thinking of falling in love—"

Miss Phoebe blinked, and coloured slightly. She sometimes wished Doctor Strong would not use such forcible language.

"Of falling in love and marrying. In common justice to his wife, he has no business to marry her; I mean, of course, the person who might be his wife. Up all night, driving about the country all day,—no woman ought to be asked to share such a life. In fact, the one reason that might justify a physician in marrying—and I admit it might be a powerful one—would be where it afforded special facilities for the study of disease. An obscure and complicated case of neurasthenia, now,—but these things are hardly practicable; besides, a man would have to be a Mormon. No, no, let lawyers marry young; business men, parsons,—especially parsons, because they need filling out as a rule,—but not doctors."

The young doctor paused, and gave his whole vigorous mind to the fire for a moment. It was in a precarious condition, and the brands had to be built up in careful and precise fashion, with red coals tucked in neatly here and there. Then he took the bellows in hand, and blew steadily and critically, with keen eyes bent on the smouldering brands. A few seconds of breathless waiting, and a jet of yellow flame sprang up, faltered, died out, sprang up again, and crept flickering in and out among the brands powdered white with ashes. Now it was a strong, leaping flame, and all the room shone out in its light; the ancient Turkey carpet, with its soft blending of every colour into a harmonious no-colour; the quaint portraits, like court-cards in tarnished gilt frames; the teak-wood chairs and sofas, with their delicate spindle-legs, and backs inlaid with sandalwood; Miss Phoebe's work-table, with its bag of faded crimson damask, and Miss Phoebe herself, pleasant to look upon in her dove-coloured cashmere gown, with her kerchief of soft net.

[Illustration: The young doctor glancing around saw all these things.]

The young doctor, glancing around, saw all these things in the light of his newly-resuscitated fire; and seeing, gave a little sigh of comfort, and laying down the bellows, leaned back in his chair again.

"You were going to say something, Miss Blyth?" he said, in his eager way. "Please go on! I had to save the fire, don't you know? it was on its last legs—coals, I should say. Please go on, won't you?"

Miss Phoebe coughed. She had been brought up not to use the word "leg" freely; "limb" had been considered more elegant, as well as—but medical men, no doubt, took a broader view of these matters.

"I was merely about to remark," she said, with dignity, "that in many ways my views on this subject coincide with yours, Doctor Strong. I have the highest respect for—a—matrimony; it is a holy estate, and the daughter of my honoured parents could ill afford to think lightly of it; yet in a great many cases I own it appears to me a sad waste of time and energy. I have noted in my reading, both secular and religious, that though the married state is called holy, the term 'blessed' is reserved for a single life. Women of clinging nature, or those with few interests, doubtless do well to marry, a suitable partner being provided; but for a person with the full use of her faculties, and with rational occupation more than sufficient to fill her time, I admit I am unable to conceive the attraction of it. I speak for myself; my sister Vesta has other views. My sister Vesta had a disappointment in early life. From my point of

view, she would have been far better off without the unfortunate attachment which—though to a very worthy person—terminated so sadly. But my sister is not of my opinion. She has a clinging, affectionate nature, my sister Vesta."

"She's an angel!" said Doctor Strong.

"You are right, my friend, you are very right!" said Miss Phoebe; and her cap strings trembled with affection. "There is an angelic quality, surely, in my sister Vesta. She might have been happy—I trust she would have been—if Providence had been pleased to call her to the married estate. But for me, Doctor Strong, no! I have always said, and I shall always say, while I have the use of my faculties—no! I thank you for the honour you do me; I appreciate the sentiments to which you have given utterance; but I can never be yours."

To any third party who had seen Miss Phoebe, drawn up erect in her chair, uttering these words with chiselled majesty, and Doctor Strong, bellows in hand, his bright eyes fixed upon her, receiving them with kindling attention, it might certainly have appeared as if he had been making her an offer of marriage; but the thought would have been momentary, for when the good lady ceased, the young doctor chimed in heartily:

"Quite right! quite right, I'm sure, Miss Blyth. He'd be absurd to think of such a thing, you know; the idea of your wasting your time! That's what I say to fellows; 'How can you waste your time, when you'll be dead before you know it anyhow, and not have had time to look about you, much less learn anything?' No, sir,—I beg your pardon, ma'am! A single life for me. My own time, my own will, and my own way!"

Miss Phoebe looked at him with very kind eyes.

"Doctor Strong," she said, "I think—it is no light thing for me to say, holding the convictions I do—but I think you are worthy of single blessedness!"

CHAPTER III.

GARDEN FANCIES

Miss Vesta was trimming her lamp. That meant, in this early summer season, that it was after seven o'clock. The little lady stood at the window in the upper hall. It was a broad window, with a low round arch, looking out on the garden and the sea beyond it. A bracket was fastened to the sill, and on this bracket stood the lamp that Miss Vesta was trimming. (It was against all fitness, as Miss Phoebe said, that a lamp should be trimmed at this hour. Every other lamp in the house was in perfect order by nine o'clock in the morning; but it was Miss Vesta's fancy to trim this lamp in the evening, and Miss Phoebe made a point of indulging her sister's fancies when she conscientiously could.)

It was a brass lamp of quaint pattern, and the brass shone so that several Miss Vestas, with faces curiously distorted, looked out at the real one, as she daintily brushed off the burnt wicking, and, after filling and lighting the lamp, replaced the brilliantly polished chimney. She watched the flame as it crept along the wick; then, when it burned steady and clear, she folded her hands with a little contented gesture, and looked out of the window.

The sun had set. The sea on which Miss Vesta looked was a water of gold, shimmering here and there into opal; only where it broke on the shingle at the garden foot, the water was its usual colour of a chrysoprase, with a rim of ivory where it touched the shore. The window was open, and a light breeze blew from the water; blew across the garden, and brought with it scents of lilac, syringa, and June roses. It was a pleasant hour, and Miss Vesta was well content. She liked even better the later evening, when the glow would fade from the west, and her lamp would shed its own path of gold across the water; but this was pleasant enough.

"It is a very sightly evening!" said Miss Vesta, in the soft half-voice in which she often talked to herself. "Good Lord, I beseech thee, protect all souls at sea this night; for Jesus Christ's sake; amen!"

This was the prayer that Miss Vesta had offered every evening for thirty years. As often as she repeated it, the sea before her eyes changed, and she saw a stretch of black tossing water, with foam-crests that the lightning turned to pale fire; a sail drove across her window, dipped, and disappeared.

Miss Vesta closed her eyes.

But as the old doctor said, people do not mourn for thirty years; when she opened her eyes, they were grave, but serene. "It is a very sightly evening!" she repeated. She leaned out of the window, and drew in long breaths of sweetness. Presently the sweetness was crossed by a whiff of a different fragrance, pungent, aromatic,—the fragrance of tobacco. Doctor Strong was smoking his evening cigar in the garden. He would not have thought of smoking in the house, even if Miss Phoebe would have allowed it; he smoked as he rode on his morning round, and he took his evening cigar, as now, in the garden. Miss Vesta saw him now, in the growing dusk, striding up and down; not hastily, but with energy and determination in every stride. Her eyes dwelt upon him affectionately; she had grown very fond of him. It was delightful to her to have this young, vigorous creature in the house, fairly electric with life and joy and strength; she felt younger every time she saw him. He was good to look at, too, though no one would have called him a beauty. Tall and well-made, his head properly set on shoulders that were perhaps the least bit too square; his fair hair cropped close, in hope of destroying the curl that would still creep into it in spite of him; his hazel eyes as bright as eyes could be, his skin healthy red and brown,—yes, the young doctor was good to look at. So Miss Vesta thought. There was a little look, too—it could hardly be called a resemblance—yet he reminded her somehow—Miss Vesta's face changed from a white to a pink rose, and she said, softly, "If I had had a son, he might have looked like this. The Lord be with him and give him grace!"

As Miss Vesta watched him, Geoffrey Strong stopped to examine something in one of the borders; stooped, hands on knees, and scrutinised a certain plant; then, glancing upward as he straightened himself, saw Miss Vesta at the window looking down at him.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "Come down, Miss Vesta, won't you, please? you are the very person I want. I want to show you something."

"Surely!" said Miss Vesta. "I will be with you in a moment, Doctor Strong; only let me get a head-covering from my room."

When she had left the window, Geoffrey was almost sorry he had called her; she made such a pretty picture standing there, framed in the broad window, the evening light falling softly on her soft face and silver hair. It was so nice of her to wear white in the evening! Why didn't old ladies always wear white? when they were pretty, he added, reflecting that Miss Phoebe in white would be an alarming vision. His mind still on Miss Vesta, he quoted half aloud:

"A still, sweet, placid, moonlight face,
And slightly nonchalant,
Which seems to hold a middle place
Between one's love and aunt."

"I wish you were my aunt!" he exclaimed, abruptly, when Miss Vesta appeared a few minutes later, with a screen of delicate white wool over her head and shoulders.

"Is that what you wished to say to me?" asked Miss Vesta, somewhat bewildered.

"No! oh, no! I was only thinking what a perfect aunt you would make. No, I wanted to show you something; a line out of Browning, illustrated in life; one of my favourite lines. See here, Miss Vesta!"

Miss Vesta looked.

"I see nothing," she began. "Oh, yes, a miller! Is that it, Doctor Strong? Quite a curious miller. The study of insect life is no doubt—"

"A moth! don't you see?" cried the young doctor. "On the phlox, the white phlox."

"And here she paused in her gracious talk
To point me a moth on the milk-white phlox."

"Don't you remember, in the 'Garden Fancies?'"

But Miss Vesta did not remember.

Didn't she know Browning?

She confessed that she did not. She had fancied that he was not quite—she hardly thought that ladies did read his works to any extent. "Cowper was my favourite poet in my youth," she said, "and I was very fond of Mrs. Hemans and Mrs. Barbauld. Their poetry is at once elegant and elevated in tone and spirit.

I hope you agree with me, Doctor Strong?"

"I don't know!" said Geoffrey, "I never read 'em. But Shelley, Miss Vesta! you love Shelley, I'm sure? He would have loved you so, you know."

Miss Vesta's quiet face showed a little trouble. "Mr. Shelley's poetry," she said, hesitatingly, "is very beautiful. He was—some one I once knew was devoted to Mr. Shelley's poetry. He—used to read it to me. But Sister Phoebe thought Mr. Shelley's religious views were—a—not what one would wish, and she objected to my following the study."

"He wrote about moths, too," said Geoffrey, abstractedly. "The desire of the moth for the star, you know. Those things make you feel queer when they come to you out here, with all these lights and dusks and smells. Now I wonder why!"

Miss Vesta looked at him kindly. "Perhaps there is some tender association," she said, gently, "such as is natural at your age, my dear young friend."

"Not an association!" said Geoffrey, stoutly. "Never had one in my life. It's only in a general way. These things stir one up, somehow; it's a form of mental intoxication. Do you think a man could get drunk on sunset and phlox, Miss Vesta?"

"Oh, I trust not, I trust not!" said Miss Vesta, hurriedly, and she made haste to change the subject. She as well as her sister found the young doctor's expressions overstrong at times, yet she loved the lad.

"The roses are at their sweetest now," she said, leading the conversation gently away from the too passionate white phlox, on which the moth was still waving its wings drowsily. "This black damask is considered very fine, but I love the old-fashioned June roses best."

"She loves you, noble roses, I know!" said Geoffrey, who certainly was not himself to-night. "This one is exactly like you, Miss Vesta. Look at it; just the colour of ivory with a little sunset mixed in. Now you know what you look like."

"Oh, hush, my dear young friend!" said Miss Vesta. "You must not—really, you know—talk in this way. But—it is curious that you should have noticed that particular rose; it—it is the kind I used to wear when I was young."

She looked up at the lamp in the window. Geoffrey's eyes followed hers. Involuntarily he laid his hand on hers. "Dear Miss Vesta!" he said, and his strong, hearty voice could be very gentle. "Miss Blyth told me. Does it still hurt, dear lady?"

Miss Vesta's breath fluttered for a moment, but it was only a moment. Her soft white fingers, cool as rose-leaves, returned the pressure of his affectionately. "No, my—my dear," she said. "It does not hurt—now. There is no pain now, only memory; blessed, blessed memory. He—there is something—you remind me of him a little, Doctor Geoffrey."

They stood silent, the young man and the old woman, hand in hand in the soft evening. The splendour in the west died out, and soft clouds of gray and purple brooded like wings over the sea. The water deepened from gold to glimmering gray, from gray to deep brown and blue. In one spot a faint glimmer trembled on the waves; the light from Miss Vesta's lamp. The little lady gazed at it long, then looked up into the strong young face above her.

"He was—your age!" she said, hurrying the words out in a low murmur, hardly louder than the night breeze in the tall lilac-trees. "He was bright and strong and gay like you; his sun went down while it was yet day. The Lord took him into his holy keeping. I wish—I wish you all the joy I should have tried to give him, Doctor Geoffrey. I wish your life fortunate and brave, and your love happy; more than all, your love happy."

She pressed his hand, and went quietly away; came back for a moment to pat his arm and say she trusted she had not distressed him, and beg him not to stay out too long in the night air; then went into the house, closing the door softly after her.

Left alone, Geoffrey Strong fell to his pacing again, up and down the neat gravel paths with their tall box hedges. His face was very tender; looking at it, one might know he had been a loving son to his mother. But presently he frowned over his cigar, and then laughed, and went and shook the unoffending moth (it was a rare one, if he had been thinking of that kind of thing) off the phlox.

"All the more reason, Stupid!" he said to the moth, as it flew away. "A man goes and gets a girl to

care for him, and then he goes and plays some fool trick—like as not this chap had his sheet tied—and leaves her alone the rest of her life. Just look at this sweet old angel, will you? it's a shame. No, sir, no woman in mine, thank you!"

He paced again. The moth fluttered off in the gloom; fluttered back, hovered, then settled once more on the milk-white phlox, which glimmered like a fragrant ghost in the half-light. The perfume rose from the flowers and mingled with the delicate scent of the roses and the heavier breath of lilac and syringa.

"Where I find her not, beauties vanish;
Whither I follow her, beauties flee.
Is there no method to tell her in Spanish"—

"Oh, I must be drunk!" said Doctor Geoffrey. He tried another path. A new fragrance met him, the keen, clean, cruelly sweet smell of honeysuckle. Browning was gone with the phlox and the roses; and what was this coming unbidden into his head, crisp and clean and possessing, like the honeysuckle?

"Where e're she be,
That not impossible She
Who shall command my life and me"—

"I *am* drunk!" said Geoffrey Strong. And he threw away his cigar and went to bed.

CHAPTER IV.

MOSTLY PROFESSIONAL.

"I fear Doctor Strong will be very much put out!" said Miss Phoebe Blyth.

Miss Vesta sighed, and stirred her coffee delicately. "It is unfortunate!" she said.

"Unfortunate! my dearest Vesta, it is calamitous. Just when he is comfortably settled in surroundings which he feels to be congenial"—Miss Phoebe bridled, and glanced round the pleasant dining-room—"to have these surroundings invaded by what he dislikes most in the world, a girl, and a sick girl at that; I tell you it would not surprise me if he should give notice at once."

This was not quite true, for Miss Phoebe would have been greatly surprised at Doctor Strong's doing anything of the kind; but she enjoyed saying it, and felt rather better after it.

"We could not possibly refuse, though, Sister Phoebe," said Miss Vesta, mildly. "Little Vesta being my name-child, and Brother Nathaniel without faculty, as one may say,—and it is certainly no place for her at home."

"My dearest Vesta, I have not been entirely deprived of my senses!" Miss Phoebe spoke with some asperity. "Of course we cannot refuse, and of course we must do our utmost for our brother's motherless child; but none the less, it is calamitous, I repeat; and I am positive that Doctor Strong will be greatly annoyed."

At this moment Geoffrey came in, full of apologies for his ten minutes' tardiness. The apologies were graciously received. The Miss Blyths would never have thought of such a thing as being late to breakfast themselves, but they were not ill-pleased to have their lodger, occasionally—not too often—sleep beyond the usual hour. It showed that he felt at home, Miss Phoebe said, and Miss Vesta, the mother-instinct brooding over the lad she loved, thought he needed all the sleep he could get, and more.

"It's really disgraceful!" said the young doctor for the third time, as he drew his chair up to the table. "Yes, please, three lumps. There never was such coffee in the world, Miss Blyth. I believe the Sultan sends it to you from his own private coffee-garden. Creamed chicken? won't I? and muffins, and marmalade,—what a blessing to be naturally greedy! More pain this morning, Miss Blyth? I hope not." His quick eye had seen the cloud on his hostess's brow, and he was all attention and sympathy over his

coffee-cup.

"I thank you, Doctor Strong; I feel little pain this morning; in fact, I may almost say none. But I—we have been somewhat disturbed by the contents of a letter we have received."

"Bad news?" cried Geoffrey. "I'm so sorry! Is there anything I can do, Miss Blyth? You will command me, of course; send telegrams or—"

"I—thank you! You are always most kind and considerate, Doctor Strong. The fact is"—Miss Phoebe hesitated, casting about in her mind for the best way of breaking the news,— "the fact is, my brother is a widower."

"Very sad, I'm sure!" murmured Geoffrey Strong. "Was it sudden? these shocks are terribly trying. How did she—"

"Oh—no! you misapprehend me, Doctor Strong. Not sudden, nor—nor what you would call recent. It is some years since Nathaniel's wife died."

"Old gentleman going to pass away himself?" said Geoffrey, but not aloud; he was aware of his tendency to headlong plunges; it was manifestly better to wait further explanations and not commit himself.

"My brother has an only daughter," Miss Phoebe went on, "a girl of twenty. She has been at college (I strongly disapproved of her going, but the child is headstrong), and has worked beyond her strength. She—that is, her father, is anxious for her to come and pass a month or two with us; he thinks the sea air will benefit her."

"No doubt it will!" said Geoffrey, still awaiting the catastrophe. It was a great bore, of course, in fact a nuisance, but it couldn't be helped.

"This—this is what has troubled us, Doctor Strong. We fear, my sister and I, that the presence of a young—person of the other sex—will be disturbing to you."

Miss Vesta looked up quickly, but said nothing. Geoffrey looked bewildered for a moment, then laughed aloud, colouring like a schoolboy. "Why, Miss Blyth, what must you think of me?" he said. "I am not particularly given to—to the society of young ladies, but I am not such a misogynist as all that."

Miss Phoebe did not know what a misogynist was, and did not like to ask; there were so many dangerous and levelling doctrines about, as her father always said. Whatever it was, she was heartily glad that Doctor Strong did not believe in it.

"Vesta is a good child," said Miss Vesta. "She makes no noise or trouble in the house, even when she is well. We shall of course see that your convenience is not interfered with in any way, Doctor Strong."

"If you talk like that, I shall pack my trunk and go to-morrow," said Geoffrey, decidedly; "and I don't want to go a bit. It's I who am likely to be in the way, so far as I can see; but you won't send me off just yet, will you?"

When Geoffrey Strong smiled, people were apt to do what he wished, unless they were ill-conditioned people indeed, and Miss Phoebe and Miss Vesta were far from ill-conditioned.

"I've never been so happy anywhere," the young man went on in his eager way, "since—since my own home was broken up. I'd stay if you would let me, if there were twenty—I—I mean, of course it will be delightful to—may I have another muffin, please? Thanks!" Geoffrey had broken short off, being a person of absolute honesty.

"I trust your niece is not seriously out of health," he said, in conclusion, with his most professional air. "Is any malady indicated, or merely overfatigue?"

Miss Phoebe put on her spectacles and took up the letter. "There is a word," she said, "that I did not understand, I must confess. If you will allow me, Doctor Strong, I will read you a portion of my brother's remarks. A—yes! 'Vesta seems very far from well. She cries, and will not eat, and she looks like a ghost. The doctor calls it neurasthenia.'"

Doctor Strong uttered an exclamation. Miss Phoebe looked up in dismay.

"It is nothing contagious, I trust, Doctor Strong?"

"No! no! nothing of the kind. Go on, please! any more symptoms?"

"I think not. She has no appetite, he says, and does not sleep well. He says nothing of any rash." Miss Phoebe looked anxiously at the young doctor. To her amazement, he was leaning forward, muffin in hand, his face wearing its brightest and most eager look.

"Is that all?" he said. "Well—of course that's not professional. Very likely the physician there will send a written diagnosis if you ask him. You see, Miss Blyth, this is very interesting to me. I want to make a study of nerves,—that's all the word means, disordered nerves,—and it will be the greatest pleasure to me to try to be of service to your niece; if you should wish it, that is."

"Oh, Doctor Strong! you are *too* kind!" said both ladies in duet.

They were so relieved, they overflowed in little grateful courtesies. He must have more cream; he was eating nothing. They feared his egg was not quite—was he positively sure? it would sometimes happen, with the greatest care, that eggs were not quite—a little scrap more bacon, then! or would he fancy some fresh cream cheese? and so on and so on, till the young doctor cried out, and said that if he ate any more he should not be able to mount his bicycle, far less ride it.

"By the way," he added, "I didn't see you when I came in last night. I hope I didn't disturb either of you. No? That's right; if I ever make a noise coming in late, shoot me at sight, please. You took the powder, Miss Blyth? and slept well? Hurrah! Well, I was going to say, I had a rather amusing time at Shellback."

Shellback was a village some ten miles off, whither he had been summoned the evening before. Both ladies brightened up. They delighted to hear of the young doctor's experiences.

"I don't suppose you know," Doctor Strong went on,—"no, you wouldn't be likely to,—an old man named Butters, Ithuriel Butters? Quaint name! suggests 'Paradise Lost' and buns. Old Man Butters they call him. Well, I went to see him; and I got a lesson in therapeutics, and two recipes for curing rheumatism, beside. I think I must try one of them on you, Miss Blyth."

Miss Phoebe, who was literal, was about to assure him that she was amply satisfied with the remedies already in use; but he went on, in high enjoyment, evidently seeing almost with his bodily vision the figures he conjured up.

"It seems the old gentleman didn't want me sent for; in fact, the family had done it on the sly, being alarmed at certain symptoms new to them. I got out there, and found the old fellow sitting in his armchair, smoking his pipe; fine-looking old boy, white hair and beard, and all that. Looked me all over, and asked me what I wanted. Wife and daughter kept out of the way, evidently scared at what they had done. I went in alone. I said I had come to see him.

"'All right,' says he. 'No extra charge!' and he shut his eyes, and smoked away for dear life. Presently he opened his eyes, and looked at me again.

"'Like my looks?' he says.

"'Yes,' said I. I thought he might have returned the compliment, but he didn't; he only grunted. I waited a bit, talked of this and that; at last I said, 'How are you feeling this evening, Mr. Butters?'

"'First-rate!' said he. 'How be you?'

"'I'm all right,' said I, 'but I don't believe you are, sir. You are not the right colour at all.'

"'What colour be I? not green, I calc'late!' Then we both laughed, and felt better. I asked if I might smoke, too, and took out my pipe. Pretty soon the old fellow began to talk.

"'My women-folks sent for you, did they? I suspicioned they had. Fact, I was slim this mornin'; took slim suddin, whilst I was milkin'. Didn't relish my victuals, and that scairt the woman. But I took my physic, and, come afternoon, I was spryer 'n a steer agin.'

"'What is your physic, if I may ask, Mr. Butters?'

"'Woodpile!' says the old fellow.

"'Woodpile?' said I.

"'Cord o' wood. Axe. Sweat o' the brow. Them's the best physic I know of.'

"He smoked on for a bit, and I sat and looked at him, admiring how the world was made. I don't know whether you read Kipling, Miss Vesta. I was rewarded for my patience.

"Young feller,' said the old man, after awhile, 'how old do you s'pose I be?'

"Seventy,' said I; and he looked it, not a day over.

"Add fifteen to that,' says he, 'and you have it. Eighty-five year last Jenooary. You are under thirty, I reckon? Thought so! Well, I was gettin' on for sixty year old when you was born. See?'

"I did see, but I wasn't going to give in yet. 'Did you ever study medicine, Mr. Butters?' I said.

"Study medicine? No, sir! but I've lived with my own bones and insides till I know 'em consid'able well; and I've seen consid'able of folks, them as doctored and them as didn't. My wives doctored, all three of 'em. I buried two of 'em, and good ones, too; and, like as not, I'll bury the third. She ain't none too rugged this summer, though she ain't but seventy. But, what I say is, start well, and stay well, and don't worry. You tell your patients that, and fust thing you know you won't have any."

"A singularly ignorant person, this Mr. Butters!" said Miss Phoebe.

"I don't know!" said the young doctor. "I'm not so sure about that. I know it would be a bad thing for the medical profession if his ideas were generally taken up. Well, he went on over his pipe. I wish you could have seen him, Miss Vesta. He looked like a veritable patriarch come to life. Fancy Abraham with a T.D. pipe, and you have Ithuriel Butters. Awfully sad for those poor old duffers not to have tobacco. I beg your pardon, Miss Blyth.

"Yes,' said the old fellow. 'I've seen folks as doctored, and I've seen folks as fooled.'

"Fooled?' said I.

"Notions; fool's tricks; idees! Take my brother Reuel. He used to have rheumatiz; had it bad. One day there was a thunder-storm, and he was out gettin' in his hay, and was struck by lightnin'. Fluid run along the rake and spit in his face, he used to say. He lost the use of his eyes and hands for six months, but he never had rheumatiz again for twenty years. Swore it was the electricity; said he swallowed it, and it got into his system and cured him. What do you say to that, young feller?'

"It's an experiment I never tried,' said I. 'I'm not going to commit myself, Mr. Butters. But that's a good story.'

"Hold on!' said he; 'that ain't all. 'Bout twenty-five years after that—Reuel was gettin' on by that time—he was out fishin', and a squall come up and swamped his boat. He was in the water quite a spell, and come next day he was all doubled up with rheumatiz. He was the maddest man you ever see. He wouldn't do a thing, only sit hunched up in his chair and ask about the weather. It was summer-time, and good hayin' weather as a rule. Bumbye come a fryin' hot day, and sure enough we had a thunder-storm in the afternoon. When it was bangin' away good and solid, Reuel hitched himself out of his chair, took an iron rake in one hand and a hoe in the other, crep' out of the house, and went and sat down under a tree in the middle of the pasture. Wife tried to stop him, but she might as well have tried to stop the lightnin'. Well, sir, the tree was struck, and Reuel never had no more rheumatiz. Couldn't tell which was tree and which was him. That comes of havin' idees."

"Dear me!" said Miss Vesta. "What a painful story! His poor wife!"

"Such impious ignorance I think I never heard of!" said Miss Phoebe, rigidly. "I should think the—a—family a most unprofitable one for you to visit, Doctor Strong."

"But so consistent!" said Geoffrey. "Knowing their own minds, and carrying out their own theories of hygiene. It's very refreshing, I must admit. But"—Geoffrey saw that his hostesses were not amused, nor anything but pained and shocked—"this is enough about Ithuriel Butters, isn't it? We decided that he would better take a little something dark-coloured, with a good solid smell to it, to please his 'women-folks;' he'll go out some day like the snuff of a candle, and he knows it. But you don't want to try the lightning cure, do you, Miss Blyth?"

"I most certainly do not!" said Miss Phoebe, concisely; and she reflected that even the best and most intelligent of men might often be lacking in delicate perception.

CHAPTER V.

LETTER-WRITING AND HYSTERICIS

The young doctor sat in his room writing. It was a pleasant room, looking upon the garden, and in style and furnishing altogether to the young doctor's taste. He liked the tall narrow mantel, with its delicate mouldings; he liked the white paint, and the high wainscoting against which, the old mahogany came out so well; and he liked the mahogany itself, which was in quaint and graceful shapes. The dimity curtains, too, with their ball and tassel fringe, were of such a fresh clear white. They had never been dirty, they never could be dirty, the young doctor thought; some things must always be fresh and clean; like that girl's dresses. He was sitting in his favourite chair; a chair that stimulated to effort or wooed to repose, according to the attitude one assumed in it. Geoffrey Strong felt a sort of ownership in this chair, for he had discovered the secret pocket in one arm; the tiny panel which, when pressed one day by his careless fingers, slipped aside, revealing a dark polished well, and in the well an ancient vinaigrette of green and gold glass. Sometimes Geoffrey would take out the vinaigrette and sniff its faded perfume, and it told him a new story every time. Now, however, it lay quiet in its nest, for Geoffrey was writing busily.

"You can't laugh any more at me and my old ladies, Jim. There's a new development, a young lady; niece, visitor here, and invalid visitor at that. Neurasthenia, overwork at college, the old story. When will young women learn that they are not young men? Malady in this case takes the form of aversion to the male sex in general, and G. S. in particular. Handsome, sullen creature, tawny hair, eyes no particular colour, but very brilliant; pupils much dilated. I won't bother you with symptoms while you are off on your vacation, but she has some interesting ones. The dear old ladies want me to prescribe for her, but she prefers to play with pills herself. Has a remarkable voice, deep notes now and again that thrill like the middle tones of a 'cello; or might, if they said anything but 'Please pass the butter!' If she were better tempered, I should be tempted to send for you; you are simply spoiling for some one to fall in love with, I can tell that from your last letter. The pretty brunette had not intellectuality enough, had she? My dear fellow, as if that had anything to do with it! You were not ready, that was all. You fall in love by clockwork once every year; and it is time now. If you should see the P. B. again to-morrow, you'd be lost directly. As for me—I should think you would be tired of asking. No, I am not in love. No, I feel no inclination whatever to become so. No, there is no 'charmer' (what vile expressions you use, James; go back to the English Department, and learn how to speak of Woman!) who interests me in the least (except pathologically, of course), except Miss Vesta Blyth, aged sixty. I am in love with her, I grant you; anybody would be, with eyes in his head. Don't I know that I would amount to twice as much if the society of women formed part of my life? Numskull, it *does* form part of it, a very important part. In the first place, I have my patients. Body of me, my patients! Did I not sit a stricken hour with Mrs. Abigail Plummer yesterday afternoon? She 'feels a crawling in her pipes,'—I'll spare you Mrs. Plummer, but you must hear how Mrs. Cotton cured her lumbago. (I am still hunting rheumatic affections, yes, and always shall be.) She took a quart of rum, my Christian friend; she put into it a pound and a half of sulphur and three-quarters of a pound of cream tartar, and took 'a good swaller' three or four times a day. There's therapeutics for you, sir! Lady weighs three hundred pounds if she does an ounce, and has a colour like a baby's. Well, I could go on indefinitely. That's in the first place. In the second, I have here in this house society that is absolutely to my mind. Experience is life, you grant that. Therefore, the person of experience is the person who really lives. (Of course I admit exceptions.) Therefore, the society of a woman of sixty—an intelligent woman—is infinitely more to be desired than that of a callow girl with nothing but eyes and theories. It is profitable, it is delightful; and this with no hurrying of the heart, no upsetting of the nerves, none of the deplorable symptoms that I observe annually in my friend Mr. James Swift. That for the second place. There is a third. Jim, Jim, do you forget that I was brought up with 'six female cousins, and all of them girls?' They were virtuous young women, every one of them; one or two were good looking; four of them (including the plainest), have married, and I trust their husbands find them interesting. I did not, but I 'learned about women from them,' as the lynx-eyed schoolboy does learn. I divided them into three classes, sugary, vinegary, peppery; to-day I should be more professional; let us say saccharine, acidulated, irritant. These classes still seem to me to include the greater part of young womankind. Sorry to displease, but *sich am de facts*. And—yes, I still sing '*aber hierathen ist nie mein Sinn!*' Business? oh, so so! A country doctor doesn't make a fortune, but he learns a power, if he isn't an idiot. Now here is enough about me, in all conscience. When you write, tell me about yourself, and what the other fellows are doing. After all, that is—"

Geoffrey came to the end of his paper, and paused to take a fresh sheet. Glancing up as he did so, he also glanced out of the window, to see what was going on in the garden. He always liked to keep in touch with the garden, and was on intimate terms with every bird and blossom in it. It was neither bird nor blossom that his eyes lighted on now. A young girl stood on the gravel-path, near his favourite syringa arbour. A hammock hung over her arm, and she carried a book and a pillow. She was looking

about her, evidently trying to select a place to hang her hammock. Geoffrey considered her. She was dressed in clear white; her hair, of a tawny reddish yellow, hung in one heavy braid over her shoulder.

"Oh, yes, she is handsome," said Geoffrey, addressing the syringa-bush. "I never said she wasn't handsome. The question is, would she like me to hang that hammock for her, or would she consider it none of my business?"

At this moment the girl dropped the book; then the pillow slipped from her hands. She threw down the hammock with a petulant gesture and stood looking at the syringa-bush as if it were her mortal enemy. Geoffrey Strong laid down his pen.

A few minutes later he came sauntering leisurely around the corner. One would have said he had been spending an hour in the garden, and was now going in.

"Good morning, Miss Blyth! glorious day, isn't it? going to sling a hammock? let me do it, won't you?"

Vesta Blyth looked at him with sombre eyes. "I couldn't hold it!" she said, unwillingly. "There is no strength left in my hands."

"You are still tired, you see," said Geoffrey, cheerfully, as he picked up the hammock. "That's perfectly natural."

"It isn't natural!" said the girl, fiercely. "It's devilish!"

"This is a good place," said Geoffrey, paying no attention to her. "Combination of shade and sun, you see. Pillow at this end? There! how is that?"

"Thank you! it will do very well."

She stretched herself at full length in the hammock. Her movements were perfectly graceful, he noted; and he made a swift comparison with the way his cousins flounced or twittered or slumped into a hammock.

[Illustration: He stood looking at her, his hand still on the hammock rope.]

He stood looking at her, his hand still on the hammock-rope. He was conscious only of a friendly feeling of compassion for this fair young creature, built for vigour and an active life, now condemned for months, it might be years, of weariness and pain. Whether any unconscious keenness of scrutiny crept into his eyes or not, is not known; but as Vesta Blyth looked up and met their gaze, a wave of angry crimson rushed over her face and neck.

"Doctor Strong," she said, violently, her voice low and vibrating, as some women's are in passion, "I must request you *not* to look at me!"

Geoffrey started, and coloured in his turn. "I beg your pardon!" he said. "I was not aware—I assure you I had no intention of being rude, Miss Blyth."

"You were not rude!" Vesta swept on. "I am rude; I am unreasonable, I am absurd. I can't help it. I will not be looked at professionally. Half the people in this village would welcome your professional glance as a beam from heaven, and bask in it, and drop every symptom as if it were a pearl, but I am not a 'case.' I am simply a human being, who asks nothing but to be let alone."

She stopped abruptly, her bosom heaving, her eyes like black agates with fire behind them, looking straight past him at the trees beyond. "If you wish to put me to the last humiliation," she added, hurriedly, "you may wait and have the satisfaction of seeing me cry; if not—"

But Geoffrey was gone, fleeing into the house with the sound of stormy sobs chasing him like Furies. He never stopped till he reached his own room, where he flung himself into his chair in most unprofessional agitation. The window was open—what a fool he was to leave windows open!—and the sound followed him; he could not shut it out. Dreadful sobs, choking, agonising; he felt, as if he saw it, the whole slender figure convulsed with them. Good heavens! the girl would be in convulsions if she went on at this rate.

Now the sobs died away into long moans, into quivering breaths; now they broke out again, insistent, terrible. Broken words among them, too.

"What shall I do? Oh, dear! oh, dear! what shall I do?"

Geoffrey, who had been trying to look over some papers, started up and paced the room hurriedly. "This—this is very curious!" he was trying to say to himself. "Hysteria pure and simple—very interesting

—I must note the duration of the paroxysms. Good God! can't somebody stop her? perfectly inhuman, to let a creature go on like that!"

He was at the door, with some vague idea of alarming the house, when a soft knock was heard on the other side. He flung the door open, and startled Miss Vesta so that she gave a little cry of dismay, and retreated to the head of the stairs. "Pray excuse me, Doctor Strong," she said. "I see that you are occupied; I pray you to excuse me!"

"No, no!" said Geoffrey, hurriedly. "I am not—it's nothing at all. What can I do for you, Miss Vesta? Do come in, please!"

"My niece," said the little lady, with a troubled look, "is in a highly nervous condition to-day, Doctor Strong. She is—weeping. My sister thought you might have—" she paused, as Miss Phoebe's crisp and decided tones came up over the stairs.

"Little Vesta has got into a crying-spell, Doctor Strong. I want a little valerian for her, please. I will go down and give it to her myself, if you will hand it to my sister."

"In one moment, Miss Blyth," called Geoffrey, in his most composed and professional tones. Then, seizing Miss Vesta's hand, he almost dragged her into the room, and shut the door.

"Don't let her go!" he said, hurriedly, as he sought and poured out the valerian. "Take it yourself, please, Miss Vesta, please! Miss Blyth will—that is, she is less gentle than you; if your niece is in such a condition as—as you say, you are the one to soothe her. Will you go? Please do."

"Dear Doctor Strong," said Miss Vesta, panting a little, "are you—I fear you are unwell yourself. You alarm me, my dear young friend."

"I am a brute," said Geoffrey; "a clumsy, unfeeling brute!" He kissed her little white wrinkled hand; then, still holding it, paused to listen. The voice came up again from the place of torture.

"What shall I do? Oh, dear! oh, dear! what shall I do?"

He pressed the glass in Miss Vesta's hand. "There! there! a teaspoonful at once, please; but you will be better than medicine. Tell Miss Blyth—tell her I want very much to speak to her, please! Ask if she could come up here now, this moment, just for two or three minutes. And you'll go down yourself, won't you, Miss Vesta—dear Miss Vesta?"

He was so absorbed in listening he did not hear the creaking of Miss Phoebe's morocco shoes on the stairs; and when she appeared before him, flushed and slightly out of breath, he stared at the good lady as if he had never seen her before.

"You wished to see me, Doctor Strong?" Miss Phoebe began. She was half pleased, half ruffled, at being summoned in this imperious way.

"Yes—oh, yes," answered Geoffrey, vaguely. "Come in, please, Miss Blyth. Won't you sit down—no, I wouldn't sit near the window, it's damp to-day (it was not in the least damp). Sit here, in my chair. Did you know there was a secret pocket in this chair? Very curious thing!"

"I was aware of it," said Miss Phoebe, with dignity. "Was that what you wished to say to me, Doctor Strong?"

"No—oh, no (thank Heaven, she has stopped! that angel is with her). I—I am ashamed to trouble you, Miss Blyth, but you said you would be so very good as to look over my shirts some day, and see if they are worth putting on new collars and cuffs. It's really an imposition; any time will do, if you are busy now. I only thought, hearing your voice—"

"There is no time like the present," said Miss Phoebe, in her most gracious tone. "It will be a pleasure, I assure you, Doctor Strong, to look over any portions of your wardrobe, and give you such advice as I can. I always made my honoured father's shirts after my dear mother's death, so I am, perhaps, not wholly unfitted for this congenial task. Ah, machine-made!"

"Beg pardon!" said Geoffrey, who had been listening to something else.

"These shirts were made with the aid of the sewing-machine, I perceive," said Miss Phoebe. "No—oh, no, it is nothing unusual. Very few persons, I believe, make shirts entirely by hand in these days. I always set the same number of stitches in my father's shirts, five thousand and sixty. He always said that no machine larger than a cambric needle should touch his linen."

"Then—you don't think they are worth new collars?" said Geoffrey, abstractedly.

"Did I convey that impression?" said Miss Phoebe, with mild surprise. "I had no such intention, Doctor Strong. I think that a skilful person, with some knowledge of needlework, could make these garments (though machine-made) last some months yet. You see, Doctor Strong, if she takes this—"

It was a neat and well-sustained little oration that Miss Phoebe delivered, emphasising her remarks with the cuff of a shirt; but it was lost on Geoffrey Strong. He was listening to another voice that came quavering up from the garden below, a sweet high voice, like a wavering thread of silver. No more sobs; and Miss Vesta was singing; the sweetest song, Geoffrey thought, that he had ever heard.

CHAPTER VI.

INFORMATION

The next day and the next Geoffrey avoided the garden as if it were a haunt of cobras. The dining-room, too, was a place of terror to him, and at each meal he paused before entering the room, nerving himself for what he might have to face. This was wholly unreasonable, he told himself repeatedly; it was ridiculous; it was—the young man was not one to spare himself—it was unprofessional.

"Oh, yes, I know all that," he replied; "but they shouldn't cry. There ought to be a law against their crying."

Here it occurred to him that he had seen his cousins cry many times, and had never minded it; but that was entirely different, he said.

However, he need not distress himself, it appeared; Vesta Blyth kept her room for several days. At first Geoffrey found it easier not to speak of her; but the third day he pounced on Miss Vesta when she was filling her lamp, and startled her so that she almost dropped her scissors.

"Excuse me, Miss Vesta," he said; "what funny scissors! I shouldn't think you could cut anything with them. I was going to ask—how is your niece to-day? I trust the hysterical condition is passing away?"

Miss Vesta sighed. "Yes, Doctor Strong," she said. "Vesta is quiet again, oh, yes, very quiet, and sleeping better; we are very grateful for your interest in her."

A few professional questions and answers followed. There were no acute or alarming symptoms. There was little to do for the girl, except to let her rest and "come round;" she would recover in time, but it might be a long time. Geoffrey felt somehow younger than he had; neurasthenia was a pretty word on paper, but he did not feel so sure about making a specialty of it.

Miss Vesta fluttered about her lamp; he became conscious that she wanted to say something to him. She began with sundry little plaintive murmurings, which might have been addressed to him or to the lamp.

"Pity! pity! yes, indeed. So bright and young, so full of hope and joy, and darkened so soon. Yes, indeed, very sad!"

Geoffrey helped her. "What is it, Miss Vesta?" he asked, tenderly. "You are going to tell me something."

Miss Vesta looked around her timidly. "Sister Phoebe did not wish me to mention it," she said, in a low tone. "She thinks it—indelicate. But—you are so kind, Doctor Strong, and you are a physician. Poor little Vesta has had a disappointment, a cruel disappointment."

Geoffrey murmured something, he hardly knew what. The little lady hurried on. "It is not that I have any sympathy with—I never liked the object—not at all, I assure you, Doctor Strong. But her heart was fixed, and she had had every reason to suppose herself—it has been a terrible blow to her. Renunciation—in youth—is a hard thing, my dear young friend, a very hard thing."

She pressed his hand, and hurried away with her scissors, giving one backward look to make sure that the lamp showed no aspect that did not shine with the last touch of brilliancy.

Geoffrey Strong went down into the garden—he had not been there since the day of the sobbing—and paced about, never thinking of the pipe in his pocket. He found himself talking to the blue larkspur.

"Beast!" was what he called this beautiful plant. "Dolt! ass! inhuman brute! If I had the kicking of you—" here he recovered his silence; found pebbles to kick, and pursued them savagely up one path and down another. A mental flash-light showed him the ruffian who had wounded this bright creature; had led her on to love him, and then—either betrayed his brutal nature so that hers rose up in revolt, or—just as likely—that kind of man would do anything—gone off and left her. His picture revealed a smart-looking person with black hair and a waxed moustache, and complexion of feminine red and white (Geoffrey called it beef and suet).

"The extraordinary thing is, what women see in such a fellow!" he told the syringa. The syringa drooped, and looked sympathetic. The hammock was hanging there still—poor little thing! Geoffrey did not mean the hammock. He stood looking at the place, and winced as the sobs struck his ear again; memory's ear this time, but that was hardly less keen. How terribly she grieved! she must have cared for him; bang! went the pebbles again.

There was a rustle behind the syringa-bush. Geoffrey looked up and saw Vesta Blyth standing before him.

He could not run away. He must not look at her professionally. Despair imparted to his countenance a look of stony vacuity which sat oddly on it.

The girl looked at him, and it seemed as if the shadow of a smile looked out of her shadowy eyes. "I thought you might be here, Doctor Strong," she said, quietly. "I am coming in to tea to-night. I am entirely myself again, I assure you—and first I wished—I want to apologise to you for my absurd behaviour the other day."

"Please don't!" said Geoffrey.

"I must; I have to. I am weak, you see, and—I lost hold of myself, that was all. It was purely hysterical, as you of course saw. I have had—a great trouble. Perhaps my aunts may have told you."

Good God! she wasn't going to talk about it? Geoffrey thought a subterranean dungeon would be a pleasant place.

"I—yes!" he admitted, feeling the red curling around his ears. "Miss Vesta did say something—it's an infernal shame! I wish I could tell you how sorry I am."

"Thank you!" said the girl; and a rich note thrilled in her voice. Yes—it certainly was like a 'cello. "I did not know how you would—you are very kind, Doctor Strong. Dear Aunt Vesta; she would try to make the best of it, I know. Aunt Phoebe will not speak of it, she is too much shocked, but Aunt Vesta is angelic."

"Indeed she is!" said the young doctor, heartily. "And she is so pretty, too, and so soft and creamy; I never saw any one like her."

There was a moment of dreadful silence. Geoffrey sought desperately for a subject of conversation, but the frivolous spirit of tragedy refused to suggest anything except boots, and women never understand boots.

The strange thing was, that the girl did not appear to find the silence dreadful. She stood absently curling and uncurling a syringa-leaf between her long white fingers. All the lines of her were long, except the curl of her upper lip, and there was not an ungraceful one among them. Her face was quietly sad, but there was no sign of confusion in it. Good heavens! what were women made of?

Presently she turned to him, and again the shadow of a smile crept into her eyes. "You don't ask whether I am better, Doctor Strong," she said; and there was even a faint suggestion of mischief in her voice.

"No!" said Geoffrey. "I shall never ask you that again."

The shadow turned to a spark. "You might help me!" she exclaimed. "At least you need not make it harder for me—" she checked herself, and went on in a carefully even tone. "I am so ashamed of myself!" she said. "I thought when I came here that I had quite got myself in hand; the other day taught me a lesson. I was abominably rude, and I beg your pardon."

She held out her hand frankly; Geoffrey took it, and was conscious that, though it was too cold, it had the same quality that Miss Vesta's hand had, a touch like rose-leaves, smooth and light and dry. She shook hands as if she meant it, too, instead of giving a limp flap, as some girls did. It was impossible to tell the colour of her eyes; but she was speaking again.

"And—I want to say this, too. There isn't anything to do for me, you know; I must just wait. But—I know how I should feel in your place; and if there seem to be any interesting or unusual symptoms, I will tell you—if you like?"

"Thank you!" said Geoffrey. "It would be very good of you, I'm sure."

She turned to the syringa-bush again, and breaking off a spray, fastened it in her white gown. "You think of studying nerves, I believe?" she said, presently. "As a specialty, I mean. Well, they are horrible things." She spoke abruptly, and as if half to herself. "To think of this network of treachery spreading through and through us, lying in wait for us, leading us on, buoying us up with false strength, sham elasticity—and then collapsing like a toy balloon, leaving nothing but a rag, a tatter of humanity. Oh, it is shameful! it is disgraceful! Look at me! what business have I with nerves?"

She stretched out her long arms and threw her head back. The gesture was powerful; one saw that strength was the natural order of life with this lithe, long-limbed creature. But the next instant she drooped together like a tired lily.

"I know that is nonsense!" she said, moodily. "I know it just as well as you do. I am tired; I think I'll go in now."

"Why not try the hammock?" Geoffrey suggested. "The garden is better than the house to-day. Or—do you like the water? My canoe came yesterday; why not come out for a short paddle?"

The girl looked at him doubtfully. "I—don't know!"

"Best thing in the world for you!" said Geoffrey, who had fully recovered his ease, and felt benevolently professional. "You ought to keep out-of-doors all you can. I'll get some shawls and a pillow."

Vesta looked longingly out at the water, then doubtfully again at the young doctor. "If you are sure—" she said; "if you really have time, Doctor Strong. Your patients—"

"Bother my patients!" said the young doctor.

An hour later, Miss Phoebe Blyth was confronting a flushed and panting matron at the front door.

"No, Mrs. Worrett, he has not come in yet. It is past his customary hour, but he has been detained, no doubt, by some urgent case. Doctor Strong never spares himself. I fear for him sometimes, I must confess. Will you step in and wait, or shall I—colic? oh! if that is all, it will hardly be necessary to send the doctor out. I shall take the liberty of giving you a bottle of my checkerberry cordial. I have made it for forty years, and Doctor Strong approves of it highly. Give the baby half a teaspoonful in a wine-glass of hot water, and repeat the dose in an hour if not relieved. Not at all, I beg of you, Mrs. Worrett. It is a pleasure to be able to relieve the babe, as well as to spare Doctor Strong a little. He comes in quite exhausted sometimes from these long trips. Good evening to you, ma'am."

CHAPTER VII.

FESTIVITY

The Ladies' Society was to meet at the Temple of Vesta; or, rather (since that name for the brick house was known only to the old and the young doctor), at the Blyth Girls'. The sisters always entertained the society once a year, and it was apt to be the favourite meeting of the season. It was the peaceful pastime of two weeks, for Miss Phoebe and Miss Vesta, to prepare for the annual festivity, by polishing the already shining house to a hardly imaginable point of brilliant cleanliness. In the kitchen of the Temple, Diploma Grotty ruled supreme, as she had ruled for twenty years. Miss Phoebe was occasionally permitted to trifle with a jelly or a cream, but even this was upon sufferance; while if Miss Vesta ever had any culinary aspirations, they were put down with a high hand, and an injunction not to meddle with them things, but see to her parlours and her chaney. This injunction, backed by her own spotless ideals, was faithfully carried out by Miss Vesta. Miss Phoebe, by right of her position as elder sister and martyr to rheumatism (though she sometimes forgot her martyrdom in these days), took charge of the upper class of preparation; examined the lace curtains in search of a possible stitch dropped in the net, "did up" the frilled linen bags that formed the decent clothing of the window-tassels, the tidies, and the entire stock of "laces" owned by her and her sister. One could never be sure

beforehand which collar one would want to wear when the evening came, and while one was about it, it was as well to do them all; so for many days the sewing-room was adorned with solemn bottles swathed in white, on which collars, cuffs, and scarfs were delicately stitched. Miss Vesta—cleaned.

For some days the young doctor had been conscious of a stronger odour than usual of beeswax and rosin. Also, the tiny room by the front door, which was sacred as his office, began to shine with a kind of inward light. No one was ever there when he came in,—no one, that is, save the occasional patient,—but he always found that his papers had assembled themselves in orderly piles on the table where he was wont to throw them; that the table itself had become so glossy that things slipped about or fell off whenever he moved them; and that no matter where he left his pipes, he always found them ranged with exact symmetry on the mantel-shelf. (If he could have known the affectionate terror with which those delicate white old fingers touched the brown, fragrant, masculine things! There were four of the pipes, Zuleika, Haidee, Nourmahal, and Scheherezade; the fellows used to call them his harem, and him Haroun Alraschid.)

Geoffrey was always careful about wiping his feet when he came in; he was a well-brought-up lad, and never meant to leave a speck on the polished floor. Now, however, he was aware of fragrant, newly rubbed spots that appeared as if by magic every time he returned through the entry after passing along it. Several times he saw a gray gown flutter and disappear through a doorway; but it might have been Diploma.

One day, however,—it was the very day of the party,—he chanced to come into the parlour for a match or the like, and found Miss Vesta on her knees, apparently praying to one of the teak-wood chairs; and the girl Vesta, white as wax, standing beside another, rubbing it with even, practised strokes. The young doctor looked from one to the other.

"What does this mean?" he said. "What upon earth are you doing, you two?"

Miss Vesta looked up, pink and breathless.

"My dear Doctor Strong, I wish you would use your professional influence with Vesta. I am making a little preparation, as you see, for this evening. It—I take pleasure in it, and find the exercise beneficial. But Vesta is entirely unfit for it, as I have repeatedly pointed out to her. She persists—" the little lady paused for breath. The young doctor took the cloth from the girl's hand, and opened the door.

"You would better go and lie down, Miss Blyth," he said, abruptly. "I'll see to this—" he said "tomfoolery," but not aloud.

The colour crept into Vesta's white cheeks, the first he had seen there. "I don't want to lie down, thank you!" she said, coldly. "Give me the cloth, please!"

Their eyes measured swords for an instant. Then—

"You can hardly stand now," said Geoffrey, quietly. "If you faint I shall have to carry you up-stairs, and that—"

She was gone, but he still saw her face like a white flame. He looked after her a moment, then turned to Miss Vesta, who was still on her knees. His look of annoyance changed to one of distress. "Dear Miss Vesta, will you please get up this moment? What can you be doing? Are you praying to Saint Beeswax?"

"Oh, no, Doctor Strong. We never—the Orthodox Church—but you are jesting, my dear young friend. I—a little healthful exercise—oh, please, Doctor Geoffrey!"

For two strong hands lifted her bodily, and set her down in her own particular armchair. "Exercise is recommended for me," said the little lady, piteously. "You yourself, Doctor Geoffrey, said I ought to take more exercise."

"So you shall. You shall dance all the evening, if you like. I'll play the fiddle, and you and the minister—no, no, I don't mean the minister! Don't look like that! you and Deacon Weight shall dance together. It will be the elephant and the fl—butterfly. But I am going to do this, Miss Vesta."

He in turn went down on his knees to the teak-wood chair, and examined it curiously. "Is this—supposed to need cleaning?" he asked; "or is it to be used as a looking-glass? Perhaps you had just finished this one?" He looked hopefully at Miss Vesta, and saw her face cloud with distress.

"I was about to polish it a little," she said. "It is already clean, in a measure, but a little extra polish on such occasions—"

Geoffrey did not wait for more, but rubbed away with might and main, talking the while.

"You see, Miss Vesta, it is very important for me to learn about these things. You and Miss Phoebe may turn me out some day, and then the lonely bachelor will have to set up his own establishment, and cook his own dinner, and polish his own chairs. Do you think I could cook a dinner? I'll tell you what we'll do, some day; we'll send Diploma off for a holiday, and I'll get the dinner."

"Oh, my dear young friend, I fear that would not be possible. Diploma is so set in her ways! She will hardly let me set foot in the kitchen, but Sister Phoebe goes in whenever she pleases. I—I think that chair is as bright as it *can* be, Doctor Strong. I am greatly obliged to you. It looks beautiful, and now I need not trouble you further; you are much occupied, I am sure. Oh, pray—pray give me back the cloth, Doctor Geoffrey."

But Geoffrey declared he had not had such fun for weeks. "Consider my biceps," he said. "You ought to consider my biceps, Miss Vesta."

He went from chair to chair, Miss Vesta following him with little plaintive murmurs, in which distress and admiration were equally blended; and rubbed, and rubbed again, till all the room was full of dark glory. There was one bad moment, when the weak leg of the three-cornered table threatened to give way under his vigorous attack, and protested with a sharp squeak of anguish; but though Geoffrey and Miss Vesta both examined it with searching scrutiny, no new crack was visible. He offered to bandage the old crack, warranting to make the ailing leg the strongest of the four; but, on the whole, it did not seem necessary.

"If only Deacon Weight does not lean on it!" said Miss Vesta. "Perhaps you could manage to stand near it yourself, Doctor Geoffrey, if you should see the deacon approaching it. He is apt, when engaged in conversation, to rest both elbows on a table; it is a great strain on any furniture."

Geoffrey looked a little blank. "Were you expecting me to join the party?" he asked; "I thought—I should be rather in the way, shouldn't I?" He read his answer in the piteous startled look of the little lady, and hastened on before she could speak. "I didn't suppose I was invited, Miss Vesta. Of course I shall come, if I may, with the greatest pleasure."

"Dear Doctor Strong," said Miss Vesta, with a happy sigh, "it would have been such a sad blow if we must have dispensed with your society."

It would indeed have been a tragic disappointment to both sisters if their lodger had not appeared on the great occasion. As it was, Miss Vesta was fluttered, and only restored to full composure when, at tea, Doctor Strong begged to know the exact hour at which the guests were expected, that he might be ready on time.

The pride of the good ladies knew no bounds when Doctor Strong entered the parlour in faultless evening dress, with a tiny blush-rose, from Miss Vesta's favourite tree, in his buttonhole. Evening dress was becoming to Geoffrey. The Ladies' Society fluttered at sight of him, and primmed itself, and shook out its skirts.

Geoffrey's face was radiant over his white tie. He had planned a cozy evening in his own room, with a new treatise on orthopaedics that had just come; but no one would have thought that he took delight in anything except Society meetings. He went from group to group, as if he were the son of the house, cheering the forlorn, lightening the heavy, smoothing down the prickly,—a medical Father O'Flynn. But it was the elderly and the middle-aged that he sought out; the matrons whose children he had tended, the spinsters whose neuralgia he had relieved. The few younger members of the Society bridled and simpered in vain; the young doctor never looked their way.

"Good evening, Mrs. Worrett; sorry I missed you the other day; but Miss Blyth prescribed for you, and she is as good a doctor as I am, any day. How *is* the baby now? quite well! Good; Yes; oh, yes, excellent. In simple cases these mild carminatives are just the thing. Keep his diet steady, though, while the warm weather lasts. I saw him with a doughnut the other day, and took it away from him; knew he got it by accident, of course. Yes, bread and milk, that kind of thing. Fine little fellow, and we want him to have the best chance there is.

"Miss Wax, I am glad to see you here. Headache all gone, eh? Hurrah! I'd keep on with those powders, though, if I were you, for a week or two. You're looking fine, as the Scotch say. Hope you won't want to see me again for a long time, and it's very good and unselfish of me to say that, for I haven't forgotten the plum-cake you gave me.

"How do you do, Deacon? glad to see you! yes, glorious weather." Here Geoffrey moved easily between Deacon Weight and the three-cornered table, which the deacon was approaching. "Suppose we stand here in the corner a moment! Men are always rather in the way, don't you think, at things of this kind? Mrs. Weight here to-night? ah! yes, I see her. How well she's looking! Not been well yourself,

Deacon? I'm sorry to hear that. What's the—dyspepsia again? that's bad. Have you tried the light diet I recommended? Well, I would, if I were in your place. I'd knock off two or three pounds of your usual diet, and get a bicycle—yes, you could. A cousin of mine in New York weighed three hundred pounds before he got his bicycle; had one made to order, of course, special weight; now he weighs a hundred and seventy-five, and is as active as a cat. Great thing! ah, excuse me, Deacon!"

He crossed the room, and bowed low before a lady with white hair and an amazing cap, who had been gazing at him with twinkling eyes. This was Mrs. Tree, the Misses Blyths' aunt.

"Mrs. Tree, how do you do? why were you looking at me in that way? I've been trying to speak to you all the evening, but you have been surrounded. I think it's a shame for a women over twenty-five" (Mrs. Tree was ninety, and immensely proud of her age) "to monopolise all the attention. What do you think?"

"I think you're a sassy boy!" replied Mrs. Tree, with vivacity. "I think children should speak when they're spoken to; that's what I think."

She clicked some castanets in her throat, which was her way of laughing.

"But you didn't speak to me," said Geoffrey. "You wouldn't speak. Do you suppose I was going to wait all the evening? What a wonderful cap you've got, Mrs. Tree! I'm going to have one made exactly like it. Will you go in to supper with me? Do! I want to cut out the minister, and he is coming to ask you now. I am much more amusing than he is, you know I am."

Mrs. Tree did know it. The minister was waved off, and the oldest parishioner sailed in to supper on Doctor Strong's arm.

"Why don't you get married," she asked on the way, "instead of fooling around old folks this way? If I was your ma'am, I'd find a wife for ye, first thing I did. You're too sassy to stay unmarried."

"Miss Vesta won't have me," said Geoffrey; "and I won't have anybody else, unless you will relent, Mrs. Tree. Now, what do you want? lobster salad? Well, I shall not give you that. If you eat it you will be ill tomorrow, and then Direxia will send for me, and you will throw my medicine out of the window and get well without it, and then laugh in my face. I know you! have some scalloped oysters, there's a dear!"

"I wish't I'd come in with the minister now!" said Mrs. Tree.

"I don't believe a word of it!" said Geoffrey. "It's much less dangerous for you to flirt with me, you know it is; though even now Miss Phoebe is looking at us very seriously, Mrs. Tree, very seriously indeed."

"If I was Phoebe, I'd send you to bed!" said Mrs. Tree. "That's what I'd do!"

CHAPTER VIII.

REVELATION

It was a perfect evening. The water lay like rosy glass under the sinking sun. Not a breath of air was stirring, and even on the beach the ripple did not break, merely whispered itself away in foam. The canoe moved easily, when it did move, under a practised stroke, but much of the time it lay at ease, rocking a little now and then as a swell rose and melted under it. Vesta lay among her pillows at one end, and Geoffrey faced her. Her face was turned toward the west, and he wondered whether it was only the sunset glow that touched it, or whether the faint rosy flush belonged there. Certainly the waxen hue was gone; certainly the girl was wonderfully better. But he did not look at her much, because it got into his breathing somehow. He had not been paddling for a year, and he was "soft," of course; nothing surprising in that.

He was telling her about some of his patients. The thing that did surprise him was the interest she seemed to take; active, intelligent interest. Being sick herself, perhaps, gave her a natural sympathy; and she certainly had extraordinary intelligence, even insight. Singular thing for a girl to have!

"But what became of the poor little fellow? did he live? better not, I am sure. I hope he did not."

"Yes; almost a pity, but he did live. Got well, too, after a fashion, but he'll never be able to do anything."

The girl was silent. Presently—"I wonder whether it is worth while to get well after a fashion!" she said. "I wonder if it's worth while to go on living and never be able to do anything. I suppose I shall find out."

"You!" said the young doctor. "You will be entirely well in a year, Miss Blyth; I'd be willing to wager it."

Vesta shook her head.

"No!" she said. "The spring is broken. There is nothing *real* the matter with me, I know that well enough. It's nothing but nerves—and heart, and mind; nothing but the whole of my life broken and thrown aside."

She spoke bitterly, and Geoffrey felt a pang of compassion. She was so young, and so pretty—beautiful was the word, rather. It seemed too cruel. If only she would not say anything more about it! How *could* she? was it because he was a physician? He would go and be a costermonger if that—

"You see," she went on, slowly; "I cared so tremendously. I had thought of nothing else for years, dreamed of nothing else. All there was of me went into it. And then, then—when this came; when he told me—I—it was pretty hard."

The quiver in her voice was controlled instantly, but it was almost worse than the sobs. Geoffrey broke out, fiercely:

"I don't know whether this man is more a beast or a devil; but I know that he is not fit to live, and I wish I—"

Vesta looked up at him in surprise. His face was crimson; his angry eyes looked beyond her, above her, anywhere except at her.

"I don't know what you mean!" she said. "He was neither. He was kind, oh, very kind. He did it as tenderly as possible. I shall always be grateful—" the quiver came again, and she stopped.

"Oh!" cried Geoffrey. He drove his paddle savagely into the water, and the canoe leaped forward. What were women made of? why, *why* must he be subjected to this?

The silence that followed was almost worse than the speech. Finally he stole a glance at his companion, and saw her face still faintly rosy—it must be mostly the light—and set in a sadness that had no touch of resentment in it.

"Perhaps you don't like my talking about it," she said, after awhile.

Geoffrey uttered an inarticulate murmur, but found no words.

"The aunties don't. Aunt Phoebe gets angry, and Aunt Vesta tearful and embarrassed. But—well, I could not stay at home. Everything there reminded me—I thought if I came here, where no such ideas ever entered, I might begin—not to forget, but to resign myself a little, after a time. But—I found you here. No, let me speak!" She raised her hand, as Geoffrey tried to interrupt.

"I have to make you understand—if I can—why I was rude and odious and ungrateful when I first came, for I was all those things, and I am not naturally so, I truly don't think I am. But, don't you see?—to come right upon some one who was having all that I had lost, enjoying all I had hoped to enjoy, and caring—well, perhaps as much as I cared, but still in a different way, a man's way, taking it all as a matter of course, where I would have taken it on my knees—"

"You must let me speak now, Miss Blyth," said Geoffrey Strong. He spoke loud and quickly, to drown the noise in his ears.

"I cannot let you—go on—under such a total misapprehension. I could not in a lifetime say how sorry I am for your cruel trouble. It makes me rage; I'd like to—never mind that now! but you are wholly mistaken in thinking that anything of the kind has ever come into my own life. I don't know how you received the impression, but you must believe me when I say I have never had any—any such affair, nor the shadow of one. It isn't my line. I not only never have had, but probably never shall have—" he was hurrying out word upon word, hoping to get it over and done with once and for ever. But letting his eyes drop for an instant to the girl's face, he saw on it a look of such unutterable amazement that he stopped short in his headlong speech.

They gazed at each other from alien worlds. At length—"Doctor Strong," said Vesta, and the words dropped slowly, one by one, "what do you mean?"

Geoffrey was silent. If she did not know what he meant, he certainly did not.

"What do you mean?" she repeated. "I do not understand one word of what you are saying."

Geoffrey tried hard to keep his temper. "You were speaking of your—disappointment," he said, stiffly. "You seemed to take it for granted that I—was engaged in some affair of a similar nature, and I felt bound to undeceive you. I have never been what is called in love in my life."

The bewilderment lingered in Vesta's eyes for an instant; then a light came into them. The sunset rushed in one crimson wave over face and neck and brow; she fell back on her pillows, quivering from head to foot. Was she going to cry again?

She was laughing! silently at first, trying hard to control herself; but now her laughter broke forth in spite of her, and peal after peal rang out, wild and sweet, helpless in its intensity.

Geoffrey sat paralysed a moment; then the professional instinct awoke. "Hysteria! another manifestation, that is all. I must stop it."

He leaned forward.

"Miss Blyth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the girl. "Oh, dear, oh, dear! what shall I do? ha, ha, ha, ha! oh, what shall I do?"

"Stop!" said Geoffrey Strong. "Do you hear me? stop!"

"Oh, yes, I hear you—but—it is so funny! oh, it *is* so funny! ha, ha, ha! what shall I do?"

"What shall *I* do?" said Geoffrey to himself. "She'll have the canoe over in another minute." He crept toward the girl, and seized her wrists in a firm grip.

"Be still!" he said. "I shall hold you until you are quiet. Be—still! no more! be still!"

"You—hurt me!" whispered the girl. The wild laughter had died away, but she was still shaking, and the tears were running down her cheeks.

"I mean to hurt you. I shall hurt you more, if you are not quiet. As soon as you are quiet I will let you go. Be—still—still—there!"

He loosed her hands, and took up the paddle again. This kind of thing was very exhausting; he was quivering himself, quite perceptibly. Now why? nerves of sympathy?

He paddled on in silence; the sun went down, and the afterglow spread and brightened along the sky. He hardly thought of his companion, his whole mind bent on suppressing the turmoil that was going on in himself.

He started at the sound of her voice; it was faint, but perfectly controlled.

"Doctor Strong!"

"Miss Blyth!"

"You—thought—I had had a disappointment in love?"

"I did!"

"You are mistaken. You misunderstood my aunt, or me, or both. I have never, any more than you—"

Her voice grew stronger, and she sat upright.

"It was so *very* funny—no, I am not going off again—but I think there was some excuse for me this time. You certainly are having every opportunity of studying my case, Doctor Strong. The truth is—oh, I supposed it had been made clear to you; how could I suppose anything else? It was my career, my life, that I had to give up, not—not a man. You say you have never been what is called in love; Doctor Strong, no more have I!"

There was silence, and now it was in Geoffrey's face that the tide rose. Such a burning tide it was, he

fancied he heard the blood hiss as it curled round the roots of his hair. He noted this as curious, and remembered that in hanging or drowning it was the trifles that stamped themselves upon the mind. Also, it appeared that he was hollow, with nothing but emptiness where should have been his vital parts.

"Shall I say anything?" he asked, presently. "There isn't anything to say, is there, except to beg your pardon? would you like to hear that I am a fool? But you know that already. Your aunt—things were said that were curiously misleading—not that that is any excuse—Do you want me to go into detail, or may I drown myself quietly?"

"Oh! don't," said Vesta, smiling. "I could not possibly paddle myself home, and I should infallibly upset the canoe in trying to rescue you."

"You would not try!" said Geoffrey, gloomily. "It would not be human if you tried."

"It would be professional," said Vesta. "Come, Doctor Strong, you see I can laugh about it, and you must laugh, too. Let us shake hands, and agree to forget all about it."

Geoffrey shook hands, and said she was very magnanimous; but he still felt hollow. The only further remark that his seething brain presented was a scrap of ancient doggerel:

"I wish I was dead,
Or down at Owl's Head,
Or anywhere else but here!"

This was manifestly inappropriate, so he kept silence, and paddled on doggedly.

"And aren't you going to ask what my disappointment really was?" inquired Vesta, presently. "But perhaps you have guessed?"

No, Geoffrey had not guessed.

"Don't you want to know? I should really—it would be a comfort to me to talk it over with you, if you don't mind."

Geoffrey would be delighted to hear anything that she chose to tell him.

"Yes, you seem delighted. Well—you see, you have not understood, not understood in the very least; and now in a moment you are going to know all about it." She paused for a moment, and there was an appeal in her clear, direct gaze; but Geoffrey did not want to be appealed to.

"I was at Johns Hopkins," said Vesta. "It was the beginning of my second year; I broke down, and had to give it up. I was studying medicine myself, Doctor Strong."

"Oh!" cried Geoffrey Strong.

The exclamation was a singular one; a long cry of amazement and reprobation. Every fibre of the man stiffened, and he sat rigid, a statue of Disapproval.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, after a moment. "I said it before, but I don't know that there is anything else to say. No doubt I was very stupid, yet I hardly know how I could have supposed just this to be the truth. I—no! I beg your pardon. That is all."

The girl looked keenly at him. "You are not sorry for me any more, are you?" she said.

Geoffrey was silent.

"You were sorry, very sorry!" she went on. "So long as you thought I had lost that precious possession, a lover; had lost the divine privilege of—what is the kind of thing they say? merging my life in another's, becoming the meek and gentle helpmeet of my God-given lord and master—you were very sorry. I could not make it out; it was so unlike what I expected from you. It was so human, so kind, so—yes, so womanlike. But the moment you find it is not a man, but only the aspiration of a lifetime, the same aspiration that in you is right and fitting and beautiful—you—you sit there like a—lamp-post—and disapprove of me."

"I am sorry!" said Geoffrey. He was trying hard to be reasonable, and said to himself that he would not be irritated, come what might. "I cannot approve of women studying medicine, but I am sorry for you, Miss Blyth."

Her face, which had been bitter enough in its set and scornful beauty, suddenly melted into a

bewildering softness of light and laughter. She leaned forward. "But it was funny!" she said. "It was very, very funny, Doctor Strong, you must admit that. You were so compassionate, so kind, thinking me —"

"Do you think perhaps—but never mind! you certainly have the right to say whatever you choose," said Geoffrey, holding himself carefully.

"And all the time," she went on, "I utterly unconscious, and only fretting because I could not have my own life, my own will, my own way!"

"By Jove!" said Geoffrey, starting. "That—that's what I say myself!"

"Really!" said Vesta, dryly. "You see I also am human, after all"

"Do you see little Vesta anywhere, sister?" asked Miss Phoebe Blyth.

Miss Vesta had just lighted her lamp, and was standing with folded hands, in her usual peaceful attitude of content, gazing out upon the sunset sea. A black line lay out there on the rosy gold of the water; she had been watching it, watching the rhythmic flash of the paddle, and thinking happy, gentle thoughts, such as old ladies of tender heart often think. Miss Phoebe had no part in these thoughts, and Miss Vesta looked hurriedly round at the sound of her crisp utterance. Her breath fluttered a little, but she did not speak. Miss Phoebe came up behind her and peered out of the window. "I don't see where the child can be," she said, rather querulously. "I thought she was in the garden, but I don't—do you see her anywhere, Vesta?"

Miss Vesta had never read the "Pickwick Papers;" she considered Dickens vulgar; but her conduct at this moment resembled that of Samuel Weller on a certain noted occasion. Raising her eyes to the twilight sky, Miss Vesta said, gently, "No, Sister Phoebe, I do not!"

CHAPTER IX.

SIDE LIGHTS

ELMERTON, June 20, 1900.

DEAR JIM:—It is rather curious that you should have written me this particular letter at this particular time. 'Give me a man's coincidences and I'll give you his life!' Who is it says that?

You want my opinion about women's studying medicine; you personally have reason to think that the career of medicine is not incompatible with true womanliness, exquisite refinement, perfect grace and breeding. I really cannot copy your whole letter. The symptoms are, alas, only too familiar! You have met your Fate again (and those foolish old Greeks used to believe there were only three of 'em!) and she is a doctor, or is going to be one. Well—it's curious, as I said, for it happens that I have been thinking more or less about the same matter. I used to feel very strongly about it—hang it, I still feel very strongly about it! A girl doesn't know what she is doing when she goes into medicine. I grant that she does it, in many cases, from the highest possible motives. I grant that she is far ahead of most men in her ideas of the profession, and what it means, or ought to mean. But, all the same, she doesn't know what she is going in for, and I cannot conceive of a man's letting any woman he cares for go on with it. She must lose something; she must, I tell you; she cannot help it. And even if it isn't the essential things, still it changes her. She is less woman, less—whatever you choose to call it. A coarser touch has come upon her, and she is changed. Well, I say I believe all this, and I do, with all my soul; and yet, as you say, it's cruel hard for a young creature, all keyed up to a pitch of enthusiasm and devotion and noble aspiration, to be checked like a boy's kite, and brought down to the ground and told to mind her seam. It's cruel hard, I can see that; I can feel and sympathise intensely with all that part of it, and honour the purpose and the spirit, even though I cannot approve of the direction.

Oh, glancing at your letter again, I see that in your friend's case everything seems to be going on smoothly. Well, the principle remains the same. I suppose—I seem to have drifted away from your question, somehow—I suppose one woman in ten thousand *may* make a good physician. I suppose that this ten-thousandth woman—a woman who is all that you say—may be justified, perhaps, in becoming a physician; whether a woman physician can *remain* all that you say—ah! that is the

question! Man alive, am I Phoebus Apollo, that I should know the answers to all the questions? I wish I could find the way to Delphi myself.

But don't get the idea that you bore me with your confidences, old man. Did I say so? on the contrary, tell me all you can; it interests me extremely. I am thinking about these matters—pathologically—a good deal. A physician has to, of course. Tell me how you feel, how it takes you. Do you find it gets into your breathing sometimes, like rarefied air? Curious sensation, rarefied air—I remember it on Mont Blanc.

What am I doing? Man, I am practising medicine! Cases at present, one typhoid, two tonsillitis, five measles, eight dyspepsia, six rheumatism, *et id gen om.*, one cantankerousness (she calls it depression), one gluttony, one nerves. Pretty busy, but my wheel keeps me in good trim. I have been paddling more or less, too, to keep chest and arms up with the rest of the procession.

The old ladies are as dear as ever; if I am not wholly spoilt, it will not be their fault, bless their kind hearts! The niece is better, I think.

Good-bye, old man! write again soon, and tell me more about Amaryllis. How pretty the classical names are: Chloe, Lalage, Diana, Vesta. I was brought up on Fannies and Minnies and Lotties, with Eliza for a change. Horrible name, Eliza!

GEOFF.

The young doctor had just posted the above letter, and was sauntering along the street on his way home. It lacked an hour of tea-time, and he was wondering which of several things he should do. There was hardly time for a paddle; besides, Vesta Blyth had gone for a drive with the minister's daughter. Geoffrey did not think driving half as good for her as being on the water. He must contrive to get through his afternoon calls earlier to-morrow. He might stop and see how Tommy Candy was,—no! there was Tommy, sitting by the roadside, pouring sand over his head from a tin cup. He was all right, then; the young doctor thought he would be if they stopped dosing him, and fed him like a Christian for a day or two. Well,—there was no one else who could not wait till morning. Why should he not go and call on Mrs. Tree? here he was at the house. It was the hour when in cities the sophisticated clustered about five o'clock tea-tables, and tested the comfort of various chairs, and indulged in talk as thin as the china and bread and butter. Five o'clock tea was unknown in Elmerton, but Mrs. Tree would be glad to see him, and he always enjoyed a crack with her.

He turned in at the neat gate. The house stood well back from the street, in the trimmest and primmest little garden that ever was seen. Most of the shrubs were as old as their owner, and had something of her wrinkled sprightliness; and the annuals felt their responsibilities, and tried to live up to the York and Lancaster rose and the strawberry bush.

The door was opened by a Brownie, disguised in a cap and apron. This was Direxia Hawkes, aunt to Diploma Grotty. In his mind Geoffrey had christened the little house the Aunt's Nest, but he never dared to tell anybody this.

"Well, Direxia, how is Mrs. Tree to-day? would she like to see me, do you think?"

"She ain't no need to see you!"

The young doctor looked grieved, and turned away.

"But I expect she'd be pleased to. Step in!"

This was Direxia's one joke, and she never tired of it; no more did Geoffrey. He entered the cool dim parlour, which smelt of red cedar; the walls were panelled with it. The floor was of polished oak, dark with age; the chairs and tables were of rare foreign woods, satin and leopard wood, violet-wood and ebony. The late Captain Tree had been a man of fancy, and, sailing on many seas, never forgot his name, but bought precious woods wherever he found them.

"Here's the doctor!" said Direxia. "I expect he'll keep right on coming till he finds you sick."

"That's what he will do!" said Geoffrey. "No chance for me to-day, though, I see. How do you do, Mrs. Tree? I think it is hardly respectable for you to look so well. Can't you give me one little symptom? not a tiny crick in your back? you ought to have one, sitting in that chair."

Mrs. Tree was sitting bolt upright in an ancient straight-backed chair of curious workmanship. It was too high for her, so her little feet, of which she was inordinately vain, rested on a hassock of crimson tapestry. She wore white silk stockings, and slippers of cinnamon-coloured satin to match her gown. A

raffled black silk apron, a net kerchief pinned with a quaint diamond brooch, and a cap suggesting the Corinthian Order, completed her costume. Her face was netted close with fine wrinkles, but there was no sign of age in her bright dark eyes.

"Never you trouble yourself about my cheer!" said the old lady with some severity. "Sit down in one yourself—there are plenty of lolling ones if your back's weak—and tell me what mischief you have been up to lately. I wouldn't trust you round the corner."

"You'll break my heart some day," said Geoffrey, with a heavy sigh; "and then you will be sorry, Mrs. Tree. Mischief? Let me see! I set Jim Arthur's collar-bone this morning; do you care about Jim Arthur? he fell off his bicycle against a stone wall."

"Serve him right, too!" said Mrs. Tree. "Riding that nasty thing, running folks down and scaring their horses. I'd put 'em all in the bonfire-pile if I was Town Council. Your turn will come some day, young man, for all you go spinning along like a spool of cotton. How's the girls?"

She rang the bell, and Direxia appeared.

"Bring the cake and sherry!" she said. "It's a shame to spoil boys, but when they're spoilt already, there's less harm done. How's the girls?"

Geoffrey reported a clean bill of health, so far as Miss Phoebe and Miss Vesta were concerned. "I really am proud of Miss Phoebe!" he said. "She says she feels ten years younger than she did three months ago, and I think it's true."

"Phoebe has no call to feel ten years younger!" said Mrs. Tree, shortly. "She's a very suitable age as it is. I don't like to see a cat play kitten, any more than I like to see a kitten play cat. How's the child?"

"I should like to see Miss Phoebe playing kitten!" said Geoffrey, his eyes dancing. "It would be something to remember. What child, Mrs. Tree?"

"The little girl; little Vesta. Is she coming out of her tantrums, think?"

"She—is a great deal better, certainly," said Geoffrey. "I hope—I feel sure that she will recover entirely in time. But you must not call her trouble tantrums, Mrs. Tree, really. Neurasthenia is a recognised form of—"

"You must have looked quite pretty when you was short-coated!" said the old lady, irrelevantly. "Have some wine? the cake is too rich for you, but you may have just a crumb."

"You must have been the wickedest thing alive when you were eighteen!" said Geoffrey, pouring out the amber sherry into a wonderful gilt glass. "I wish Direxia would stay in the room and matronise me; I'm afraid, I tell you."

"If Direxia had nothing better to do, I'd send her packing," said Mrs. Tree. "Here!"

They touched glasses solemnly.

"Wishing you luck in a wife!" said the old lady.

"Good gracious!" cried Geoffrey.

"It's what you need, young man, and you'd better be looking out for one. There must be some one would have you, and any wife is better than none."

She looked up, though not at Geoffrey, and a twinkle came into her eyes. "Do you call little Vesta pretty, now?" she asked.

"Not pretty," said Geoffrey; "that is not the word. I—"

"Then you'd better not call her anything," said Mrs. Tree, "for she's in the door behind ye."

Geoffrey started violently, and turned around. Vesta was standing framed in the dark doorway. The clear whiteness of her beauty had never seemed more wonderful. The faint rose in her cheeks only made the white more radiant; her eyes were no longer agate-like, but soft and full of light; only her smile remained the same, shadowy, elusive, a smile in a dream.

When the young doctor remembered his manners and rose to his feet—after all, it was only a moment

or two—he saw that Miss Vesta was standing behind her niece, a little gray figure melting into the gloom of the twilight hall. The two now entered the room together.

"Aunt Vesta wanted you to see my new hat, Aunt Tree," said the girl.
"Do you like it?"

"Yes!" said Miss Vesta, coming forward timidly. "Good evening, Aunt Marcia. Oh, good evening to you, Doctor Strong. The hat seemed to me so pretty, and you are always so kindly interested, Aunt Marcia! I ought to apologise to you, Doctor Strong, for introducing such a subject."

"Vesta, don't twitter!" said Mrs. Tree. "Is there anything improper about the hat? It's very well, child, very well. I always liked a scoop myself, but folks don't know much nowadays. What do you think of it, young man?"

Geoffrey thought it looked like a lunar halo, but he did not say so; he said something prim and conventional about its being very pretty and becoming.

"Are you going to sit down?" asked Mrs. Tree. "I can't abide to see folks standing round as if they was hat-poles."

Miss Vesta slipped into a seat, but the younger Vesta shook her head.

"I must go on!" she said. "Aunt Phoebe is expecting a letter, and I must tell her that there is none."

"Yes, dear, yes!" said Miss Vesta. "Your Aunt Phoebe will be impatient, doubtless; you are right. And perhaps it will be best for me, too—" she half rose, but Mrs. Tree pulled her down again without ceremony.

"You stay here, Vesta!" she commanded. "I want to see you. But you"—she turned to Geoffrey, who had remained standing—"can go along with the child, if you're a mind to. You'll get nothing more out of me, I tell ye."

"I am going to send you a measles bacillus to-morrow morning," said the young doctor. "You must take it in your coffee, and then you will want to see me every day. Good-bye, Mrs. Tree! some day you will be sorry for your cruelty. Miss Vesta—till tea-time!"

Aunt and niece watched the young couple in silence as they walked along the street. Both walked well; it was a pleasure to see them move. He was tall enough to justify the little courteous bend of the head, but not enough to make her anxious about the top of her hat—if she ever had such anxieties.

"Well!" said Mrs. Tree, suddenly.

Miss Vesta started. "Yes, dear Aunt Marcia!" she said. "Yes, certainly; I am here."

"They make a pretty couple, don't they?" said the old lady. "If she would come out of her tantrums,—hey, Vesta?"

"Oh, Aunt Marcia!" said Miss Vesta, softly. She blushed very pink, and looked round the room with a furtive, frightened glance.

"No, there's no one behind the sofa," said Mrs. Tree; "and there's no one under the big chair, and Phoebe is safe at home with her knitting, and the best place for her." (Mrs. Tree did not "get on" with her niece Phoebe.) "There's no use in looking like a scared pigeon, Vesta Blyth. I say they make a pretty couple, and I say they would make a pretty couple coming out of church together. I'd give her my Mechelin flounces; you'll never want 'em."

"Oh, Aunt Marcia!" said dear Miss Vesta, clasping her soft hands. "If it might be the Lord's will—"

"The Lord likes to be helped along once in a while!" said Mrs. Tree. "Don't tell me! I wasn't born yesterday." And this statement was not to be controverted.

CHAPTER X.

OVER THE WAY

"Deacon," said Mrs. Weight, "Mis' Tree is sick!"

"Now, reelly!" said the deacon. "Is that so?"

"It is so. She sent for Doctor Strong this morning. I saw Direxia go out, and she was gone just the len'th of time to go to the girls' and back. Pretty soon he came, riding like mad on that wheel thing of his. He stayed 'most an hour, and came out with a face a yard long. I expect it's her last sickness, don't you?"

"Mebbe so!" said the deacon, dubiously. "Mis' Tree has had a long life; she'd oughter be prepared; I trust she is. She has always loved the world's things, but I trust she is. Ain't this ruther a slim dinner, Viny? I was looking for a boiled dinner to-day, kind of."

"Fried apples and pork was good enough for my father," replied his wife, "and I guess they'll do for you, Ephraim Weight. Doctor Strong says you eat too much every day of your life, and that's why you run to flesh so. Not that I think much of what he says. I asked him how he accounted for me being so fleshy, and not the value of a great spoonful passing my lips some days; he made answer he couldn't say. I think less of that young man's knowledge every time I see him. 'Pears to me if I was the Blyth girls, I should be real unwilling to have my aunt pass away with no better care than she's likely to get from him. Billy, where's your push-piece? I don't want to see you push with your fingers again. It's real vulgar."

"I've eat it!" said Billy. "Mother, there's the young lady from Miss Blythses going in to Mis' Tree's."

"I want to know—so she is! She's got a bag with her. She's going to stay. Well, I expect that settles it. I should think Phoebe and Vesta would feel kind o' bad, being passed over in that way, but it's pleasant to have young folks about a dying bed—Annie Lizzie, I'll slap you if you don't stop kicking under the table—and Nathaniel was always his aunt's favourite. Most likely she's left her property to him, or to this girl. I expect it'll be a handsome provision. Mis' Tree has lived handsome and close all her days. As you say, deacon, I hope she's prepared, but I never see any signs of active piety in her myself."

There was a pause, while all the family—except Annie Lizzie, who profited by the interlude to take two doughnuts beyond her usual allowance—gazed eagerly at the house opposite.

"She's questioning Direxia. She's shaking her head. Mebbe it's all over by now; I expect it is. I declare, there's a kind of solemn look comes over a house—you can't name it, but it's there. Deacon, I think you'd ought to step over. Elder Haskell is away, you know, and you senior deacon; I do certainly think you'd ought to step over and offer prayer, or do whatever's needful. They'll want you to break it to the girls, like as not; it's terrible to have no man in a family. All them lone women, and everything to see to; I declare, my heart warms to 'em, if Phoebe *is* cranky. Ain't you going, Deacon?"

The deacon hesitated. "I—ain't sure that I'd better, Viny!" he said. "I feel no assurance that Mis' Tree has passed away, and she is not one that welcomes inquiry as a rule. I've no objection to asking at the door—"

"Now, Deacon, if that isn't you all over! you are always so afraid of putting yourself forward. Where would you have been this day, I should like to know, if it hadn't been for me shoving behind? I tell you, when folks comes to their last end they suffer a great change. If you let that woman die—though it's my firm belief she's dead a'ready—without at least trying to bring her state before her, you'll have to answer for it; I won't be responsible. Here's your hat; now you go right over. There's no knowing—"

"There's Doctor Strong going in now!" pleaded the deacon. "Most likely he will see to—"

"Ephraim Weight! look me in the eye! We've lived opposite neighbours to Mis' Tree twenty years, and do you think I'm going to have it said that when her time came to die we stood back and let strangers, and next door to heathen, do for her? If you don't go over. I shall. Mebbe I'd better go, anyway. Wait till I get my bunnit—"

It ended with the deacon's going alone. Slowly and unwillingly he plodded across the street, and shuffled up the walk; timidly and half-heartedly he lifted the shining knocker and let it fall. Direxia Hawkes opened the door, and he passed in.

* * * * *

"Well?" said Mrs. Weight.

The deacon had not made a long stay at the opposite house. Returning faster than he came, his large white cheeks were slightly flushed; his pale blue eyes wore a startled look. He suffered his wife to take his hat and stick from him, and opened his mouth once or twice, but said nothing.

"Well?" said Mrs. Weight again. "Is she dead, Deacon? Ephraim, what has happened to you? have you lost the use of your speech? Oh! what will become of me, with these four innocent—"

"Woman, be still!" said Ephraim Weight; and his wife was still, gaping in utter bewilderment at this turning of her mammoth but patient worm.

"Mrs. Tree is not dead!" resumed the deacon. "I don't see as she's any more likely to die than I am. I don't see as there's any living thing the matter with her—except the devil!"

At this second outburst Mrs. Weight collapsed, and sat down, her hands on her knees, staring at her husband. The children whimpered and crept behind her ample back. "Pa" was transformed.

"I went to that house," Deacon Weight went on, "against my judgment, Viny; you know I did. I felt no call to go, quite the reverse, but you were so—"

"I found Mis' Tree sitting up straight in her chair in the parlour. She had her nightcap on, and her feet in a footmuff, but that was all the sign of sickness I could see. She looked up at me as wicked as ever I saw her. 'Here's the deacon,' she says! 'he's heard I'm sick—Viny saw you come, doctor,—and he has come to pray over me. I'm past praying for, Deacon. Have some orange cordial!'

"There was glasses on the tray, and a decanter of that cordial Direxia makes; it's too strong for a temperance household. Doctor Strong and that young Blyth girl were sitting on two stools, and they was all three playing cards! I suppose I looked none too well pleased, for Mis' Tree said, 'I can't have you turning my cordial sour, Ephraim Weight. Remember when you stole oranges out of the schooner, and Cap'n Tree horsed you up and spanked you? here's your health, Ephraim!'

"She—she looked at me for a minute, sharp and quick—I was seeking for some word that might bring her to a sense of her state, and what was fitting at her age—and then she begun to laugh. 'You thought I was dead!' says she. 'You thought I was dead, I see it in your face; and Viny sent you to view the remains. You go home, and tell her I'll bury ye both, and do it handsome. Go 'long with ye! scat!'

"That was the expression she used, to a senior deacon of the congregation she sits in. I believe Satan has a strong hold on that old woman. I—I think I will go to my room, wife."

* * * * *

"Do you think there is really anything the matter with Aunt Tree?" asked Vesta. She had followed the young doctor out into the prim little garden, and was picking some late roses as she spoke.

"I can't make out anything," said Geoffrey. "She says she has a pain, and tells me to find out where it is, if I know anything; and then she laughs in my face, and refuses to answer questions. I think Mr. Tree must have had a lively time of it; she's perfectly delightful, though. Her pulse and temperature are all right; she looks well; of course at that age the slightest breath blows out the flame, but I cannot make out that anything is actually wrong. I suspect—"

"What?" said Vesta.

"I suspect she simply wanted you to come and stay with her, and made this an excuse."

"But I would have come; there was no need of any excuse. I would have come in a minute if she had asked me; I am so very much stronger, and I love to stay here."

"You won't stay long, though, will you? it can't be necessary, not in the least necessary. She is really perfectly well, and we—your aunts, that is—the house will be too forlorn without you."

Vesta laughed; she had a delightful laugh.

"You have charming manners!" she said. "I can't help knowing that you will really be glad to be rid of me, all but Aunt Vesta; dear Aunt Vesta."

"You don't know!" said Geoffrey. "It won't be the same place without you."

"Yes, I do know; Aunt Phoebe told me. You said the three of you made the perfect triangle, and you wouldn't let in the Czar of Russia or the Pope of Rome to spoil it."

"Oh! but that was before—that was when things were entirely different!" said Geoffrey. "I—to tell the

truth, I think I was about twelve years old when I first came to the house. I am growing up a little, Miss Blyth, I truly am. And you are not in the least like the Czar or the Pope either, and—I wish you would come back. Mayn't I have a rose, please?"

"Oh! all you want, I am sure," said Vesta, heartily. "But they are not really so pretty as those at home."

"I thought perhaps you would give me one of those in your hand," said Geoffrey, half-timidly. "Thank you! I don't suppose—"

He was about to suggest her pinning it on his coat, but caught sight of Mrs. Weight at the opposite window, and refrained.

"Do you know any Spanish?" he asked, abruptly.

"Spanish? no!" said Vesta, looking at him wide-eyed.

"Not even names of flowers?"

"No! how should I? Why do you ask?"

"Oh—nothing! I was thinking of learning it one of these days, but I don't believe I shall. Come and walk a little way, won't you? You look tired. I can't—you must not stay here if you are going to get tired, you know. Old people are very exacting sometimes."

"Oh, I shall not get tired. You can't think how much better I am. No, I must go back now, Doctor Strong. Aunt Tree might want something."

"Physician's orders!" said Geoffrey, peremptorily. "Dose of one-half mile, to be taken immediately. Won't you please come, Miss Blyth? I—I want to tell you about a very interesting case."

Mrs. Weight peered over the window-blind. She was carrying a cup of tea to the deacon, who was feeling poorly, but had paused at sight of the young couple. "If that girl thinks of making up to that young man," she said, "she's got hold of the wrong cob, I can tell her. Mira Pettis made him a napkin-holder, worked 'Bonappety' on it in cross-stitch on blue satin, and he give it to the girls' cat for a collar. I see the cat with it on. I don't want to see no clearer than that how he treats young ladies. I wish't Doctor Stedman was home."

CHAPTER XI.

BROKEN BONES

Another bicycle accident! This time it was a head-on collision, two boys riding at each other round a corner, as if for a wager. The young doctor had patched them both up, there being no broken bones, only a dislocated shoulder and many bruises, and was now riding home, reflecting upon the carelessness of the human race in general, and of boys in particular. Here was one of the great benefactions of modern civilisation, a health-and-pleasure-giving apparatus within the reach of all, and often turned into an engine of destruction by senseless stupidity. Mrs. Tree would burn all bicycles if she could have her way; not that Mrs. Tree was stupid, far from it! Miss Phoebe disapproved of them, Miss Vesta feared them, and evidently expected his to blow up from day to day. What would they all say if they knew that he had been trying to persuade Vesta to ride with him? He called her Vesta in his thoughts, merely to distinguish her from her aunt. He was quite sure it would be the best possible exercise for her, now that she was so much stronger. So far, she had met all his representations with her gentle—no! not gentle; Geoffrey would be switched if she was gentle; her quiet negative. Her aunts would not like it, and there was an end. Well, there wasn't an end! A reasonable person ought to listen to reason, and be convinced by it. Vesta did not appear to be reasonable yet, but she was intelligent, and the rest would come as she grew stronger. And—he had no right to say she was not gentle; she could be the gentlest creature that ever lived, when it was a question of a child, or a bird, or—anything that was hurt, in short. When that little beggar fell down the other day and barked his idiotic little shins, the way she took him up, and kissed him, and got him to laughing, while he, Geoffrey, plastered him up; and it hurt too, getting the gravel out. When that violoncello note gets into her voice—well, you know! Yes, she must certainly ride the bicycle! What could be more restoring, more delightful, than to ride along a country road like this, in the soft afternoon, when the heat of the day was over? The honey-

clover was in blossom; there were clusters of it everywhere, making the whole air sweet. Of course he would watch her, keep note of her colour and breathing, see that she did not overdo it. Of course it was his business to see to all that. What was that the old professor used to say?

"There are two hands upon the pulse of life; the detective's, to surprise and confound, the physician's, to help and to heal."

It was that, after all, that feeling, that decided one to be a physician. If he could do anything to help this beautiful and—yes, noble creature, he was bound to do it, wasn't he, whether her aunts liked it or not? even, perhaps, whether she herself liked it or not. Well, but she would like it, she couldn't help liking it, once she tried it. She was built for a rider. He might borrow Miss Flabb's wheel for her. It was absurd for Miss Flabb to attempt to ride; she would never do enough to take down her flesh, and meantime, being near-sighted, she was at the mercy of every stray dog and hen, and likely to be run down by the first scorcher on the highroad. Now with him, even at the beginning, Vesta would have nothing to fear. He would—

At this moment came an interruption. The interruption had four legs, and barked. It came from a neighbouring farmhouse, and flew straight at the wheel, which was also flying, for the young doctor was apt to ride fast when he was thinking. There was a whirl of arms, legs, wheels, and tails, a heavy fall,—and the dog ran off on three legs, ki-hying to the skies, and the young doctor lay still in the road.

Half an hour later, Mr. Ithuriel Butters stopped at the door of the Temple of Vesta. He was driving a pair of comfortable old white horses, who went to sleep as soon as he said "Whoa!" He looked up at the house, and then behind him in the wagon. Seeing nobody at the windows, he looked up and down the street, and was aware of a young woman approaching. He hailed her.

"Say, do you know the folks in that house?"

"Yes," said Vesta; "I am staying there."

"Be!" said Mr. Butters. "Wal, Doctor Strong boards there too, don't he?"

"Yes; I don't think he is in now, though."

"I know he ain't!" said Ithuriel Butters.

Vesta looked with interest at the stalwart old figure, and strong keen face. Most of the wrinkles in the face had come from smiling, but it was grave enough now.

"Will you come in and wait," she asked, "or leave a message?"

"Wal, I guess I won't do neither—this time!" said Mr. Butters, slowly.

Vesta looked at him in some perplexity; he returned a glance of grave meaning.

"You kin to him?" asked the old man. "Sister, or cousin, mebbe?"

"No! what is it? something has happened to Doctor Strong!" Vesta's hand tightened on the rail of the steps.

"Keepin' company with him, p'raps?"

"No, oh, no! will you tell me at once, please, and plainly, what has happened?"

Vesta spoke quietly; in her normal condition she was always quieter when moved; but the colour seemed to fall from her cheeks as her eyes followed those of the old man to something that lay long and still in the cart behind him.

"Fact is," said Mr. Butters, "I've got him here. 'Pears to be"—the strong old voice faltered for an instant—"pears to be bust up some consid'able. I found him in the ro'd a piece back, with his velocipede tied up all over him. He ain't dead, nor he ain't asleep, but I can't git nothin' out of him, so I jest brung him along. I'll h'ist him out, if you say so."

"Can you?" said Vesta. "I will help you. I am strong enough. Will your horses stand?"

"They can't fall down, 'count of the shafts," said Mr. Butters, clambering slowly down from his seat, "and they won't do nothin' else. We'll git him out now, jest as easy. I think a sight of that young feller; made me feel bad, I tell ye, to see him there all stove up, and think mebbe—"

"Don't, please!" said Vesta. "I am—not very strong—"

"Thought you said you was!" said Ithuriel Butters. "You stand one side, then, if it's the same to you. I can carry him as easy as I would a baby, and I wouldn't hurt him no more'n I would one."

* * * * *

"There are two hands upon the pulse of life!" said the young doctor.

No one replied to this remark, nor did he appear to expect a reply. The room was darkened, and he was lying on his bed; at least some one was, he supposed it was himself. There was a smell of drugs. Some one had been hurt.

"There are two hands upon the pulse of life," he repeated; "the detective's, to surprise—and confound; the phys—phys—what?"

"Physician's," said some one.

"That's it! the physician's, to help and to heal. This appears to be—combination—both—"

The hand was removed from his wrist. He frowned heavily, and asked if he were a Mohammedan. Receiving no answer, repeated the question with some irritation.

"I don't think so," said the same quiet voice. "Then why—turban?" he frowned again, and brought the folds of linen lower over his nose. They were quietly readjusted. The light, firm hand was laid on his forehead for a moment, then once more on his wrist. Then something was put to his lips; he was told to drink, and did so. Then he said, "My name is Geoffrey Strong. There is nothing the matter with me."

"Yes, I know."

"But—if you take away your hand—I can't hold on, you know."

The hand was laid firmly on his. He sighed comfortably, murmuring something about not knowing that violoncellos had hands; dozed a few minutes; dragged himself up from unimaginable depths to ask, "You are sure you understand that about the pulse?"

Being answered, "Yes, I quite understand," said, "Then you'll see to it!" and slept like a baby.

When he woke next morning, it was with an alert and inquisitive eye. The eye glanced here and there, taking in details.

"What the—*what* is all this?"

There was a soft flurry, and Miss Vesta was beside him. "Oh! my dear—my dear young friend! thank God, you are yourself again!"

Geoffrey's eyes softened into tenderness as he looked at her. "Dear Miss Vesta! what is the matter? I seem to have—" He tried to move his right arm, but stopped with a grimace. "I seem to have smashed myself. Would it bother you to tell me about it? Stop, though! I remember! a dog ran out, and got tangled up in the spokes. Oh, yes, I remember. Am I much damaged? arm broken—who set it? that's a nice bandage, anyhow. But why the malignant and the turbaned Turk effect? is my head broken, too?"

"Oh, no, dear Doctor Strong, nothing malignant; nothing at all of that nature, I assure you. Oh, I hope, I hope the arm is properly cared for! but it was so unfortunate his being laid up with pleurisy just at this time, wasn't it? and a severe contusion on your head, you see, so that for some hours we were sadly—but now you are entirely yourself, and we are so humbly and devoutly thankful, dear Doctor Strong!"

"I think you might say 'Geoffrey,' when I am all broke up!" said the boy.

"Geoffrey, dear Geoffrey!" murmured Miss Vesta, patting his sound arm softly.

"I think you might sit down by me and tell me all about it. Who is laid up with pleurisy? how much am I broken? who brought me home? who set my arm? I want to know all about it, please!"

The young doctor spoke with cheerful imperiousness. Miss Vesta glanced timorously toward the door, then sat down by the bedside. "Hush!" she said, softly. "You must not excite yourself, my dear young friend, you must not, indeed. I will tell you all about it, if you think—if you are quite sure you ought to be told. You are a physician, of course, but she was very anxious that you should not be excited."

"Who was anxious? I shall be very much excited if you keep things from me, Miss Vesta. I feel my temperature going up this moment."

"Dear! dear!" cried poor Miss Vesta. "Try—to—to restrain it, Geoffrey, I implore you. I will—I will tell you at once. As you surmise, my dear, a dog—we suppose it to have been a dog, though I am not aware that anyone saw the accident. An old man whom you once attended—Mr. Butters; you spoke of him, I remember—found you lying in the road, my child, quite unconscious. He is an unpolished person, but possessed of warm affections. I—I can never forget his tender solicitude about you. He brought you home in his wagon, and carried you into the house. He volunteered to go to Greening for Doctor Namby—"

"Namby never put on this bandage!" interrupted Geoffrey.

"No, Geoffrey, no! we do not think highly of Doctor Namby, but there was no one else, for you seem to feel so strongly about Doctor Pottle—"

"Pottle is a boiled cabbage-head!" said Geoffrey. "He couldn't set a hen's leg without tying it in bow-knots, let alone a man's arm. Who did set it, Miss Vesta? I'm sure I must be up to 105 by this time. I can't answer for the consequences, you know, if—"

"Oh! hush! hush!" cried Miss Vesta. "He had the pleurisy, as I said; very badly indeed, poor man, so that he was quite, quite invalided—"

"Pottle had? serve him—"

"No, no, Geoffrey; Doctor Namby had. And so—she was quite positive she understood the case, and—Mr. Butters upheld her—oh, I trust, I trust I did not do wrong in allowing her to take so grave a responsibility—Sister Phoebe in bed with her erysipelas—Geoffrey—you will not be angry, my dear young friend? Little Vesta set the arm!"

The word finally spoken, Miss Vesta sat panting quickly and softly, like a frightened bird, her eyes fixed anxiously on the young doctor.

The young doctor whistled; then considered the arm again with keen scrutiny.

"The de—that is—she did, did she?" he said, half to himself. He felt it all over with his sound hand, and inspected it again. "Well, it's a mighty good job," he said, "whoever did it."

Miss Vesta's sigh of relief was almost a gasp. Geoffrey looked up quickly, and saw her gentle eyes brimming with tears.

"You dear angel!" he cried, taking her hand. "I have made you anxious. I am a brute—a cuttlefish—hang me, somebody, do!"

"Oh! hush, hush! my boy!" cried the little lady, wiping away her tears. "It was only—the relief, Geoffrey. To feel that you are not angry at her—Sister Phoebe would call it presumption, but Vesta did not *mean* to be presumptuous, Geoffrey—and that you think it is not so ill done as I feared. I—I am so happy, that is all, my dear!"

She wept silently, and Geoffrey lay and called himself names. Presently—"Where is she?" he asked.

"Sister Phoebe? she is still in bed, and suffering a good deal. I am continuing the remedies you gave her. I—I have thought it best to let her suppose that Doctor Namby had attended you, Geoffrey. She is very nervous, and I feared to excite her."

Geoffrey commended her wisdom, but made it clear that he was not thinking of Miss Phoebe. Couldn't he see Miss Little Vesta? he asked. He wanted to—to thank her for what she had done, and ask just how she had done it. There were all sorts of details—in short, it was important that he should see her at once. Asleep? Why—it seemed unreasonable that she should be asleep at this hour of the morning. Was she not well?

"She—she watched by you most of the night!" Miss Vesta confessed. "Your head—she was afraid of congestion, and wanted the cloths changed frequently. She would not let me sit up, Geoffrey, though I begged her to let me do so. She will come as soon as she wakes, I am sure."

"I told you I was a cuttlefish!" said Geoffrey. "Now you see! I—I believe I am getting sleepy again, Miss Vesta. What is that pretty thing you have around your neck? Did she sit in that chair? What a fool a man is when he is asleep!"

Seeing his eyelids droop, Miss Vesta moved softly away; was called back at the door, and found him looking injured. "You haven't tucked me up!" he said.

Miss Vesta tucked him up with delicate precision, and drew the snowy counterpane into absolute smoothness. "There!" she said, her gentle eyes beaming with maternal pleasure. "Is there anything else, dear doctor—I mean dear Geoffrey?"

"No, nothing—unless—I don't suppose angels ever kiss people, do they?"

Very pink indeed, even to her pretty little ears, Miss Vesta stooped and deposited a very small and very timid kiss on his forehead; then slipped away like a little shocked ghost, wondering what Sister Phoebe would say.

CHAPTER XII.

CONVALESCENCE

"Where did you get your splints?" asked Geoffrey. "Was this thing all arranged beforehand? you confess to the bandages in your trunk."

Vesta laughed. "Your poor cigars! I tumbled them out of their box with very little ceremony. See them, scattered all over the table! I must put them tidy."

She moved to the table, and began piling the cigars in a hollow square. "A cigar-box makes excellent splints," she said; "did you ever try it?"

But Geoffrey was thinking what a singular amount of light a white dress seemed to bring into a room, and did not immediately reply.

When he did speak, he said, "You watched me—I kept you up all night. I ought to be shot."

"That would be twice as troublesome," said Vesta, gravely; "I can set an arm, but I don't know anything about wounds, except theoretically. Perhaps you would'nt like theoretic treatment."

"Perhaps not. Was there—it seems a perfectly absurd question to ask, but—well, was any one playing the 'cello here last night? why do you laugh?"

"Only because you seem to have the 'cello so on your mind. You said such funny things last night, while you were light-headed, you know."

Geoffrey became conscious of the roots of his hair. "What did I say?" he asked.

"You seemed to think that some one was playing the 'cello; or rather, you fancied there was a 'cello in the room, and it seemed to be endowed with life. You said, 'I didn't know that 'cellos had hands!' and then you asked if it spoke Spanish. I couldn't help laughing a little at that, and you were quite short with me, and told me I that didn't know phlox from flaxseed. It was very curious!"

"Must have been!" said Geoffrey, dryly. "I'm only thankful—was that the worst thing I said?"

"Wasn't that bad enough? yes, that was the very worst. I am going out now, Doctor Strong. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Going out!" repeated Geoffrey, in dismay.

"Yes. I have some errands to do. What is it?" for the cloud on his brow was unmistakable.

"Oh—nothing! I thought you were going to see to this crack in my skull, but it's no matter."

"It is hardly two hours since I dressed it," said Vesta. "I thought you said it felt very comfortable."

"Well—it did; but it hurts now, considerably. No matter, though, if you are busy I dare say I could get Pottle to come in sometime in the course of the day."

He had the grace to be ashamed of himself, when Vesta brought basin and sponge, and began quietly and patiently to dress the injured temple.

"I know I am fractious," he said, plaintively. "I can't seem to help it."

He looked up, and saw her clear eyes intent and full of light.

"It is healing beautifully!" she said. "I wish you could see it; it's a lovely colour now."

"It's a shame to give you all this trouble," said Geoffrey, trying to feel real contrition.

"Oh, but I like it!" he was cheerfully assured. "It's delightful to see a cut like this."

"Thank you!" said Geoffrey. "I used to feel that way myself."

"And the callous is going to form quickly in the arm, I am sure of it!" said Vesta, with shining eyes. "I am so pleased with you, Doctor Strong! And now—there! is that all right? Take the glass and see if you like the looks of it. I think the turban effect is rather becoming. Now—is there any one you would like me to go and see while I am out? Of course—I have no diploma, nothing of the sort, but I could carry out your orders faithfully, and report to you."

"Oh, you are very good!" said Geoffrey. "But—you would be gone all the—I mean—your aunts might need you, don't you think?"

"No, indeed! Aunt Phoebe is better—I gave her the drops, and Aunt Vesta is bathing her now with the lotion—I can take the afternoon perfectly well. Your case-book? this one? no, truly, Doctor Strong, it will be a pleasure, a real pleasure."

"You're awfully good!" said Geoffrey, ruefully.

"It is the *most* unfortunate combination I ever heard of!" said Miss Phoebe Blyth.

Miss Phoebe was in bed, too, and suffering very considerable discomfort. Erysipelas is not a thing to speak lightly of; and if it got into Miss Phoebe's temper as well as into her eyes, this was not to be wondered at.

Miss Vesta murmured some soothing words, and bathed the angry red places gently; but Miss Phoebe was not to be soothed.

"It is all very well for you, Vesta," said the poor lady, "you have never had any responsibility; of course it is not to be supposed that you should have, with what you have gone through. But with all I have on *my* shoulders, to be laid up in this way is—really, I must say!"

This last remark was the sternest censure that Miss Phoebe was ever known to bestow upon the Orderings of Providence.

"Has Doctor Pottle attended to the doctor's arm this morning?"

This was the question Miss Vesta had been dreading. She pretended not to hear it; but it was repeated with incisive severity.

"You are getting a little hard of hearing, Vesta. I asked you, has Doctor Strong's arm been attended to this morning?"

"Yes! oh, yes, Sister Phoebe, it has. And—it is healing finely, and so is his head. She says—I mean—"

"You mean *he* says!" said Miss Phoebe, with a superior air. "This excitement is too much for you, Vesta. We shall have you breaking down next. I do not know that I care to hear precisely what Doctor Pottle says. In such an emergency as this we were forced to call him in, but I have a poor opinion of his skill, and none of his intelligence. If our dear Doctor Strong is doing well, that is all I need to know."

"Yes, Sister Phoebe," acquiesced Miss Vesta, with silent thanksgiving.

"When you next visit Doctor Strong's room," Miss Phoebe continued,—"*I* regret that you should be obliged to do so, my dear Vesta, but the disparity in your years is so great as to obviate any glaring impropriety, and besides, there seems to be no help for it,—when you next visit him, I beg you to give him my kindest—yes! I am convinced that there can be no—you may say my affectionate regards, Vesta. Tell him that I find myself distinctly better to-day, thanks, no doubt, to the remedies he has prescribed; and that I trust in a short time to be able to give my personal supervision to his recovery. You may point out to him that a period of seclusion and meditation, even when not unmingled with suffering, may often be productive of beneficial results, moral as well as physical; and in a mind like his—hark! what is that sound, Vesta?"

Miss Vesta listened. "I think—it is Doctor Strong," she said. "I think he is singing, Sister Phoebe. I

cannot distinguish the words; very likely some hymn his mother taught him. Dear lad!"

"He has a beautiful spirit!" said Miss Phoebe; "there are less signs of active piety than I could wish, but he has a beautiful spirit. Yes, you are right, it is a hymn, Vesta."

Even if Miss Vesta had distinguished the words, it would have made little difference, since she did not understand Italian. For this is what the young doctor was singing:

"Voi che sapete che cosa e l'amor,
Donne, vedete s'io l'ho nel cuor!"

The sisters listened; Miss Phoebe erect among her pillows, her nightcap tied in a rigid little bow under her chin; Miss Vesta sitting beside her, wistful and anxious, full of tender solicitude for sister, friend, niece,—in fact, for all her little world. But neither of them could tell the young doctor what he wanted to know.

* * * * *

It was near sunset when Vesta came again into the young doctor's room. He was sitting in the big armchair by the window. He was cross, and thought medicine a profession for dogs.

"I trust you have enjoyed your afternoon!" he said, morosely. Then he looked up at the radiant face and happy eyes, and told himself that he was a squid; cuttlefish was too good a name for him.

Vesta smiled and nodded, a little out of breath.

"I ran up-stairs!" she said. "I didn't think, and I just ran. I am well, Doctor Strong, do you realise it? Oh, it is so wonderful! It is worth it all, every bit, to feel the spring coming back. You told me it would, you know; I didn't believe you, and I hasten to do homage to your superior intelligence. Hail, Solomon! Yes, I have had a most delightful afternoon, and now you shall hear all about it."

She sat down, and took out the note-book. Geoffrey had been wondering all the afternoon what colour her eyes were, now that they had ceased to be dark agates. "I know now!" he said. "They are like Mary Donnelly's."

"Her eyes like mountain water
Where it's running o'er a rock."

"Whose eyes?" asked Vesta. "Not Luella Slocum's? I was just going to tell you about her."

"No, not hers. How is she? You must have had a sweet time there."

Vesta gave her head a backward shake—it was a pretty way she had—and laughed. "I am sure I did her good," she said. "She was so angry at my coming, so sure I didn't know anything, and so consumed with desire to know what and where and how long I had studied, and what my father was thinking of to allow me, and what my mother would have said if she had lived to see the day, and what my aunts would say as it was, that she actually forgot her *tic*, poor soul, and talked a great deal, and freed her mind. It's a great thing to free the mind. But she said I need not call again; and—I'm afraid I have got you into disgrace, too, for when I said that you would come as soon as you were able, she sniffed, and said she would let you know if she wanted you. I am sorry!"

"Are you?" said Geoffrey. "I am not. She will send for Pottle to-morrow, and he will suit her exactly. Where else did you go?"

Several cases were given in detail, and for a time the talk was sternly professional. Geoffrey found his questions answered clearly and directly, with no superfluous words; moreover, there seemed to be judgment and intelligence. Well, he always said that one woman in ten thousand might—

Coming to the last case in the book, Vesta's face lightened into laughter.

"Oh, those Binney children!" she said. "They were so funny and dear! I had a delightful time there. They were all much better,—Paul's fever entirely gone, and Ellie's throat hardly inflamed at all. They wanted to get up, but I didn't think they would better before to-morrow, so we played menagerie, and had a great time."

"Played menagerie?"

"Yes. I made a hollow square with the cribs and some chairs, and they were the lions, and I was the tamer. We played for an hour,—Mrs. Binney was tired, and I made her go and lie down,—and then I

sang them to sleep, dear little lambs, and came away and left them."

"I see!" said Geoffrey. "That is what made you so late. Do you think it's exactly professional to play menagerie for an hour and a half with your patients?"

Vesta laughed; the happy sound of her laughter fretted his nerves.

"I suppose that is the way you will practise, when you have taken your degree!" he said, disagreeably.

The girl flushed, and the happy light left her eyes. "Don't talk of that!" she said. "I told you I had given it up once and for all."

"But you are well now; and—I am bound to say—you seem in many ways qualified for a physician. You might try again when you are entirely strong."

"And break down again? thank you. No; I have proved to myself that I cannot do it, and there is an end."

"Then—it's no business of mine, of course—what will you do?" asked Geoffrey. His ill-temper was dying out. The sound of her voice, so full, so even, so cordial, filled him like wine. He wanted her to go on talking; it did not matter much about what.

"What will you do?" he repeated, as the girl remained silent.

"Oh, I don't know! I suppose I shall just be a plain woman the rest of my life."

"I don't think plain is exactly the word!" said Geoffrey.

"You didn't think 'pretty' was!" said Vesta; and, with a flash of laughter, she was gone.

Geoffrey had not wanted her to go. He had been alone all the afternoon. (Ah, dear Miss Vesta! was it solitude, the patient hour you spent by his side, reading to him, chatting, trying your best to cheer the depression that you partly saw, partly divined? yes; for when an experiment in soul-chemistry is going on, it is one element, and one only, that can produce the needed result!) He had been alone, I say, all the afternoon, and his head ached, and there were shooting pains in his arm, and—he used to think it would be so interesting to break a bone, that one would learn so much better in that kind of way. Well, he was learning, learning no end; only you wanted some one to talk it over with. There was no fun in knowing things if there was no one to tell about them. And—anyhow, this bandage was getting quite dry, or it would be soon. There was the bowl of water on the stand beside him, but he could not change bandages with one hand. He heard Vesta stirring about in her room, the room next his. She was singing softly to herself; it didn't trouble her much that he was all alone, and suffering a good deal. She had a cold nature. Absurd for a person to be singing to chairs and tables, when other people—

He coughed; coughed again; sighed long and audibly. The soft singing stopped; was she—

No! it went on again. He knew the tune, but he could not hear the words. There was nothing so exasperating as not to be able to place a song.—

Crash! something shivered on the floor. Vesta came running, the song still on her lips. Her patient was flushed, and looked studiously out of the window.

"What is it? Oh, the bowl! I am so sorry! How did it happen?"

"It—fell down!" said Geoffrey.

Vesta was on her knees, picking up the pieces, sopping the spilt water with a towel. He regarded her with remorseful triumph.

"You were singing!" he said, at length.

"Was I? did I disturb you? I won't—"

"No! I don't mean that. I wanted to hear the words. I—I threw the bowl down on purpose."

Vesta looked up in utter amazement; meeting the young doctor's eyes, something in them brought the lovely colour flooding over her face and neck.

"That was childish!" she said, quietly, and went on picking up the pieces. "It was a valuable bowl."

"I am—feverish!" said Geoffrey. "This bandage is getting dry, and I am all prickles."

Vesta hesitated a moment; then she laid her hand on his forehead. "You have *no* fever!" she said. "You are flushed and restless, but—Doctor Strong, this is convalescence!"

"Is that what you call it?" said Geoffrey.

CHAPTER XIII.

RECOVERY

"Feelin' real smart, be ye?" asked Mr. Ithuriel Butters. "Wal, I'm pleased to hear it."

Mr. Butters sat in the young doctor's second armchair, and looked at him with friendly eyes. His broad back was turned to the window, but Geoffrey faced it, and the light showed his face pale, indeed, but full of returning health and life; his arm was still in a sling, but his movements otherwise were free and unrestrained.

"You're lookin' fust-rate," said Mr. Butters. "Some different from the last time I see ye."

"I wonder what would have become of me if you had not happened along just then, Mr. Butters," said Geoffrey. "I think I owe you a great deal more than you are willing to acknowledge."

"Nothin' at all; nothin' at all!" said the old man, briskly. "I h'isted ye up out the ro'd, that was all; I sh'd have had to h'ist jest the same if ye'd be'n a critter or a lawg, takin' up the hull ro'd the way ye did."

"And how about bringing me home, three miles out of your way, and carrying me up-stairs, and all that? I suppose you would have done all that for a critter, eh?"

"Wal—depends upon the value of the critter!" said Mr. Butters, with a twinkle. "I never kep' none of mine up-stairs, but there's no knowin' these days of fancy stock. No, young man! if there's anybody for you to thank, it's that young woman. Now there's a gal—what's her name? I didn't gather it that day."

"Vesta—Miss Vesta Blyth."

"I want to know! my fust wife's name was Vesty; Vesty Barlow she was; yes, sir. I do'no' but I liked her best of any of 'em. Not but what I've had good ones since, but 'twas different then, seems' though. She was the ch'ice of my youth, ye see. Yes, sir; Vesty is a good name, and that's a good gal, if I know anything about gals. She's no kin to you, she said."

"No; none whatever."

"Nor yet you ain't keepin' company with her?"

"No-o!" cried Geoffrey, wincing.

"Ain't you asked her?"

"No! please don't—"

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Butters, with ample severity.

Geoffrey tried to laugh, and failed. "I—I can't talk about these things, Mr. Butters."

"Don't you want her?" the old man went on, pitilessly. Geoffrey looked up angrily; looked up, and met a look so kind and true and simple, that his anger died, still-born.

"Yes!" he said. "God knows I do. But you are wholly mistaken in thinking—that is—she wouldn't have me."

"I expect she would!" said Ithuriel Butters. "I expect that is jest what she would have. I see her when you was layin' there, all stove up; you might have be'n barrel-staves, the way you looked. I see her face, and I don't need to see no more."

Geoffrey tried to say something about kindness and womanly pity, but the strong old voice bore him down.

"I know what pity looks like, and I know the other thing. She's no soft-heart to squinch at the sight of blood, and that sort of foolery. Tell ye, she was jest as quiet and cool as if 'twas a church sociable, and she set that bone as easy and chirk as my woman would take a pie out the oven; but when she had you all piecened up, and stood and looked at you—wal, there!"

"Don't! I cannot let you!" cried Geoffrey. His voice was full of distress; but was it the western sun that made his face so bright?

"Wal, there's all kinds of fools," said Mr. Butters. "Got the toothache?"

"Toothache? no! why?"

"Thought you hollered as if ye had. How would you go to work to cure the toothache now, s'posin' you had it?"

"I should go to a dentist, and let him cure it for me."

"S'posin' you lived ten mile from a dentist, young feller? you're too used to settin' in the middle of creation and jerkin' the reins for the hoss to go. Jonas E. Homer had the toothache once, bad."

He paused.

"Well," said the young doctor, "who was Jonas E. Homer, and how did he cure his toothache?"

"Jonas Elimelech was his full name," said Mr. Butters, settling himself comfortably in his chair. "He's neighbour to me, about five miles out on the Buffy Landin' ro'd. Yes, he had the toothache bad. Wife wanted him to go and have 'em hauled, but he said he wouldn't have no feller goin' fishin' in *his* mouth. No, sir! he went and he bored a hole in the northeast side of a beech-tree, and put in a hair of a yaller dawg, and then plugged up the hole with a pine plug. That was ten years ago, and he's never had the toothache sence. He told me that himself."

"It's a good story," said the young doctor. "Do you believe it, Mr. Butters?"

"Wal, I do 'no' as I exactly believe it; I was sort of illustratin' the different kinds of fools there was in the world, that's all."

They were silent. The sun went down, but the light stayed in the young doctor's face.

* * * * *

There was a commotion in the room below. Voices were raised, feminine voices, shrill with excitement. Then came a bustle on the stairs, and the sound of feet; then one voice, breathless but decided.

"I tell ye, I know the way. There's no need to show me, and I won't have it. I haven't been up these stairs for near seventy years, Phoebe, since the day of your caudle-party, but I know the way as well as you do, and I'll thank you to stay where you are."

The next moment the door opened, and Mrs. Tree stood on the threshold, panting and triumphant. Her black eyes twinkled with affection and malice. "Well, young sir!" she said, as Geoffrey ran to give her his sound arm, and led her in, and placed her in the seat of honour. "Fine doings since I last saw you! Humph! you look pretty well, considering all. Who's this? Ithuriel Butters! How do you do, Ithuriel? I haven't seen you for forty years, but I should know you in the Fiji Islands."

"I should know you, too, anywhere, Mis' Tree!" responded Mr. Butters, heartily. "I'm rejoicin' glad to see ye."

"You wear well, Ithuriel," said Mrs. Tree, kindly. "If you would cut all that mess of hair and beard, you would be a good-looking man still; but I didn't come here to talk to you."

She turned to Geoffrey in some excitement. "I'll speak right out," she said. "Now's now, and next time's never. I've let the cat out of the bag. Phoebe has found out about little Vesta's setting your arm and all, and she's proper mad. Says she'll send the child home to-morrow for good and all. She's getting on her shoes this minute; I never could abide those morocco shoes. She'll be up here in no time. I thought I'd come up first and tell you."

She looked eagerly at the young doctor; but his eyes were fixed on the window, and he scarcely seemed to hear her. Following his gaze, she saw a white dress glimmering against the soft dusk of the garden shrubs.

The young doctor rose abruptly; took one step; paused, and turned to his guest of ninety years with a little passionate gesture of appeal "I—cannot leave you," he said; "unless—just one moment—"

"My goodness gracious *me!*" cried Mrs. Tree. "Go this minute, child; *run*, do you hear? I'll take care of Ithuriel Butters. He was in my Sunday-school class, though he's only five years younger than me. Take care and don't fall!"

The last words were uttered in a small shriek, for apparently there had been but one step to the staircase.

Breathless, the old woman turned and faced the old man. "Have you got any bumblebees in your pocket this time, Ithuriel?" she asked.

"No,'m," said Ithuriel, soberly. Then they both stared out of the window with eyes that strove to be as young as they were eager.

[Illustration: "Then he comes, full chisel!" cried Ithuriel Butters.]

"There he comes, full chisel!" cried Ithuriel Butters. "She don't see him. He's hollerin' to her. She's turned round. I tell ye—he's grabbed holt of her hand! he's grabbed holt of both her hands! he's—"

Who says that heroism dies with youth? Marcia Tree raised her little mitted hand, and pulled down the blind.

"It's no business of yours or mine what he's doing, Ithuriel Butters!" she said, with dignity.

Then she began to tremble. "Seventy years ago," she said, "Ira Tree proposed to me in that very garden, under that very syringa-tree. I've been a widow fifty years, Ithuriel, and it seems like yesterday." And a dry sob clicked in her throat.

"I've buried two good wives," said Mr. Butters, "and my present one seems to be failin' up some. I hope she'll live now, I reelly do."

* * * * *

"Vesta!" Miss Phoebe's voice rang sharp and shrill through the house. Miss Vesta started. She was at her evening post in the upper hall. The lamp was lighted, the prayer had been said.

"Dear Lord, I beseech thee, protect all souls at sea this night; for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen!"

But Miss Vesta was not watching the sea this time. Her eyes, too, were bent down upon the twilight garden. The lamplight fell softly there, and threw into relief the two figures pacing up and down, hand in hand, heart in heart. Miss Vesta could not hear, and would not if she could have heard, the words her children were saying; her heart was lifted as high as heaven, in peace and joy and thankfulness, and the words that sounded in her ear were spoken by a voice long silent in death.

"Vesta!"

Miss Phoebe's voice rang sharp and shrill through the silent house. Instinct and habit answered the call at once. "Yes, Sister Phoebe!"

"Stay where you are! I am coming to you. I have discovered—"

The figures below paused full in the lamplight. Two faces shone out, one all on fire with joy and wonder, the other sweet and white as the white flower at her breast.

Miss Phoebe's morocco shoes creaked around the corner of the passage.

"Good Lord, forgive me, and save all souls at sea just the same!" said Miss Vesta; and she blew out the lamp.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GEOFFREY STRONG ***

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